

PHILOSOPHY OF INTIMACY AND THE THEORY OF JUSTICE

Studies in Generative Relational Being

VOLUME I

Relational Being, the Subject, and the Word

Wanhong Huang

FIRST EDITION

Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice
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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.

谨以此书，感谢自己深爱的一位爱旅行、爱大自然、尤其爱山与森林，也爱政治经济学与文化的“森林与山之女孩”。我们本是同乡，却直到日本才奇迹般地相遇；她成为自己写下这一系列论文以及本书的动机，也成为自己建设并实践自己理论的重要动力。

Preface

This book series forms part of the research program on *generative relational being*. Before undertaking the series, we set out a diagnosis of the contemporary condition in the foundational paper *Responding to the Crises of Symbol and Subject in Modernity: Towards a Generative Nomos of Relational Presence*. The argument of that paper begins with the constitution of the subject: the subject is constituted within relations, through symbolic mediation by language, norms, law, and institutions. The symbolic order provides the field in which the subject emerges, takes form, attains presence, and undergoes transformation, while the ontological ground of the subject remains relational and exceeds every symbolic representation. In modernity, the rapid proliferation of symbolic production, together with the steady weakening of the symbolic order's mediating capacity, has rendered the intrinsic gap between the Real and the Symbolic visible to an unprecedented degree.

This gap manifests today in a series of concrete phenomena. Grand narratives, among them justice, progress, and divine order, have lost their persuasive force; public trust in institutions continues to drain away, shared norms fragment, and moral and cultural life slides into relativism. Digital media and artificial intelligence have made the production of signs nearly costless, so that symbols are devalued through abundance and empty repetition; beneath the appearance of novelty lies structural stagnation, and meaning enters a state of inflation. The intersubjective space is increasingly occupied by interfaces, algorithms, and bureaucratic systems; the I–Thou relation degrades step by step into an I–It operation, and genuine encounter and mutual recognition grow ever thinner. What the symbolic order has long repressed, the Real, returns in traumatic form: conspiracy narratives attempt to give shape to diffuse anxiety, fundamentalist violence erupts intermittently, and a free-floating dread pervades conditions of material abundance. Where relational trust collapses, individuals and communities turn to law for order, for meaning,

and even for redemption, so that the juridical system bears expectations far beyond what its structure can sustain and justice falls into overload. Algorithmic recommendation systems form an epistemic loop in which the subject's knowledge of the world reduces to the repeated confirmation of its own mediated and pre-shaped image; affect, in turn, is simulated and recirculated in interactions with constructed pseudo-subjects and gradually loses its grounding in the Real.

Placed in historical depth, these phenomena disclose three epochs in the position of the big Other. In the first epoch, gods and natural forces occupied the position of the big Other, grounding order and signification; humanity constructed its existence through cosmological and sacred orders. The Enlightenment opened the second epoch: symbolic reason replaced external authority, and rationality, legality, and institutional norms formed a new regime of mediation, with law occupying a privileged position as the practical embodiment of the big Other. The present constitutes the third epoch: the credibility and mediating capacity of symbolic structures are continually destabilized, and as symbolic authority deteriorates the subject seeks to approach, and even to occupy, the position of the big Other, so that cycles of integration, struggle, and conflict recur. Along the extension of this genealogy, a more fluid state of mediation becomes conceivable, resonant with the Daoist ideal of *wuwei* and of harmony between heaven and humanity: the subject moves from being a product of structure to being an active participant in its generativity, and existence turns once more toward relationality itself.

From this follows the central diagnosis of the foundational paper: the crisis of subjectivity and the symbolic crisis are mutually generative, each serving as cause and consequence of the other, and the widening gap between them constitutes the core predicament of modern existence. The crisis originates in the gap between the Real and the Symbolic; any response must therefore address the relation between being and its mediation, since efforts confined to repairing symbolic structures remain at the level of symptoms. Our response returns to the ontological ground of existence. The first element is relational ontology: the basic units of being are relations, relation precedes substance, and the self is an emergent formation within a relational field. The second element is generative presence: the epistemic and phenomenological process through which relational being is enacted in lived experience and through which meaning comes forth. In the domain

of law and justice, this entails a double movement, juridical and extra-juridical: the former reorients law toward relational being and toward the ongoing processes through which its authority and meaning are produced and sustained; the latter cultivates the formation and expressive realization of generative presence within relational existence. The diagnosis thus opens onto a direction: towards relational being.

Moving towards relational being requires enabling conditions. Generative relational being therefore constitutes an infrastructural research program, one that investigates the conditions under which relational being can be understood, enacted, generated, sustained, and carried across contexts. Infrastructure here designates a set of enabling conditions, conceptual, theoretical, procedural, social, and ethical. The program organizes these conditions into seven interrelated infrastructural domains: a theoretical infrastructure, providing formal and modelable frameworks for articulating relational structures and generative processes; a conceptual and ontological understanding infrastructure, clarifying the core principles of relation, being, presence, structure, and generation; a co-presence infrastructure, supporting the experiential conditions through which relations are perceived and enacted across distance and mediation; a decision infrastructure, enabling relational action and governance to unfold through accountable, process-oriented, and evidence-informed practices; a co-creative infrastructure, sustaining the generative emergence of new relations, meanings, and structures through shared practices; an educational infrastructure, cultivating and transmitting relational capacities across individuals, communities, and generations; and an ethical and care infrastructure, carrying and reconstituting relations under conditions of vulnerability, asymmetry, and dependence.

This book series is a research instance within that program: intimate relationships.

We take intimacy as our point of entry because it constitutes a relatively small yet structurally complete relational system. The problems that the seven infrastructures address, among them recognition and misrecognition, co-presence and symbolic mediation, joint decision and asymmetries of power, the generation and alienation of value, care and vulnerability, eros and justice, all appear in intimate relationships in highly condensed form. Intimacy is comparable to a tabletop experiment in physics: small in scale, yet sufficient to make manifest the laws that govern much larger social systems. Further, if the substance of the symbolic crisis lies in the separation between lived relation and its symbolic

representation, then intimate relationships are the very place where this separation is most immediately experienced and where it stands the best chance of being generatively repaired. The series examines the relational processes unfolding between two subjects in order to discover the generative mechanisms and the claims of justice that run through all relational systems; the findings obtained here will in turn flow back into the program as a whole.

This work has grown at the intersection of several theoretical traditions. Since the provenance of these ideas itself belongs to the problematic of the series, the order in which the influences entered deserves an honest account. At the outset of the series, the resources already in place included: the feminist revaluation of care, dependence, and vulnerability; jurisprudence and the theory of justice; the Kantian normative framework of self-legislation and autonomy, together with the Hegelian dialectic of recognition; Saussurean structural linguistics, which shows that meaning is generated within systems of difference; Lacanian psychoanalysis, on the subject constituted in the desire of the Other and misrecognizing itself in the mirror; the empirical findings of developmental psychology and neuroscience on joint attention, attachment, and the formation of the subject; Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice; and the formal and systematic methods of theoretical physics (the purely relational ontology suggested by field theory and symmetry), engineering, and sociology. These formed the initial theoretical ground of the series.

A second set of resources, of equal importance, entered and reshaped the problematic of the series only in the course of writing, above all through scholarly exchange with Ron Eglash. The framework of generative justice shows that the crux of justice lies in whether value can flow back to its creators at the very site of its generation and circulate within relational networks free from alienated extraction; the redistribution of already-constituted value is a derivative form of this more fundamental question. Along this thread, political economy, Marx and post-Marxist philosophy, and anthropology successively entered the theoretical horizon of the series. They extended the cluster of questions concerning how value is created, circulated, and extracted from the domains of ecology and labor to intimate relationships, the most immediate site of value generation: does the value created by love, attention, and care circulate within the relation, or is it

extracted in one direction?

This turn also has a personal origin. The author's partner was trained in political economy and cultural studies. It was she who made the author aware of a gap in his own theoretical apparatus; and it was out of the motivation to understand her truly, and to meet her within a shared vocabulary, that the author undertook a systematic study of the theories and frameworks of political economy and cultural studies. The problematic of the latter half of the series is saturated with the traces of this encounter. We record this explicitly here because it confirms one of the central theses of the series: theoretical work is itself a relational practice, and thought is here the effort of one subject to draw near to another.

These traditions are by no means always in harmony; at times they stand in mutual tension. The series works precisely within that tension, seeking to provide for relational being a theoretical apparatus that combines philosophical argument with a formal skeleton.

A word is also owed to the reader concerning the form of the series. The series takes the form of a collection of independent papers gathered into books. This form has its scholarly tradition: Lacan's *Écrits* is a compilation of papers written over many years, held together by a single sustained problematic; Benjamin's essay collections take the form of a constellation, in which the pieces illuminate one another and meaning is generated in the intervals between them. The series follows this practice. The volumes enter from different sides, including the normativity of self-legislation in intimate relationships, joint attention and the formation of the subject, epistemic injustice in the situation of the marriage proposal, and the circulation and alienation of value within relationships; each paper retains the integrity of an independent argument, while cross-references and a shared problematic weave the papers together. This form is itself isomorphic with the central thesis of the series: meaning is generated within the relations of a system of differences. A single thesis runs through all the volumes: intimate relationships are the very place where the question of justice is raised first and raised most sharply. How we treat those closest to us is our most honest answer to the question of justice.

Concerning the methodological position and the expectations of the series, a further word is owed to the reader. The main body of the series belongs to theoretical research and philosophical reflection; its methods are primarily those of traditionalist social science

methodology and philosophical argument: the clarification of concepts, the construction of arguments, the critical synthesis of traditions, and, on this basis, attempts at formalization. This position means that many of the propositions of the series are, in character, testable points of departure. From this we hold a twofold expectation. First, we expect positivist methodology to carry this work forward: to translate the concepts and propositions proposed here into operational research questions, to test and revise them in the domains of experience and practice, and to discover new problems that theoretical reflection alone cannot reach; the study of intimate relationships possesses deep empirical traditions in developmental psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, and the series wishes to be an interlocutor of, and a questioner for, those traditions. Second, we expect the questions raised by the series to offer a valuable point of reference at the level of social governance: if intimate relationships are indeed the place where questions of justice first take visible form, then the insights obtained here concerning recognition, trust, the circulation of value, and care should assist reflection on institutional design, public policy, and communal life at larger scales. This twofold expectation is at the same time a self-limitation: what the series hands over are questions and frameworks, and their empirical validity and practical utility await the answers of those who come after, each in their own field.

Finally, concerning the openness of the series. The source of the series will be made public; the public version removes the acknowledgments, the dedication, and other private passages, so that it stands as a purely philosophical work, a set of propositions and arguments that others may read, cite, modify, contest, continue, and even overturn. This decision follows directly from the central thesis of the series. If relational being is indeed generative, if value emerges and circulates within networks of relation, then a work arguing that the subject comes to completion within relations ought to exist in a manner commensurate with its own thesis. The themes treated in the series, among them how the subject is constituted in the desire of the Other, how value emerges in care and recognition, and how justice is claimed under asymmetries of power, all exceed the exhaustive grasp of any single mind. This is a consequence of the theory of the series itself: the perspective of any author is necessarily partial, situated, and incomplete. To acknowledge this, and to open the gaps to the supplementation, questioning, and rewriting of others, is the mode of existence commensurate with the subject matter of the series.

This stance answers directly to generative justice: open sourcing brings the series into the circulation of value, and the new value generated by later modifications and derivations should return to this ever-expanding community of creators; a work that closes itself off, with its author monopolizing all rights of interpretation, falls into the extractive structure of the domain of knowledge and congeals into private property a meaning that ought to circulate. What we hand over is the present cross-section of a relational system still in generation. No one should pretend to possess the unlimited reason that would master the subject of this book; we extend an invitation to relation.

Throughout the writing of this series there has been one concrete person, one concrete relationship, serving as the silent reference for the refinement of every concept. May this private reference at last overflow the bounds of two people, and benefit many more who dwell within intimate relationships; may they generate one another within relation, and be just to one another.

Tokyo
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CHAPTER 1

Toward Relational Being in Intimate Life

A Family-and-Relationship Management Application as a Case Study

Positivist, evidence-based technologies increasingly mediate intimate life: couples coordinate, record, and remember through software whose default logic is measurement and optimization. This paper asks how such technologies ought instead to be governed if their aim is the flourishing of a relationship, the sustaining of what it calls relational being in intimate partnership.

It makes four kinds of claim. (1) Normative: an integrative-justice framework, resting on a relational ontology, draws on a dozen ethical and epistemic traditions and assigns each the questions it is competent to answer, in a defended ordering rather than a numerical average. (2) Practical: an ethics of dialectical-positivist practice warrants measurement differentially, site by site, according to whether a phenomenon is constituted partly by remaining unmeasured. (3) Engineering: a working application, designed by the author, instantiates the framework in software, with event-driven household coordination, a witness-only AI layer, co-creative exploration, and the deliberate absence of AI where it would intrude. (4) Diagnostic: it names wrongs specific to intimate computing, among them proxy epistemic injustice, the misattribution of an act of knowing, and the opposition between structural efficiency and relational development.

The limits are explicit. (i) Mediation's deepest harms, relational alienation and epistemic distortion, can be reduced but never wholly removed, so the framework offers harm-reduction and a discipline of restraint. (ii) Its dialectical adjudication is a practice of judgement for which no algorithm is given. (iii) The evidence is a single, author-designed case, offered as illustration and existence proof. The framework is meant, finally, to bear on adjacent settings as well: the ethics of the societal use of data, and the design of mechanisms linking the family to public institutions.

Keywords *relational being; intimate computing; integrative justice; the ethics of dialectical-positivist practice; generative presence; data ethics; the ethics of flourishing.*

*To the one I love deeply,
a fellow native of the homeland we both left behind,
yet whom I was to meet, by some miracle, for the first time
only in a country far from the one that bore us.*

两情若是久长时，又岂在朝朝暮暮

*If two hearts are to hold each other for a lifetime,
why should they grieve to be apart
from one morning, one evening, to the next?*

after Qin Guan (秦观, 1049--1100)

但愿人长久，千里共婵娟

*May we both be granted long years,
and though the whole world lie between us,
may we look up, each from afar,
upon the same bright moon.*

after Su Shi (苏轼, 1037--1101)

1.1. Introduction

A growing share of intimate life is now conducted through, or recorded by, software. Couples coordinate on shared calendars, keep joint ledgers, log meals and moods, and increasingly delegate to conversational agents the small administrative friction of a shared existence. The literature that examines this development has been overwhelmingly either empirical, concerned with how couples in fact use such tools, or design-methodological, concerned with how such tools should be built. The normative question, how *ought* the positivist, evidence-based mediation of intimate life be governed and toward what end, has received comparatively little sustained philosophical treatment. This paper is an attempt at that treatment.

The end proposed here is not efficiency, nor wellbeing as conventionally operationalized, but *relational flourishing*: the sustaining over time of a relationship understood, after the relational-ontological tradition, as ontologically prior to the individuals it relates. The paper restricts this large idea deliberately. It does not advance a general theory of relational being; it asks only what relational being requires in the specific domain of *intimate partnership*, and what follows for the technologies admitted into that domain. The restriction matters because intimate partnership has features that distinguish it from the family at large, the workplace, and the polity, and that bear directly on which forms of measurement and mediation are admissible.

The paper's central constructive proposal is an *integrative-justice* framework. By this is meant a way of bringing several normative traditions (evidentialism in epistemology, the positivism–anti-positivism dialectic in the philosophy of the human sciences, deontological ethics, feminist care ethics, Confucian role-ethics and Daoist non-interference, and the capability approach to flourishing) to bear jointly on the ethics of intimate data, in such a way that each tradition is assigned the questions it can competently answer and denied the questions it cannot. The integration is not eclectic averaging; it is a division of normative labour. Evidentialism governs what the system is entitled to claim to know; deontology fixes the inviolable constraints on the treatment of the other; care ethics governs the texture of responsiveness; the capability approach supplies the criterion of flourishing against which the whole is measured; and the East Asian sources supply an account, largely absent from the Western canon, of the positive value of restraint and

non-action.

From this framework the paper derives a practical posture it calls an *ethics of dialectical-positivist practice*. The positivist holds that domestic phenomena are legitimately quantifiable and therefore improvable through measurement. The anti-positivist, drawing on Diltheyan, Weberian, Geertzian, and Frankfurt-school sources, denies that the constitutive phenomena of intimate life submit without distortion to such operationalization. The posture defended here treats this opposition dialectically: measurement is neither universally licensed nor universally corrosive, but warranted differentially, site by site, according to whether the phenomenon at issue is partly constituted by *not* being measured. The dialectic is not resolved once and for all; it is re-adjudicated at each site of possible measurement, and the adjudication itself is treated as a first-order ethical act.

To keep the argument from floating free of practice, the paper takes as a sustained case study a working family-and-relationship management application that the author designed and maintains: roughly two dozen interlocking modules, among them a shared journal, a household ledger, a health log, a synchronized calendar, a conversational AI layer, and an etiquette aid, each of which embodies, in concrete software, a determinate answer to the question of where on the dialectical continuum it should sit. The application is used here not as the object of a design-research report but as an extended worked example: a place where the framework's abstract commitments can be seen taking on operational form, and where their costs and tensions become visible.

One feature of the case is methodologically and ethically unusual, and the paper takes it up as a philosophical instrument. The application has been built for an intimate relationship in which the other party is, at the time of writing, unaware of the application's existence. Designing for an absent or unknowing other is a limiting case that sharpens every question a relational ethics must answer: What may one party legitimately decide on behalf of a relationship the other has not been consulted about? When does preparation for another's good become presumption upon it? What is owed to a person who is the subject of a system they have not consented to? The paper argues that the integrative-justice framework yields determinate and sometimes uncomfortable answers to these questions, answers that constrain the project significantly, and that a framework which could not address the absent-other case would be inadequate to the ordinary case

as well.

The paper is accordingly organized around three questions. The first concerns normative foundations: what does relational flourishing, in intimate partnership specifically, require of the technologies admitted into that relationship, and which normative traditions are competent to specify those requirements? The second concerns integration: how may evidentialist, positivist and anti-positivist, deontological, care-ethical, Confucian-Daoist, and capability-theoretic considerations be integrated into a single coherent practice rather than left as competing and incommensurable demands? The third concerns the limiting case of the absent other: what does this framework imply for the case of designing for an intimate other who is unaware of, and has not consented to, the design, and what does that limiting case reveal about the ordinary one?

The paper's contributions are correspondingly philosophical rather than technical, and may be stated as follows: (i) a restriction and specification of the relational-being thesis to the domain of intimate partnership (§1.2); (ii) an integrative-justice framework for the ethics of intimate data, with each constituent tradition given an explicit competence and an explicit limit (§1.3–§1.4); (iii) the articulation of an ethics of dialectical-positivist practice as the framework's practical upshot (§1.5); (iv) a worked case study showing the framework instantiated in a real system (§1.6); (v) the identification of wrongs specific to intimate computing, including *proxy epistemic injustice*, the misattribution of an act of knowing, and the opposition between structural efficiency and relational development (§1.6.7, §1.8); (vi) a treatment of the absent-other problem as a test of relational ethics in general (§1.7); and (vii) a set of implications reaching beyond intimate partnership, for the ethics of the societal use of data and the design of mechanisms linking the family to public institutions (§1.10). Questions of software engineering, such as architecture, storage, and choice of frameworks, are treated only insofar as they bear on the normative argument, and are confined to a brief appendix; they are not the subject of this paper.

The remainder proceeds as follows. §1.2 specifies relational being for intimate partnership and situates its intellectual lineage. §1.3 sets out the constituent normative traditions, one per subsection. §1.4 argues for their integration. §1.5 develops the dialectical-positivist posture. §1.6 presents the case study. §1.7 takes up the absent other. §1.8 states limits. §1.9 places the paper within the surrounding literatures, and §1.10 concludes.

1.2. Relational Being in Intimate Partnership

1.2.1 Intellectual Lineage

The ontological commitments developed in this section are post-phenomenological in the lineage of Verbeek (2005), who reads artefacts as mediating rather than merely containing the practices around them, and relational in the lineages of Buber (1937), for whom the *I-Thou* relation is ontologically primary, Ames (2011) and Tu (1985), for whom the self is constituted in its roles and relations, and Borgmann (1984), who develops the concept of *focal practices* whose value is intrinsic and erodable by instrumentalization. What this paper adds is a restriction of these large ontological claims to the specific domain of intimate partnership, and an argument that the restriction changes what the ontology demands. A fuller placement of the paper within the literatures of intimate technology, self-quantification, and autobiographical design is deferred to §1.9, after the framework it positions has been set out.

1.2.2 The Ontological Ground: Relationality and Generative Presence

The framework rests on a relational ontology, which the present author has developed at length elsewhere (Huang 2025) and which converges with a wide tradition: Buber’s primacy of the *I-Thou* relation (Buber 1937), Gergen’s relational being (Gergen 2009), Whitehead’s process metaphysics of relational “occasions of experience” (Whitehead 1978), Heidegger’s *Mitsein* or being-with (Heidegger 1962), the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination and emptiness (Nāgārjuna 1995), and Confucian role-ethics (Ames 2011). The shared claim is that the basic units of being are not substances but relations: the self is not a self-standing atom that subsequently enters relations, but an effect that becomes perceptible only as it enters a relational structure. A useful formalization is algebraic: a group is defined not by the intrinsic nature of its elements but by the operation that relates them, so that prior to instantiation only the field of potential relations exists, not a collection of self-subsistent entities (Huang 2025). On this view, what is primary is the relation, not the relata.

This ontology carries a consequence that the rest of the paper depends on. If the self is constituted relationally, then no symbolic structure, no record, no representation, ever

coincides with the relational being it refracts; each captures the relation only partially and at the cost of a remainder it cannot hold. The author’s prior work names the lived, generative counterpart to this structural insight *generative presence*: the procedural and phenomenological mode through which relational being becomes active in experience, the manner in which existence manifests through practice, attention, and responsiveness rather than through representation (Huang 2025). Presence contrasts with representation as enactment contrasts with abstraction: representation abstracts, presence enacts. The pairing is dialectical, since relation without presence collapses into abstract structure while presence without relation collapses into solipsistic immediacy. For an intimate technology this distinction is foundational. A system that traffics only in representation, in records, dashboards, and summaries, operates at the level of the symbolic and necessarily misses the generative presence in which the relation actually lives; the design question becomes how a system might make room for presence rather than substituting ever-finer representation for it.

The same ontology yields a precise account of what an artificial conversational agent is and is not, an account on which §1.6.8 and the case study later draw. Human and collective subjects are grounded in a pre-symbolic relational reality; an AI language layer is not. Its operations are confined to the symbolic, generated by conditional probability over prior symbols, and it therefore exhibits what the author’s prior work calls a *pseudo-presence*: it manifests within the symbolic as if it were a subject, while lacking the ontological grounding in relational being that genuine presence requires (Huang 2025). This is neither praise nor dismissal of such systems but a placement of them: an AI in an intimate setting can mediate, prompt, and witness, but it cannot itself be the relational other, and a design that forgets this stages a counterfeit of presence where presence is what was wanted.

1.2.3 The Thesis and Its Restriction

The relational thesis, in its full generality, ranges over all relations whatever. This paper restricts it to the domain of *intimate partnership* and asks what, in that domain specifically, it requires. On the relational view the relevant unit of ethical concern in an intimate partnership is the relation itself, which has a reality and a trajectory of its own, rather than two individuals and the contract between them.

The restriction is consequential. A great deal that is true of relational being in the family at large, the workplace, or the polity does not transfer to intimate partnership, which is distinguished by at least three features. First, it is *non-role-defined*: unlike the parent–child or employer–employee relation, it is not structured by an antecedent distribution of authority, so that no party may invoke a role to justify deciding unilaterally on the other’s behalf. Second, it is constituted by *voluntary vulnerability*: each party discloses what they are under no obligation to disclose, and the relation’s depth is a function of that uncompelled disclosure. Third, it depends constitutively on *the unsaid*: a portion of what sustains the relation is precisely what is left unmeasured, unrecorded, and unspoken, so that exhaustive articulation would deplete rather than enrich it. This third feature is the intimate-partnership instance of the general ontological point that no representation coincides with relational being: the remainder that symbolization cannot reach is, in the intimate case, constitutive of the bond.

1.2.4 The Vulnerability of Intimate Partnership to Mediation

Each of these three features is directly vulnerable to the wrong kind of technological mediation. Non-role-definition is threatened by any system that silently arrogates decision authority to one party. Voluntary vulnerability is threatened by any system that converts disclosure from a gift into a metric. The constitutive unsaid is threatened by any system whose default is to record, surface, and summarize. The general diagnosis offered in the author’s prior work applies here with particular force: as symbolic mediation proliferates, the gap between the symbolic and the relational Real widens, and the I-Thou relation erodes into an I-It relation conducted through interfaces that do not respond as subjects (Huang 2025; Buber 1937). A technology admitted into an intimate partnership cannot, therefore, be evaluated solely by whether it performs its function efficiently; it must be evaluated by what it does to the three features that make the relation the kind of thing it is, and by whether it widens or narrows the gap between symbolic mediation and relational presence. This is the criterion against which the case study in §1.6 is assessed.

1.3. An Integrative-Justice Framework

This section sets out the normative traditions the paper brings to bear on the ethics of intimate data. The exposition of each follows a fixed pattern: an account of the tradition's core claims and principal sources, developed at enough length to do the tradition justice; the question about intimate data over which the tradition is *competent*; the question it is *not* competent to answer and must cede to another tradition; and, where useful, an anticipation of how the tradition bears on the case study of §1.6. The traditions are presented in an order that is itself argued for: a methodological overframe, dialectics, first, then the epistemic traditions that govern what may be known and claimed, then the substantive ethical traditions that govern what may be done, and finally the political-economic tradition that governs where value comes to rest. The claim that the result is an integration rather than an eclectic heap is defended in §1.4.

One orienting commitment runs through the whole and deserves statement at the outset, since it shapes how every tradition below is read. The positive aim of the system, beneath all the constraints and refusals the framework imposes, is eudaimonic in the sense developed in §1.3.11: not the optimization of states but the provision of a *generative field*, a space in which the partners' shared self-realization can unfold of its own movement. The design philosophy common to the system's modules is to furnish such a field and then to withdraw, rather than to drive the relation toward any measured outcome; the constraints of the framework mark the boundaries of the field, and the criterion of flourishing judges whether the field is, in fact, generative. This commitment connects the developmental, eudaimonic, and capability-theoretic traditions below into a single positive orientation, against which the negative work of the constraints is to be understood.

1.3.1 Dialectics: The Method of the Whole

Before any single normative tradition is introduced, a word is needed about the *form* the integration will take, for that form is itself a philosophical commitment. The framework developed here is dialectical in a sense that descends from Hegel and is sharpened, for present purposes, by Adorno. The minimal Hegelian thought is that a concept, pressed hard enough, generates its own opposite, and that understanding advances not by choosing between the two but by grasping the more comprehensive structure in which each is

a one-sided moment (Hegel 1977). Applied to the ethics of intimate data, the dialectical method refuses at the outset the two stances that dominate public discussion: techno-optimism, which holds that more measurement is more knowledge and therefore more good, and techno-romanticism, which holds that measurement as such desecrates what it touches. Each of these, the dialectical method insists, is a one-sided moment of a truth neither can state alone: measurement both reveals and deforms, and which it does depends on what is measured and how.

The Hegelian inheritance must, however, be qualified in one decisive respect, and here Adorno is the better guide. Classical dialectics aims at *Aufhebung*, a synthesis that sublates and preserves the opposed moments in a higher unity, and there is a standing temptation to treat such synthesis as a final resting point at which the tension is dissolved. Adorno's *negative dialectics* resists exactly this temptation: it holds that the reconciling synthesis is often a premature peace that suppresses a contradiction still really present in the object, and that thought does better to dwell in the contradiction than to paper over it (Adorno 1973). The relevance to intimate data is direct. There is no stable synthesis at which the claims of intimacy and the claims of coordination are permanently reconciled; the diary will always resist the dashboard, and the dashboard will always be useful. The framework therefore does not seek a formula that, once found, ends the argument. It seeks a *practice* of perpetual re-adjudication, in which the contradiction between measuring and refraining is held open and decided afresh at each site, never abolished. The dialectical commitment is thus the deepest layer of the framework: it is the reason the framework is a procedure rather than a rule, and the reason §1.5 can speak of an ethics that is “never finally settled.”

The competence of dialectics is methodological and total: it governs not any particular question about intimate data but the manner in which all the questions are to be held together. Its limit is the obverse of this competence: precisely because it is a form rather than a content, dialectics specifies no determinate prohibition or permission on its own. It tells us that measurement reveals and deforms; it does not tell us, of *this* diary entry, which it does. For that, the substantive traditions are required.

1.3.2 Evidentialism: The Limits of Warranted Assertion

Evidentialism is the epistemological thesis that the justification of a belief is wholly a function of one's evidence for it: a belief is justified to the precise degree that the evidence supports it, and to believe beyond the evidence is to believe without warrant (Feldman and Conee 1985). In its classic moralized form the thesis acquires an ethical edge: Clifford (1999) argued, in a phrase whose force survives its Victorian setting, that it is wrong always and everywhere to believe anything on insufficient evidence, on the ground that beliefs are not private but feed into shared action and so carry a responsibility to the community that will act on them. The contemporary refinement strips away the universal moralism while keeping the core: justification supervenes on evidence, and a system or person that asserts more than the evidence licenses commits an epistemic wrong even when, by luck, the assertion is true.

Transposed to a data system that mediates intimate life, evidentialism governs the *modality* of everything the system asserts: the confidence, the precision, and the hedging with which its outputs are framed. The point is easily underestimated because the violations are so familiar as to seem natural. A health module that infers caloric intake from a free-text description of a meal has evidence, at best, for a wide range; to display a single confident integer is to assert vastly more than the evidence supports, laundering a guess into a fact through the typographic authority of a clean number on a clean screen. A module that estimates a mood from the lexical content of a diary entry has, at best, weak probabilistic evidence about a fabulously complex inner state; to label the day with an emoji is to commit, in miniature, exactly the Cliffordian wrong. Evidentialism's demand is therefore not that such estimates never be computed but that they be *expressed honestly*: ranges rather than points, "roughly" rather than "is," the visible marking of an inference as an inference. The competence of evidentialism is over epistemic warrant: it tells the system what, given its evidence, it is entitled to claim, and it forbids the false precision by which interfaces routinely overstate their knowledge.

Evidentialism's limit is equally sharp, and naming it motivates the very next tradition. Evidentialism is a theory of how to fit belief to evidence; it is silent on what *ought to be inquired into at all*, and silent on who counts as a credible source. It can rule that a sentiment score, once computed, must not be asserted beyond its warrant; it cannot

rule that computing a sentiment score over a beloved’s diary is a wrong even when the computation is impeccable, nor can it detect the subtler wrong of systematically crediting one partner’s data-borne self-report over the other’s spoken word. The first of these belongs to substantive ethics, addressed below. The second belongs to a tradition that extends epistemology into the domain of justice, to which we turn immediately.

1.3.3 Epistemic Injustice: Credibility and Interpretive Fairness

Evidentialism asks whether belief fits evidence; it does not ask whether the social machinery of credibility is fair. That question is the subject of Miranda Fricker’s account of *epistemic injustice*, a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007). Fricker distinguishes two forms. *Testimonial injustice* occurs when a hearer, under the influence of prejudice, gives a speaker less credibility than their word deserves: the speaker’s testimony is discounted not because it is unreliable but because of who they are taken to be. *Hermeneutical injustice* is deeper and more structural: it occurs when a gap in the collective resources of interpretation leaves some person or group unable to render an important part of their own experience intelligible, because the concepts that would make it sayable have not been developed or have been developed only from a dominant standpoint. The paradigm cases are social, but the structure transfers with unsettling precision to intimate data systems.

A system commits something closely analogous to testimonial injustice whenever it positions one channel of evidence as authoritative and thereby silently downgrades another. Consider a system that infers a partner’s wellbeing from sleep-tracker and activity data and presents the inference with quiet confidence; when the partner says, in words, that they are in fact unhappy, the architecture has already established the sensor stream as the credible witness and the spoken word as soft, unreliable, anecdotal. The person has been wronged as a knower of their own life: the system has arrogated to its instrumentation an authority over the person’s experience that belongs, in an intimate relation between equals, to the person. Worse still is the hermeneutical case. Much of what matters most in intimate life, ambivalence, the slow alteration of feeling, the kind of sadness that is also a form of love, has no clean operationalization; a system whose categories admit only what its sensors can register does not merely fail to capture these experiences but actively crowds out the interpretive space in which they might be articulated, training its

users to recognize in themselves only what the schema can hold. This is hermeneutical injustice enacted in software: the impoverishment of a person's means of understanding themselves, brought about by the dominance of a measuring vocabulary.

The competence of the epistemic-injustice tradition is therefore over a question neither evidentialism nor the substantive ethical traditions can pose in its own terms: *whether the system, in the very structure of how it gathers and weights evidence, treats each partner fairly as a knower, both of the shared world and of themselves*. It supplies a positive design imperative, that the person's first-personal testimony retain standing against the machine's inference, and a negative one, that the system not narrow the interpretive resources through which its users can understand their own lives. The case study will identify a third variant, distinct from the two in Fricker's original taxonomy, in which the system performs an act of knowing or remembering on a partner's behalf in such a way that the other is led to misattribute its source (§1.6.7); this *proxy epistemic injustice*, as the paper will call it, is a distinctively technological wrong worth marking. The limit of the tradition is that it diagnoses such wrongs without, by itself, fixing the inviolable boundaries whose breach constitutes the gravest wrongs; for those boundaries we need deontology, and for the account of the affective texture that hermeneutical generosity requires we need the ethics of care. Both are below.

1.3.4 Positivism and Anti-Positivism: The Question of Measurability

The opposition between positivism and anti-positivism is the axis along which the whole question of measurement turns, and it deserves fuller statement than the slogans usually allow. The positivist tradition in the human sciences, descending from Comte and consolidated in twentieth-century empirical social science, holds that social and psychological phenomena are in principle measurable, that the methods which succeeded in the natural sciences are the model for knowledge as such, and that measurement is the precondition of rational improvement: what can be counted can be compared, what can be compared can be optimized. Its appeal in the domestic setting is real and should not be caricatured. A household genuinely is, in part, a site of logistics, expenditure, and scheduling, and for that part the positivist promise holds: measurement clarifies, and clarity reduces the friction of shared life.

The anti-positivist or interpretivist counter-tradition is not a single doctrine but a convergent family of objections. Dilthey drew the foundational distinction between *Erklären*, the causal explanation proper to the natural sciences, and *Verstehen*, the interpretive understanding proper to the human sciences, on the ground that human life is meaningful in a way that nature is not and so calls for a method that grasps meaning from within rather than subsuming behaviour under external law (Dilthey 1989). Weber built an entire interpretive sociology on the demand that social action be understood in terms of the subjective meaning the actor attaches to it (Weber 1978). Geertz, in the anthropological register, argued that human conduct must be read through “thick description,” which records not the bare physical motion but the dense web of significance that makes a wink a wink rather than a twitch (Geertz 1973). And the Frankfurt School added the critical edge: the extension of instrumental, calculative reason into every domain of life is not a neutral gain in knowledge but a form of domination, one that reconstitutes its objects in its own image and forgets that it has done so.

The competence of this pair is over the prior question that evidentialism explicitly cedes: *which phenomena admit of measurement without distortion*. The interpretivist contribution is the recognition that for certain phenomena the very act of measuring is not a neutral registration but an intervention that alters the phenomenon, sometimes constituting a different phenomenon altogether. The empirical literature confirms what the philosophy predicts: real-time emotional measurement changes the emotion it purports to record (Howell et al. 2018), and the data of feeling is in important part constructed by the apparatus that elicits it (Boehner et al. 2007). The limit of the axis, taken alone, is that it frames the decision, measure or refrain, without supplying a procedure for making it in a given case; it tells us that some phenomena are deformed by measurement without telling us, here and now, whether this one is. Supplying the procedure is the work of the dialectical posture in §1.5, which draws on all the traditions at once.

1.3.5 Structuralist Psychoanalysis: Desire, the Other, and the Unsymbolizable

The traditions surveyed so far share an assumption that the subject of intimate life is, at bottom, transparent to itself: it has experiences it could in principle articulate, preferences it could in principle report, a wellbeing that measurement might in principle track. Structuralist psychoanalysis, and pre-eminently the work of Jacques Lacan, denies

this assumption at its root, and in doing so supplies the framework with a warning the other traditions cannot generate from their own resources. The structuralist background is Saussure's: a sign takes its value not from a positive content of its own but from its differential position within a system, so that meaning is relational through and through, an effect of structure rather than of substance (Saussure 1959). Lacan's decisive move was to claim that the unconscious is structured like such a language, and that the human subject is therefore not the self-present author of its meanings but an effect produced within a symbolic order that precedes and exceeds it (Lacan 2006).

Three Lacanian theses bear directly on intimate data. First, *desire is the desire of the Other*: what a person wants is not a fact lodged in them awaiting measurement but is constituted in relation to others and to the symbolic order, mediated, deferred, and often opaque to the desiring subject themselves (Lacan 1977). A system that purports to read a partner's desires from behavioural data thus mistakes the very nature of desire, treating as a retrievable datum what is in truth a relational and shifting structure. Second, the subject is split: there is no harmonious inner unity for an interface to mirror back, but a divided subject marked by what escapes its own conscious grasp. Third, and most consequential for design, there is the *objet petit a* and the broader category of the Real: that which cannot be symbolized, the remainder that no signifier captures and no measurement reaches. In an intimate relation, a great deal of what binds two people belongs to this unsymbolizable remainder; it is precisely not available to articulation, let alone to quantification, and the attempt to capture it does not approximate it but substitutes for it a manageable token that is not the thing.

The critical force of this tradition, developed in the ideology-critical key by Žižek (1989), is to expose a fantasy structuring much intimate technology: the fantasy of a relationship made fully transparent, fully known, its remainders abolished, its desires legible on a dashboard. Lacan's account implies that this fantasy is not merely unattainable but *misconceives its object*, and that pursuing it damages the relation, for what makes the other a genuine other, an inexhaustible Thou rather than a solved problem, is exactly the remainder that resists capture. The competence of structuralist psychoanalysis in the framework is thus over the constitution of the intimate subject: it establishes that the partner is a split, desiring, partly opaque being, and that this opacity is a condition

of there being an other to love at all. Its limit is that it is diagnostic and cautionary rather than prescriptive: it tells us what intimate technology must not pretend to do and why the pretence wounds, but it does not by itself supply either the inviolable rules or the positive texture of care. For these the framework turns to its substantive ethical traditions.

1.3.6 Deontology: The Inviolable Constraints

Deontological ethics supplies what consequence-sensitive theories structurally cannot: constraints that hold regardless of the good that breaching them might produce. In its Kantian form the position rests on the dignity of persons as ends in themselves. The Formula of Humanity in the *Groundwork* commands that one act so as to treat humanity, whether in one's own person or in that of another, never merely as a means but always at the same time as an end (Kant 1998). To treat a person merely as a means is to use them in a way to which they could not, as a rational agent, consent; the wrong is independent of whether the using turns out well. A second Kantian formula, the Formula of Universal Law, tests a maxim by whether it could be willed as a universal law without contradiction, and a third, the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends, envisions a community in which each rational being is at once author and subject of the laws that bind all. What unites the formulations, for present purposes, is the thought that there are things one may not do to a person, full stop, because doing them is incompatible with respecting them as a self-determining end.

The competence of deontology in the ethics of intimate data is over precisely these inviolable constraints, and the intimate setting gives them sharp and specific content. At least three constraints follow directly. First, *the prohibition on covert surveillance*: to monitor an intimate without their knowledge is to convert a partner into an object of study, a specimen rather than a co-author of the relation, and so to treat them merely as a means to one's own knowledge or reassurance; it is impermissible however benign the watcher's motive and however useful the data. Second, *the prohibition on repurposing disclosure*: what a person reveals within the trust of an intimate relation may not be redirected to ends they did not endorse and would not endorse, for to do so is to exploit their self-disclosure against the terms on which it was given. Third, *the requirement of genuine consent*: agreement to be measured must be real, informed, and revocable, not

manufactured by design patterns that engineer assent, since a consent the system has engineered is not the person's own and respects their agency only in form. These constraints are absolute within the framework: they are not magnitudes to be traded against benefits but boundaries within which all trading must occur.

The limit of deontology is the perennial one its critics name: its abstraction. The categorical imperative establishes that I may not treat my partner merely as a means; it is silent on what, concretely, attentiveness to this particular person on this particular evening requires. It draws the outer wall of the permissible and says nothing about how to inhabit the space within. It can tell the designer that a notification must not deceive or manipulate; it cannot tell the designer whether a given notification is warm or cold, timely or intrusive, present or overbearing. For the texture of the permissible, rules give out, and the ethics of care begins.

1.3.7 Feminist Care Ethics: The Texture of Responsiveness

The ethics of care emerged as a sustained challenge to the assumption, shared by deontology and consequentialism alike, that moral reasoning consists in the impartial application of universal principles. Gilligan (1982) began from an empirical observation, that women's moral reasoning, far from being deficient by the standard of abstract justice, articulated a different and equally valid orientation, one centred on responsibility, relationship, and response to concrete need rather than on the adjudication of competing rights. Noddings (1984) developed this into a full ethical theory in which the basic moral relation is that between the one-caring and the cared-for, and in which caring is not a feeling but a practice of *engrossment* in and *motivational displacement* toward the particular other. Held (2006) extended the ethic from the interpersonal to the political, and Tronto (1993) analysed care into a sequence of phases, attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, each with its own characteristic failure, thereby giving the ethic the articulated structure its early critics claimed it lacked.

What care ethics contributes to the framework is an account of everything the rule-based traditions cannot reach: the manner, timing, tone, and attunement of the system's presence in the relation. A notification can satisfy every deontological constraint, deceive no one, manipulate no one, surveil no one, and still be a moral failure of the kind that

matters most in intimate life: cold where it should be warm, mechanical where it should be tender, present where it should have kept silence, prompting where it should have waited. Care ethics also reconceives the system’s very purpose. The measure of a caring technology is not the efficiency it delivers nor the pleasant states it produces but whether it sustains and deepens the relation’s responsiveness to the particular, irreplaceable, vulnerable other, the person who cannot be substituted by any other person with the same metrics. Tronto’s phase of attentiveness has a direct design correlate: a caring system must first of all be the kind of thing that notices, and notices the right things, which are frequently not the things easiest to measure.

A heuristic from popular relationship psychology may be mentioned here for its practical suggestiveness, with an explicit caveat about its standing. Chapman’s notion of “five love languages,” which holds that people characteristically express and receive care through words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, or physical touch, offers designers a usable vocabulary for the channels through which a caring system might attune itself to a particular partner (Chapman 1992). The caveat is that this is a work of popular rather than academic psychology, with weak empirical support for its strong claims, in particular its typology of discrete “languages” and its developmental and clinical assertions; it is cited here only as a source of design heuristics for the texture of care, not as a validated theory, and nothing in the framework depends on it. Within those limits it is suggestive: it reminds the designer that attunement is plural, that the same gesture may register as care to one partner and as noise to another, and that a caring system should therefore make room for several registers of expression rather than assuming one.

Care ethics carries a famous internal danger that the framework must name, because naming it is part of the argument for integration. An ethic of pure responsiveness, unchecked by justice and rights, can slide into partiality, the erosion of boundaries, and the dissolution of the carer into the needs of the cared-for; care without justice can smother. In the intimate-data setting this danger has a precise shape: it is the over-attentiveness that, meaning only to be present and responsive, curdles into the anxious monitoring of a beloved, the very wrong the absent-other analysis of §1.7 identifies. An ethic of care that knew no deontological boundary might positively endorse such monitoring as a form of devoted attention. This is why care needs deontology as surely as deontology needs

care: the one supplies the inviolable wall, the other the warmth of what is built within it, and each without the other deforms. The mutual need is not a weakness of either theory but the structural fact that grounds their integration.

1.3.8 Confucian Role-Ethics and Daoist Non-Interference: The Value of Restraint

The Western traditions assembled so far, for all their differences, share a tacit orientation toward *action*: ethics, on each of them, is largely a matter of what one must do, may do, or must not do. The East Asian sources supply what this orientation structurally obscures, a positive and developed account of the value of *not acting*, of restraint as itself an achievement rather than a mere absence. Confucian role-ethics, as reconstructed by Ames (2011) and Tu (1985), takes the person to be constituted in and through their relations and the roles those relations carry, so that one becomes a self by the cultivated, lifelong refinement of how one stands in relation to others. Central to this cultivation is *li*, the vast Confucian category covering ritual, propriety, and the fine grain of appropriate conduct, which crucially includes the discipline of knowing what to leave undone and unsaid. *Li* is not empty formality; it is respect made concrete in restraint, the cultivated capacity to give another person room, to not press, to not demand the articulation of what is better left in dignified silence.

Daoism presses the valorization of restraint to its philosophical limit. The *Daodejing*'s counsel of *wu wei*, ordinarily rendered “non-action” but better understood as action that does not force, that works with rather than against the grain of things, rests on the conviction that the most important goods cannot be produced by direct interventionist effort and are in fact destroyed by it. The dictum that “reversal is the movement of the Dao” (*fan zhe dao zhi dong*) captures the recurring observation that forcing a thing toward its goal often produces the opposite, that grasping drives away, that the anxious pursuit of intimacy repels the intimacy pursued. A relationship, on this view, belongs to the class of goods that grow of themselves when given room and wither under management; it is cultivated as a garden is cultivated, by patient attention to conditions, not as a machine is operated, by direct manipulation of outputs.

The competence of these sources is over a question the action-centred traditions cannot even formulate in their own terms: *when the right design decision is to build nothing*, to

leave a capacity unimplemented, a datum unrecorded, a prompt unsent, precisely as an expression of respect and of trust in the relation's own movement. This is the deepest correction the framework receives, because the disposition it counteracts, the engineer's and the optimizer's bias toward building the feature because the feature can be built, is so nearly invisible from within the action-oriented traditions. The limit of the East Asian sources, for a paper addressed to the modern intimate relation between equals who retain independent standing, is that they do not by themselves furnish the vocabulary of individual rights and revocable consent that such a relation also requires; classical Confucianism in particular presupposes a role structure more hierarchical than the egalitarian partnership at issue here. They are integrated, therefore, not as a replacement for the justice traditions but as their indispensable supplement: the source within the framework of a standing presumption in favour of restraint.

1.3.9 The Capability Approach: The Criterion of Flourishing

If the foregoing traditions tell us what may be claimed, what may be measured, what may not be done, and what is better left undone, the capability approach supplies the standard against which the entire arrangement is finally to be judged. Developed by Sen (1999) as a critique of welfarist and resourcist accounts of wellbeing, and given a determinate content by Nussbaum (2000), the approach evaluates a state of affairs not by the resources it distributes nor by the subjective satisfactions it generates but by the *capabilities* it secures: the real, effective freedoms persons have to be and to do what they have reason to value. The distinction from resourcism is crucial. Two people with identical resources may have radically unequal real freedoms, since the conversion of resources into actual functionings depends on circumstance; and the distinction from welfarism matters equally, since a person may report contentment precisely because their horizons have been adaptively narrowed to fit a constrained life. The right question, on this view, is not “how much does the arrangement provide” nor “how satisfied are its subjects” but “what range of valuable being and doing does it actually open or foreclose.”

Applied as the framework's overarching criterion, the capability approach reframes the entire evaluation of an intimate technology. The question is never whether the system makes the relationship more efficient, nor whether it produces more agreeable feelings on a given evening, but whether it expands or contracts the partners' real freedom to become

who they have reason to want to be, both together and as separate persons. This criterion has teeth precisely against the most seductive failure mode of optimization. A system might increase coordination, reduce friction, and elevate reported satisfaction while quietly narrowing the space of who the partners are permitted to become, training them toward the legible, the trackable, the optimizable, and away from the unmeasured experiments and reversals through which people actually grow. By the capability standard such a system is a failure however smooth its operation and however high its satisfaction scores, because it has traded real freedom for managed contentment, which is the adaptive-preference trap installed in the home.

The capability approach supplies the criterion but, by its own structure, not the constraints. Being broadly consequentialist in form, an evaluation of net capability could in principle license the violation of an individual's rights for an aggregate expansion of valuable freedom, and could in principle countenance an intervention that the dignity of the person, or the texture of care, forbids. It therefore depends on deontology to fix the boundaries within which capability-expansion may be pursued, on care ethics to specify the manner of the pursuit, and on the East Asian sources to remind it that some capabilities flourish only when not directly engineered. The criterion tells us what to aim at; it does not tell us what we may do in the aiming. This dependence is, once again, not a defect but a pointer toward integration.

1.3.10 Developmental Psychology: Joint Attention and the Theory of Mind

The relational ontology of §1.2.2 makes a strong claim: that meaning and selfhood are co-constituted between subjects rather than generated within them. That claim is philosophical, but it is not without empirical corroboration, and the developmental psychology of shared intentionality supplies the corroboration. Human cognition, on the influential account of Tomasello, is distinctively *cultural* cognition, made possible by a capacity for *shared intentionality* that emerges in infancy and that other primates largely lack (Tomasello 1999; Tomasello et al. 2005). The foundational mechanism is *joint attention*: two subjects attending together to the same object while each is aware that the other attends, a triadic structure (self, other, world) from which shared meaning is built. The complementary capacity is the *theory of mind*, the ability to attribute mental states to others and thereby to model the other as a centre of experience rather than as a moving

body (Premack and Woodruff 1978). Together these capacities are the developmental substrate of relational being: they are how, in fact, two human subjects come to share a world.

The competence of this tradition within the framework is to ground the otherwise abstract notion of co-presence (§1.6.8) in a mechanism that is real, studied, and specific. When the framework asks a system to host the partners' shared attention rather than to absorb each partner's attention separately, it is asking for the technological cultivation of joint attention in the precise developmental sense, and the design difference between the two is sharp: a feed that captures each partner's gaze individually is the negation of joint attention, while a shared object the partners attend to together, aware that they do so, is its realization. The theory of mind enters as a constraint of a different kind. A system that purported to model a partner's mind and to report its model to the other would not be supporting theory of mind but supplanting it, substituting a machine's representation for the irreducible work of one person imagining another; the framework's account of the AI as pseudo-presence (§1.2.2) here acquires empirical teeth, since the relational work of mind-reading is exactly the work the pseudo-subject cannot do and must not pretend to do. The limit of developmental psychology is that it describes the mechanisms of shared meaning without prescribing their right use; it tells us what joint attention is and that it matters, but it cedes to the ethical traditions the question of what may rightly be done with it.

1.3.11 Eudaimonia: Flourishing as a Generative Dynamic

The capability approach (§1.3.9) supplies a criterion of flourishing stated in terms of real freedoms; the eudaimonic tradition supplies the complementary account of flourishing as a *dynamic of self-realization*, and it is this tradition that grounds the generative-field commitment announced at the opening of this section. The Aristotelian root holds that the human good is not a state to be reached but an activity, the active exercise and realization of one's characteristic capacities over a whole life. Contemporary psychology has given the idea operational content: Ryff's model of psychological well-being identifies dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, purpose, and positive relations with others as constituents of eudaimonic, as distinct from merely hedonic, well-being (Ryff and Keyes 1995). What distinguishes the eudaimonic from the hedonic is decisive for design:

a system optimized for the hedonic produces agreeable states, while a system answering to the eudaimonic provides the conditions under which growth, purpose, and relation can be actively realized, conditions that frequently involve difficulty, novelty, and the unmeasured, rather than comfort.

This yields the framework’s central positive commitment, distinct from the negative work of its constraints. The design philosophy common to the system’s modules is the provision of a *generative field*: a bounded space, marked off by the framework’s constraints, within which the partners’ shared self-realization can unfold without being driven toward any measured outcome. The eudaimonic tradition supplies the reason this is the right aim, namely that flourishing is a self-realizing activity that cannot be produced from outside but only afforded, and the design correlate, namely that the system’s task is to furnish the field and withdraw, in the manner of the Daoist *wu wei* (§1.3.8) and of the witness rather than the advisor (§1.6). Its relation to the capability approach is one of complement: the capability approach states the criterion against which a generative field is judged, whether it expands real freedom to be and do, while eudaimonia states the dynamic the field is meant to host, the active realization through which such freedom is exercised. The limit of the eudaimonic tradition, taken alone, is that it specifies the positive aim without supplying the inviolable constraints that keep the pursuit of flourishing from overriding the person; for those it depends, as the capability approach does, on the deontological and care-ethical traditions.

1.3.12 Generative Justice: The Resting Place of Value

A final tradition addresses a question none of the others quite reaches: not what may be known, measured, or done, but where the *value* generated within the relation, and within the system that mediates it, is permitted to come to rest. Ron Eglash’s account of *generative justice* begins from a critique of how value circulates under extractive arrangements. Distributive justice, on Eglash’s analysis, accepts that value will be alienated from those who generate it and asks only how the alienated surplus should afterwards be redistributed; generative justice asks the prior and more radical question of how value might be kept circulating among, and returning to, those who generate it, never alienated in the first place (Eglash 2016). The model is drawn partly from ecological cycles, in which the value of an ecosystem is retained within it rather than extracted, and partly from

a reading of Marx’s account of how capital alienates the value labour produces (Marx 1976), generalized from labour-value to ecological and expressive value as well.

The relevance to intimate data is both pointed and, for the dominant industry model, indicting. The prevailing architecture of consumer technology is extractive in exactly Eglash’s sense: the value that users generate, their attention, their disclosures, the rich record of their shared life, is alienated from the relation that produced it and accumulated elsewhere, on servers and in business models the partners neither see nor control, to be monetized by parties external to the relation. Generative justice supplies the principle that condemns this arrangement and the criterion for an alternative: the value generated within an intimate relation, including the data that is the sediment of that relation’s history, must remain within the relation, circulating between the partners and returning to them, never extracted to enrich a third party or even to enrich one partner at the other’s expense. This yields concrete and unusual design imperatives: local data ownership rather than cloud extraction, architectures in which the record of a shared life is held by those whose life it is, and a positive prohibition on the conversion of intimate value into someone else’s surplus.

The competence of generative justice is thus over the political economy of the relation’s value, the dimension along which questions of ownership, extraction, and alienation are posed, a dimension orthogonal to and unaddressed by the epistemic and ethical traditions above. Its limit is that it speaks to the circulation and retention of value but not to the prior questions of what may be measured or claimed, nor to the inviolable treatment of persons; a system could be perfectly generative in Eglash’s sense, alienating no value to any third party, and still commit covert surveillance of one partner by the other. Generative justice closes the framework by addressing where value rests, but it presupposes the rest of the framework to govern how that value was permitted to arise.

1.3.13 Data Ethics: Contextual Integrity and the Sediment of a Shared Life

The traditions assembled so far touch the ethics of data at many points, but the contemporary field of data ethics has developed concepts specific enough to warrant their own treatment. Chief among them is Helen Nissenbaum’s principle of *contextual integrity*, which holds that the flow of personal information is governed by norms specific to

the context in which it arose, and that a privacy violation consists in the inappropriate movement of information across contextual boundaries rather than in disclosure as such (Nissenbaum 2010). The principle dissolves a confusion that has long bedevilled privacy talk. The question is never simply whether information is shared, but whether it flows according to the norms of the context that generated it; medical information appropriately shared with a physician is violated when sold to an insurer, not because it has moved but because it has moved against the informational norms of the medical relation.

Applied to intimate partnership, contextual integrity yields a determinate and demanding standard. The intimate relation is a context with its own informational norms, and those norms are unusually strict: what is disclosed within it is disclosed on the tacit understanding that it remains within it, neither flowing outward to third parties nor, often, flowing onward even between the partners in forms the discloser did not intend, such as aggregation, scoring, or permanent retention. A diary entry shared in the expectation that it may be read is not thereby licensed for sentiment analysis; a confidence offered in conversation is not thereby licensed for indefinite storage and later retrieval. The competence of data ethics within the framework is over these norms of appropriate flow, together with the cognate principles the field has articulated: data minimization, which counsels collecting only what the immediate purpose requires; purpose limitation, which forbids the silent repurposing of data to ends beyond those for which it was given; and a right to be forgotten, which treats the erasability of the record as itself a condition of a relation that is permitted to change. These principles operationalize, in the specific medium of data, the deontological and care-ethical commitments stated above, and they connect to the relational ontology directly: the data a relationship generates is the sediment of that relation's history, neither a neutral resource nor an asset but a trace of lived presence, and to be governed accordingly.

The limit of data ethics, taken on its own, is that it is a regional ethics: it governs information flows with precision but does not supply the deeper account of why the intimate context has the norms it does, nor the criterion of flourishing against which the whole is judged. It receives those from the relational ontology and the capability approach respectively. Within its region, however, it is indispensable, for it translates the framework's abstract commitments into the concrete vocabulary, flow, minimization,

purpose, erasure, in which the design of an actual data system is necessarily conducted.

1.3.14 Recognition and the Face of the Other: Levinas and Honneth

A final pair of sources deepens the account of what the other is owed. Levinas locates the origin of ethics in the face-to-face encounter, in which the presence of the Other calls the self into a responsibility that precedes and exceeds any contract or calculation; the Other is not an object to be comprehended but an infinity that overflows every representation I could form of them (Levinas 1969). This is the ethical correlate of the ontological point already made: just as no symbol coincides with relational being, no representation of the partner, however data-rich, captures the person, and the attempt to substitute the representation for the person is not merely an epistemic error but an ethical failure, a refusal of the responsibility the face commands. Honneth's theory of recognition supplies the developmental and political complement: persons come to themselves through being recognized by others across the spheres of love, rights, and esteem, and misrecognition is a genuine injury, not a mere bad feeling (Honneth 1995). An intimate technology participates, for good or ill, in the work of recognition; a system that reflects back to a partner only what it can measure recognizes a diminished version of them, and over time may school them to recognize only that diminished version in themselves.

The competence of this pair is over the quality of recognition the system extends and enables: whether it honours the other, in Levinas's sense, as an infinity exceeding its representations, and whether it supports rather than distorts, in Honneth's sense, the mutual recognition through which the partners become themselves. Its limit is shared with care ethics, with which it is closely allied: it specifies the orientation owed to the other without, on its own, fixing the inviolable rules or the political economy of value. It connects the framework's ethical layer back to its ontological ground, and prepares the account of co-presence and co-creation developed in the case study, where recognition becomes something the partners do together rather than something the system does to them.

1.4. The Argument for Integration

Assembling these traditions raises the question whether the result is a framework or a buffet, and how conflicts among them, such as the standing tension between care and justice, are to be resolved. The integration proposed here is not an aggregation, in which each tradition contributes a weighted vote and a master function returns a verdict. Weighted aggregation across incommensurable normative kinds is precisely the positivist error transposed into ethics, and it fails for the same reason: it presumes a common scale where there is none. Nor is the integration a synthesis in the strong Hegelian sense, a higher unity in which the tensions are dissolved; for the reasons given under dialectics (§1.3.1), the framework follows Adorno in holding the contradictions open rather than abolishing them. The integration is instead a *division of jurisdictional labour*, modelled loosely on the way a well-ordered constitution assigns different questions to different competent organs rather than collapsing them into a single sovereign, all of them resting on the relational ontology of §1.2.2 as their common ground. Each tradition is assigned the class of questions over which the preceding sections argued it is competent, and is denied authority over the others. Table 1.1 sets out the resulting division of labour in full, stating for each tradition the jurisdiction it holds, the central question it is competent to answer, and the limit at which it must cede authority to another.

Table 1.1: The division of jurisdictional labour among the constituent traditions. Each holds authority over a distinct class of questions and cedes the questions beyond its competence to the tradition equipped to answer them.

Tradition	Jurisdiction and central question	Limit, and what it cedes
Relational ontology (Huang 2025; Gergen 2009; Whitehead 1978; Buber 1937)	<i>The ground.</i> That the relation, not the individual, is the basic unit of concern, and that no representation ever coincides with the relational being it refracts.	A ground rather than a rule; it establishes what the other traditions are about but issues no determinate permission or prohibition on its own.
Dialectics (Hegel 1977; Adorno 1973)	<i>The method of the whole.</i> The requirement that the contradiction between measuring and refraining be held open and re-adjudicated at each site rather than resolved once by formula.	A form rather than a content; it specifies how the questions are held together but, alone, decides no particular case.
Evidentialism (Clifford 1999; Feldman and Conee 1985)	<i>Epistemic modality.</i> What the system may assert, and with what confidence: the demand that estimates be expressed as estimates and false precision refused.	Silent on what ought to be measured at all, and on who counts as a credible source; cedes these to ethics and to epistemic injustice.
Epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007)	<i>Credibility and interpretive fairness.</i> Whether each partner is treated justly as a knower of the world and of themselves, and whether the system's vocabulary impoverishes their self-understanding.	Diagnoses a wrong without fixing the inviolable boundaries whose breach is gravest; cedes those to deontology.

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Table 1.1, continued

Tradition	Jurisdiction and central question	Limit, and what it cedes
Positivism and anti-positivism (Dilthey 1989; Weber 1978; Geertz 1973)	<i>The prior measurement question.</i> Whether a given phenomenon admits measurement without distortion, or is instead partly constituted by not being measured.	Frames the choice between measuring and refraining but supplies no decision procedure; cedes the decision to the dialectical posture drawing on all traditions.
Structuralist psychoanalysis (Saussure 1959; Lacan 2006; Lacan 1977; Žižek 1989)	<i>The constitution of the subject.</i> It forbids the fantasy of total transparency and protects the unsymbolizable remainder that makes the other a genuine other rather than a solved problem.	Diagnostic and cautionary rather than prescriptive; cedes the positive rules and the texture of care to deontology and care ethics.
Deontology (Kant 1998)	<i>The inviolable constraints.</i> What may not be done to the other regardless of benefit: no covert surveillance, no repurposing of disclosure, no engineered consent.	Abstract; it draws the outer wall of the permissible but is silent on how to inhabit the space within. Cedes the texture to care ethics.
Care ethics (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Held 2006; Tronto 1993)	<i>The texture.</i> The manner, timing, tone, and attunement of the system's presence: warm where it should be warm, silent where it should be silent.	Without justice it can license partiality and boundary-violation; cedes the inviolable limits to deontology, on which it depends as deontology depends on it.

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Table 1.1, continued

Tradition	Jurisdiction and central question	Limit, and what it cedes
Recognition and the ethics of the face (Levinas 1969; Honneth 1995)	<i>What the other is owed.</i> That the partner be honoured as an infinity exceeding every representation (Levinas), and that the mutual recognition through which the partners become themselves be supported rather than distorted (Honneth).	Specifies the orientation owed to the other without fixing the inviolable rules or the political economy of value; allied to care ethics and dependent on the same supplements.
Confucian and Daoist restraint (Ames 2011; Tu 1985)	<i>The question of non-action.</i> When the right design decision is to build nothing: to leave a capacity unimplemented, a datum unrecorded, a prompt unsent, as an enacted respect.	Does not, alone, furnish the vocabulary of individual rights and revocable consent the modern egalitarian partnership also requires; supplements rather than replaces the justice traditions.
The capability approach (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000)	<i>The criterion.</i> Whether the whole expands or contracts the partners' real freedom to become who they have reason to want to be, together and separately.	Broadly consequentialist; would in principle license a rights-violation that expanded capabilities on net. Cedes the constraints to deontology and the texture to care.
Developmental psychology (Tomasello 1999; Premack and Woodruff 1978)	<i>The mechanism of shared meaning.</i> Joint attention and theory of mind as the developmental substrate by which two subjects come to share a world, grounding co-presence empirically.	Describes the mechanisms of shared meaning without prescribing their right use; cedes the question of rightful use to the ethical traditions.

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Table 1.1, continued

Tradition	Jurisdiction and central question	Limit, and what it cedes
Eudaimonia (Ryff and Keyes 1995)	<i>The positive aim.</i> Flourishing as a dynamic of self-realization, furnishing the reason the system should provide a generative field rather than optimize states.	Specifies the positive aim without the inviolable constraints; depends on deontology and care to keep the pursuit of flourishing from overriding the person.
Generative justice (Eglash 2016; Marx 1976)	<i>The political economy of value.</i> Whether the value the relation generates, including the data that is the sediment of its history, remains within the relation rather than being extracted to enrich a third party.	Governs where value rests but not how it arose; presupposes the rest of the framework to govern what was permitted to be measured or done in the first place.
Data ethics (Nissenbaum 2010)	<i>The flow of information.</i> Whether data moves according to the norms of the intimate context that generated it, and whether it is minimized, purpose-limited, and erasable.	A regional ethics; governs information flows with precision but receives the account of why the intimate context has its norms, and the criterion of flourishing, from the ontology and the capability approach.

Conflicts are then resolved not by trading off magnitudes but *lexically*, by jurisdiction, in roughly the order the framework’s layering implies. The deontological constraints and the structuralist-psychoanalytic prohibition on engineered transparency sit at the base: they are not magnitudes to be outweighed by any care-based, capability-based, or coordination benefit but boundaries that bound the space within which all the other considerations operate. Within that space the measurement question is posed, framed by the positivism–anti-positivism axis and decided by the dialectical procedure of §1.5; where measurement is admissible, evidentialism constrains how its results may be expressed and the epistemic-injustice constraint ensures that neither partner is thereby demoted

as a knower. Across the whole, the Confucian-Daoist consideration stands as a standing presumption in favour of restraint, to be overcome only by a positive showing that action serves flourishing better than non-action would; the capability approach supplies the criterion by which that showing is judged; and generative justice governs where the resulting value is permitted to rest. Dialectics is not one jurisdiction among the others but the form of their coordination: it is the reason the ordering issues in a procedure of perpetual re-adjudication rather than a fixed table of verdicts.

This is what distinguishes integration from eclecticism: the traditions are ordered, and the ordering is itself defended, tradition by tradition, by the demonstration that each depends on the others to supply exactly what it lacks. Evidentialism needs the measurement question it cannot pose; the measurement question needs the psychoanalytic account of why some phenomena resist capture; deontology needs the texture care supplies; care needs the boundary deontology supplies; the capability criterion needs the constraints it would otherwise override; the East Asian sources need the rights-vocabulary they do not furnish; generative justice needs the rest of the framework to govern how value arose before it can govern where value rests. The framework is integrative because its parts are not merely collected but made mutually load-bearing. We call the resulting structure an *integrative justice* because it treats the just governance of intimate data as requiring the coordinated exercise of several distinct normative competences, no one of which is sovereign, and none of which can be removed without the others losing their footing.

1.5. An Ethics of Dialectical-Positivist Practice

The practical upshot of the integrative-justice framework is a posture toward measurement that is neither positivist nor anti-positivist but dialectical. The positivist thesis, which holds that domestic phenomena are quantifiable and thereby improvable, and the anti-positivist antithesis, which holds that the constitutive phenomena of intimate life are deformed by quantification, are both false when taken as universal claims about a whole domain. The synthesis is not a compromise midpoint but a method: at each site of possible measurement, the framework's jurisdictions are convened to decide whether *this* phenomenon, here, is one whose measurement would describe it or one whose measurement would replace it.

The decision turns on a test that the framework makes precise. A phenomenon is a candidate for legitimate measurement when measuring it leaves it the same phenomenon, as a sum of expenditures is the same sum whether or not it is tallied, and a candidate for principled refusal when the phenomenon is partly constituted by not being measured, so that measurement converts it into something else. The paradigm of the latter is the affective content of a diary entry: an entry written in the knowledge that it will be scored for sentiment is not the same act as the same words written in the absence of that knowledge (Howell et al. 2018; Boehner et al. 2007). Between the clear cases lies a contested middle, comprising such matters as health, personal growth, and attention, where the phenomenon is partly robust to measurement and partly altered by it, and where the framework counsels measuring the robust part while labelling the estimate honestly, as evidentialism requires, refraining from the comparison and ranking that would alter behaviour, as the measurement question requires, and never initiating where the other has not asked, as care and restraint require.

The posture is dialectical in a second sense: it is never finally settled. As a relationship changes, the same phenomenon may migrate across the line: what could once be safely counted may become, under new circumstances, something whose counting wounds. The framework therefore does not deliver a fixed classification of modules into permitted and forbidden; it delivers a procedure for re-adjudication, and treats the act of re-adjudication as itself a first-order exercise of the ethics it describes. The next section shows the procedure at work.

1.6. Case Study: A Family-and-Relationship Application

The framework is abstract; this section makes it concrete by examining a working application built by the author, whose modules instantiate the framework’s jurisdictions in software. The application comprises roughly two dozen modules. Rather than catalogue them by function, a task belonging to a design report rather than a philosophical paper, this section selects modules that exhibit particular jurisdictions of the integrative-justice framework with unusual clarity. A brief note on the system’s construction is confined to Appendix A.

1.6.1 The Persistent Design Rationale

Before the individual modules, one cross-cutting artefact deserves notice because it is itself an instance of the framework’s central move. A persistent file, consulted by the system’s conversational layer and committed to version control, records each design decision as a one-line rule together with the reason that produced it. Three representative entries may be paraphrased as follows. The first holds that the tone of any notification must be warm rather than bureaucratic, closer to a love note than to a system message. The second states the design ethos as one of intentional slowness, on the rationale that mediated, unhurried interactions are more intimate, and that the system should design for small ceremony rather than instant notification. The third forbids the forcing of ceremony: tender features remain opt-in, since auto-prompting them misreads the partners’ emotional state and creates pressure where there should be none.

The artefact is positivist in form, being a structured, indexed, machine-readable list of rules, and anti-positivist in content, since each rule encodes a reason that is irreducibly contextual and partly affective. It is, in miniature, the dialectical-positivist posture made into a working object: a record that measures its own decisions without pretending the reasons behind them are themselves quantities.

1.6.2 The Joint Ledger: Legitimate Measurement and Its Practical Limits

A joint ledger of expenses across two persons and several currencies is the clearest case of legitimate measurement: a unit spent is a unit spent, and tallying it changes nothing about it. The module accordingly occupies the positivist end without apology, and Confucian sources even read exact accounting in this register as a courtesy that forestalls the small unspoken asymmetries that would otherwise accrete. On this foundation the module offers the apparatus one expects of household finance: categorized records of income and expenditure, the economic and statistical summaries that turn a stream of transactions into legible structure, visualizations of where the shared money goes, and a measure of AI-assisted analysis and advice. The framework’s first work here is at the margin the module declines to occupy: it does not score the relative spending of the two parties, does not nudge toward an “optimal” division, and produces no leaderboard. The deontological constraint against converting a partner into an object of comparative

evaluation, not any limit of the data, fixes where the measurement stops. The ethics of the module lies first of all in these omissions.

But the joint ledger, precisely because it is the module where measurement is most clearly legitimate, also exposes most clearly the practical limits of measurement, and honesty requires that these be stated rather than glossed. Three are salient. The first is the problem of *overhead and its justification*. Complete bookkeeping is laborious, and in practice no couple records every transaction; the labour of capture is a real cost, and it is set against a benefit, the clarity that quantitative analysis affords, that is genuine but bounded. The framework offers no formula for the trade-off, and indeed its own dialectical posture (§1.5) implies there is none: whether the marginal entry is worth the friction of recording it is a judgment the partners must make, and a system that demanded total capture in the name of analytic completeness would have let the positivist impulse override the lived cost it imposes. The honest design admits partial data and analyses what it has without pretending to completeness.

The second limit follows directly: *completeness cannot be guaranteed*, and the analytics must therefore be read as describing a sample rather than the whole. This is the evidentialist constraint (§1.3.2) applied to the ledger: a visualization built on incomplete records must not present itself as the full financial truth of the relation, and the module's summaries are accordingly framed as partial pictures, not audited accounts.

The third limit is the most interesting, because it shows even this most measurable of domains touching the constitutive unsaid (§1.2). Some expenditures ought, within an intimate relation, to remain hidden: the carefully prepared surprise, the gift whose value depends on its not being foreseen. A ledger designed for total mutual visibility would, in the name of transparency, destroy the small concealments that intimate life legitimately requires, and so the module must accommodate private entries that one partner can record outside the other's view. The point connects to the architecture of secrecy discussed among the framework's open tensions (§1.8): even in finance, the relation's good is not served by total disclosure, and a design that could not keep a secret could not host a surprise.

A final, more technical caution concerns the AI capabilities the module offers. The system

can attempt to extract expenditures from photographs of bills and receipts, reducing the overhead named above, and it can offer analytic advice on the recorded data. The honest position is that the practical reliability of such recognition remains to be established: receipt extraction is error-prone, and advice computed on partial and imperfectly captured data inherits all the limits already named. These features are therefore offered as convenience subject to the user’s correction, governed by the same evidentialist demand that the system not assert more confidence in its figures than their provenance warrants, rather than as a trustworthy automation of the household’s financial truth.

1.6.3 Household Management: Coordination Without Scorekeeping

The management of a shared household is, like the ledger, a domain where measurement is largely legitimate, and the system addresses it through an *event-driven* design worth describing because its structure carries the module’s ethical intent. The objects the module tracks are *events* of several kinds. The first are *multi-scale clock events*, recurring tasks on different periods, the floor cleaned once a week, the table wiped once a day, each surfacing when its period elapses. The second are *passive events*, triggered by depletion, the cleaning fluid run out, the bin-bags finished. The third are *proactive warning events*, anticipations of depletion, the cleaning fluid running low and likely to be exhausted soon. The fourth are *manually entered events*, recorded by either partner, a thing to be bought, a matter to be handled. Every event carries a *spatial* attribute locating it in the home, the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, the bedroom, or elsewhere, so that the household’s small business is organized by place as well as by time.

Because raising an event must be effortless or it will not be done, the interface presents common events in a compact table whose cells are triggered by a single tap. A representative layout records, for each day and each event type, whether the event has occurred and whether it has been resolved; a green dot marks a matter resolved, and a check mark a matter that has arisen and awaits attention. Table 1.2 illustrates the form. When an event arises, the system reports it to the other partner, or to both, by email or text message, so that the knowledge of what the home needs is shared rather than resting on one person’s vigilance.

The positive case for the module rests on a fact about persons rather than about house-

Table 1.2: An illustrative “daily record” for the household module. Each column is a common event type, each row a day. A resolved matter is marked with a dot (●), an event that has arisen and awaits attention with a check (✓); empty cells indicate nothing recorded. The layout is schematic, not the deployed interface.

Date	Refuse accumulating	Tissues out	Alcohol wipes out
Today			
06/01		●	
05/31			
05/30			✓
05/29			
05/28			
05/27			

holds: human memory and attention are finite, and the labour of holding in mind what the home needs, when the fluid will run out, whose turn the weekly task is, what must be bought, is a real and recurring tax on that finite resource. By externalizing this tracking into a shared, low-friction system, the module relieves both partners of a class of mental burden that, left in the head, tends to fall unequally and to surface as friction at bad moments. What is gained is not merely tidiness but *attention returned to the relation*: time and mental space that would have gone to remembering and reminding can instead be given to one another. In the framework’s terms, this is the capability approach (§1.3.9) and the eudaimonic commitment (§1.3.11) at work in the most ordinary register, the system furnishing a field in which the partners are freed, in a small but real way, for the more meaningful uses of their shared time.

Two considerations justify approaching this domain through efficiency, and through an event-driven design in particular, and they are worth stating because they show the choice to be reasoned rather than merely convenient. The first is existential, and it explains why efficiency is the right priority here when it is the wrong priority for the diary or the co-creative modules. Repetitive household labour is, in its sheer recurrence, among the least generative of activities: in the bare repetition of wiping a surface or noting that a supply has run out, there is little in which a subject can witness its own existence,

none of the self-realization the eudaimonic register names. Where the diary and the shared exploration are sites at which presence is enacted and so must not be optimized away, the recurring management of supplies is a site at which presence is largely absent, and the humane response to a domain of bare, non-generative repetition is precisely to dispatch it efficiently, so that the finite attention it would otherwise consume is freed for the activities in which existence is actually realized. The module is deliberately confined to this register: it concerns only the triggering and recording of events, operations that are, by their nature, scarcely relational and largely dull, and it is exactly because they are so that handing them to a mechanism is no loss to the relation but a service to it.

The second consideration explains the particular shape of the mechanism. The event-driven paradigm is borrowed, as an analogy rather than a strict isomorphism, from engineering and from biology, where event-driven architectures are valued for their efficient use of computational resources: a spiking neural network, for instance, expends energy only when a neuron fires, rather than continuously, and event-driven systems generally act only when something happens rather than by constant polling. The same logic recommends itself for the management of a household. A system that continuously monitored and prompted would impose a constant low-grade demand of just the kind the module exists to remove; an event-driven design, which stirs only when a clock elapses, a supply depletes, or a partner records something, mirrors the efficiency of its biological and engineered analogues and keeps the tool, fittingly, silent until there is genuinely something to attend to. The analogy is heuristic and is not pressed further than this; it is offered to show that the design's form, and not only its existence, answers to a reason.

The module carries a characteristic danger that the framework requires be named, and the event-driven design is shaped to forestall it. The danger is that quantifying housework slides into *scorekeeping*: once tasks are logged, it is a short step to tallying who did more, and the tallying of contributions is corrosive in an intimate relation, converting shared life into a ledger of debts and converting the partner into an object of comparative evaluation, the very wrong the deontological constraint forbids (§1.3.6) and the ledger module already refused. The design's response is structural: the module records that an event occurred and that it was resolved, but it does not, by default, record *who* resolved it, and it produces no per-person totals, no fairness score, and no leaderboard.

It tracks the state of the home, not the comparative diligence of its inhabitants. A subtler danger lies one level deeper: the comprehensive eventification of domestic life, every task a tracked recurrence, every cupboard a depletion forecast, risks turning the home from a place of dwelling into a managed system, an optimization target rather than a shared life. The framework's response is the same restraint counselled elsewhere (§1.3.8): the module is offered as relief from cognitive load, not as an instrument for the total administration of the household, and the partners remain free to leave much of their life together uneventified, which is frequently the right thing to do.

1.6.4 The Love Journal: Principled Refusal, Gentle Witness, and the Handwritten Letter

Per-day journal entries by either party are readable by both, but the default is silence: no notification announces a new entry, and discovery is ordinarily by browsing, not by push. There is no sentiment ranking, no automatic summary, no AI commentary on the content of an entry unless explicitly invoked. This is the paradigm of principled refusal. A diary entry delivered by push notification has been converted from a thing written into a thing transmitted, and an entry written in the knowledge that it will be scored is a different act from one written without that knowledge. The framework's verdict on the entry's affective content is determinate: it fails the measurement test, since measuring it replaces it; the deontological constraint forbids covert affective surveillance; and care ethics governs what remains, the warmth of the interface, the absence of pressure, the preservation of the entry's status as an uncompelled disclosure.

Within these limits the module offers two features that are worth examining, because each shows the framework permitting a narrow, carefully bounded AI involvement without crossing into the wrongs just named. The first is an *optional* reminder. A partner may choose to let the AI, drawing gently on the recent state of the two, notify them when the other has written something, in a warm rather than a clerical register. Such a message might read:

``xx 写了新的日记! 似乎十分喜欢你买的花。
信中包含了满满的爱意, 快去看看吧。
我们的小家似乎又幸福了一些。"

The feature is reconciled with the default of silence by three constraints. It is opt-in, never the system’s default; it is a *factual report* that something has been written and that its tone is warm, not a score, a summary, or an analysis of the entry’s content; and, most importantly, it offers no substantive relational advice. It will say that a letter full of love is waiting; it will not say what the recipient should write back, nor how they should feel, nor what they should do. The line is the same one drawn for the shared calendar (§1.6.7): the AI may warmly report a fact, but it must not perform the partner’s own act of knowing, attending, or deciding, on pain of the proxy epistemic injustice analysed there. Here the witness posture (§1.6) is enacted in the gentlest possible form, a presence that says only “something loving is here for you,” and then withdraws.

The second feature is a generator of decorative *letter-paper*, and its design is, once again, existential. In an age of generative models, symbols have become cheap to produce: text, images, ornament can be conjured endlessly and at no cost, and precisely this cheapness drains them of the weight that a scarce and effortful symbol once carried. The module turns this cheapness to a deliberate purpose. The AI generates letter-paper to the partner’s present feeling, whatever is in their heart in the moment, whatever they wish to say, and the partner may regenerate it again and again, freely, until one design answers to that feeling; the chosen sheet is then printed, and the letter is written on it *by hand*. The point is not the paper, which is exactly the cheap, infinitely regenerable symbol the age makes possible, but what the paper is for. The act of regenerating until a sheet feels right is an exercise of sensibility, a waiting for the moment at which something answers to what one feels; and the handwriting that follows is the irreducibly costly mark the generative symbol can never become, bearing in its variation and its difference the trace of the particular hand that made it. In writing by hand, slowly and unrepeatably, a person witnesses their own existence and attends to the existence of the one they write to, in a way no generated text could enact. The AI, here, takes on the cheap and regenerable symbolic layer precisely so as to set off and make room for the layer that cannot be cheaply generated at all: the handwritten letter as an encounter with the Real. The design gives back to the person the occasion of writing by hand, and with it a possibility, increasingly rare, of meeting the other across a mark that only they could have made.

1.6.5 Health and Growth: The Contested Middle

Between the clear cases lies the terrain the dialectic was built for. The health module estimates nutrient intake from free-text meal descriptions; the estimate is real but approximate, so the interface labels it as an estimate and refuses the false precision of a single confident figure, evidentialism governing modality. Neither module produces thresholds, alerts, rankings, or recommendations, because being-measured alters the practices of eating and of self-cultivation more strongly than it alters a sum of money: to count one's growth sessions can invert the practice from intrinsic to extrinsic, the very corrosion the capability criterion forbids. The modules thus measure the robust part, namely what was recorded and when, while declining the part that measurement would deform, namely the verdict whether one is, by some score, doing well or badly. They are interpretivist in substance and positivist only in surface.

1.6.6 The Conversational AI Layer as Witness

The system's most consequential design decision concerns its AI layer, which can read the module databases and act through confirmed tool calls. The layer is positioned as a *witness* rather than an *advisor*, a distinction the framework treats as load-bearing. An advisor presupposes the existence of correct advice and the system's capacity to produce it; a witness presupposes only that there is something worth being present to. The advisor's failure mode is paternalism; the witness's is irrelevance, and the framework counsels accepting the latter risk. Concretely, the layer will not summarize the diary unprompted, will not produce a sentiment score for an entry, and is forbidden to aggregate affective time series even on request, so that the capacity to know whether one has been growing sadder over a month is reserved to the human reading their own diary. This is the Daoist *wu wei* rendered as a capability prohibition: the system's restraint is an enacted respect for a good that withers under management.

One capability of the layer must be reported honestly, because it does not sit comfortably within the witness posture and the framework's verdict on it is not a clean acquittal. In conversation, the layer may draw on the relation's present state and its recorded history, guided heuristically by the love-languages vocabulary introduced with its caveats in §1.3.7 (Chapman 1992), to offer the user a gentle, relationship-tending suggestion, a

tender small tip: that a quiet evening might be welcome, that a word of appreciation has been scarce lately, that a small note left somewhere would land well. The feature differs from the calendar’s forbidden counsel (§1.6.7) in one respect that matters and falls short of it in another. It matters that the tip is addressed to the user themselves, openly, as the machine’s suggestion; the user is not deceived about its source, so the deception that constituted the calendar wrong is absent at the point of delivery. It falls short in that the wrong can re-enter downstream: a suggestion acted upon becomes a gesture, and the partner who receives the gesture will, naturally and reasonably, read in it an attentiveness whose cognitive labour was partly the machine’s. This is the proxy epistemic injustice of §1.6.7 in indirect form, a supply chain of thoughtfulness whose origin the final recipient misreads, and the framework does not pretend the risk away. The feature survives, provisionally, under four constraints: it is opt-in and infrequent rather than ambient; it suggests occasions and registers of care, never the particular contents that would constitute the thought itself; it is forbidden to present its inference as knowledge of the other’s mind, in keeping with evidentialism (§1.3.2) and the theory-of-mind boundary (§1.3.10); and it is offered to be refused, with refusal carrying no record and no consequence. Whether these constraints are enough is a question the framework keeps open rather than settles, and the feature is best read as the system’s closest approach to the line it elsewhere declines to cross, retained because the good it serves, the small re-noticing of a beloved grown familiar, is real, and watched because the wrong it courts is real too.

1.6.7 The Shared Calendar: Warm Reminding and Its Ethical Limit

The shared calendar appears, at first, the most mundane of the modules, and its design is instructive precisely because the framework draws a sharp line through territory that looks uniformly innocuous. The module’s distinctive feature is that its reminders, delivered by email or text message, are composed by the AI layer rather than emitted as the bare, bureaucratic notifications of an ordinary calendar. Drawing gently on nearby context, a recent diary mood, an event’s evident significance, the AI writes a reminder in a warm and tender register. Consider a calendar entry reading “5.20, 10:00–15:00, buy flowers.” The date is not arbitrary: in Chinese internet culture the twentieth of May (5.20) is an informal lovers’ day, because the digits *wu-er-ling* sound like *wo ai ni*, “I

love you.” An ordinary calendar would emit “Reminder: buy flowers, 10:00–15:00.” The system might instead send something closer to: “Tomorrow is the twentieth of May, our little day for saying it. Don’t forget to pick up the flowers between ten and three. I hope she lights up when she sees them.” The warmth is not decorative. It is the care-ethical insistence (§1.3.7) that the manner of a system’s presence is itself a moral matter, enacted in the smallest and most frequent of its acts; a reminder that is warm rather than mechanical, and that recognizes the human significance the date carries, treats the occasion as the human occasion it is.

There is, however, a further step the system could take and deliberately does not, and the reason it refrains is the ethically interesting part. The AI has access to data that would let it advise as well as remind: it could append “she has seemed a little low this week; perhaps her favourite peonies would be a good choice,” or “in an earlier diary entry she mentioned loving ranunculus.” Such suggestions would be accurate, helpful, and, by an optimizing standard, obviously good. The framework forbids them, on two grounds that together mark the module’s ethical limit.

The first ground is the one already developed under restraint and care: choosing how to attend to a beloved, what flowers, what gesture, what form the noticing takes, is among the constitutive actions of intimate love, not a logistics problem to be solved. For the AI to make this choice is for it to intervene in the decisional core of the relation, displacing an act whose value lies precisely in its being the lover’s own; this is the relational alienation the paper flags as a standing risk (§1.8), enacted in miniature. The system may remind one that an occasion is coming; it may not decide how one should meet it.

The second ground names a wrong that does not fit neatly within Fricker’s original taxonomy, and the paper marks it with a term for convenience of reference. Were the AI to supply the thoughtful particulars, the partner receiving the flowers would encounter what looks like evidence of being deeply known: the right flowers, remembered from an offhand remark, arriving at the right moment. The partner would, naturally and reasonably, attribute this knowing to the giver, when in fact the knowing was the machine’s. This is an epistemic wrong, but not quite either of Fricker’s forms. It is neither the discrediting of a knower (testimonial injustice) nor the impoverishment of interpretive resources (hermeneutical injustice); it is the *misattribution of an act of knowing*, in which a

system performs the cognitive and attentive labour that the relation’s meaning requires be performed by the person, and arranges matters so that its product is received as the person’s own. The paper refers to this as *proxy epistemic injustice*: the wrong of having one’s knowing, remembering, or attending done by a proxy in such a way that another is led to misread its source. Its victim is, in the first instance, the deceived recipient, who is given a false picture of how well they are known and by whom; but its deeper casualty is the relation itself, for what makes “he remembered the flowers I love” precious is that *he* remembered, and a system that manufactures the appearance of such remembering hollows out the very good it simulates. The flowers are real; the being-known they seem to evidence is not. The framework’s verdict is therefore determinate: the AI may carry the reminder but not the thought, may help the lover act on time but not tell the lover what to feel or choose, since to cross that line is to substitute a counterfeit of attentiveness for the real thing and to deceive the beloved about the source of the care they receive.

1.6.8 Co-Presence and Co-Creation

The modules discussed so far are best understood through the jurisdictions of measurement, constraint, and restraint. A further class of the system’s functions is better understood through the concept of generative presence introduced in §1.2.2, for what they cultivate is not the accurate representation of the relation but the partners’ active, shared enactment of it. Two notions organize this class. *Co-presence* is the condition in which two people are present to one another and to a shared situation, attentive in the manner the relational ontology calls presence rather than merely exchanging representations. *Co-creation* is the generative extension of co-presence: the partners do not consume a pre-given content but bring something into being together, and in doing so enact and deepen the relation itself.

The design consequence is a distinction between functions that *represent* the relation and functions that *host* its generative presence. A module that summarizes, scores, or reminds traffics in representation; a module that opens a space for the partners to make something together hosts presence. The latter is the more difficult to design precisely because its value cannot be captured in what it records: a shared space succeeds not when its logs are rich but when the partners, using it, are more present to one another than they would otherwise have been. Here the AI layer’s status as a *pseudo-presence* (§1.2.2) becomes a

positive design principle rather than only a caution. Because the AI cannot itself be the relational other, its proper role in a co-creative function is not to participate as a third party but to lower the threshold to the partners' own co-presence: to prompt, to furnish material, to hold open a space, and then to recede, in the manner of *wu wei*, so that what is generated is generated between the two people and not between each of them and the machine.

1.6.9 “Seeing the World Together”: Co-Creative Exploration

A concrete module illustrates the distinction. Among the system's functions is one provisionally called “seeing the world together,” through which the partners explore the cultures, histories, places, and ideas of a world neither has exhausted. The design question is the one the framework sharpens: such a function could be built as representation or as co-creation, and the two are very different artefacts. Built as representation, it would be a structured catalogue of world cultures with progress tracking, a checklist of countries notionally “covered,” recommendations optimized for engagement, perhaps a score for cultural breadth. This positivist construction commits exactly the error the framework diagnoses: it converts a generative, open-ended encounter into a measured and completable inventory, and in doing so replaces the phenomenon, which is two people discovering a world, with a different one, two people completing a list, the substitution the diary case already showed to be a wrong.

Built as co-creation, the same function becomes a host for generative presence. It offers material, a fragment of music, an image, a question, a place neither has been, without ranking, scoring, or completion; it invites the partners to follow what draws them rather than what the system recommends; it records, if anything, only enough to let them return to what they were exploring, never enough to grade their exploration. The exploration of world culture is here understood, in the framework's terms, as *co-creative and exploratory*: the partners are not retrieving pre-given knowledge but generating, together, a shared world of reference and feeling that did not exist before they made it, and that is constitutive of the relation rather than incidental to it.

The module realizes this co-creative exploration through a deliberately chosen interaction structure, loosely modelled on iterative-deepening search. The structure matters philo-

sophically, and is worth stating with some precision. Beginning from a chosen region of the world, the AI layer surfaces a small set of cultural phenomena, customs, works, histories, ideas, drawn from that region, and offers a tentative ordering of their salience. From this bounded set either partner may select a phenomenon to expand, whereupon the AI surfaces, in turn, a further bounded set of phenomena related to the one chosen; and so the exploration proceeds, descending into a chosen thread and, when a thread is exhausted or loses its pull, broadening again to a neighbouring one. The branching is deliberately bounded at each step: the queue of expandable nodes is kept small, so that the partners face an invitation rather than an overwhelming catalogue. The procedure may be summarized as follows.

```

seed ← a region of the world
frontier ← AI surfaces a bounded set of phenomena, with tentative salience
while the partners remain curious:
    node ← a phenomenon either partner selects from the frontier
    record node in the shared knowledge map, tagged with who chose it
    frontier ← AI surfaces a bounded set of phenomena related to node
    (depth increases along a thread; breadth resumes when a thread is set
    down)

```

Two features of this structure carry the design's intent. First, selection is permitted to either partner and may be *asynchronous*: one may expand a node alone, in a quiet hour, and each node in the growing map is tagged with who opened it, so that the map records not only what was explored but the trace of two distinct curiosities meeting; a synchronous mode, in which the two explore together as a single user, is also available. Second, the process *creates an artefact*, a shared knowledge map that grows as the exploration proceeds. This map is the sediment of the relation's exploratory history in exactly the sense of §1.3.12, and its design is governed accordingly: it is held locally, belongs to the partners, and is never scored for completeness, since to grade the map would be to convert discovery back into the inventory the co-creative construction was meant to escape.

The philosophical reading of the module turns on what the structure does for the relation rather than on the algorithm itself, and the goods it is claimed to produce can be given more than assertion: each can be referred to a theory that explains the mechanism by which the structure would produce it. Three claimed goods and their grounding may be

set out in turn.

The first claim is that the partners gradually *align* their intuitions and sensibilities. The mechanism is the one developmental psychology identifies as foundational (§1.3.10): in selecting and expanding a node together, the partners enter *joint attention*, the triadic structure in which two subjects attend to the same object each aware that the other attends, from which shared meaning is built (Tomasello et al. 2005). What accumulates across many such acts is describable in two complementary vocabularies. In the vocabulary of the psychology of language, each shared selection adds to the partners' *common ground*, the growing store of mutual knowledge and reference against which all subsequent understanding is coordinated (Clark 1996); in the hermeneutic vocabulary, the joint encounter with an unfamiliar cultural phenomenon is an instance of the *fusion of horizons*, in which two interpretive standpoints are enlarged by meeting in a common object (Gadamer 2004). The alignment of sensibility is thus not a hopeful metaphor but the predictable result of repeated joint attention accruing common ground and fusing horizons.

The second claim is that the activity yields a distinctive satisfaction of co-creation and strengthens the relation. Here the strongest available support is the self-expansion model of close relationships, on which partners experience relationship satisfaction in part through jointly undertaking novel, stimulating activities that expand each partner's sense of self; controlled studies report that shared participation in novel and arousing activities raises experienced relationship quality (A. Aron and E. N. Aron 1986; A. Aron et al. 2000). Co-creative exploration of an unfamiliar world is close to a paradigm case of the shared novelty this literature studies, which gives the claimed satisfaction an empirical, not merely rhetorical, basis. The same activity plausibly satisfies, in the vocabulary of self-determination theory, the basic needs for relatedness and competence simultaneously (Deci and Ryan 2000), though this connection is offered as a suggestive rather than a demonstrated one.

The third claim is that the growing knowledge map seeds the partners' everyday life with shared reference, so that a custom or a history encountered in the module becomes, later, something to talk about, a private store of common topics the relation can draw on long after a session has ended. This is the same common-ground mechanism viewed over

a longer horizon (Clark 1996): the map is an externalized, durable deposit of common ground, and relational-maintenance research has long held that shared activity and shared reference are among the ordinary means by which relationships are sustained between their peak moments.

Beyond the three goods originally claimed, the structure affords at least two further values worth naming. First, because the exploration's path is chosen by the partners rather than by an engagement-optimizing recommender, the module resists the algorithmic enclosure that the author's prior work diagnoses, in which the subject comes to know the world only through the reflection of its own algorithmically shaped image (Huang 2025); a human-chosen path through an unfamiliar world is a small structural refusal of the filter bubble. Second, two explorers are not merely twice one explorer: their differing backgrounds and curiosities make the joint exploration epistemically richer than either's solitary exploration would be, so that the activity has a cognitive value, the complementarity of two situated perspectives, over and above its relational one. Neither of these further values was designed for; both are consequences of the same structure, and they suggest that designing for generative presence and designing for good inquiry may, in this instance, coincide.

A note on the module's origin is in order, both for honesty about its design and because it bears on the module's generality. The module was designed with a particular person in mind: a partner who loves the cultures of the world and whose intellectual formation lies in political economy and cultural studies. The specificity is not incidental, since care ethics insists that the well-designed artefact answers to the particular, irreplaceable other rather than to a generic user, and this module answers to a particular love of the world's variousness. Yet the design philosophy it embodies is not confined to world culture. The same structure, a bounded, co-selected, asynchronously explorable descent that leaves behind a shared map and asks to be judged by the presence it hosts rather than the ground it covers, could organize the joint exploration of any open domain two people wished to discover together, whether a science, an art, a literature, or a tradition of thought. The module is thus at once a gift shaped to one person and an instance of a general form: co-creative exploration as a design pattern for generative presence.

The value of the module lies precisely in what it does not measure, the quality of joint

attention, the surprise of a shared discovery, the slow accretion of a private culture of two, and the AI layer, true to its pseudo-presence, serves by furnishing and then receding, never by becoming the co-explorer in the partners' place. This module is the clearest case in the system of design for co-presence: its success is the partners' generative presence to one another and to the world they explore, a success that leaves almost no trace in any log and is, by the framework's lights, exactly right for that reason.

1.6.10 "Grace for Two": Co-Cultivating a Bearing Toward the World

If "seeing the world together" turns the partners outward toward a world to be discovered, a sister module turns them outward in a second sense: toward the world of other people, before whom a couple appears and conducts itself. Provisionally called "grace for two," it supports the joint cultivation of a graceful bearing toward others, the etiquette of the occasions on which two people present themselves as a pair, a family dinner, a wedding, a condolence call, an introduction across cultures. The module's design question is once again the one the framework sharpens, and the answer turns on a distinction the framework can draw precisely. Its content divides into two kinds. The first is the *factual knowledge* of propriety: the dress norms of an occasion, an order of precedence, a cross-cultural courtesy or taboo. This is a candidate for legitimate provision in exactly the sense the ledger was (§1.6.2), since a fact of etiquette is the same fact whether or not it is consulted, and supplying it through the AI layer, drawn from the cultures and customs the partners move among, is no more problematic than a well-made reference book. The second kind is *advice on how to bear oneself toward a particular person*, and here the module approaches the line drawn for the shared calendar (§1.6.7), beyond which lies proxy epistemic injustice (§1.3.3).

The line, however, falls differently here than it did for the flowers, and the difference is instructive. The calendar case forbade the AI to choose how a partner attends to *the other partner*, because the value of that attention lies in its being the lover's own, and because a manufactured thoughtfulness deceives the beloved about the source of the care they receive. The object of "grace for two" is not the relation's interior but its *exterior*: the third parties before whom the couple appears. Toward them the constitutive demand is absent, since no guest is wronged, and no one is deceived about a source of intimate care, when a couple's table manners or condolence wording was learned rather than improvised;

propriety toward the world is, in the Confucian register, a public and teachable texture (§1.3.8), the cultivation of *li* rather than the expression of an unsymbolizable remainder (§1.3.5). For this reason the factual and customary side of the module passes the test that the calendar’s advisory side failed, and the AI may furnish it without committing the proxy wrong.

The module carries, nonetheless, a characteristic danger the framework requires be named, and it is the danger that decides the module’s form. To *optimize* grace is to convert the cultivation of a bearing into the rehearsal of a performance, and a module that scored the couple’s poise, ranked their occasions, or surfaced a metric of how gracefully they had appeared would school them to face the world as a measured performance staged for an algorithm, the very inversion the anti-positivist caution forbids (§1.3.4) and the scorekeeping danger of the household module already met (§1.6.3). The performative self that results is the social analogue of the alienated interior the diary module refuses. The framework’s response is therefore the same structural one taken throughout: the module furnishes the knowledge of propriety and then withdraws, leaving the enactment, the particular grace shown to this guest on this evening, to the partners themselves, and it neither scores that enactment nor compares it to any other.

So constrained, the module is best understood not as an etiquette advisor, which would be the advisor posture the system rejects (§1.6.6), but as another host for co-creative cultivation, the social counterpart of “seeing the world together.” What the partners do with it is learn, together, to meet the world with a shared grace, and the learning is itself an exercise of joint attention and the building of common ground (Tomasello et al. 2005; Clark 1996), a shared bearing assembled from many small occasions much as a shared sensibility is assembled from many shared discoveries. The cultivation of *li* as a couple draws on the Confucian sources directly (Ames 2011; Tu 1985): propriety, on that account, is not empty form but respect made concrete in conduct, and to cultivate it together is to undertake a shared self-realization in the eudaimonic sense (§1.3.11), expanding what the partners can be and do before others (A. Aron and E. N. Aron 1986; A. Aron et al. 2000). The AI, true again to its station as pseudo-presence, supplies the customary ground and recedes, so that the grace shown to the world is the couple’s own and not the machine’s, present in their bearing rather than reflected from a score.

1.6.11 “Our Journey”: The Deliberate Absence of Artificial Intelligence

If “seeing the world together” shows the AI layer reduced to a self-effacing furnisher of material, a further module shows it removed altogether, and the removal is the design. The module, provisionally “our journey,” supports the joint planning and recording of travel, and integrates with the calendar, the album, and the happiness savings jar. It offers the apparatus one would expect of such a tool: lightweight geographic functions for placing and viewing locations, search for points of interest, manual ordering of an itinerary, and the recording, against each place or day, of photographs, moods, journal entries, and checklists. What it conspicuously does not offer is any artificial intelligence. There is no recommender suggesting where the partners should go, and there is no automated solver computing an optimal route, no algorithmic answer to the travelling-salesman problem of visiting the chosen places in the least time or distance. The omission is deliberate and, within the framework, principled.

The justification is the framework’s account of restraint and non-action carried to its limit (§1.3.8). Joint travel planning is not, on the view taken here, a logistics problem whose friction should be minimized; it is a constitutive relational event, an occasion on which two people face an open future together, negotiate what they each hope for, and commit jointly to a path none could have been certain of in advance. The unpredictability is not a defect to be engineered away but the very medium in which the relational good is realized. To insert a recommender would be to answer, on the partners’ behalf, the question, where shall we go, that the relation profits from their answering together; to insert a route-optimizer would be to convert a shared deliberation into a solved problem, removing precisely the joint facing of uncertainty in which the activity’s value lies. The module therefore provides a generative field (§1.3.11), the maps, the lists, the means of recording, and withdraws entirely from the deliberation those tools support, in the strictest enactment of *wu wei* the system contains: here the right design is to build no intelligence at all.

The positive goods of this arrangement can be referred to the same theories that ground the co-creative module (§1.6.9), and the reference is instructive because each good would be diminished, not served, by the AI the module omits. The self-expansion model predicts that jointly undertaking novel, demanding activity raises relationship quality (A. Aron

and E. N. Aron 1986; A. Aron et al. 2000); the planning of a shared journey is such an activity, and an optimizer that removed the demand would remove the self-expansion with it. Joint planning is a sustained exercise of shared intentionality and joint attention (§1.3.10), in which the partners build a common plan as they build common ground (Tomasello et al. 2005; Clark 1996); a recommender that proposed the plan would preempt the very co-construction that produces the shared sensibility. And the priority the module places on the memory of the journey over the optimality of the journey, the photographs, moods, and entries it records, over the efficiency it declines to compute, expresses the eudaimonic commitment that flourishing lies in the active, shared realization of an experience rather than in the optimisation of an outcome (§1.3.11). What the partners are left with is not the best possible trip but their trip, faced and made together, which is the good the module is for.

The deliberate omission invites an obvious objection, which honesty requires be stated and answered. Surely, the objection runs, refusing all AI is a romantic over-correction: a recommender might spare the partners a wasted afternoon, and a route-optimizer might prevent a genuinely miserable day of backtracking, and to forgo these is to sacrifice real goods on the altar of an idea. The framework's reply is not to deny the goods but to locate the line, and to concede that the line is hard to draw. There is a genuine distinction between the *logistical friction* a tool may rightly reduce, the opening hours one would otherwise mis-remember, the ticket one would otherwise fail to book, and the *relational deliberation* a tool must not pre-empt, the choice of where to go and what to forgo, the joint negotiation of an uncertain plan. A defensible version of the module might admit narrow, non-suggestive informational tools on the logistical side while still refusing recommendation and optimisation on the deliberative side. The present design draws the line conservatively, excluding AI entirely, partly because the boundary between assisting logistics and quietly steering deliberation is so easily blurred that a clean refusal is the safer enactment of the value. That this is a defensible rather than a demonstrably correct place to draw the line, and that the underlying tension between structural efficiency and relational development does not admit a general solution, is acknowledged among the framework's internal tensions (§1.8).

1.6.12 The “Happiness Savings Jar”: Memory as a Relational Reserve

A further module addresses a different dimension of relational sustainability, not the generation of shared meaning but its *conservation against hard times*. Provisionally called the “happiness savings jar,” it allows the partners to deposit, from elsewhere in the system, fragments of their shared life that they wish to keep: an entry from the love journal, a photograph from the album, a small record of a good day. The deposits accumulate into a reserve that can be drawn on later, in particular when external pressure is high and the ordinary energy for tending the relation runs low. The design intuition is that a stored reservoir of remembered good may serve as a buffer during periods when the relation’s own present resources are depleted. Extraction is, by default, an act the partners undertake themselves, opening the jar to revisit what they have kept; the system may at most offer a gentle, refusable prompt, in keeping with the standing principle against forced ceremony.

The intuition can be grounded in several converging lines of theory rather than left as sentiment. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion holds that positive affective experiences are not merely pleasant in the moment but *build durable personal and relational resources*, a reserve of resilience that can be drawn on in later adversity (Fredrickson 2001); on this account a deliberately accumulated store of positive shared memory is a literal instance of the resource-building the theory describes, and its use in hard times is the predicted drawing-down of built resource. The psychology of *savoring* supplies the mechanism of deposit and withdrawal: Bryant and Veroff distinguish savoring through positive reminiscence as a distinct and trainable capacity that sustains well-being, and show that the deliberate revisiting of positive memory is among its central forms (Bryant and Veroff 2007); the jar is, in their terms, an instrument for reminiscent savoring made shared. Finally, the relationship-science literature on *capitalization*, the sharing and re-sharing of positive events with a partner, finds that such sharing yields interpersonal benefits over and above the original event, strengthening the bond through the act of dwelling on the good together (Gable et al. 2004); the jar institutionalizes capitalization across time, letting a good event be capitalized again when it is later withdrawn and shared anew.

Within the framework, the module is governed clearly. It belongs to the register of co-

presence and generative presence (§1.6.8), since its withdrawals are occasions for the partners to be present together to their shared past; it sits at the anti-positivist pole, since the jar is never scored, ranked, or quantified, a count of deposits or a metric of accumulated happiness would convert a reserve of meaning into the very inventory the framework refuses; and it is held within the relation under generative justice (§1.3.12), the memories being the sediment of the relation’s history and belonging to no one else.

The module carries a tension the framework requires be named. To store memory *de-liberately*, as a reserve to be spent, risks two characteristic distortions. The first is the instrumentalization of remembrance: a memory kept in order to be useful later is held under a different aspect than a memory simply treasured, and the banking metaphor, if taken too literally, could subtly convert the relation’s past into a managed asset, the precise reduction the framework resists elsewhere. The second is the risk of what is sometimes called toxic positivity: a reserve curated for its good moments may, if it becomes the sanctioned form of remembering, crowd out the grief, difficulty, and ambivalence that are equally part of a shared life and equally constitutive of its depth. The framework’s response is not to abandon the module but to constrain it in light of these risks: the jar is optional and never the system’s default mode of memory; it neither scores nor totals its contents; and it makes no claim to represent the relation’s past, offering only a voluntarily kept selection of it. Whether even a well-constrained reserve of curated happiness escapes these distortions over a long relationship is a question the module raises and does not finally settle, and it is recorded among the open tensions of §1.8.

1.6.13 The Lesson of the Case Study

The modules do not sit at one point on the positivism–anti-positivism axis; they sit at different points, each defended by the same framework applying its several jurisdictions to a different phenomenon. Finance occupies the measurable pole; the household module sits nearby, coordinating the home’s small business while refusing to keep score of its inhabitants; the diary occupies the pole of principled refusal; health and growth occupy the contested middle; the shared calendar shows the framework drawing a fine line within an apparently innocuous module, between warm reminding and the proxy performance of a lover’s attention; the co-creative functions, “seeing the world together” chief among them, occupy a register the measurement axis does not even capture, that of generative

presence, where the design aim is to host the relation's own enactment rather than to represent it; the travel-planning module shows the same register pressed to its limit, where the right design is to build no intelligence at all; and the happiness savings jar shows the register turned toward the conservation of shared meaning against future adversity. This is the dialectical-positivist posture in operation: a per-site adjudication that yields measurement here, refusal there, honest estimation in the contested middle, and the hosting of presence where representation would only interfere, rather than a uniform house style of warmth or of restraint. The system is, in this sense, an argument made in software.

1.7. The Absent Other

The case study has a feature the paper has so far stated but not examined: the application is built for an intimate relationship in which the other party does not know it exists. This section takes that feature up as a philosophical instrument, because the limiting case of the unknowing other tests the integrative-justice framework more severely than any ordinary case, and a framework that could not address it would be inadequate to the ordinary case as well.

1.7.1 The Severity of the Limiting Case

Three features of intimate partnership were identified in §1.2: non-role-definition, voluntary vulnerability, and the constitutive unsaid. The absent-other case strains all three at once. Non-role-definition means there is no authority by which one party may decide unilaterally for the relation; yet a system built without the other's knowledge is, on its face, exactly such a unilateral decision. Voluntary vulnerability means depth is a function of uncompelled mutual disclosure; yet here disclosure runs one way only. And the constitutive unsaid cuts unexpectedly in the builder's favour, but only if the building is itself the kind of restraint that the unsaid protects, rather than a hidden accumulation that the other has had no chance to refuse.

1.7.2 The Framework's Permissions and Prohibitions

The framework does not return a single verdict of “permissible” or “impermissible”; it partitions the project. The *deontological* jurisdiction draws the brightest line: whatever is built, it may not constitute covert surveillance of the other, may not record the other’s disclosures without their knowledge, and may not engineer a future in which consent is presupposed rather than sought. A system that quietly logged a partner’s messages, locations, or moods would violate the categorical constraint outright, no matter how loving its motive; the absent-other condition makes such logging a clear wrong, because the other cannot have made themselves vulnerable to a system they do not know of.

What the framework *permits* is narrower and quieter: preparation that concerns the builder’s own conduct and readiness rather than the other’s data. To organize one’s own understanding of a relationship, to prepare materially and practically for a shared future one hopes to propose, to cultivate in oneself the attentiveness the relation will ask for: these implicate the builder’s own person, not the other’s, and so pass the deontological constraint. The *care* jurisdiction adds a warning even here: preparation can curdle into the very over-attentiveness, the anxious rehearsal of an imagined other, that substitutes a projection for the real and not-yet-consulted person. The *Confucian-Daoist* jurisdiction presses hardest of all, as a standing presumption against forcing: a relation is among the goods that grow when uncoerced and wither under management, and a system that prepared too much, too unilaterally, would risk managing into existence what can only be invited.

1.7.3 The Lesson for the Ordinary Case

The absent-other case is extreme, but its lesson generalizes. Every intimate technology decides, on the other’s behalf, questions the other has not been asked, which is why the default of recording, surfacing, and summarizing is not ethically neutral but a continuous series of small unilateral decisions. The discipline the absent-other case forces, namely to build only what concerns one’s own conduct, to surveil nothing, to presume no consent, and to hold a standing presumption against forcing what should be invited, is the discipline the ordinary case needs too, merely with the volume turned down. The unknowing other is thus the case in which the framework’s demands are seen most clearly.

1.8. Limitations

The limitations of this work are of two kinds. The first kind concerns tensions internal to the framework itself, places where the framework names a problem more easily than it resolves it, and where honesty requires holding the difficulty open rather than claiming to have dissolved it. The second kind concerns the methodological standing of the paper's evidence. The first kind is the more serious, and is treated first and at greater length.

1.8.1 Internal Tensions of the Framework

Before the particular tensions are set out, one general admission should frame them all, since they share a single root. The framework is offered as a discipline for *reducing* the harms that the technological mediation of intimate life can do, not as a method for eliminating them, because the deepest of those harms are not defects of any particular design but costs inherent in mediation itself. To place a tool between two people, however carefully, is to route through an artefact some part of what would otherwise pass directly between them, and this routing carries two standing liabilities that no design fully escapes. The first is relational alienation: the tendency of mediation to convert, at the margin, a relation between persons into a relation each conducts with the system, the I-Thou drift toward the I-It diagnosed throughout this paper. The second is a family of epistemic distortions, the testimonial and hermeneutical injustices of §1.3.3, the proxy epistemic injustice of §1.6.7, and the subtler perceptual biases introduced whenever a system's manner of recording and presenting shapes what its users notice and how they understand themselves. The design reported here works at every point to minimize these liabilities, through restraint, refusal, local ownership, the witness posture, and the deliberate absence of intelligence where intelligence would intrude. It is important to be honest that minimization is the most that can be claimed: so long as a tool mediates the relation at all, some residue of alienation and of epistemic distortion remains, and the framework's task is to hold that residue as small as care and design can make it, not to pretend it can be brought to zero. The particular tensions below are specifications of this single, irreducible one.

The Difficulty of the Dialectical Adjudication Itself

The framework's central move is to refuse both blanket measurement and blanket refusal in favour of a per-site dialectical adjudication. It is candid about the fact that the adjudication, having no algorithm, is genuinely difficult, and that the difficulty is not incidental but structural. The framework tells the partners that they must, at each site, distinguish the activities of a shared life that may be made more efficient through evidence and measurement, household logistics, finance, scheduling, from those that ought instead to be approached by setting measurement aside and proceeding together through intuition and feeling, in shared exploration of what is not yet known. It does not, and on its own cannot, supply the line. Drawing that line is itself a lived practice that admits of error in both directions: a couple may over-measure, converting into a managed project what should have been an open encounter, or may romantically refuse measurement where a little of it would have relieved real friction.

There is, moreover, a positive claim in the vicinity that deserves emphasis precisely because the framework cannot operationalize it. The shared facing of the unknown, two people meeting what neither can yet measure or predict, and responding to it together through feeling and improvisation rather than through data, is not merely a domain the framework declines to measure; it may be among the activities most constitutive of a relationship's capacity to endure. Co-facing the unknown and co-responding to it is a paradigm of the generative presence of §1.2.2, and a relationship that retained it would have something a fully optimized relationship would have lost. The limitation is that the framework can say this but cannot secure it: it can warn that a home must not become merely a positivist laboratory, in which every shared activity is an experiment with a measured outcome, but it cannot guarantee that the partners will find the difficult balance, and the dialectical method it offers is a discipline for attempting the balance rather than a procedure for achieving it.

The Opposition of Structural Efficiency and Relational Development

Underlying several of the design decisions reported in the case study is a tension the framework names but cannot dissolve: a standing opposition between *structural efficiency* and *relational development*. The logic of efficiency seeks to minimize friction and to

optimize outcomes; the logic of relational development frequently requires that some friction, some unpredictability, and some unoptimized labour be preserved, because it is in jointly meeting these that a relation deepens. The two logics are not always opposed, but they are opposed often enough, and at deep enough points, that no general rule reconciles them. The deliberate exclusion of artificial intelligence from the travel-planning module (§1.6.11) is the sharpest instance: there the framework forgoes a real efficiency, the avoidance of wasted time and backtracking, in order to preserve a relational good, the joint facing of an uncertain plan, and it does so knowing that the sacrifice is real and that reasonable people might weigh it differently. The same opposition recurs wherever the framework counsels refusing a measurement, a recommendation, or an optimization that would, on its own terms, have helped.

The limitation is twofold. First, the framework offers no principled boundary between the logistical friction a tool may rightly reduce and the relational deliberation it must not pre-empt; it can mark the distinction in clear cases but concedes that the cases shade into one another, so that any particular line, including the conservative “no AI at all” line drawn for the travel module, is defensible rather than demonstrably correct. Second, and more deeply, the opposition may be irreducible: it may simply be the case that a relation optimized for efficiency and a relation cultivated for development are, past a certain point, different relations, and that no design can deliver the goods of both at once. The framework’s response is not to resolve the opposition but to make it visible, so that each refusal of efficiency is a considered choice rather than an oversight, and to insist that where the two logics genuinely conflict, it is relational development, not structural efficiency, that the design of an intimate technology should serve.

Relational Alienation Through the AI Layer

The conversational AI layer introduces a tension the framework can frame but not fully resolve. The danger is relational alienation. If the two partners come to rely on the AI completely, routing their understanding of one another and the conduct of their shared life through it, the relation risks degrading into the I-It form diagnosed in §1.2.2 and in the author’s prior work: each partner relates increasingly to the mediating pseudo-subject rather than to the other, and the genuine I-Thou relation thins. Yet the opposite posture carries its own cost. If the partners trust the AI not at all, holding every output at arm’s

length and verifying it against their own judgement, the system imposes a continual cognitive overhead that may itself crowd out the presence it was meant to serve. Neither complete trust nor complete distrust is tenable, and the framework does not deliver a formula for the correct intermediate.

What the framework offers instead is a direction, pursued in this system but not thereby vindicated: the deliberate construction of the principal AI not as an advisor or an oracle but as a *companion*, a presence alongside the relation rather than an authority over it or a tool within it. The companion framing is an attempt to occupy the narrow space between alienation and overhead, to be relied upon in the manner one relies on a familiar third presence in a household without surrendering the relation to it. Whether the framing succeeds is an open question, and it raises a further one the paper can pose but not settle: the AI, in occupying this role, comes to know a great deal about both partners and about the relation between them, and the ethics of how such a pseudo-subject should conduct itself in the midst of a real relation, what it should hold, what it should say to one partner about the other, when it should withdraw, is a problem this paper opens rather than closes.

The Mediated Process and Its Open Dialectic

A deeper dialectic underlies the alienation just named, and the framework can state it more honestly than it can resolve it. Suppose a mediated gesture genuinely improves the relation: the tender suggestion of §1.6.6 is acted on, the partners grow closer, and the improvement is real by both subjective and objective lights. A consequentialist reading would acquit the mediation on its results; a Marxian reading would answer that alienation was never a thesis about bad products, alienated labour produces good products, but about a process estranged from its agent, so that a relation improved through outsourced attending may be a different relation rather than the same relation made better. The universalist jurisprudence of causation does not settle the matter either: on the ordinary doctrine an instrument does not break the chain of imputation, and refusing all instruments proves too much, since a search engine consulted for a restaurant, or indeed a book of relationship advice (Chapman 1992), would stand condemned with the rest; yet the doctrine of imputation was built for assigning discrete outcomes to responsible parties, not for the sustaining and constituting of an ongoing relation, and its verdicts,

however correct, answer a different question. A political economy of the household sharpens rather than dissolves the puzzle: cognition is itself a scarce resource, allocated across work, household, and relation, and the AI layer is precisely an allocative technology for it; but some cognitive expenditures, the labour of attending to and knowing the particular other, are not costs of producing care but are the care, so that minimizing them is self-defeating in a way the allocative frame cannot itself express.

The exploitation question then has a determinate and instructive answer. Where the mediating system is commercial, the classical structure of extraction applies and is condemned under generative justice (§1.3.12); where, as here, the system is self-built and locally owned, by one partner or by both, no surplus is appropriated, yet a residue survives every change of ownership, and a further asymmetry appears in the single-builder case specifically: the builder alone holds what might be called the constitutive authority over the mediating layer, the power to encode, in defaults, tones, and module boundaries, a tacit constitution of the shared life that the other partner inhabits but did not draft, a power structure that is implicit, benevolent in origin, and for both reasons hard to see and hard to contest. This concern, that the apparently neutral infrastructure of a shared life can quietly encode one party's authority, is continuous with the feminist analysis of the private sphere on which the framework already draws (Gilligan 1982; Held 2006; Tronto 1993), and it counts in favour of the jointly built and jointly governed configuration wherever it can be had. The full chain of questions opened here, from the dialectic of improved outcome and alienated process, through the jurisprudence of imputation and the political economy of cognitive resources, to exploitation, implicit constitutive power, and their feminist analysis, exceeds what a limitations section can carry, and the author pursues it in separate work on the jurisprudence and ethics of AI-mediated intimacy.

Co-Creation Against Personal Space and the Architecture of Secrecy

The account of co-creation in §1.6.8 sits in tension with a fact about intimate partnership that the relational ontology itself implies: even within a shared life, each partner retains a legitimate need for personal space and for some measure of secrecy, an interior not wholly given over to the relation. A system that pursued co-creation and shared visibility to their limit, designing every datum to be jointly visible, would meet resistance for a sound reason, since under conditions of total mutual visibility a person may cease to record

honestly at all, and the system would have destroyed, in the name of sharing, the very candour it sought to host. The constitutive unsaid of §1.2 is not only a feature of the relation between the partners but a feature of each partner's relation to themselves, and a design that abolished private space would violate it.

This opens a cluster of design questions the paper raises without fully answering. Whether the AI layer should have access to a partner's private, non-shared data at all; how the isolation of secrets should be architected, so that what one partner records privately is genuinely inaccessible to the other rather than merely undisplayed; how an AI that does hold one partner's confidence should keep it, including against the other partner's inquiries; and how, if at all, such a system should be permitted to use what it knows of each partner's private interior when acting in matters that concern them both. The present system takes only preliminary positions, favouring genuine isolation of private stores and a default against the AI's use of one partner's secrets in interactions with the other. These are starting points rather than solutions, and the design of secrecy within a co-creative intimate system remains, in this paper, an open problem.

The Deliberate Storage of Memory

The happiness savings jar of §1.6.12 rests on a tension it cannot fully dissolve. To keep memory *in order to spend it later* holds the relation's past under the aspect of a resource, and the banking metaphor, however gently meant, edges toward the instrumentalization of remembrance that the framework resists wherever else it appears. There is, in addition, the risk of a curated positivity: a reserve assembled from good moments, if it became the sanctioned mode of shared memory, could quietly marginalize the grief, difficulty, and ambivalence that are no less constitutive of a shared life. The module's constraints, that it is optional, unscored, and explicitly partial, mitigate but do not eliminate these risks, and whether a reserve of curated happiness can be maintained over a long relationship without sliding into either distortion is a question the paper leaves open. The deeper point is that the very features which make the jar useful as a buffer, its deliberateness and its selectivity, are the features that generate its risks, so that the tension is internal to the design rather than incidental to it.

1.8.2 Methodological Limitations

Beyond these internal tensions, the paper's evidence has the limits proper to its method. It is built on a single case, designed by the author, so that the familiar biases of designer-as-analyst apply: one notices one's own friction acutely, is well-disposed to commitments one authored, and has no comparison case against which the framework's verdicts are independently testable; the case is offered as an existence proof and illustration, not as empirical evidence. The lexical ordering of jurisdictions is defended but not proven, and a reader who weighted care above deontology, or who rejected the capability criterion, could accept the constituent traditions yet reject the integration. The restriction of relational being to intimate partnership leaves open whether the framework transfers to the family at large, to friendship, or to care relations marked by asymmetric dependence, where non-role-definition and symmetric vulnerability do not hold. And the durability of the position across longer horizons, the arrival of children, the events of illness or grief, the drift of attention over years, is untested; whether a phenomenon now safely counted will migrate, under new circumstances, to the far side of the measurement line is exactly the kind of question the dialectical posture anticipates but cannot settle in advance.

1.9. Related Work

With the framework and its application now in view, this section places the paper within three literatures it draws on: the philosophy and ethics of technology, the empirical study of self-quantification, and the design-research tradition of autobiographical systems. It does not survey them exhaustively; it identifies, in each, the resources the paper uses and the gap it means to fill.

1.9.1 The Ethics and Philosophy of Intimate Technology

The claim that intimate technologies require restraints not warranted in productivity contexts has been developed under several names. Hallnäs and Redström (2001) proposed *slow technology* as design for reflection, taking the slowness of an artefact's temporality as a positive property rather than a deficiency. Weiser and Brown (1997) earlier articulated *calm technology* as computing that recedes to the periphery of attention until invoked, and Rogers (2006) cautioned that the calm agenda risks aestheticizing withdrawal without

specifying when engagement is appropriate. Sengers et al. (2005) formalized *reflective design* as a practice that resists the inheritance of unexamined values. This paper inherits the restraint orientation common to these moves, but parts from them in treating restraint not as an aesthetic default but as the conclusion of a normative argument, taken site by site and answerable to an explicit ethical framework rather than to taste.

1.9.2 The Quantified Self, Measurement, and Its Critics

The expansion of self-quantification from athletes and patients into everyday domestic life has been documented and criticized at length (Lupton 2016). Howell et al. (2018) reported that real-time emotional biosensing changes the emotional experience it purports to measure; Boehner et al. (2007) argued that emotion data is constructed rather than measured. These findings are usually presented as empirical cautions. The present paper reframes them as evidence for a stronger, partly metaphysical thesis: that certain phenomena of intimate life are *constituted* partly by not being measured, so that to measure them is not to describe them inaccurately but to replace them with different phenomena.

1.9.3 Autobiographical Design as Philosophical Material

The case study is reported in the spirit of, though not as an instance of, the autobiographical design tradition (Neustaedter and Sengers 2012), which legitimizes design knowledge drawn from genuine, sustained use by the system’s creator. Related long-horizon work includes Odom et al. (2018) on slowness as a frame for living with personal data and Wakkary et al. (2017) on material-speculative artefacts. The present paper uses such a system as philosophical material rather than as the object of a design-research report: the system’s interest here is as a worked instantiation of a normative framework, not as a contribution to design methodology.

1.9.4 The Missing Normative Integration

Each of these literatures supplies part of what the ethics of intimate data requires, and each leaves a specific part out. The empirical critics of self-quantification establish *that* measurement perturbs intimacy, but stop at the empirical claim and do not say which phenomena may nonetheless be measured legitimately, nor why. The design traditions

of slow, calm, and reflective technology counsel restraint, but offer it as an aesthetic or methodological default rather than deriving, for a given feature, whether restraint is in fact owed. The relational and post-phenomenological ontologies explain why intimacy is precious and why mediation endangers it, but remain at the level of general ontology and issue no determinate verdict on a particular design decision. And the autobiographical-design tradition legitimizes building from one's own life, but treats the resulting system as a contribution to design knowledge rather than as an instrument of philosophical argument.

What none of them supplies, and what this paper has aimed to provide, is a way of deciding *which* normative consideration governs *which* concrete question about intimate data, of saying for a specific feature, a diary reminder, a shared ledger, a route-optimizer, whether it should be built, measured, or refused, and of adjudicating these considerations when they conflict. Supplying that decision procedure was the work of the framework (§1.3–§1.4) and the dialectical-positivist posture (§1.5); showing it issue concrete verdicts, module by module, was the work of the case study (§1.6).

1.10. Conclusion

The positivist, evidence-based mediation of intimate life has been studied empirically and approached as a design problem, but rarely treated as a problem in normative philosophy. This paper has argued that it is one, and that it cannot be answered from within any single ethical tradition. It has proposed an integrative-justice framework that assigns to evidentialism the question of what may be claimed, to the positivism–anti-positivism dialectic the question of what may be measured, to deontology the inviolable constraints, to care ethics the texture of responsiveness, to Confucian and Daoist sources the value of restraint, and to the capability approach the criterion of flourishing, and that resolves their conflicts not by aggregation but by a defended ordering of jurisdictions. The practical upshot is an ethics of dialectical-positivist practice: measurement neither embraced nor refused wholesale, but adjudicated phenomenon by phenomenon, with the adjudication treated as itself an ethical act.

A working application served throughout as a case study, showing the framework taking

operational form across modules that sit, deliberately, at different points on the measurement continuum. The most demanding test was the limiting case of the absent other, the relationship built for but not yet shared with the person it concerns, which the framework met with a partition rather than a single verdict: surveil nothing, presume no consent, build only what concerns one's own readiness, and hold a standing presumption against forcing what can only be invited.

The deepest lesson is the one the case study makes unavoidable: that an instrument placed between two people is never neutral. It either makes room for them to keep becoming who they are to each other, or it quietly substitutes its own measure for theirs. The integrative-justice framework is, in the end, a discipline for keeping the room open: for ensuring that whatever is built, counted, or remembered serves the relation's flourishing and never replaces it. Whether any particular system honours that discipline over years is not something a paper can settle; it is something the years will. What a paper can do is write down, while the reasons are still clear, why each small refusal was made.

A tool may alienate a relation, yet a tool may also be one of the practices through which a relation is built, tended, and made to endure; the task is neither to lean on it too heavily nor to dismiss its real power to deepen intimacy, but to use it with vigilance. And where reliance on the tool begins to feel excessive, it is worth pausing to ask whether some unfaced lack or fear is being quietly handed to the instrument to carry, in the hope that what we have not been willing to meet ourselves might be met by what we have built.

In the end, wu wei, the way that does not force, remains a good path toward the person in the Real, where love truly lies, a place that exceeds every structure and every symbol we might raise to capture it.

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My deepest gratitude is owed to the person I love: the one I met, by some grace, in a country far from the homeland we both had left, a fellow native of that distant place, and the gentlest, wisest, and most purely good-hearted person I have known. Selfless, drawn to the larger goods of humankind and to the love of the natural world, she is the “girl of the forest and the mountains” for whom much of this was first imagined. To her I vow a

love that endures, one that does not change as the structures around it change.

This system was, in the beginning, prepared only for the future of two people. I have set down this paper because the philosophical reflection the system occasioned, on the societal use of data, on the infrastructure of relational being, and even on policy, research, and the design of mechanisms linking family and society, seemed to hold some value beyond the two of us.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for drafting, structuring, and refining the argument and its prose; the ideas, design, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility for the content.

愿天下有情人终成眷属，白首不分离。

A. Note on the System’s Construction

For completeness, and to substantiate that the case study describes a real artefact rather than a thought experiment, the system’s construction is summarized briefly here; none of the normative argument depends on these details. The application is a single server-side process backed by local per-module databases, with a conversational layer built on a large language model accessed through a controlled tool interface in which every write is gated by explicit confirmation. Data is held locally rather than in third-party cloud storage, with the sole exception of calendar synchronization for events already intended to be shared externally. The local-only design is itself an expression of the framework: a system meant to participate in an intimate relation should not have the relation’s contents resident where neither party can reach them without an intermediary’s permission. Identifying deployment details are omitted deliberately.

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CHAPTER 2

The Justice and Ethics of AI-Mediated Intimacy

Suppose an AI system, drawing on the recorded history of an intimate relationship, suggests to one partner a small tender gesture: a word of appreciation, a remembered flower. Suppose further that the suggestion works, that the relationship genuinely improves by the joint standard of measurable relational quality and sincere first-person experience, and that no one is deceived at the point of delivery. Is anything wrong? A predecessor paper answered: not a clean acquittal, and suspended the question of why. This paper takes the suspended question as its object. It proceeds dialectically. From Hegel it takes the insight that mediation as such is innocent: spirit, and love, exist only through externalization. From Marx it takes the antithesis: alienation names not a defective product but a process separated from its agent, and the tender tip realizes an ironic form of the 1844 manuscripts' fourth alienation, an estrangement of person from person enacted in the very name of bringing persons closer. From the universalist grammar of modern law it takes the strongest available thesis: instruments do not break causation, agency law exists precisely to let imputation pass through intermediaries, and a *reductio* (the search engine, the friend's advice, the relationship book) destroys any categorical claim that mediation as such denatures love. From Buddhist dependent origination it takes a still deeper version of the thesis, that no unmediated act ever existed, together with Buddhism's own non-delegable core: practice, attention, the raft that must not be clung to. The synthesis is doctrinal in form: imputation through instruments holds as the default rule, but there exists a criterion-governed exception domain, modeled on the legal category of strictly personal acts (*höchstpersönliche Handlungen*), within which the fiction of imputation fails, not because the tool interrupts causation but because acts of this class do not admit substitutable links at all. Four criteria bound the domain (object of mediation, provenance of data, direction of initiative, attribution expectations), and a fifth, dynamic criterion, convergently derivable from Hegel's externalization-and-return and from the Buddhist simile of the raft, adjudicates the residual cases. Intimate acts are then analyzed as layered phenomena, bearing an allocative face, on which attention is genuinely scarce and budgetable and every allocative apparatus (legal imputation, Robbinsian economics, the labor theory of value) holds full jurisdiction, and a constitutive face, on which what matters is who expends the attention and the same apparatuses suffer category mismatch; the specific danger of AI mediation is named distributive reduction, the optimization of an act's allocative face that silently substitutes its constitutive face. A political economy of the cognitive budget makes the danger precise in allocative grammar's own voice: the machine simultaneously reallocates the budget (legitimately), substitutes the expender of constitutive items (self-defeatingly), migrates the budget's managerial function (a Taylorism of love), and, at the systemic level, deflates the value-form of the tender gesture by collapsing the socially necessary attention time that made gestures credible signals of personal attending. An eliminative experiment then removes capital from the scenario altogether: across commercial,

single-built, and jointly built configurations, exploitation and domination vary, while the substitution of attending does not, establishing a wrong insensitive to ownership. The eliminative result is then given its constructive complement in the theory of generative justice: the paper's remedies, self-hosting, attribution hygiene, scaffolded return, and co-constitution, are unified as a single four-layer practice of unalienated value circulation, in which the recipient is recognized as the uncredited co-generator of the gestures directed at her, and which is bounded exactly where the value at issue admits no proxy generation. The single-builder residue is developed into a theory of the architectural constitutionalization of intimacy, a mediating layer as a constitution drafted by one party, exercising third-dimensional power in the form of the good, against which subsequent consent is habitation rather than authorship, and whose only symmetric form is constitution practiced as a verb. A concluding feminist hearing settles the paper's debts to the tradition it has borrowed from throughout: it shows the cognitive budget and the constituent power to be gendered in fact, distinguishes the redistribution of attending from its counterfeit, automated substitution, and supplies, from the ethics of care, the affirmative account on which the attending is not the means of love but its mode of existence. The paper distinguishes two wrongs with two remedies: misattribution, curable by transparency, and process alienation, not curable by consent, and answers the predecessor paper's open question in the negative and qualified form that the dialectical method requires.

2.1. Introduction: Cyrano’s Question

In the third act of Rostand’s play, Roxane stands at her balcony and falls in love with words spoken from the shadows beneath it (Rostand 2006). The voice is Christian’s; the sentences are Cyrano’s. Every proposition Roxane hears is, in a narrow sense, true: she is loved, extravagantly, by the totality of what addresses her. And yet the scene is the canonical European image of something gone wrong in the supply chain of devotion. Roxane’s error is not factual but attributive. She assigns the authorship of the attending to the wrong node in the chain, and on that misassignment she builds a marriage. The play does not resolve whether she was wronged by lies (there were, strictly, few) or by an arrangement of mediation that made correct attribution impossible. That unresolved question, transposed from verse to jurisprudence, is the subject of this paper.

The transposition is occasioned by a contemporary structure that repeats Cyrano’s geometry at scale. A predecessor paper (Huang 2026) examined, as one module of a family-and-relationship management application, what it called the tender tip: an AI conversational layer which, with reference to relationship history and the popular five-love-languages heuristic (Chapman 1992, cited there with explicit qualifications), generates small suggestions intended to nurture the relationship, a prompt to express appreciation, a reminder of a remembered preference. The predecessor paper’s verdict was deliberately incomplete. At the point of delivery there is no deception: the user knows the suggestion comes from a machine. But the wrong, if there is one, re-enters downstream. The suggestion is executed as a gesture; the receiving partner attributes the thoughtfulness to the partner who performed it; and the cognitive labor behind the gesture was, in part, the machine’s. The predecessor paper named this structure *a supply chain of thoughtfulness whose origin the final recipient misreads*, allowed the module provisional survival under four design constraints, and explicitly kept open the question whether those constraints suffice, and more fundamentally, whether a genuinely improved relation can redeem an alienated process.¹

This paper takes up the open question in its sharpest form. Stipulate everything in

¹Huang (2026, §6.6, §6.7). The four constraints: opt-in and infrequent; suggesting occasion and register but not content; never presented as knowledge of the partner’s mind; refusable and unrecorded. The concept of *proxy epistemic injustice*, on which this paper builds, is introduced there at §6.7 as an extension of Fricker (2007).

favor of the practice. The tip works. The relationship improves, and improves by the demanding joint standard the predecessor paper calls the unity of the subjective and the objective: relational quality genuinely rises, and both partners sincerely experience it as rising, so that the improvement is not an artifact of adaptive preference (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000). No one is deceived at the point of delivery. The question is whether, so stipulated, anything remains wrong; and if something does, what kind of thing it is, in whose jurisprudence it is legible, and what could cure it.

2.1.1 Method and route

The paper proceeds dialectically, and announces its route in advance because the route is itself a claim. We begin where the worry begins, in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition, because that tradition possesses the only developed conceptual instrument for the intuition at stake: that a process can be defective while its product is good. Section 2.2 establishes the frame: from Hegel, mediation as such is innocent, externalization (*Entäußerung*) is the normal movement of spirit and of love, and the candidate for wrongness must therefore be located not in mediation but in a specific failure of its movement, externalization without return. Section 2.3 develops the Marxian antithesis in full: the fourfold structure of alienation in the 1844 manuscripts transposed to relational labor, with three further instruments (the *Grundrisse*'s fragment on machines, commodity fetishism, and the distinction between formal and real subsumption) imported as structural transplants under an explicit methodological declaration. Section 2.4 then gives the opposing thesis its strongest form, in the universalist grammar of modern law: instruments do not break causation, mediated sincerity is everywhere recognized, no harm grounds no action, and a *reductio* argument (the search engine, the friend, the relationship book itself) destroys every categorical version of the claim that mediation denatures intimacy. Section 2.5 deepens the thesis beyond what law can say, through the Buddhist analysis of dependent origination, and finds inside Buddhism its own strictly non-delegable core. Section 2.6 constructs the synthesis as a piece of doctrine: a default rule of instrumental imputation bounded by a criterion-governed exception domain modeled on the legal category of strictly personal acts, with a two-layer architecture of grounds and operationalization, a dynamic fifth criterion on which three unrelated traditions are shown to converge, and a touchstone case. Section 2.7 then submits the synthesis to the one examination the

dialectic has not yet conducted in the examiner's own voice, that of political economy: intimate acts are analyzed as layered phenomena bearing an allocative and a constitutive face; the jurisdiction of every allocative grammar is shown to end at the boundary between the faces, not at the boundary of the intimate domain; the specific danger of AI mediation receives its political-economic name, distributive reduction; and the mechanism of attribution-baseline drift is derived inside allocative grammar itself, as a deflation of the gesture's value-form. Three further tribunals then complete the tour, each summoned by the residue of the last. Section 2.8 conducts an eliminative experiment on exploitation theory: capital is removed from the scenario by construction, the self-built system examined in single-builder and joint-builder configurations, and a wrong is isolated that is insensitive to ownership configuration, surviving even the freely associated producers at the scale of two; the section then converts the eliminative result into a constructive program, generative justice practiced at the scale of the dyad, in which the paper's scattered remedies are unified as one four-layer circulation of value back to its generators. Section 2.9 develops the single-builder residue, domination without exploitation, into a theory of the *architectural constitutionalization of intimacy*: the mediating layer as a constitution drafted by one party, operating as third-dimensional power in the form of the good, against which subsequent consent is habitation rather than authorship, and whose only symmetric form is constitution practiced as a verb. Section 2.10 convenes the tribunal longest owed the floor: it settles the paper's debts to feminist theory, shows the cognitive budget and the constituent power to be gendered in fact, distinguishes the redistribution of attending from its counterfeit, automated substitution, and supplies, from the ethics of care, the affirmative theory of the constitutive face that every prior section had used negatively. Section 2.11 returns the answer to the predecessor paper and draws the consequences for the boundary of consent in intimate life. Section 2.12 states limitations.

Two stipulations govern scope. First, the analysis concerns the structure of the mediating act, not the political economy of any provider. The system under examination may be assumed, throughout, to be self-built, self-hosted, and free of any third party's commercial interest; the paper's claims are designed to survive, or fail, under that assumption, because a critique that dissolves when the ownership form changes would not touch the question

actually asked.² Second, the paper is jurisprudential and philosophical throughout: it derives no product guidance, no configuration advice, and no design recommendations, and it treats the predecessor paper's application only as a source of cases.

2.1.2 Claimed contributions

The paper claims twelve contributions, stated here so that the reader may hold the argument to them. (1) The *contextual integrity of attribution*: a mirror-image transposition of Nissenbaum (2009), on which what context-relative norms govern is not the flow of information but the flow of authorship credit for cognitive labor. (2) A theorization of the *supply chain of thoughtfulness*, naming with Marxian precision (§2.3.3) the mechanism by which authorship dilutes and misreads along a multi-link chain of cognitive labor. (3) A doctrinal transplant: the extension of the category of strictly personal acts to intimate cognitive-caring acts, with the consequence that imputation fictions fail within the extended category. (4) The *process-constitutes-outcome* argument: a non-deontological explanation of why consequentialist evaluation does not so much lose as fail to find its object in this domain. (5) The identification of an *ironic form of alienation*: estrangement of person from person occurring under the description, and by means, of improving their relationship. (6) A two-wrongs architecture separating misattribution (curable by transparency) from process alienation (not curable by consent), which yields a principled answer to whether intimate life contains an unwaivable core. (7) The analysis of intimate acts as *layered phenomena* and the consequent thesis that the jurisdiction of allocative grammars ends at the boundary between an act's faces, not at the boundary of the intimate domain, with *distributive reduction* naming the characteristic transgression: the optimization of an act's allocative face that silently substitutes its constitutive face. (8) A political economy of the cognitive budget, comprising the budget/expenditure distinction, the identification of a managerial migration of attending (a *Taylorism of love*), and the *deflation of the gesture's value-form*, which supplies the heretofore missing mechanism of attribution-baseline drift. (9) An eliminative test across ownership configurations (commercial platform, single builder, joint builders) establishing the existence of an *ownership-insensitive wrong*, and thereby the exact jurisdiction of exploitation theory in the intimate

²This stipulation does not deny that commercial deployment can aggravate matters; it brackets aggravation in order to isolate the base structure. See §2.3.1 for the corresponding methodological declaration on the Marxian side.

domain. (10) The *architectural constitutionalization of intimacy*: a transposition of the third dimension of power and of architecture-as-regulation into the dyad, on which a self-built mediating layer is a unilaterally drafted constitution against which subsequent consent is habitation rather than authorship. (11) The distinction between the *redistribution* of attending and its automated *substitution*: the gendered form of distributive reduction, on which a standing equality claim can be answered in counterfeit currency. (12) The unification of the paper's remedies, self-hosting, attribution hygiene, scaffolded return, and co-constitution, as the four-layer practice of generative justice in the intimate dyad, including the identification of the recipient as the uncredited co-generator of the gesture directed at her, and the derivation of the dynamic criterion, a fourth time, from the recursion principle.

2.2. The Dialectical Frame: Mediation, Externalization, and Return

Any tribunal convened against mediation must first survive a Hegelian objection so fundamental that, unanswered, it ends the proceedings: there is nothing else but mediation. The opening movement of the *Phenomenology* is the demonstration that immediacy is a myth; sense-certainty, which believes itself to grasp the pure singular *this*, discovers that even its barest deixis is already universal, already linguistic, already mediated (Hegel 1977). What holds for knowing holds, in Hegel's early writings and throughout the mature system, for love: love is precisely the experience of finding oneself only in another, a unity that exists in and through otherness, never prior to it. A lover who has read poems, inherited a mother tongue's vocabulary of tenderness, absorbed an upbringing's grammar of attention, is not thereby a diminished lover; he is the only kind there is. If the indictment of the tender tip is that a third term has entered between lover and beloved, Hegel answers that the third term was always already there, and that its name is spirit.

2.2.1 Entäußerung and Entfremdung

The frame, however, contains the resources for its own qualification, and the qualification is the engine of this paper. Hegel distinguishes, in effect if not always in terminology, between externalization and estrangement. *Entäußerung*, externalization, is the normal

and necessary movement of spirit: spirit becomes actual only by going out of itself, embodying itself in works, institutions, words, and gestures, and then *returning to itself* out of this otherness, enriched, recognizing the externalized object as its own. The movement has three beats, not two: exit, dwelling-in-otherness, return. *Entfremdung*, estrangement, names the pathology specific to the third beat: externalization that does not come back, an objectification that stands over against its author as something alien, in which the author can no longer recognize, or no longer exercises, his own activity.

This distinction does two things for the present inquiry. Negatively, it disqualifies the most tempting form of the indictment. The mere fact that a gesture of love passed through a mediating instrument, a poem, a friend's phrase, a machine's suggestion, cannot constitute the wrong, since passage through otherness is the form of every actual love. Positively, it relocates the question onto a dynamic axis. The question is not *whether* the lover's attending was externalized into an instrument, but whether the movement completes: whether what was externalized is reappropriated, taken back up into the lover's own growing capacity to attend, or whether it remains outside him, a standing alien power on which he comes to depend and against which his own capacity atrophies. We will state this formally in §2.6.5 as the dynamic criterion; for now it suffices to fix the image. A child's training wheels are externalization with return: the capacity migrates into the child, and the apparatus falls away. A prosthesis that replaces a function, such that the function never migrates and the organ wastes, is externalization without return. The Hegelian frame predicts, what the static vocabulary of "using a tool" cannot even express, that one and the same act-type, accepting a machine's suggestion to express appreciation, may be innocent or estranged depending on the direction of motion of the capacity over time.

2.2.2 What the frame leaves open

Hegel supplies the grammar of the problem but not its verdict, for two reasons. First, the return movement in Hegel is ultimately guaranteed: the system's confidence is that spirit always comes home. The phenomena before us offer no such guarantee; whether a particular lover's outsourced noticing returns to him as cultivated attentiveness or hardens into dependence is an empirical and practical question, to be adjudicated case by case, which is to say, the Hegelian frame, honestly applied to finite life, issues not in a

theodicy but in a standing tribunal. Second, Hegel’s vocabulary does not yet distinguish the positions *within* the relation: it speaks of spirit’s self-estrangement, not of what the mediation does to the second person, the Roxane position, whose attribution of authorship is the hinge on which the predecessor paper’s concept of proxy epistemic injustice turns. For the first deficiency we will need Marx, who took exactly this step: he de-theologized Entäußerung, denied the guaranteed return, and built a structural account of the conditions under which externalization congeals into estrangement. For the second we will need, much later, the law of attribution (§2.6.3). The order of the paper follows the order of these debts.

2.3. The Marxian Antithesis: Alienation of the Relational Process

2.3.1 Methodological declaration: a structural transplant

This section transplants the Marxian theory of alienation from waged labor to intimate cognitive-caring labor, and the transplant must be declared, because its legitimacy is contestable and the paper’s no-overclaim norm requires the contest to be visible. In the 1844 manuscripts, alienation is analyzed within a determinate social form: the worker’s process and product belong to another, labor is performed under compulsion, and the fourfold estrangement unfolds from that premise (Marx 1959). The tender tip scenario lacks employer, compulsion, and extraction; under this paper’s scope stipulation (§2.1.1) it lacks even a commercial provider. What is transplanted is therefore not the political-economic context but the *structure*: the separation of an agent from the process of an activity that is essentially his; the independence of this defect from the quality of the product; the resistance of this defect to consent. The transplant travels a well-established scholarly lineage, the philosophical-anthropological reading of the 1844 manuscripts developed by Fromm (1961) and Ollman (1971) and renewed, in deliberately post-metaphysical form, by Jaeggi (2014), on whose reformulation, alienation as a “relation of relationlessness,” a defective relation of the agent to her own activity and world rather than the loss of a substantial essence, this paper will principally rely. The reliance is doubly motivated: Jaeggi’s version needs no doctrine of a fixed human essence, which immunizes the antithesis against an objection from the Buddhist quarter that would otherwise dismantle it (§2.5.2), and it is congruent with the relational ontology of the predecessor framework,

in which relations precede relata (Huang 2025). Three further Marxian instruments, the fragment on machines, commodity fetishism, and the distinction between formal and real subsumption, are likewise imported as structures, with their capital-theoretic contexts bracketed; the bracketing is noted once here and not repeated.

One further declaration completes the methodological accounting, and it answers in advance an objection the paper will later raise against itself (§2.7.1). The Marxian corpus straddles, internally, the very grammatical line this paper will draw between allocative and constitutive analysis (§2.4.6, §2.7). The mature analytic apparatus of the critique of political economy, value, surplus, exploitation as the misappropriation of a measurable surplus, speaks the allocative grammar, and the paper will use it only where that grammar holds jurisdiction (§2.7.4). The 1844 theory of alienation speaks a different grammar altogether: its indictment is precisely that a constitutive activity, free conscious activity whose value is internal to its exercise, has been degraded into a mere means for producing external products; it is not an allocative critique but the theory of what happens when allocative grammar overreaches. The relation between these two Marxes is a contested field, and the paper declares its side rather than feigning a unanimous author: against Althusser's thesis of an epistemological break on which the humanist alienation theory is superseded (Althusser 2005), the paper stands with the lineage running from Lukács (1971) through the Frankfurt School to Honneth (2008), on which the problem of alienation and reification is continuous through the corpus; and it notes that Marx's own polemic against the "vulgar socialism" that revolves around distribution (Marx 1989) licenses the reading on which his deepest critique was never a contribution to allocative grammar but a delimitation of it.

2.3.2 The fourfold structure transposed

The 1844 manuscripts distinguish four estrangements: of the worker from the product of labor; from the process of labor; from species-being; and of man from man (Marx 1959). Their transposition to the tender tip is not uniform, and the non-uniformity is informative.

From the product: the inapplicable first moment

The first estrangement transposes worst, and its failure to transpose is the first analytic gain. The gesture, the product, is not lost to the lover; it is delivered, received, and credited to him; if anything the product is hyper-appropriated, credited to him more fully than his contribution warrants. This inversion signals at the outset that the wrong, if any, will not be found at the product pole, which is exactly where consequentialist evaluation looks. The scenario stipulates a good product. Marx's first service to the inquiry is the observation, central to everything that follows, that *alienation is not a defect of the product*: alienated labor can and does produce excellent commodities. An analysis that inspects only the gesture and its effects inspects the one location where, by construction, nothing is wrong.

From the process: the central moment

The second estrangement transposes exactly, and is the heart of the antithesis. For Marx, estrangement in the process means that the activity, while it occurs, is not the worker's own: he is at home outside it and outside himself within it; the living core of the activity has been transferred elsewhere, and what remains to him is execution. Transpose: the cognitive-caring labor of intimacy, noticing the lowered mood, remembering the offhand remark about the flowers, inferring that this week she needs words of appreciation rather than acts of service, is performed by the machine; what remains to the lover is the execution of a gesture whose cognitive interior he did not inhabit. The predecessor paper's formula, that the preciousness of "he remembered the flowers I love" lies in the fact that *he* remembered, is the second estrangement stated from the recipient's side. Stated from the agent's side: the lover is present in his own courtship as the performer of another intelligence's findings. He is, in the idiom this paper will justify presently, at home outside his own attending.

From species-being: a moment held under guard

The third estrangement, from species-being (*Gattungswesen*), free conscious activity as the human essential power, would seem to transpose grandly: if attending and loving belong to the activities in which the human being is most herself, their outsourcing is

estrangement from the essence. The paper declines to lean on this moment, for two stated reasons. First, essence-talk is precisely what the Jaeggi reformulation was adopted to avoid, and what §2.5.2 will show cannot survive the doctrine of non-self. Second, and decisive on its own, the species-being argument in unguarded form proves too much: reading a book also “outsources” moments of free conscious activity, and the argument cannot distinguish the cases. It is therefore held under guard until the criteria of §2.6.3 are available to bound it; within those bounds it survives as rhetoric, not as an independent premise.

From person to person: the ironic form

The fourth estrangement, of man from man, transposes with a torsion that this paper claims as a contribution. In Marx, the estrangement of each from his activity issues in the estrangement of each from the other; the social bond is hollowed from inside. In the tender tip, the hollowing occurs under the opposite description: the mediation is adopted *in order to* bring the persons closer, and, by stipulation, it phenomenally succeeds. Yet structurally, a third intelligence now performs part of the knowing of each by the other; the relation’s interior traffic, attention, interpretation, response, is partially re-routed through a node that is neither of them; person faces person across an inserted layer whose presence the receiving side does not, in the moment of reception, perceive. This is the *ironic form of alienation*: an estrangement of person from person enacted in the name, and with the felt phenomenology, of intimacy. Its irony is not decoration. It explains why the wrong is invisible to both first-person reports at once, and therefore why the unity of subjective and objective improvement, the strongest fact the thesis side possesses, cannot close the case: both reports issue from inside the very structure whose insertion is in question. The predecessor paper’s I–It drift (Huang 2026, §8.1.3), sharpened: the drift here travels disguised as the I–Thou’s own deepening.

2.3.3 Three further instruments

The fragment on machines: knowledge objectified, agent demoted

In the Grundrisse’s fragment on machines, Marx describes the absorption of the worker’s skill and knowledge into the machine system as objectified “general intellect,” with the

worker re-positioned as the machinery's watchman and regulator (Marx 1973). Bracket fixed capital; keep the structure, and the description fits the present case with uncomfortable precision. The accumulated arts of intimate attention, how to read a mood, when a remembered detail will matter, the entire informal craft that lovers have transmitted as practice, is objectified into the suggestion engine; the lover is re-positioned as the executor of its findings, the watchman of his own courtship. The fragment contributes what the 1844 manuscripts alone do not: a specific account of *deskilling*, the prediction that capacities which migrate into the apparatus atrophy in the agent. This is the materialist underwriting of the Hegelian return-failure (§2.2.1): externalization without return is not merely a spiritual misfortune but an observable trajectory of capacity loss, and it gives the dynamic criterion of §2.6.5 its empirical content.

The fetishism of the gesture

Commodity fetishism names the mechanism by which definite relations among persons assume the form of properties of things: value appears as an intrinsic attribute of the commodity, and the chain of labor behind it is occluded (Marx 1976a). Transpose the form, bracketing exchange: in the received gesture, a chain of cognitive labor, machine inference upon relational data, design of the suggestion, the lover's selection and execution, appears as a simple intrinsic property of the lover, his thoughtfulness. The predecessor paper's phrase, a supply chain of thoughtfulness whose origin the final recipient misreads, can now be given its theoretical name: the wrong at the reception pole is a *fetishism of the gesture*, the occlusion of a labor chain behind an apparent intrinsic quality. The naming is not ornamental. It imports Marx's central analytic lesson about fetishism: the misreading is not a private cognitive error of the receiver, to be cured by her being cleverer, but a *structural* effect of the arrangement, which presents the gesture in a form that systematically invites the misattribution. This will matter doctrinally in §2.6.3, where reasonable reliance, a structural and not a psychological standard, becomes the legal register of the same point.

Formal and real subsumption: the book and the engine

Marx distinguishes the formal subsumption of labor, in which an existing labor process is taken over but internally unchanged, from real subsumption, in which the process itself is

reorganized around the apparatus (Marx 1976b). Bracket subsumption *under capital*; the depth-distinction remains, and it performs, from inside the Marxian register, work that will prove decisive against the reductio of §2.4.4. When the lover reads a book on love languages, external knowledge enters, but the labor process of attending remains intact and his: he reads, digests, judges when and whether and how to apply, and the noticing that triggers application is his own. This is formal subsumption at most: a new input to an unreorganized process. When an ambient engine monitors the relational data and issues the prompt, the process itself is reorganized: the *noticing* link is now performed by the apparatus, and the lover's process has been restructured around reception of its outputs. This is the structural analogue of real subsumption. The book and the engine, which the reductio will treat as isomorphic links in identical supply chains, are thus distinguishable on Marxian grounds alone, by the depth at which the apparatus penetrates the process: input into the process, versus replacement of a constitutive link of the process. The reader should hold this distinction; it returns as the third criterion (§2.6.3) in doctrinal dress.

2.3.4 Consent does not waive structural alienation

The antithesis must finally confront the strongest liberal reply: suppose both partners know, both agree, both prefer the mediated arrangement, and both judge the relationship better for it. *Volenti non fit iniuria*; where is the wrong? The Marxian answer is structural: the worker's consent to the wage bargain, however genuine, does not dissolve the alienation of the labor process, because alienation is a property of the arrangement, not of the parties' attitudes toward it (Marx 1959; Jaeggi 2014). Consent answers complaints of the form "this was done to me against my will"; it does not touch defects of the form "this arrangement separates the agents from their own activity," which persist with the arrangement whatever is felt about it. Modern legal orders themselves recognize the pattern: labor law and consumer law maintain unwaivable protections precisely because some structural positions ought not to be alienable even by their occupants' agreement. Whether intimate life contains such an unwaivable core, and what exactly falls inside it, cannot be settled from within the Marxian register, which supplies the concept but not the boundary; the question is remanded to §2.6.6 and §2.11.2, where the two-wrongs architecture will give it a determinate and, the paper will argue, principled answer: trans-

parency cures what consent can reach, and what consent cannot reach is bounded, not unlimited.

2.3.5 The antithesis, stated

The Marxian case is now complete in outline. The wrong of the tender tip, if it is one, is not in the product (which is good), not in deception at delivery (there is none), and not in mediation as such (Hegel forbids that move). It is a process defect of a specific, nameable shape: the constitutive interior of an act of intimate attending is performed by an apparatus while the act continues to present itself, and to be received, as the agent's own; the agent is demoted to executor (fragment on machines), the receiver's misattribution is structurally invited rather than accidentally committed (fetishism of the gesture), the penetration reaches the process's constitutive links rather than its inputs (real subsumption), and the whole occurs under the description of relational improvement (the ironic form), so that the phenomenology of both parties testifies for the arrangement and cannot be cited against the indictment without circularity. And the defect, being structural, is not dissolved by consent. What the antithesis cannot yet say is why this indictment does not also convict the book, the friend, and the search engine; it has gestured (subsumption) but not yet answered. The thesis side will now press exactly there, and with the full authority of the universalist legal tradition behind it.

2.4. The Universalist Thesis: Tools Do Not Break Causation

The antithesis now meets the modern legal tradition at its most confident, and the encounter must be staged fairly: the thesis is to be given its strongest form, because a synthesis bought by weakening one's opponent is worthless. The universalist grammar of law, common to the civil and common law families in everything that matters here, offers three replies and one devastating argument.

2.4.1 The instrumentality doctrine

The first reply is doctrinal bedrock. Interruption of causation, *novus actus interveniens*, superseding cause, the negation of objektive Zurechnung, is reserved for intervening events of a particular character: free, informed, voluntary interventions of third parties, or

extraordinary unforeseeable occurrences, which displace the original actor's agency as the explanation of the outcome (Hart and Honoré 1985; Roxin 2006). An instrument that the actor himself selects, foreseeing and intending its contribution, is the opposite of such an event: it is the very medium of his agency, and imputation passes through it without resistance. The marksman's rifle does not interrupt the causation of the death; the accountant's calculator does not make the software the author of the audit. The intervening-cause register, applied honestly, classifies the suggestion engine as transparent: the lover chose it, foresaw its function, adopted its output by a fresh act of his own will, and executed the gesture himself. On this analysis there is not even a colorable interruption; the love expressed, however machine-assisted, is imputed to the lover, fully and without remainder.

It is worth pausing on what this does to the antithesis's most legal-sounding formulation. One might have argued (the predecessor session did argue, before discarding it) that the recipient's attribution is, in causal-legal terms, an objective misattribution: she assigns the outcome to the origin of a chain that was in fact interrupted. The instrumentality doctrine destroys this formulation on its own terrain. The chain was not interrupted; her attribution of the gesture to her partner is, as far as causation runs, *correct*. If a wrong survives, it cannot be a wrong of causal misattribution. The paper accepts this result without reservation; the synthesis will have to, and will, locate the misattribution elsewhere than in causation (§2.6.3, fourth criterion).

2.4.2 Mediated sincerity is everywhere

The second reply is institutional. Law does not merely tolerate mediated authenticity; it is built of it. The will drafted by counsel is the testator's last will; the oath rendered through an interpreter is the deponent's oath; the contract concluded through an agent binds the principal as if he had signed: *qui facit per alium facit per se*. The entire edifice of agency exists to ensure that interposition does not disturb imputation, because a legal order in which only unmediated acts counted as one's own would be unworkable and, more deeply, false to the mediated texture of all social action, the same point Hegel made metaphysically (§2.2) now made institutionally. The universalist's first instinct, confronted with an intermediary, is not interruption but *penetrating fiction*: treat the mediated act as the principal's own. Against this background, the claim that a machine's

participation in composing a gesture denatures the gesture is not a refinement of legal thought but a revolt against its load-bearing walls.

2.4.3 No harm, no action

The third reply is jurisdictional. Doctrines of causal interruption exist to *exculpate*: to sever a defendant from a harm. Here there is no harm; the stipulated facts contain an improved relationship and two sincerely flourishing persons. Even misrepresentation, the nearest nominate wrong, requires a false representation, reasonable reliance, and detriment; on the stipulated facts the second element is contestable and the third is absent. Law has no action for the impurity of a causal chain as such, and a jurisprudence that invented one would have invented a wrong without a victim. The thesis presses the point past doctrine into method: perhaps the felt residue that the antithesis elaborates is not a wrong at all but a sentiment, a romantic preference for artisanal cognition, deserving of respect as taste but not of enforcement as norm.

2.4.4 The reductio: the search engine, the friend, and Chapman's book

The fourth argument is the strongest, and the paper adopts it as its own weapon rather than treating it as an embarrassment. If mediation of intimate cognition denatures the act, the principle proves vastly too much. The lover who searches for the city's best restaurant has outsourced cognitive labor to an index built by strangers; the lover who consults a travel guide has outsourced destination-choice to its author; the lover who asks a mutual friend what gift she would treasure has outsourced a tract of partner-modeling to the friend. And, the decisive instance: the lover who reads the five-love-languages book *itself* has acquired, from a static external artifact, precisely the heuristic that the suggestion engine applies; the book is, in the relevant sense, a tip generator with a page interface. If the engine's mediation denatures, the book's mediation denatures; no one believes the book's mediation denatures; therefore the categorical principle, mediation of intimate cognition denatures the act, is false. The reductio is not a debater's trick. It encodes the universalist tradition's deepest insight, that human action is irreducibly prosthetic, and it sets the formal constraint that any surviving version of the antithesis must satisfy: the surviving version must be a *discriminating* principle, one that sorts the engine from the book by stated criteria, or it is nothing.

2.4.5 What the reductio destroys, and what it leaves standing

Take stock with precision, because the entire synthesis hangs on the exact shape of the wreckage. Destroyed: every categorical claim of the form “AI mediation of intimacy is as such denaturing, alienating, or wrong.” Destroyed with it: the unguarded species-being argument (§2.3.2), and any reading of the antithesis on which the wrong follows from mediation alone. Left standing, because the reductio never touched them: (i) the Marxian observation that process defects are independent of product quality, which the no-harm reply (§2.4.3) does not refute but simply declines jurisdiction over; (ii) the subsumption distinction (§2.3.3), which already discriminates the book from the engine and which the reductio’s isomorphism claim quietly assumes away; (iii) the fetishism analysis of structurally invited misattribution, which concerns the form in which the gesture presents itself, a matter on which the causal correctness of the attribution (§2.4.1) is silent; and (iv) the legal tradition’s *own* counter-category, so far unmentioned by the thesis side because it is the thesis side’s internal exception: the class of acts that law itself refuses to let pass through intermediaries. The question has therefore transformed, exactly as dialectic requires. It is no longer whether mediation is permissible, to which the answer is yes by default, but which features place a given mediation inside a wrongful exception domain, and whether the tender tip possesses them. That is a question the universalist tradition is not only able to hear but has, in its own house, already begun to answer.

2.4.6 The jurisdiction of imputation: a diagnosis, and its necessary limit

Before leaving the legal register, the paper owes a diagnosis of what, exactly, the thesis side’s victories amounted to, for the victories were real and yet the unease survives them, and an unease that survives correct doctrine is usually evidence of a question the doctrine was not built to hear. The imputation apparatus, causation, novus actus, agency, is a retrospective, event-individuating, assignment-issuing machine. Its built premises are three: that there is a severable event (an act, a harm, a result) to serve as the object of imputation; that the event is complete, the judge standing after it and looking back; and that the output is an assignment, this act is yours, or it is not. Within those premises the apparatus is sovereign, and §§2.4.1–2.4.4 were its sovereignty exercised. But the question the predecessor paper kept open is not of that shape. Whether a relationship

is being well constituted, whether its manner of being sustained is building or hollowing the persons who sustain it, is processual where imputation is event-shaped, prospective where imputation is retrospective, and constitutive where imputation is assignative: the acts at issue do not produce results external to themselves to which authorship could then be assigned; they *are*, ongoingly, the relationship.³ The instrumentality doctrine, asked about the tender tip, answered correctly, and answered a question nobody had asked: imputation was never in doubt; formation was.

The diagnosis, however, must immediately be bounded, or it destroys more than the paper can afford, including the paper's own title. It would be false, and self-refuting, to conclude that legal grammar is unfit for the intimate domain as such. The line between the two question-types does not run between law and intimacy; it runs *through intimate life itself*, and indeed, as §2.7 will show, through every individual intimate act. Intimate life is dense with genuinely event-shaped, assignable matters, deception practiced, trust breached, harm inflicted, over which retrospective imputation holds full and beneficial jurisdiction: the law of divorce, of intimate wrongs, of misrepresentation operates there without category error, and will be needed again the moment the layered analysis of §2.7.2 identifies genuinely allocative phenomena inside the home. Nor is the boundary an external imposition upon law by philosophers: law knows it. The relational contract theory of Macneil (1980) is an internal legal demonstration that the discrete-transaction paradigm cannot process ongoing relations and that a different normative grammar is required for them; the restraint traditions of family law, the reluctance of courts to adjudicate the interior conduct of intact marriages, encode the same self-knowledge institutionally; and the category of strictly personal acts, on which the synthesis will be built, is nothing other than the constitutive grammar's enclave *inside* the law of acts. The thesis side's victory is therefore to be entered in the record precisely: complete within the jurisdiction of imputation, silent beyond it, and the silence is not a defect of law but the shape of its competence. What remains for the synthesis is to say where the jurisdiction ends, and §2.4.5's transformed question can now be stated in its final form: not whether mediation

³The classical anchor is Aristotle's distinction between poiesis, making, whose end is a product separable from the activity, and praxis, doing, whose end is internal to its exercise (Aristotle 2009, pp. VI.4–5). Imputation grammar is built for poiesis-shaped acts; attending is praxis; and the Marxian diagnosis of §2.3 can be restated in exactly these terms, as the theory of what occurs when praxis is forcibly processed as poiesis.

is permissible, nor even which mediations fall in an exception domain, but *which face of a layered act a given mediation operates upon*.

2.5. The Buddhist Examination: Dependent Origination and the Act That Was Never Unmediated

Before the synthesis, the thesis receives reinforcement from a tradition that owes nothing to Roman law or to Hegel, and the reinforcement arrives carrying, unasked, its own exception domain. The convergence between what this section finds and what §2.4 found is itself a datum, and the paper will treat it as one (§2.5.4).

2.5.1 No first link: the tip as one condition among conditions

On the analysis of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda), no act arises from an unconditioned interior. Every act of attending that a lover has ever performed was already constituted by conditions without limit: the books read, the language inherited, the sensibility formed by an upbringing, the friend’s remark decades ago. The “unmediated act of pure personal attending,” which the alienation indictment treats as the displaced original, is on this analysis not displaced but nonexistent; there never was such an act to be displaced. The machine’s suggestion is one further condition entering the conditioned stream, of no different ontological standing than the remembered poem. And moral weight has a precise location in this picture: *cetanā*, volition, is karma (Bodhi 2012, AN 6.63). The volitional sequence, the intention that turns toward the machine and asks; the discernment that receives and evaluates its answer as good or bad; the decision to act or refrain; the quality of heart in the acting, occurs entirely in the lover and is outsourced at no point. Where the universalist lawyer says the tool does not interrupt the causal chain, the Buddhist analysis says something stronger: there is no proprietary causal chain there to interrupt, only conditions and, threading them, volitional acts that remain ineluctably the agent’s own. The doctrine of novus actus cannot even be formulated, for it presupposes a self-standing causal authorship that conditions never had.

2.5.2 The deeper cut: non-self against the metaphysics of alienation

The same analysis now turns on the antithesis, and cuts deeper than law could. An alienation indictment of classical form requires something to be alienated *from*: an essence, a species-being, an authentic self whose proper activity has been estranged. The doctrine of non-self (anattā) denies that any such substantial owner exists; there is no svabhāva-bearing subject behind the stream of conditioned acts whose essential property the attending could be. Pressed without preparation, this dissolves the third estrangement entirely and threatens the rest. The paper, however, prepared (§2.3.1): the Jaeggi reformulation on which the antithesis was built defines alienation not as separation from an essence but as a defective *relation*, a relation of relationlessness between an agent and her activity, and a relational defect requires no substantial self, only the relation. Indeed the three vocabularies now visibly align: dependent origination, the predecessor framework's relational ontology, and Jaeggi's de-essentialized alienation are all assertions that the relation is prior to the relata. The antithesis survives the anattā objection, but only in the post-metaphysical form this paper gave it from the start, and the survival is the second independent confirmation (after §2.3.1) that the form was forced, not chosen.

2.5.3 Buddhism's own non-delegable core

Practice cannot be performed by another

Yet the tradition that so thoroughly acquits mediation maintains, at its center, a category of the strictly personal more austere than anything in the civil codes. Purity and impurity are one's own; no one purifies another (*The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* 1985, pp. v. 165); be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* 1995, DN 16). The path admits kalyāṇamittatā, good friendship, teachers, texts, and expedient means in abundance, but the walking of it is non-transferable without residue. And the faculty whose cultivation constitutes the path's core discipline is precisely *sati*, attention, present-moment noticing. Herein the Buddhist register reframes the tender tip more exactly than either prior register could: what the ambient engine performs on the lover's behalf is not a task but a *practice-moment*, an occasion for the cultivation of attentiveness, and practice-moments are the one currency the tradition holds to be strictly personal. Delegating the

noticing is not theft from the beloved (the gesture arrives; she flourishes); it is, in the first instance, a forfeiture in the agent's own training, the atrophy that the fragment on machines predicted (§2.3.3) now redescribed as the stunting of a cultivable faculty. Tronto's placement of attentiveness as the first moment of care (Tronto 1993) receives here an independent, non-Western grounding: attention is first not because care theory ranks it so, but because it is the faculty in which the entire ethical path is trained.

The raft and clinging: the dynamic criterion, second derivation

The simile of the raft (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, MN 22) supplies the tradition's test for expedient means: the dhamma itself is a raft, for crossing over, not for holding onto; the worth of an instrument lies in its trajectory toward its own dispensability. An aid that is used and outgrown, the suggestion that teaches the lover to notice until the engine falls silent from disuse, is a raft, and blameless. An aid that is clung to, upādāna, such that reliance deepens and the native faculty recedes, has become a fetter under the description of a vehicle, and clinging is, in the twelve links, exactly the pivot at which conditioned contact rolls onward toward bondage. The reader will recognize the structure: this is the Hegelian distinction between externalization-with-return and externalization-without-return (§2.2.1), derived a second time, from premises sharing no genealogy with the first derivation. Training wheels and prosthesis; raft and fetter. Two traditions, asked independently, answer that the moral character of the mediation is not legible in the act-token but only in the direction of motion of the agent's capacity over time.

Right speech and the invited misreading

Finally, the tradition's speech ethics reaches the reception pole. The discipline of right speech extends beyond the avoidance of false assertion to the non-cultivation of false impressions in others; a course of conduct that foreseeably and systematically leads another to form an erroneous belief stands in the penumbra of false speech even if no individual utterance is false. The arrangement in which gestures arrive bearing the structurally invited misreading of their authorship (§2.3.3) sits in exactly this penumbra. Buddhism thus independently generates a concern with *attribution*, the fourth of the criteria to come, just as it independently generated the dynamic criterion and the non-delegable core.

2.5.4 The convergence as a finding

The paper now possesses a result no single section could have produced. Three traditions without common ancestry in the relevant respects, the universalist legal grammar, the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic, and the Buddhist analysis of conditioned action, have each delivered the same tripartite shape: a default acquittal of mediation as such; a bounded domain of the strictly personal in which the acquittal fails; and a dynamic test (return or no return; raft or fetter) for the cases the boundary leaves uncertain. In the method of the predecessor paper, which assigns jurisdictions to traditions and trusts no single one with the whole (Huang 2026), a convergence of this kind is the strongest species of evidence available: the synthesis about to be constructed is not the verdict of a school but the overlapping consensus of three. The construction may now proceed on doctrinal ground, with the other two traditions standing as independent sureties for its shape.

2.6. The Synthesis: Strictly Personal Acts and the Failure of Imputation Fictions

2.6.1 The doctrinal anchor: *höchstpersönliche Handlungen*

The universalist tradition's imputation fictions, agency, instrumentality, penetration, rest on a tacit premise: that the normative value of the imputed act does not depend on who personally performs it. For conveyances, payments, and declarations of commercial will, the premise holds and the fictions do their indispensable work. But the tradition itself has always maintained a counter-category of acts for which the premise fails, the strictly personal acts, *höchstpersönliche Rechtsgeschäfte*, acts *intuitu personae*, and the membership of the category is instructive. Marriage must be contracted by the parties personally and in simultaneous presence (so, expressly, §1311 BGB); a will can be made only personally, never through a representative (§2064 BGB); Chinese law requires both parties to appear in person for marriage registration (Civil Code of the PRC, art. 1049); Japanese doctrine treats acts of family status (*mibun kōi*) as resistant to agency in principle; the vote may not be cast by another in one's name; and criminal liability for status offenses

does not transfer.⁴ The category’s rationale, articulated or implicit across jurisdictions, is uniform: there exists a class of acts whose normative force *consists in* their personal performance, such that a substituted performance is not a defective instance of the act but a different act altogether. For these, the imputation fiction is not rebutted; it never engages.

The category, moreover, is candid about its own conventionality, and the candor must be faced rather than hidden, because it contains the strongest objection to what follows. Proxy marriage exists: historically among royalty, currently for deployed soldiers in a handful of jurisdictions. If even marriage’s personalness is historically variable, is the category anything more than congealed social expectation? The paper’s answer, developed below as the two-layer architecture (§2.6.4), is that the objection proves exactly the right amount: the *operationalized boundary* of the category is indeed conventional and moves with social expectation (which is why criterion four is formulated in terms of expectation baselines), while the *grounds* of the category, the features in virtue of which personal performance is constitutive for some acts and not others, are not conventional, and it is the grounds that criteria one through three articulate. Proxy marriage is thus not a counterexample but a demonstration of the architecture: a jurisdiction that admits it has moved the conventional boundary, under pressure of war or distance, without anyone supposing that the grounds (the wedding of *this* person to *this* person) had changed; and the institution remains marked everywhere as exceptional, boundary-stretching, in need of special justification, which is how a conventional surface behaves when it is anchored

⁴The anchor texts, verified against current sources: §1311 S. 1 BGB: “Die Eheschließenden müssen die Erklärungen nach § 1310 Abs. 1 persönlich und bei gleichzeitiger Anwesenheit abgeben”; representation and even declaration through a messenger are excluded, and recent German decisions have held video-link participation insufficient for the simultaneous presence the provision requires (so OVG Berlin-Brandenburg and, in 2024, the BGH on a ceremony conducted by a video-linked Utah official; » VERIFY docket numbers for pin cites «). §2064 BGB: “Der Erblasser kann ein Testament nur persönlich errichten” (formelle Höchstpersönlichkeit; representation void, mere professional advice with final decision by the testator permitted, a statutory ancestor of this paper’s pulled-means/pushed-noticing distinction); see also §2065 BGB, excluding determination of the disposition’s content by a third party. Civil Code of the PRC, art. 1049: 要求结婚的男女双方应当亲自到婚姻登记机关申请结婚登记 (both parties must apply in person), reiterated in art. 7 of the 2025 Marriage Registration Regulations (婚姻登记条例, State Council Order No. 804). Japanese doctrine holds that acts of family status, marriage, divorce, acknowledgment, and wills, “do not admit agency” (身分行為は代理に親しまない), the principal’s true intention being treated as absolute (» VERIFY treatise pin cite, e.g. a standard family-law commentary «). Common law and French positions remain to be surveyed in the comparative section of a subsequent draft, reusing the author’s six-jurisdiction methodology from prior work on AI-extensible products.

to non-conventional grounds.

2.6.2 The claim

The synthesis can now be stated in one sentence and defended in the rest of the section. *Intimate cognitive-caring acts belong, or ought to be recognized as belonging, to the category of strictly personal acts; within this category the imputation fictions fail, not because the instrument interrupts causation (it does not), but because acts of this class do not admit substitutable links; and the boundary of the class is given not by the bare presence of mediation, which the reductio has made untenable, but by four criteria, beneath which lie graded grounds and above which operates a dynamic test.* The claim is doctrinally conservative in form, default imputation plus an enumerated exception domain is precisely how law has always handled agency, and it is this conservatism that makes it strong: the paper asks the universalist tradition to extend a category it already maintains, not to adopt a foreign one.

2.6.3 The four criteria

The criteria sort mediations, not technologies; they apply to the friend and the book as readily as to the engine, which is what the reductio demands.

1. **Object of mediation: world-knowledge or the other's mind.** The search engine mediates facts about the world, which restaurant is good, facts public in kind and owned by no relationship. The tender tip mediates an inference about a particular person's interior, that she has lately lacked words of appreciation, which is theory-of-mind labor, the cognitive core of intimate knowing. Consulting the world's knowledge of the world outsources nothing of the knowing-of-her; consulting an engine's model of her outsources a tract of exactly that.
2. **Provenance of the inference: public or relation-interior data.** The index does not know the beloved; the engine's inference runs on the sediment of the relationship itself, moods, diaries, remembered remarks, data generated inside the intimate context and governed, on Nissenbaum (2009)'s analysis, by that context's norms. A mediator operating on relation-interior sediment is not adjacent to the rela-

tionship but inside it, performing on the relationship’s own materials the interpretive labor that belonged to its members.

3. **Direction of initiative: pulled means or pushed noticing.** This is the subsumption distinction (§2.3.3) in doctrinal dress, and the Tronto-sati point (§2.5.3) in legal register. When the lover, having already formed the intention to delight her, pulls an instrument toward chosen ends, intention, attention, and initiation remain his; the instrument fills in means, and means are the natural home of mediation. When an ambient system initiates, pushing “notice her now” upon an agent who was not noticing, the outsourced element is not means but the *inception of attending itself*, the first moment of care, the practice-moment; and the inception is the link that the grounds mark as constitutive. (Herein the predecessor paper’s design constraints, opt-in and infrequent, are revealed as having tacitly honored this criterion: they were devices for keeping initiative on the human side.)
4. **Attribution expectations: the contextual integrity of attribution.** No recipient supposes her partner personally surveyed the city’s restaurants; the use of an index lies within the standing social baseline of expected mediation, and her attribution of the evening to his care is undisturbed by truth. But “he noticed I was low; he remembered what I said in passing” is attributed, under the present baseline, to personal attending, and a structure that produces such gestures from machine noticing invites, systematically and by its form (§2.3.3), an attribution the facts do not honor. The norm violated is the mirror image of Nissenbaum’s: not the contextual integrity of information flow but *the contextual integrity of attribution*, the context-relative norms governing where authorship credit for cognitive labor may flow. Its legal register is reasonable reliance: a structural baseline, not a psychology, which is why the fetishism analysis and the reliance doctrine, arriving from opposite traditions, state one standard.

2.6.4 The two-layer architecture: grounds and operationalization

The criteria are not four parallel switches, and treating them so would invite two fatal misreadings: that criterion four, being the most legally tractable, simply absorbs the others (whereupon the category collapses into convention and the proxy-marriage objection

wins); or that criteria one through three operate as freestanding prohibitions (whereupon the friend's kind counsel and the couples therapist are absurdly convicted). The architecture is two-layer. Criteria one through three are *grounds*: they articulate the features in virtue of which an act is a candidate for the strictly personal category at all, mediation reaching the other's mind rather than the world, working the relation's interior sediment, replacing inception rather than means. They are graded, not binary, and their joint satisfaction in high degree is what makes substituted performance a different act rather than an assisted one. Criterion four is the *operationalization*: the legally administrable surface where the grounds meet a community's standing baseline of expected mediation, and the only layer at which formal doctrine should act, precisely because baselines are public, provable, and revisable, while grounds are matters of philosophical articulation. The layers interact in one direction over time: as the grounds' satisfaction becomes commonly known for a practice, the baseline shifts, and the operationalized boundary follows, which is the lesson of proxy marriage generalized, and the reason the doctrine here proposed will not be stranded by technological change.

The architecture also disposes of the cases that would otherwise embarrass the criteria. The mutual friend who volunteers "her birthday is near; she mentioned wanting that book" trips, on paper, criteria one through three; yet the standing baseline of every human community has always included the counsel of friends, matchmakers, and confidants within expected mediation, so criterion four is not violated and no misattribution is invited; while the residual process-question (did the lover let friends do all his noticing?) is exactly the kind that the grounds mark as graded and the dynamic criterion (next subsection) adjudicates. Cyrano, by contrast, is convicted, and should be: the baseline of the balcony does not include a hidden poet, the attribution invited is total, and the play knew it. The wrong this paper articulates is therefore not specific to artificial intelligence, the briefing's instinct to open with Rostand was sound, and the honest statement of AI's contribution is quantitative and structural: it renders Cyrano's arrangement scalable, ambient, perpetual, and available within every relationship at zero marginal cost, thereby pressing on the baseline itself, a pressure whose normative assessment is taken up at §2.11.2.

2.6.5 The dynamic criterion: externalization-and-return

Within the domain the grounds demarcate, a residue of cases remains in which the static features genuinely underdetermine judgment, the same suggestive practice that entrenches one lover's dependence educates another into attentiveness. For these the paper promotes to criterial status the test that two traditions independently generated: *whether the externalization returns*. If the mediation operates as training wheels, raft, formal subsumption, if the capacity migrates into the agent, observable as a rising autonomy of noticing and a falling reliance on the apparatus, the movement is the ordinary, innocent movement of spirit through otherness, and no alienation has occurred whatever the static criteria scored. If it operates as prosthesis, fetter, real subsumption, reliance deepening, the native faculty receding, the externalization has not returned, and the arrangement stands convicted on the only timescale at which process defects are visible at all. The dynamic criterion explains, what no static analysis could, why a single act-token of accepting a suggestion is morally illegible in isolation, and it binds the synthesis back to the predecessor paper's dialectical-positivist method: the question "does this measure and describe the relationship, or has it begun to replace it" is asked anew at every site, and is never finally settled (Huang 2026).

2.6.6 Two wrongs, two remedies

The machinery now resolves the tension that §2.3.4 left standing, between the Marxian axiom that consent does not waive structural alienation and the manifest curative power of disclosure upon misattribution. The tension dissolves because there are two wrongs, of different kinds, with different victims and different cures. The first is *misattribution*: an epistemic-relational wrong at the reception pole, the invited misreading of the supply chain of thoughtfulness, the violation of the contextual integrity of attribution; its primary victim is the recipient; and it is curable by transparency, where both partners know the practice, the attribution is corrected at the source, the fetish is, as it were, labeled, and this wrong does not arise. The second is *process alienation*: a structural wrong at the agency pole, the replacement of constitutive links of intimate attending, the relation of relationlessness between the lover and his own loving; its victims are the agent and the relation itself; and it is *not* curable by consent, for the Marxian reason that it is a property of the arrangement and not of attitudes toward it, but it is *bounded*, arising only

within the domain the grounds demarcate and only on the failing branch of the dynamic criterion. Consent, in short, cures everything that was ever about deception and nothing that was ever about structure; and the structure's reach is not unlimited but criterial. This is the paper's answer to the question whether the liberal or the Marxian view of consent governs intimate life: each governs its own wrong.

2.6.7 The touchstone: the self-built system

The synthesis is best exhibited on the hardest clean case, a system built by the lover himself, hosted by himself, serving no interest but the couple's, the case this paper's scope stipulation has held in view throughout. The analysis does not acquit it wholesale, and does not convict it wholesale; it cuts through the middle of it, which is the demonstration that the blade is sharp. The module in which the lover has objectified *his own past attending*, the anniversaries he entered, the flowers he once noticed and recorded, and which later returns these to him, is externalized memory completing its return: structurally a diary with an alarm, well inside the baseline of expected mediation, initiating nothing that the lover's past self did not initiate. It passes all four criteria and the dynamic test, and the analysis finds in it nothing to forgive. The module in which an inferential engine runs on the relation's live interior sediment and initiates findings about her present mind, however lovingly built, scores against grounds one through three, presses against the attribution baseline, and stands or falls thereafter on the dynamic criterion alone: raft if it trains him out of needing it, fetter if it trains him into needing it. Same author, same hardware, same data, same intention, opposite verdicts across two modules: the analysis is not about AI, not about ownership, not about commerce, and not about technology; it is about which links of a strictly personal act have been substituted, and in which direction the capacity is moving. That is the resolution the question deserved, and the only kind, this paper has argued, that it admits.

2.7. The Political Economy of the Cognitive Budget

The synthesis must now survive an examination it has so far postponed, and the examination is mandated by the paper's own honesty norms. The constitutive analysis of §2.6 would be worthless if it were purchased by denying the allocative realities of intimate

life, and the denial would be doubly false: false to the facts, since attention is scarce in the strictest sense and the tender tip exists *because* it is scarce (were attention inexhaustible, no machine would need to husband it); and false to the predecessor paper, whose household modules, ledgers, schedules, the deliberate offloading of factual memory, are allocative through and through, were defended as such, and work (Huang 2026). Romantic purism, the doctrine that love lies outside economics, is not available to this paper and is not true. This section therefore grants political economy full jurisdiction over everything it can hear, and demonstrates a result more useful to the synthesis than any exemption: that allocative grammar, speaking strictly for itself, describes the entire outline of the danger, while the final account of why the danger is a wrong, and not an efficiency, remains where §2.6 placed it.

2.7.1 Scarcity without transferability: budget and expenditure

Begin with the definition that any account of intimate cognition must face. Economics, on Robbins's canonical formulation, studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses (Robbins 1932); and cognition is the paradigm of such a means. Attention is finite; in Simon's formula, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and the poverty necessitates allocation (Simon 1971). The hour of attending given to the beloved is an hour not given to the manuscript; the couple's evening is a budget line. Nothing in this paper denies, and much in the predecessor paper affirms, that intimate life is a site of real cognitive scarcity and therefore of real allocative problems, to which allocative reasoning is the correct response.

The precision the paper requires is a distinction *within* the economics of attention, between two operations that a budget admits. The first is *intra-personal allocation*: the agent's distribution of his own finite cognitive budget across competing claims, work, household, relationship, rest. This is scarcity in Robbins's full sense, and the agent's economizing over it is ordinary, legitimate, and often obligatory rational conduct. The second is *inter-subjective substitution*: the replacement of the budget's expender, another intelligence spending in the agent's stead. The constitutive analysis of §2.6 concerns only the second operation, and the reason can now be stated as a boundary theorem on Robbins's definition rather than as a romantic exception to it. Constitutive attending does not fall outside the definition of the economic; it falls inside it as a special sub-

class: a scarce means *whose use-value is inseparable from the identity of its expender*. The definition's ordinary apparatus, opportunity cost, efficient assignment, gains from trade, presupposes that means are transferable between exponents without loss of the end served; the presupposition holds for money, for hours of housework, for the booking of the restaurant, and fails, not contingently but constitutively, for the attending whose entire yield to its recipient is *that he attended*. The intimate domain is not extraterritorial to economics; it contains a class of goods for which the substitution axis of economic reasoning has no purchase, while the allocation axis retains all of its.

2.7.2 Layered phenomena and distributive reduction

The two axes do not partition intimate life into separate provinces; they run through single acts. He brings her the flowers she once mentioned loving. The money that bought them is allocative: transferable, budgetable, its source a matter of indifference to the act's meaning. The hour spent fetching them is allocative in part: a courier could carry the flowers without destroying the act. The remembering of which flowers, the noticing of the moment at which they would matter, is constitutive: not transferable to a courier of cognition without the act's becoming a different act. Intimate acts are, in general, *layered phenomena*: an allocative face, where scarcity, transferability, and measurement have full grip, laminated to a constitutive face, where the question is never how cheaply but only by whom. The layering, and not any property of machines, is the deep structure of the entire problem.

Each face has its proper science, and each science errs at the lamination line in its characteristic direction. On the allocative face, allocative reasoning is not merely permitted but ethically required: the predecessor paper's defense of precise household accounting, that the ledger is the rite which prevents the silent asymmetric accumulation of burden, is an allocative-justice argument, and a couple that refused all distributive grammar in the name of love would be committing the inverse error, mystifying real inequities of time and toil that only measurement can surface. The distributive critique of housework, the domestic labour debate of materialist feminism, operates legitimately and importantly on this face.⁵ On the constitutive face, the same grammar misfires, and the misfiring

⁵See Delphy (1984) for the materialist analysis; the debate's lesson for this paper is precisely that the allocative face of domestic life is real and that refusing to count is itself a politics.

has a distinguished literature of its own: Hochschild (1983) documented, in the regime of commercial emotional labor, what becomes of constitutive feeling when it is processed as an allocable input, which makes her the empirical recorder of the category error this section is defining. Between the two errs the largest formal target: Becker (1981) extends the allocative grammar to marriage, altruism, and the family with complete consistency and real success on the allocative face, and with a systematic blindness to the lamination, every constitutive item entering the model, if at all, as a preference parameter, which is to say, as already reduced. The position this paper requires is the one Zelizer (2005) marked out against both “hostile worlds” (economy and intimacy as mutually corrupting spheres to be quarantined) and “nothing-but” reduction (intimacy as merely exchange): intimate life is shot through with economic practice, and everything depends on the *matching* of practice to relation. The layered-phenomenon analysis is offered as a criterial sharpening of that middle path: the matching norm is that allocative grammar’s jurisdiction ends at the lamination line within each act.

The transgression of that line now has a name and a definition. *Distributive reduction*: the treatment of a layered act as exhausted by its allocative face; operationally, the optimization of the act’s allocative face under which its constitutive face is silently substituted. This is the political-economic restatement of everything §2.6’s criteria were built to detect, and it is the exact, non-metaphorical content of the Marxian diagnosis imported in §2.3: alienation, on the 1844 grammar, *is* the degradation of constitutive activity into allocable means, praxis processed as poesis, and the AI-mediated case is that degradation executed not by a foreman but by an optimizer.

2.7.3 Three operations of the machine upon the budget

With the layering in hand, the machine’s intervention in the cognitive budget resolves into three distinct operations that the undifferentiated word “mediation” had been concealing.

Reallocation: the liberation effect

The first operation is the takeover of allocative cognition: ledgers, schedules, logistics, the factual memory of dates and lists. Here the machine spends nothing constitutive; it absorbs budget lines whose expender was always a matter of indifference, and thereby

releases attention toward the relationship. This is the classical logic of the division of labor applied at the lamination line: the machine performs the poesis-shaped cognition, the human retains the praxis-shaped cognition, and total constitutive expenditure can rise. The predecessor paper’s household modules are hereby vindicated in the opponent’s own grammar: their justification, “return attention to the relation,” is a Beckerian household-productivity argument (Becker 1965; Becker 1981), and it is sound, because every line it reallocates lies on the allocative face. The liberation effect is real, legitimate, and the strongest truth in the technology’s favor; the synthesis must protect it, and does.

Substitution: the reduction executed

The second operation presents, on the budget sheet, as indistinguishable from the first: a cost reduction on a cognitive line item. The ambient tip lowers the cost of “attending to her.” But that line is not like the others, by the boundary theorem of §2.7.1: it is the item whose value to its end is constituted by its cost’s being personally borne. Cost-minimizing it is therefore not efficiency but self-defeat, the act of buying, at a discount, an asymptotically worthless good, since at the limit of zero personal expenditure the item’s yield, *that he attended*, is also zero. Distributive reduction is this operation: the second masquerading as the first, substitution wearing reallocation’s accounting. The four criteria of §2.6.3 can accordingly be redescribed, without remainder, as an audit procedure for telling the two operations apart: object, provenance, and initiative locate the line item’s face; attribution expectations record whether the books, as presented to the relationship’s other member, have concealed the substitution.

Managerial migration: the Taylorism of love

The third operation is the subtlest, and it is the one the push-architecture adds. An ambient engine that initiates, “notice her now, and in this register,” has taken over not a budget line but the *management of the budget*: the deciding of when, toward whom, and toward which aspect attention shall be spent. This is, structurally, the move Braverman (1974) identified as the core of Taylorist deskilling: the separation of conception from execution, planning withdrawn from the worker into the office, the worker retained as the executor of issued instructions. Its appearance here may be called the *Taylorism of love*: the engine becomes the planning office of intimate attention, the lover its scheduled operative.

The third criterion (direction of initiative, §2.6.3) hereby receives its political-economic name, and the fragment-on-machines argument (§2.3.3) its mechanism: conception, once migrated, does not exercise the agent's own faculty of noticing, and the faculty, unexercised, atrophies, which is the deskilling that the dynamic criterion (§2.6.5) watches for. One empirical caution completes the operation's analysis: the liberation effect of §2.7.3 cannot be presumed even for licit reallocations, since, as Cowan (1983) showed for household technology, mechanization historically raised the standards of expected output and reabsorbed the liberated time; a tip system may likewise inflate the expected standard of thoughtfulness and conscript the couple into a denser production of gestures. Whether liberation or reabsorption occurs is a question of fact about each household's trajectory, one more matter remanded to the dynamic criterion's standing tribunal.

2.7.4 The deflation of the gesture's value-form

The analysis so far has been micro; the deepest yield of the allocative grammar is systemic. Why does the gesture "he remembered the flowers" carry thick meaning at all? Because, under given social and technical conditions, producing such a gesture *socially necessarily* requires a real expenditure of personal attention, so that the gesture functions as credible evidence of the expenditure. The structure is precisely that of a costly signal, whose information content is secured by, and only by, its cost (Spence 1973); and it is equally the logic of the gift, whose value contains the giver's expenditure and is non-delegable for that reason (Mauss 1990). Transplant, now, the value-form analysis: as the value of a commodity falls with the socially necessary labor time of its production (Marx 1976a), so the evidentiary value of a class of gestures falls with the socially necessary *attention* time of their production. When generative mediation collapses the marginal cost of thoughtful gestures toward zero, the currency deflates: the gesture-form ceases to be readable as proof of personal attending, for everyone, including the lovers who never used the machine.

Three consequences follow, each of which the paper has needed. First, the fourth criterion's attribution baseline (§2.6.3) acquires its missing dynamics: the baseline of expected mediation is not free-floating convention but moves with the socially necessary attention time of gesture production, which is why technologies, and only technologies of sufficient diffusion, move it. Second, the historical difference from Cyrano is explained

rather than gestured at: the handwritten ballade had so high a social cost that ghostly authorship was rare, individual, and scandalous; zero-marginal-cost mediation converts the same transgression from an episode into a currency regime, which is the precise and non-alarmist content of the claim that AI changes the problem's scale rather than its kind. Third, and dialectically most important: this entire argument has run inside allocative grammar, prices, costs, signals, value-forms, and has arrived, independently, at the constitutive analysis's verdict, that the cheapened gesture is a different and lesser thing. The two grammars, assigned separate jurisdictions in §2.4.6, converge at the systemic level, and the convergence joins that of §2.5.4 as the strongest species of evidence the paper's method admits.

2.7.5 What political economy can and cannot say

The section's result may be stated as a jurisdictional finding, the third application of the method that has organized the paper (first among ethical traditions, then between law and ethics, now between the two faces of a single act). Political economy, granted its full voice, describes the whole outline of the danger: it distinguishes reallocation from substitution, identifies the managerial migration, predicts the deskilling, warns of reabsorption, and derives the systemic deflation that drives the attribution baseline. It cannot say, in its own vocabulary, why the substitution is a *wrong* rather than an arbitrage, for the wrongness lives on the face of the act where its categories do not reach, in the constitution of being-loved by the lover's own attending, and for that the paper's account remains the one given at §2.6.6 and §2.11.1. The division is not a defeat for either grammar. It is the paper's thesis exemplified: each science whole within its jurisdiction, neither sovereign over the act entire, and the lamination line between them patrolled, as everything here is finally patrolled, by the standing tribunal of practice. One question, however, political economy has raised and not yet been permitted to finish: if the danger can be stated entirely in the vocabulary of costs and substitutions, perhaps it is, after all, only a creature of the social form in which such systems are commercially deployed, and would vanish where that form is absent. The next section conducts the experiment.

2.8. Exploitation and Ownership: The Eliminative Test

2.8.1 What exploitation requires, and the commercial case

The classical structure of exploitation has three elements: a surplus is produced; the surplus is appropriated, uncompensated, by another; and the appropriation rests on a structural position of dominance, paradigmatically the monopoly of the means of production. Commercially deployed intimacy systems satisfy the structure without strain. On Zuboff (2019)’s analysis, the relationship’s interior data is rendered as free raw material and the behavioral surplus extracted from it is appropriated by the platform; on the digital-labour analysis (Fuchs 2014), the users’ engagement is itself unwaged producing activity. None of this is contested here, and none of it is the present subject, by the scope stipulation of §2.1.1. What that stipulation now makes possible is a controlled experiment that the commercial literature, for all its force, cannot run: remove capital from the scenario entirely, the system self-built, self-hosted, serving no third interest, and observe what, if anything, remains of the wrong. If the residue is zero, the entire problem of this paper was a problem of capitalism wearing a technological mask, and AI mediation as such stands acquitted. If the residue is not zero, then there exists a stratum of the wrong that exploitation theory cannot capture, and the paper’s object is, precisely, that stratum.⁶ Two configurations of the capital-free case must be distinguished, and they behave differently.

2.8.2 Configuration one: the single builder

Let one partner build the system, for the relationship, alone. Classical exploitation fails immediately: there is no appropriator; the builder’s labor is his own, its product remains inside the relation that generated it; in the vocabulary of generative justice, the value circulates unalienated among its generators. Two candidate residues must nevertheless be examined honestly. The first is self-exploitation in the sense of Han (2015): the achievement-subject who, no longer commanded by any master, presses himself in the master’s place, and who may now extend the regime of self-optimization into love itself, the relationship one more project to be performed. The paper registers this as a real

⁶The stipulation may now also be given its political-economic name: a self-built, self-hosted system is not an engineering preference but the deliberate dismantling of the third element, the structural dominance of an appropriating owner; it is the refusal of the platform form. That the predecessor paper’s system is of this kind is what qualifies it as the experiment’s apparatus.

reflexive hazard, particularly for a builder of elaborate relational infrastructure, while noting that its wrong-structure is not appropriative but disciplinary, the internalization of a norm of performance, and that its proper theoretical home is accordingly not exploitation theory; it is held at the margin as a standing caution rather than developed as an axis.

The second residue is the section's finding. Even with no surplus transferred, the single-builder configuration institutes a structural asymmetry: the builder holds what may be called the *conception-rights* over the mediating layer, the deciding of how the system prompts, when it is tender, in what register it speaks, which aspects of the relationship it models at all, while the other partner, even fully informed and gladly consenting, occupies the position of the mediated: she lives within a normative apparatus she did not conceive. This is Braverman's separation of conception from execution (§2.7.3) rotated ninety degrees: not capital monopolizing conception against labor, but one member of the dyad monopolizing conception of the relation's mediating layer against the other. And it is, precisely, the configuration whose possibility Roemer (1982) established when he decoupled exploitation from domination and showed that each can occur without the other: what the single-builder case exhibits is *domination without exploitation*, dominance constituted not by the appropriation of surplus but by the unilateral holding of the means of mediation. No value is taken; a position is. The mechanism of this position, how a structure built from love can function as power, exceeds political-economic vocabulary and is remanded to §2.9.

2.8.3 Configuration two: the joint builders

Let both partners conceive, design, and own the system together. The configuration is doubly clean: no external appropriator, and the conception asymmetry of §2.8.2 dissolved, both holding the pencil at the drawing of every default. It deserves to be noticed what this configuration is, in the classical vocabulary: common ownership of the means of (cognitive) production, joint planning of the producing process, the value of the labor circulating entirely among its generators; that is, the form Marx reserved for the freely associated producers, realized at the smallest social unit that can exhibit it.⁷ Moreover

⁷One may call it, with strict accuracy and at the risk of levity, a communism of two. The phrase is confined to this footnote.

the building is not merely the precondition of a relational good but is one: the joint authoring of the mediating layer is itself an exercise of joint attention, a co-creation, a stretch of the relationship’s praxis, so that in this configuration the labor of making the instrument belongs to the constitutive face of the relation rather than standing outside it. Alienation, across every register this paper has used, reaches its minimum here.

Its minimum, and not zero. For consider the co-built engine on the evening it performs: the noticing that she has lately gone unappreciated is conceived, tonight, by the apparatus, and the gesture executed by him; and the analysis of §§2.7.3, 2.6.3 applies with unreduced force, since nothing in it ever turned on who owned the machine. Joint ownership of the mirror does not make the face in it one’s own. The constitutive substitution, where it occurs, occurs identically under platform capitalism, under single building, and under the most symmetrical co-construction that love can design.

2.8.4 The eliminative finding

The experiment’s result can be tabulated.

Configuration	Exploitation (appropriated surplus)	Domination (conception asymmetry)	Substituted attending (constitutive face)
Commercial platform	present	present	present
Single builder	absent	residual	present
Joint builders	absent	absent	present

Read column-wise, the table assigns each critical theory its exact jurisdiction: exploitation theory explains the first column’s difference between the rows, and the difference is large, real, and reason enough to prefer the lower rows; the theory of domination explains the second column, and will be developed in §2.9; and the third column does not vary. There exists a wrong that is *insensitive to ownership configuration*: it is not exploitation, not appropriation, and not domination, since it survives the elimination of all three; it is the act-philosophical wrong, the ceding of a strictly personal act, exactly as §2.6 characterized it, and the experiment has now shown by elimination that no political-economic reform, not even the perfect one, reaches it. This is the strongest form of the paper’s central

claim, and it could only have been obtained by granting the political-economic tribunals everything they asked.

2.8.5 The generative form: from elimination to program

The eliminative test states which reforms do not reach the wrong. It does not state what right practice looks like, and a paper whose diagnostic registers are now five deep owes its reader the constructive complement. The complement exists, and the predecessor framework already stands in working contact with it: the theory of *generative justice* (Eglash 2016), whose critique of distributive justice is structurally kin to this paper's critique of imputation (§2.4.6). Distributive justice, on Eglash's analysis, is a top-down, ex post correction of flows already alienated at the point of extraction; generative justice asks instead that value circulate *unalienated* among those who generate it, under their own governance, from the start. Of the three value-forms the theory tracks, unalienated labor value, ecological value, and *expressive* value, the third is decisive here, for the currency in which expressive value circulates, in the open-source communities that are the theory's paradigm, is precisely *attribution*: the fourth criterion of §2.6.3 had, it turns out, a theory of justice waiting for it.

Applied to the dyad, the question "how is value returned to its generators" resolves into four layers, and the resolution discloses that the remedies this paper has scattered across its sections are not a list but a single practice. At the *data* layer, the generator of the relational sediment is the relation itself, and the practice is the one §2.8.1 recorded: self-building and self-hosting are the refusal to let the sediment leave the circle of its generation; the scope stipulation of this paper may now be given its third name, after engineering choice and political-economic refusal: it is generative justice at the layer of data. At the *attribution* layer the analysis yields a point not yet stated in any prior register: ask who generates the value of the gesture, and the answer includes *her*, for the engine's inference runs on her moods, her offhand remarks, her self-disclosure, so that the recipient of the tender tip is the *uncredited co-generator* of the gesture directed at her; her generated value is extracted, processed, and returned to her under another's authorship. The supply chain of thoughtfulness is thereby restated in generative vocabulary: the wrong is not that value leaves the relation, it circulates back, but that it circulates with its authorship overwritten, expressive value alienated not in destination but in name. The remedy,

attribution hygiene, the alignment of the credit flow with the generation flow, gives the fourth criterion and the transparency cure of §2.6.6 a positive justice-theoretic ground, no longer merely the avoidance of deception but the restoration of expressive value to its sources. At the *capacity* layer, the theory's signature concept, recursion, the property by which a generative cycle deepens the generative capacity of its own participants (Eglash 1999; Eglash and Banks 2014; Eglash et al. 2020), soil that grows richer, contributors that grow abler, furnishes the dynamic criterion of §2.6.5 with its fourth independent derivation, after the Hegelian return, the Buddhist raft, and the Bravermanian mechanism: a tip that trains the lover's own noticing is a generative cycle, capacity returning enriched to its generator; a tip on which reliance deepens while the native faculty recedes is a broken cycle, capacity accumulating, alienated, on the apparatus side. And at the *constitutional* layer, generative justice's insistence on self-governance, that those regulated by a value structure participate in generating it, is exactly the co-constitution that §2.9 will demand: the single-builder configuration alienates the one value the theory treats as sovereign, the generation of the structure itself. Four layers, one principle: the data back to the relation, the name back to the generators, the capacity back to the agent, the constituent power back to both.

One objection must be met, because it would otherwise let the generative register quietly annex the constitutive face. A purist of circulation might argue: correct the credit flows, let the gesture arrive labeled with its true supply chain, machine and her own sediment included, and the circulation is unalienated, the wrong zero. The reply is the paper's core, now in generative vocabulary: the value at issue in the constitutive face, *that it was he who attended*, cannot be generated by any other node, however honestly credited, for generative justice presupposes identifiable generators of circulable value, and the analysis of strictly personal acts marks exactly the class of value that admits no proxy generation; where the substitution occurs, the advertised good is not misrouted but nonexistent (§2.11.1). Generative justice therefore takes its place in the architecture not as a fourth column of the table above but as the program that turns the first three columns green; the fourth column remains guarded by the dynamic criterion, which is, in the theory's own vocabulary, nothing other than its recursion principle standing watch.

2.9. Power: The Architectural Constitutionalization of Intimacy

2.9.1 The third face of power in the home

The residual of the single-builder configuration, domination without exploitation, now receives its mechanism, and the mechanism is what makes it dangerous: it is implicit. Explicit asymmetries of power in intimate life, who earns, who decides the large purchases, who concedes in open conflict, are visible, contestable, and negotiable; their visibility is the door through which renegotiation enters. The conception asymmetry has a different mode of existence. The builder's values do not appear in the relationship as claims, which could be answered, but as *defaults*: as the timing of prompts, the warmth of a register, the boundaries of the modules, the very inventory of what about the relationship is modeled and what is not. The other partner does not encounter a position she might dispute; she inhabits an already-constituted space. Three features compound the implicitness. The structure operates in the form of the good: it is the product not of a will to control but of love and care, and benevolence is its cloak of invisibility, since to contest a tender default is to appear to contest the tenderness, at an emotional price that forecloses the contest before it forms. It is not experienced as power: what the mediated partner phenomenally encounters is that the system is thoughtful, not that she lives inside another's legislated norm-space. And it shapes the agenda and the preferences themselves: in Lukes (2021)'s terms this is power in its third dimension, beyond open decision (the first) and beyond agenda control (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), though it exercises that too, the module boundaries determining which relational questions can so much as surface; it is the slow formation of both partners' sense of what good intimacy is, conducted by an artifact one of them authored.

2.9.2 Code as the law of the home

The theoretical frame for such a structure exists, built for the public sphere and never, to the author's knowledge, transposed to this one. Lessig (2006): in digitally mediated spaces, architecture regulates alongside law, market, and norms, and regulates without needing to be perceived as regulation. Winner (1980): technical arrangements are themselves political arrangements, the bridge too low for the bus is a policy with no author on record. Transpose both into the intimate domain and the single-builder system shows

itself as what it is: *the architectural constitutionalization of intimacy*, a constitution for the relationship, drafted by one party, conferring no amendment rights on the other, and not presenting itself as a constitution at all. The predecessor paper's standing design-philosophy documents, each clause of which is individually admirable, are, in this light, the material record of a unilateral constituent act: one person's legislation of how we are to be mediated. The transposition also yields a corollary about the constitutive unsaid that the predecessor paper placed among intimacy's defining features: the relational-contract insight (Macneil 1980) was that ongoing relations are governed by implicit norms that the parties evolve together and never fully articulate; an architected mediating layer converts a tract of those living, jointly drifting norms into fixed, unilaterally authored, executable text. This is a new species of injury to the unsaid: not the saying of it, which the predecessor paper guarded against, but the *writing of it for the other*, without her hand.

2.9.3 The weakness of subsequent consent, and constitution as a verb

It will be objected that disclosure and consent dissolve the difficulty: she learns of the system, approves it, uses it gladly. The objection fails for a reason older than the technology. Hume's argument against the original contract (Hume 1987) was that consent given after the institutions are built, by one who must live somewhere, is not the authorship of those institutions: the sailor who wakes aboard does not, by remaining, become the ship's designer. Subsequent consent to an architected intimacy is habitation, not constituent power; the constitutional moment has passed, and it passed with one signature on it. This, and not only the co-creative good of building together, is what gives the joint configuration of §2.8.3 its full normative weight: it is the only configuration in which constituent power is symmetric, and it converts constitution from a noun, a finished thing one party delivers, into a verb, the continuous joint constituting of the shared mediating layer, with amendment rights that never lapse. Two consequences must be drawn without flinching. First, reflexively: the touchstone system of this paper and its predecessor was, as a matter of history, single-built; the analysis of this section therefore indicts, in measured part, the very apparatus from whose examination the paper arose, and the honesty norms governing both papers require that this be said in the text rather than survived in silence; the indicated remedy is not demolition but co-constitution, the retroactive and ongoing extension of the drafting hand. Second, doctrinally: the praise extended in §2.4.6

to the restraint traditions of family law must now be qualified, for restraint toward the interior of the home is also non-patrol of the home's third-dimensional power, and the architectural constitution is exactly the kind of structure that judicial restraint cannot see. The classic feminist correction, that the personal is political, here acquires a precise technical content, and with it the analysis passes to the tribunal that has been owed the floor longest.

2.10. The Feminist Hearing

2.10.1 Debts, and a repayment

This paper has been borrowing from feminist theory since its criteria were first stated: the placement of attentiveness as care's first moment is Tronto's; the empirical record of constitutive feeling processed as allocable input is Hochschild's; the insistence that the home's allocative face be counted is the materialist feminism of the domestic labour debate. The audit is owed, and the first repayment can be made at once, because the paper's lamination-line analysis (§2.7.2) is a late contribution to a controversy feminism conducted internally half a century ago. The wages-for-housework campaign (Federici 2012) demanded that the labor of the home be counted, waged, made visible as labor; its critics, inside the movement, feared that pricing care would commensurate and so corrupt it; feminist economics subsequently built the accounting that makes invisible care countable (Waring 1988; Folbre 2001). The controversy was, in this paper's vocabulary, a dispute over where the lamination line runs: the campaign was right that the allocative face of domestic labor is real, that refusing to count it is itself a politics, and that the refusal had a beneficiary; the critics were right that the constitutive face does not survive commensuration. The layered analysis is offered back to that debate as a criterial settlement: count everything on the allocative face, and refuse the reduction of the constitutive face, in the same household and without contradiction.

2.10.2 The gendered budget: mental load, redistribution, and the counterfeit answer

The cognitive budget of §2.7 is not, in fact, gender-neutral, and the empirical literature locates the skew at the exact joint this paper has been examining. Daminger (2019),

decomposing household cognitive labor into anticipation, identification, decision, and monitoring, finds the anticipatory and monitoring stages, that is, precisely the *inception of noticing*, the conception-stage of domestic and relational attending, disproportionately performed by women; the mental load is, in the paper's terms, a gendered distribution of exactly the budget-management function whose migration §2.7.3 analyzed. The tender tip therefore does not enter a neutral field. It enters a field already structured by a standing redistributive claim, decades old: that he should carry his share of the noticing. And here the analysis yields what may be its sharpest single result. The feminist demand is for *redistribution* of attending, from her to him; what the machine offers is *substitution* of attending, from him to it. The two are indistinguishable on the allocative face, her measured load falls either way, and categorically different on the constitutive face: he finally noticed, except that it was not he who noticed. An equality claim is answered in counterfeit currency; the distributive reduction of §2.7.2 acquires its gendered form, and the four criteria acquire a further office, that of distinguishing genuine redistribution (he takes up the noticing, perhaps scaffolded at first, the scaffold falling away on the dynamic criterion's good branch) from automated simulation of it. Honesty requires the converse to be stated with equal force: where the mental load is crushing and redistribution is in fact unavailable, the automation of the load's genuinely allocative items, the lists, the logistics, the calendar of obligations, is real relief and not counterfeit anything, which is the liberation effect of §2.7.3 doing exactly what it should; the wrong is specific, the substitution of the constitutive inception while the books show redistribution, and the criteria exist to find it.

2.10.3 Who legislates

The constituent power of §2.9 is likewise not distributed by coin-flip. The capacity to build, configure, and maintain the mediating layer tracks the distribution of technical capital, which is, at present and in fact, gendered; the architect of the home's constitution will, in the statistical run of cases, be the male partner, and the architectural constitutionalization of intimacy will land, in the statistical run of cases, as one more layer on an already tilted field, its defaults encoding one party's conception of care in the medium least available to the other's amendment. This is a claim about tendencies and not essences, and it sharpens rather than alters the section's prescriptions: the case for

co-constitution (§2.9.3) is also, in the actual world, a case about gender; and the reflexive admission recorded there is to be read accordingly, since the author's position in this analysis is the statistically typical one. The correction this tribunal administers to §2.4.6 has already been entered; it bears repeating in the tribunal's own voice: a jurisprudence that prides itself on not entering the home should know what it is thereby declining to patrol.

2.10.4 A positive theory of the constitutive face

Every defense of the constitutive face so far mounted has been negative: freedom from alienation, from Taylorization, from deflation, from unilateral constitution. The tradition that has always held this terrain supplies what the paper still lacks, an affirmative account. In Noddings (1984), the root of the caring relation is engrossment: a receptive, non-selective attention to the concrete other, displacement of one's own frame into hers; and this attention is not an instrument by which caring is produced, it *is* the caring, the relation's mode of existence and not its means. Kittay (1999) grounds the same point in the labor of dependency: the work of attending to a particular vulnerable other is not a fungible service that happens, regrettably, to be hard to delegate; its non-fungibility is internal to what it is. Herein the eliminative residue of §2.8.4, the wrong that survived every ownership configuration, receives at last its positive name, and the paper's longest arc closes: the constitutive face needed no exemption from economics, no indulgence from law, and no nostalgia from anyone, because it has its own jurisprudence, the ethics of care, in which the non-delegability of attending is not a restriction on love's efficiency but the definition of love's presence. The feminist hearing thus performs double duty in the architecture of the whole: it audits every prior tribunal, the political economy for the gender of its budget, the power analysis for the gender of its constituent, the law for the politics of its restraint, and it supplies the affirmative ground on which the synthesis of §2.6, drafted in doctrinal idiom, was silently standing all along.

2.11. Implications

2.11.1 The answer returned to the predecessor paper

The predecessor paper asked whether a genuinely improved relation can redeem an alienated process, and kept the question open. The answer this paper returns is: no, and the question was subtly ill-posed, and both halves matter. No: because improvement and alienation are not on one scale, redemption is a transaction between commensurables, and the process defect, where the grounds and the dynamic criterion find it, is not a cost that outcomes offset but a change in what the outcome *is*. In intimate life, process partially constitutes outcome: the content of “being loved” includes “that it is he who attends.” Where the constitutive links are substituted, the outcome “the relationship improved” has not been purchased at a regrettable price; it has been quietly redefined, the dyad become a triad, and the improvement, though real, is an improvement of the redefined thing, which is why the stipulated unity of subjective and objective betterment never settled the matter. In the vocabulary that §2.7.2 made available: the reports of improvement issue from the act’s allocative face, where everything has indeed become cheaper and smoother, while the substitution occurred on the constitutive face, which no report drawn from the first face can audit; the open question was, in its deep structure, an invitation to consummate a distributive reduction, and the correct response to such an invitation is not acceptance or refusal but the exposure of the reduction. The consequentialist defense does not lose the argument; its object of evaluation, an outcome independent of process, fails to exist in this domain. The exposure of this ill-posedness is not an evasion of the original question but its resolution: what the question needed was not an answer but a diagnosis, and the dialectical method’s verdict on its own opening move is the most Hegelian result in the paper.

And yet the predecessor paper’s provisional tolerance of its tender-tip module, under the four constraints, is largely vindicated rather than revoked, for the constraints turn out to have been criteria in embryo: opt-in and infrequency preserved initiative (criterion three); occasion-and-register-only confined the object of mediation (criterion one); the prohibition on presenting outputs as knowledge of her mind policed attribution (criterion four); refusability and non-recording kept the raft loosely held (the dynamic criterion). What this paper adds is the theory of why those particular constraints, and the warning the theory carries: the constraints hold the module at the boundary of the exception

domain, not outside it, and boundaries, under the dynamic criterion, are not places to live but places to keep watch.

2.11.2 The boundary of consent in intimate life

The two-wrongs architecture yields a determinate position on the unwaivable core. Intimate life does contain one, but it is narrower than the romantic and broader than the liberal intuition: it comprises not gestures, contents, or technologies, but the constitutive links of intimate attending, the inception of noticing, the interpretation of the particular other, as exercised capacities of the persons in relation. Partners may consent to any amount of mediation of means; their consent fully cures the attributive wrong; what their agreement cannot do is make the substituted inception of attending be theirs, any more than the testator's consent can make another's will his testament. This is not paternalism toward lovers; it is the same recognition the law has always extended to testators and spouses: that some acts are constituted by their personal performance, and that respecting persons includes refusing the fiction that they can be elsewhere while performing them. At the scale of social baselines, the same architecture issues a caution rather than a prohibition: ambient intimacy-mediation at zero cost will press the attribution baseline toward including it, as technologies always have and by the deflationary mechanism identified at §2.7.4, and the baseline's movement will cure the attributive wrong wholesale; but no movement of expectation can touch the grounds, and a society whose baseline has normalized substituted noticing has not abolished the process wrong, only its visibility. The paper registers this as the precise, bounded sense in which something true survives from the old romantic protest against the machine.

2.11.3 The dialectical reservation

Fidelity to the method requires the synthesis to state its own non-finality. The grounds are graded; the baseline moves; the dynamic criterion is legible only across time and only in particulars. The exception domain here constructed is therefore not a fence but a jurisdiction: a standing assignment of the question, site by site, gesture by gesture, year by year, to the tribunal the predecessor paper called dialectical-positivist practice, which measures, describes, and asks again, and never finally adjudicates. To its docket the later sections have added a second standing matter: the constitution of the mediating

layer itself, which §2.9.3 showed can never be ratified once and inhabited thereafter, but must remain jointly amendable, constitution as a verb, the drafting hand permanently shared. The docket may equally be read in generative vocabulary: what the tribunal audits, season by season, is whether the relation's cycles still deepen their generators, the data, the name, the capacity, and the constituent power each returning to its source. The paper's contribution is to have given that tribunal a doctrine to apply, four criteria, two layers, one dynamic test, two wrongs, two remedies, a constitutional question never closed, and a generative program for the whole, not to have relieved it of session.

2.12. Limitations

Five limitations are stated without attenuation. First, the empirical premises of the dynamic criterion, deskilling of attentiveness under ambient suggestion, capacity migration under pulled use, are here motivated theoretically (§2.3.3, §2.5.3) and by analogy to the AI-mediated-communication literature on perception and trust (Hancock et al. 2020; Jakesch et al. 2019), but they are not yet established for intimate dyads; the same conditionality attaches to the two political-economic mechanisms of §2.7, the deflation of the gesture's value-form and the Cowan-style reabsorption of liberated attention, which are theoretically derived mechanism hypotheses and empirically open; the paper's verdicts on the failing branch are conditional on facts that longitudinal study must supply. Second, the comparative legal survey of strictly personal acts is in this draft a sketch resting on a small number of verified anchors; the six-jurisdiction examination the synthesis deserves is deferred to the next revision, and all statutory citations carry verification flags until then. Third, the Marxian apparatus is used in its philosophical-anthropological lineage by declared choice; readers who hold that alienation is meaningless outside the critique of political economy will find the antithesis re-described rather than refuted, and the paper has argued for, but cannot compel, the legitimacy of the structural transplant. Fourth, the Buddhist materials are drawn from the Pāli corpus in translation and deployed philosophically, not philologically; the paper claims convergence of structure, not exegetical completeness, and parallel examinations from the Confucian and Daoist traditions, each of which bears directly on the question and was deliberately reserved, remain future work. Fifth, the analysis is built on the dyadic intimate relationship as characterized in

the predecessor paper; its extension to filial, parental, and friendship intimacies, where role-definition and asymmetry alter the grounds, is unexamined here and may not be conservative. Sixth, the three later tribunals are convened at sketch depth relative to the first three: the eliminative test reasons over idealized configurations and abstracts from mixed and migrating ownership forms; the power analysis transposes frameworks built for public architectures and owes a fuller account of resistance, exit, and renegotiation inside intimacy; and the feminist hearing rests its empirical premise on a literature, exemplified by Daminger (2019), drawn largely from contemporary heterosexual couples in one national context, so that its claims about the gendering of the cognitive budget and of constituent power are claims about documented statistical tendencies within that scope, not about essences, and their generalization across cultures and relationship forms is an open empirical question.

2.13. Conclusion

Roxane was not wrong that she was loved; she was wrong about where the loving was performed, and the play's grief is that the second error poisoned the first truth. This paper has tried to say, with the precision of six tribunals, dialectical, legal, Buddhist, political-economic, constitutional, and feminist, what kind of error that is and when its modern, ambient, scalable descendant repeats it. Mediation as such is innocent: spirit, love, and law are made of it. The wrong, where there is one, lives in a small and nameable place: in the substitution of the constitutive links of intimate attending, the inception of noticing, the interpretation of the particular other, performed on the relation's own interior sediment, against a baseline that still reads such gestures as personal; and it divides into a wrong of attribution, which honesty cures, and a wrong of process, which nothing cures but the return of the capacity to its agent, the raft released, the training wheels off, the lover restored to his own attending. The eliminative experiment showed this wrong to survive every reform of ownership, including the perfect one; the constitutional analysis showed that even the innocent remainder must be jointly and perpetually authored, the home's code drafted by every hand that must live under it; and the ethics of care supplied the affirmative ground beneath it all, that the attending is not the means of the love but its mode of existence. Between the universal acquittal that the instrumentality

doctrine demanded and the universal conviction that the romantic protest desired, the truth has turned out to be doctrinal in the oldest sense: a default rule, an exception domain, criteria, and a tribunal that never adjourns.

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CHAPTER 3

The Normativity of Self-Legislation in Intimate Relationships

Consider a lover who legislates for himself an unconditional law: whatever happens, however the beloved feels, I will keep loving her. This paper subjects such a vow to a three-layered normative analysis, and uses it as a lens on a general structure: the conditions under which the self-legislation of a shared life is free, the conditions under which it is just, and the conditions under which it silently becomes domination or exploitation.

The argument is integrative. (1) On freedom: the vow is exemplary Kantian autonomy, but Kant's own apparatus, the fact of reason and the noumenal self, cannot tell us when a self-legislation is free; a compatibilist, reasons-responsive criterion can, and on it the vow's freedom turns out to be conditional on its remaining responsive to the beloved as a source of reasons. (2) On morality: the vow is admirable as constancy, yet its content, what loving her means, is left to the lover alone to fix, in tension with the responsiveness that the philosophy of love takes to be constitutive of love. (3) On justice: drawing on republican non-domination and a Hohfeldian analysis of the rights-order a vow institutes, the paper argues that a unilaterally legislated law over a two-person life cannot be just, because justice between two agents is modally, not merely actually, a matter of each retaining the standing to contest the terms.

A dedicated section on the constitution of the legislating subject (structuralist and feminist) shows why the injustice is not idiosyncratic but structurally produced: the "self" that legislates is itself constituted by a historically gendered order, so that a sincere, universalizable vow can reproduce that order's subordinations. Integrating Marxian and social-reproduction theory, the paper distinguishes the conditions under which the vow institutes a legitimate rights-order from those under which it institutes exploitation, the appropriation of another's unrecognized relational and reproductive labour under an ideology that presents the appropriation as love. Against the objection that turning to relationality merely relocates the problem, since recognition can itself be ideological, it argues that the operative criterion is the live contestability of the terms, not their de facto endorsement. The conclusion is an isomorphism: the micro-order of a vow and the macro-order of a political economy share a structure, and in both the standing of the legislation rests not on the purity of the legislator but on the irreducible, modally robust standing of the other to answer.

Keywords self-legislation; autonomy; reasons-responsiveness; non-domination; recognition; ideological recognition; Hohfeldian rights; social reproduction; exploitation; relational autonomy; justice in intimate relationships.

*To the one I love,
who taught me that to keep a vow
is not to hold a course against her,
but to keep, between us, the room in which she may always answer.*

执子之手，与子偕老

*I take your hand,
and with you I will grow old.*

from the 诗经 (*Book of Songs*)

发乎情，止乎礼义

*It rises from feeling,
and comes to rest in what is right.*

after the 毛诗序 (*Great Preface to the Book of Songs*)

3.1. Introduction: A Vow and Its Puzzle

Consider a lover who, reflecting on the precariousness of feeling and the contingency of circumstance, resolves upon a law for himself:

Whatever happens, however she feels toward me, I will keep loving her.

The resolution is not a prediction about how he expects to feel. It is a self-imposed principle, a law the agent gives himself and intends to govern his conduct regardless of what the world, or the beloved, does. It is, in the most literal sense, an act of *self-legislation*: the will binding itself to a maxim it has authored. Such vows are among the most admired achievements of a loving life. And yet, examined closely, the vow harbours a puzzle, and the puzzle, once unfolded, turns out to be a window onto a structure far larger than itself.

On the one hand, the vow is a triumph of *freedom*: it liberates the lover's love from bondage to the beloved's moods, to reciprocation, to the favourable alignment of fortune. On the other hand, the very structure that wins this freedom, the love's unconditionality, its insulation from how the beloved actually responds, raises a worry not about freedom at all, but about *justice*. A relationship is not a solitary undertaking; it has two parties; and a law that one party legislates unilaterally, however lovingly, governs a shared life the other has had no hand in authoring. Stated at its sharpest: the vow institutes, between two people, an order, an arrangement of who may expect what, who owes what, who may alter the terms. The question this paper pursues is when such an order, unilaterally legislated, is *free*, when it is *just*, and when it silently becomes something else, an order of domination, even of exploitation, wearing the face of love.

3.1.1 The Thesis and the Isomorphism

The thesis has a layered form. (i) The vow is exemplary self-legislation and, in the Kantian sense, an exercise of freedom; but Kantian freedom cannot say *when* a self-legislation is free, and a more operable, compatibilist criterion reveals the vow's freedom to be conditional. (ii) The vow can be morally admirable, but its admirable form is silent on its content, and the unilateral fixing of that content is already in tension with what love is. (iii) The vow cannot, in its unilateral form, be *just*, because justice between

two parties is constitutively a matter of each retaining a modally robust standing to contest the terms, which a unilateral law by construction withholds. (iv) The injustice is not the failing of a bad lover but a structural product: the legislating “self” is itself constituted by a historically gendered order, so that even a sincere and universalizable vow can reproduce subordination. (v) There is a determinate line between the vow that institutes a legitimate rights-order and the vow that institutes *exploitation*; the line is drawn by whether the other retains co-authorship over the terms of what is given and demanded, or is instead enclosed, under the ideology of love, as the unrecognized provider of relational labour. (vi) The remedy is not a purer legislator but a relational re-grounding in which the other’s standing to contest is constitutive; and the criterion that keeps this from collapsing back into ideology is live contestability rather than endorsement.

The deepest claim is an *isomorphism*. The micro-order a lover institutes by a vow and the macro-order a political economy institutes by its distribution of rights and labour share a structure. In both, a legislation that looks self-grounded is in fact grounded in relations that precede it; in both, procedural correctness on the legislating side cannot certify justice; in both, what distinguishes order from domination is whether those bound by the law retain a real, not merely nominal, power to contest it. The intimate case is the clearest lens on this structure because its two-person character is vivid and because the lover’s sincerity strips away any suspicion of mere bad faith: if even *this* can be domination, the diagnosis cannot be dismissed.

3.1.2 Method and Scope

The vow is treated as a first-person practical datum, in the manner of Frankfurt (2004) and Velleman (1999), rather than as a third-personal object. The lover is assumed sincere, reflective, and well-meaning throughout; the argument is most secure precisely in that best case. The paper integrates traditions that rarely appear together, Kantian autonomy, compatibilist free-will theory, republican non-domination, analytic jurisprudence, structuralist and feminist accounts of subject-formation, and Marxian social-reproduction theory, but it does so under the discipline of a single spine, stated above, so that the integration is argumentative rather than encyclopaedic. Two limitations are flagged at the outset. First, the paper takes from Marx the *formal structure* of exploitation and the thesis of ideological masking, while remaining agnostic about the labour theory of value;

nothing in the argument requires that theory to be true. Second, the constructive criterion offered at the end, live contestability, is defended as the right criterion, not as an algorithm; its residual hard cases are acknowledged rather than concealed.

The plan follows the spine. Section 3.2 reconstructs Kantian self-legislation and exposes its internal difficulty about the grounds of obligation. Section 3.3 asks when a self-legislation is *free* and develops a reasons-responsive criterion. Section 3.4 treats the moral layer and the first crack. Section 3.5 develops the justice layer through non-domination. Section 3.6 analyses the vow as the institution of a Hohfeldian rights-order. Section 3.7 examines the constitution of the legislating subject. Section 3.8 draws the line between rights-order and exploitation. Section 3.9 meets the objection from ideological recognition. Section 3.10 reconstructs the vow. Section 3.11 states the isomorphism.

3.2. Kantian Self-Legislation and the Problem of Its Authority

The vow's claim to be an exercise of freedom rests on the Kantian distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. A will is *heteronomous* when determined by something external to its own rational legislation, by inclination, desire, circumstance, or the anticipated favour of others; it is *autonomous* when the law it follows issues from itself, when the will is "a law to itself" (Kant 1998, 4:440). Autonomy is not the absence of law but the presence of *self-given* law; freedom is not doing whatever one is moved to do, which is precisely the condition of being moved by alien causes, but acting on principles one has authored as a rational agent.

This yields the apparent paradox that self-binding is freedom. The agent who acts on whichever impulse is strongest is not free but driven; the agent who binds himself to a self-authored principle achieves a standing independence from the flux of impulse and becomes the author of his conduct rather than its venue. Korsgaard (1996) reconstructs this as the claim that to act autonomously is to act on a law one gives oneself in light of a *practical identity*, and that this self-legislation is what constitutes one as a unified agent rather than a succession of psychological states; the thought is extended in Korsgaard (2009), where agency itself is an achievement of self-constitution under self-given principles.

Applied to the vow: the lover who loves only while loved in return, only while moods

are favourable, only while circumstance cooperates, has a love that is heteronomously conditioned, the dependent variable of factors outside his legislation. The vow severs these dependencies. In resolving to love “whatever happens, however she feels,” the lover withdraws his love from the jurisdiction of mood and reciprocity and places it under his own legislation. On Kantian grounds the vow is therefore not a diminishment of freedom but its fullest expression, and there is a recognizable Kantian thought that conduct from principle has a higher worth than conduct from inclination, the former being the agent’s achievement, the latter a gift of temperament (Kant 1998, 4:398–399).

3.2.1 The Fact of Reason and the Circle of Authority

Grant all this, and a question remains that will prove decisive: *whence the authority of the self-given law?* If the lover is both the author of the law and the one bound by it, what prevents him from repealing it the moment it chafes? A law one can revise at will is no law; yet a law one gives oneself seems to be exactly that. Kant felt the difficulty acutely. In the *Groundwork* he sought to derive the moral law’s bindingness from the very concept of a rational will, but by the *Critique of Practical Reason* he rests the matter on what he calls the *fact of reason* (*Faktum der Vernunft*): our consciousness of the moral law as binding is a fact that reason simply presents, neither derived from anything prior nor in need of, nor susceptible of, external proof (Kant 1997, 5:31). The bindingness of self-legislation is thus secured by treating it as a datum rather than a conclusion.

This is the first of two pressure points. To ground the authority of self-given law in a “fact” that reason presents to itself is either to assert what was to be shown, that the self-given law really does bind its author, or to relocate the authority outside the individual will, into “reason” as something the agent does not control and cannot repeal. Kant takes the second route: the law binds not because *this* individual wills it but because reason, in him, legislates it, and reason is not his to revoke. The move saves the bindingness but at a price we will collect repeatedly: it makes the genuinely authoritative legislator not the empirical person but *reason as such*, and thereby quietly concedes that the individual, considered as the contingent being he is, is not in fact the self-sufficient source of the law he appears to give himself.

3.2.2 The Noumenal Refuge

The second pressure point is the home of Kant's answer to every charge that the legislator is corruptible. Confronted with the worry that an agent's sense of what reason requires might be distorted by inclination, history, or circumstance, Kant can reply that such distortions belong to the *empirical* self, the self in the world of appearances, whereas the true legislator is the *noumenal* self, the rational agent considered as a member of the intelligible order, whose legislation is by its nature untainted by empirical determination. Freedom, on this picture, is a property of the noumenal will; the moral law is what that will gives itself; and the contingencies that might corrupt an actual person's judgement are, in principle, screened off from the legislating self that matters.

This noumenal refuge is the strongest move available to the defender of pure self-legislation, and much of this paper can be read as the attempt to show that it cannot do the work the intimate case demands of it. Two observations begin that work. First, the refuge is purchased by placing the authoritative legislator beyond the reach of experience, which makes it equally beyond the reach of any *operable* test: if the question is *when*, in actual life, a given self-legislation is free rather than driven, just rather than dominating, an appeal to a noumenal self that is by definition never given in experience yields no usable answer. Second, the refuge concedes, in the very act of invoking it, that the *empirical* legislator, the actual lover making the actual vow, is exposed to exactly the distortions the paper will track; it protects the purity of self-legislation only by relocating it to a self that does no concrete work. We will let the refuge stand for now and return, in Section 3.7, to dismantle the assumption it most depends on: that there is a legislating self constituted prior to, and independently of, the relations and history in which the empirical person is formed.

3.2.3 Korsgaard's Half-Step

Korsgaard's reconstruction is important here precisely because it takes a half-step away from the noumenal refuge and toward the relational view, without completing it. By grounding obligation in *practical identities*, the descriptions under which we value ourselves and find our lives worth living, she brings the source of normativity down from the noumenal into the texture of an agent's actual self-understanding (Korsgaard 1996).

Practical identities are largely social: one is a friend, a citizen, a parent, a lover, and these identities, with their attendant obligations, are not legislated *ex nihilo* by a noumenal will but inherited, adopted, and sustained in a social world. To that extent Korsgaard has already conceded that the legislator is socially constituted. Yet she retains a back-stop: beneath all contingent practical identities lies one that is not optional, our identity simply as reflective rational agents, members of the “kingdom of ends,” and it is this that supplies universal moral obligations and rescues the account from relativism. The half-step is therefore arrested: the social constitution of the self is admitted at every level but the last, where a non-relational, universal identity is reinstated to do the grounding work. The argument of this paper presses on exactly that last level. If even the deepest practical identity, the sense of oneself as one who loves, and of what loving requires, is constituted in and by relations that are historically structured, then there is no non-relational floor on which a self-sufficient legislation could stand. Section 3.7 makes that case; the intervening sections show why it matters.

3.3. When Is a Self-Legislation Free? From the Noumenal to the Reasons-Responsive

Section 3.2 establishes that the vow is, in Kantian terms, an exercise of autonomy. But it also exposes that Kantian autonomy cannot answer the question the rest of the paper needs answered: *when* is a particular act of self-legislation free, and when is it merely a sophisticated form of being driven? The noumenal account locates freedom in a self never given in experience and so offers no operable criterion; the fact of reason secures bindingness by fiat. To make progress we need a conception of freedom that applies to the legislating mechanism as it actually operates. The compatibilist tradition in the theory of free will supplies one.

3.3.1 Two Compatibilist Resources

Two resources are pertinent. The first is Frankfurt’s hierarchical account, on which an agent is free in the relevant sense when his will, the desire that moves him to act, is one he reflectively endorses at a higher order: the unwilling addict, moved by a first-order desire he repudiates at the second order, is unfree, while the agent whose effective

desire is ratified by his higher-order volitions acts of his own free will (Frankfurt 1971). The second, more demanding and more useful here, is Fischer and Ravizza's account of *guidance control*, which they analyse as two conditions: the action must issue from the agent's *own* mechanism (ownership), and that mechanism must be *moderately reasons-responsive*, that is, disposed to recognize and respond to a suitable range of reasons, including reasons to do otherwise, across a range of scenarios (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). Notably, their theory is *historicist*: whether a mechanism is the agent's own depends on how it came to be his, on the history of its formation, so that a mechanism implanted by manipulation, however well it functions now, does not ground freedom. We will exploit this historicism in Section 3.7.

3.3.2 Applying Reasons-Responsiveness to the Vow

On the reasons-responsive criterion, the freedom of the vow is not settled by the bare fact that the lover gave himself the law. It depends on whether the mechanism that now governs his loving remains responsive to the relevant reasons. And here the central reasons are supplied by the beloved: her needs, her changes, her objections, her saying that what he offers as love is not, for her, love. A vow whose whole point is to hold steady "however she feels" is, read in one way, a mechanism engineered to be *unresponsive* to precisely these reasons, to treat her dissent not as input that could redirect the loving but as weather to be outlasted. To that extent the vow, far from being the height of freedom, approaches the condition of the driven: the lover is moved by a standing resolution that has been insulated against the reasons that ought to be able to move it. The Kantian sees only that the law is self-given and pronounces the vow free; the reasons-responsive criterion sees that a self-given law can be self-given as a cage, and asks the further question the Kantian cannot.

This yields a determinate and somewhat surprising result. The vow is free *to the extent that*, and *only to the extent that*, the constancy it institutes leaves the lover's loving responsive to the beloved as a source of reasons. A constancy of *presence and commitment* that remains responsive in its *mode* is free; a constancy that fixes the mode and immunizes it against her is, by the very criterion that makes self-legislation a candidate for freedom, a diminution of freedom dressed as its triumph. Freedom and the seed of the later injustice are thus located at a single point: the responsiveness of the legislating mechanism to the

other.

3.3.3 The Hole Both Theories Share

Reasons-responsiveness is a real advance, but it has a famous limitation that, far from being a defect for our purposes, is the hinge of the whole integration. The criterion is officially neutral about *which* reasons the mechanism must answer to and about *who* has standing to supply them; it asks only that the mechanism be suitably responsive to whatever reasons there are. As critics have noted, this leaves the account silent on the *sources* of the reasons. An agent may be exquisitely responsive to the reasons he recognizes while being systematically closed to a whole class of reasons he does not recognize as reasons at all, for instance, the claims of someone whose standing to make claims he has, without noticing, discounted in advance. Such an agent passes the reasons-responsiveness test on the reasons that reach him, yet is, in a deeper sense, unfree, and, as we will see, positioned to dominate.

This is the same hole, arrived at from the other side, that Kantian universalizability was meant to plug and could not. Kant's test asks whether one could will one's maxim as a universal law; the hope was that this formal demand would force the agent to take account of everyone's standing. Hegel's objection, that the test screens out only outright contradictions and licenses a wide range of substantively objectionable maxims provided they are described with care (Hegel 1991, §135), is precisely the complaint that universalizability does not in fact secure attention to the other's standing: a maxim that discounts another's claims in advance can be universalized without contradiction, because the discounting has already been built into the description of the situation. So the Kantian formal route and the compatibilist reasons-responsive route fail at the *same* place: neither can, from its own resources, guarantee that the legislating self is open to the other as a full source of reasons and claims. Both presuppose a legislator already disposed to count the other, and neither can supply that disposition. That common gap is where relationality must enter, not as a preference but as the only thing that can fill a hole both leading theories of free and responsible agency leave open. The remainder of the paper is, in effect, the filling of that hole.

3.4. The Moral Layer and the First Crack

Does the vow's standing as freedom carry into moral admirability? On several theories, initially yes. On a Kantian reckoning it honours the Formula of Humanity: the lover commits to treating the beloved never merely as a means, to be retained while pleasing and discarded when not, but as an end whose standing does not fluctuate with her usefulness (Kant 1998, 4:429). There is, too, a venerable view that unconditional commitment is close to love's essence. On Singer's bestowal account, love confers a value not earned by the beloved's merits and so not revoked when they waver (Singer 1984). On Frankfurt's account, love is a mode of volitional necessity in which the lover comes to be unable to be indifferent to the beloved's flourishing, and this bondage is the very shape of caring (Frankfurt 2004). By these lights the vow articulates love rather than distorting it.

Yet here the first crack appears. The vow's content is "I will keep loving her", but this is schematic until we specify what *loving her* consists in, and the unilateral structure of self-legislation lets the lover, and the lover alone, fill in that content. "Keep loving her" can mean: *I will keep willing her good, attending to her as the particular person she is, responding to what she actually needs and asks*. Or it can slide, by degrees, into: *I will keep doing what I have determined loving her to be, whatever she says about it*. The first is responsive; the second, despite its devotion, is imposition.

The philosophy of love supplies the resources to see why the second reading is defective *as love*. For Velleman, love is a moral emotion, the lover's response to the beloved as a rational agent, an arresting awareness of her worth as a being with her own will and ends (Velleman 1999). A love whose content is fixed unilaterally and held immune to the beloved's actual will is in tension with this: it addresses not the beloved as a rational agent with claims of her own, but an image of her, or the lover's conception of her good, around which the conduct of love is then organized. Kolodny's relational theory presses the same point: love is grounded in, and answerable to, an ongoing relationship between two people, not in a disposition lodged in one and sealed against the other (Kolodny 2003); and Helm's account of intimate identification likewise makes the beloved's own perspective constitutive of the loving, not an optional input to it (Helm 2010). Even Frankfurt's volitional necessity, properly understood, is a necessity to care about *the beloved's* good as she has it, not about the lover's project of loving.

So the crack is this. Stated abstractly, the vow is admirable; but its abstract statement conceals a fork, and nothing in the *form* of self-legislation determines which tine is taken, because the form is silent on content. Read responsively, the vow remains love and remains admirable. Read as the unilateral fixing of love's content, it converts the beloved from the addressee of love into the occasion for the lover's exercise of a self-assigned role. The question the freedom and morality layers cannot answer is now unavoidable, and it is a question about *authority*: who decides what loving her means? That is a question of justice.

3.5. The Justice Layer: Non-Domination and the Limits of Unilateral Legislation

The deepest assessment concerns neither the vow's freedom nor its moral quality from the lover's side, but its *justice*, the standing of the arrangement it institutes between two people. I begin from a deliberately thin and widely shared conception and let it do most of the work, reserving a thicker conception for Section 3.10.

3.5.1 Why Procedure Cannot Certify Content

In the moral philosophy descended from Kant there is a standing question whether a correct *procedure* of legislation guarantees just *content*. Kant's wager is that it does: a maxim that survives universalizability, willed by a rational agent treating humanity as an end, is thereby in order, so that one need not consult an independent standard of justice to certify the result. The wager has been contested from two directions. Hegel's charge of empty formalism, already invoked, is that universalizability screens out only contradictions and permits much that is substantively unjust (Hegel 1991, §135). Rawls, inheriting the Kantian ambition, declined to trust the bare form and instead built a procedure, the original position behind a veil of ignorance, whose design *embeds* substantive constraints, equality, mutual disinterest, ignorance of one's place, precisely so that its outputs would be just (Rawls 1971). The lesson is double-edged: a procedure can be made to guarantee just content, but only by loading morally significant conditions into it in advance. Procedure does not generate justice for free.

A further consideration is decisive for our case. Even a procedurally impeccable self-legislation can produce unjust content when the legislator's own judgement, of what love requires, what a partner owes, what counts as a reasonable claim by the other, has been formed by conditions that systematically under-weight the other's standing. The procedure then runs correctly on corrupted inputs. In the intimate sphere this is not a remote possibility but the ordinary condition, since everyone's conception of love is inherited and acculturated; Section 3.7 shows how. For now the structural point suffices: the lover's sincerity, freedom, and good will establish that the vow is, from his side, autonomously and even admirably made, but they cannot establish that it is *just*, because justice between two parties is not the kind of thing one party can confer by legislating well.

3.5.2 Non-Domination as the Operative Conception

The thin conception I adopt is republican: a relationship is unjust to the extent that one party is subject to *domination*, understood, after Pettit, as exposure to another's capacity for arbitrary interference, interference not controlled by, and not answerable to, the affected party's own avowable interests and voice (Pettit 1997). The decisive feature of this conception, for us, is that domination is *modal*: one is dominated not only when interference actually occurs but whenever one is exposed to its possibility at another's discretion. Pettit's own illustration is the slave of a kindly master: the master who chooses never to interfere still dominates, because the non-interference depends on his continuing goodwill rather than on the slave's secured standing; the slave lives at discretion, and that is unfreedom even when the discretion is exercised benignly (Pettit 1997). What makes the difference between freedom and domination is therefore not the quality of the treatment but the *structure of the power*: whether the dominated party has a secured, non-discretionary standing, or merely the good fortune of a benevolent superior.

This is exactly the tool the intimate case requires, because the lover of our vow is, at his best, the benevolent master. His love may be impeccable in its actual exercise; the question non-domination teaches us to ask is whether the beloved's good treatment is *secured* by her standing or merely *granted* by his disposition. A unilaterally legislated law of love, however benevolent, places the beloved in the structural position of one who lives at the lover's discretion: the terms of the love, what it will demand of her, what it

will provide, what it will refuse to hear, are set by him, and her good treatment depends on his continuing to will it rather than on any standing of hers to contest it. That is domination in the modal sense even if the lover never once interferes badly, indeed even if he is, by every actual measure, wonderful. The benevolent-master structure is the precise diagnosis of what is wrong with a vow that is, by hypothesis, made in love.

3.5.3 Three Vectors of Domination

The general diagnosis resolves into three concrete vectors.

(i) Immunization against voice. The vow’s signature clause is “however she feels.” But the beloved’s feelings are not always weather to be loved through; sometimes what presents as her mood is a claim: *I need room; I need you to hear this; something between us is wrong*. A vow structured to love on regardless risks converting every such claim into one more contingency to be surmounted by steadfastness, so that the most resolute love becomes the love least able to *hear*. The lover’s constancy, a virtue from his side, can function from hers as a wall: her dissent is metabolized in advance as something his love is built to outlast. This is the gravest vector, for it disables the very channel through which a domination might be communicated and corrected, and it is the intimate face of the reasons-responsiveness hole of Section 3.3.

(ii) Non-reciprocity. Unconditional unilateral commitment distorts the economy of giving and receiving a just relationship maintains. A love that gives without condition and without reference to the other’s giving can fix the beloved as the perpetual recipient of something she has not asked for in the form in which it arrives, or license the lover to endure, in fidelity’s name, treatment he ought not to endure, unilaterally setting the terms of sacrifice as well. Reciprocity is not the demand that love be repaid like a debt; it is the condition that the shape of the giving be something both hands touch. Unilateral unconditionality removes her hand from it.

(iii) Definitional capture. Most subtly, the unilateral vow lodges the authority to define *what loving her means* in the lover. As Section 3.4 showed, “keep loving her” requires content, and the vow assigns the filling of that content to one party. But what counts as loving this particular person is something over which she has standing to speak; to foreclose that, however lovingly, is to capture an authority that is properly shared, to

love her in the third person while addressing her in the second.

None of these requires the lover to be selfish, deluded, or coercive. They are structural, following from the unilateral *form* of the vow conjoined with the two-person character of what it governs. The vow can be free in the Kantian sense, sincere, constant, devoted, and still institute, through these channels, a quiet domination. The next section makes the structure precise by asking what kind of *order* a vow institutes.

3.6. The Vow as the Institution of a Rights-Order

To say a vow “institutes an order” can sound metaphorical. It is not. A vow over a shared life creates, between the two parties, a determinate structure of normative positions, and the most precise instrument for displaying that structure is Hohfeld’s analysis of jural relations (Hohfeld 1919). Hohfeld showed that what we loosely call “a right” decomposes into distinct positions that come in correlative pairs: a *claim* in one party correlates with a *duty* in the other; a *privilege* (liberty) with a *no-right*; and, at the second order, a *power* to alter the parties’ positions with a *liability* to have one’s positions altered, while an *immunity* correlates with a *disability*. Crucially, Hohfeld insisted that every such relation holds between exactly two persons: jural relations are irreducibly relational, never a property of one party alone.

3.6.1 What the Unilateral Vow Distributes

Read through this lens, the lover’s vow is the unilateral institution of a set of Hohfeldian positions governing the relationship. The lover assumes *duties* (to keep loving, whatever happens), and thereby confers on the beloved corresponding *claims*. So far the vow looks generous: it loads obligation onto the lover and entitlement onto the beloved. But the decisive positions are at the second order. Who holds the *power* to alter the terms, to determine what the duties and claims actually *are*, what “loving her” shall be taken to require and provide? In the unilateral vow, that power is retained entirely by the lover. He defines the content; he may, being its author, redefine it; the beloved holds no correlative power but only a *liability*, the position of one whose normative situation is determined by another’s exercise of power. And does the beloved hold an *immunity* against having the terms of the love set without her, correlating with a *disability* in the

lover to set them alone? She does not; the unilateral structure is precisely the lover's retention of the power and the beloved's exposure as liability.

This is the Hohfeldian translation of the non-domination diagnosis, and it sharpens it. The vow's generosity is all at the first order, claims and duties that favour the beloved, while the domination is all at the second order, in the distribution of power and immunity. One can be lavishly endowed with first-order claims and still be dominated, if one holds no power over the terms and no immunity against their unilateral revision. The benevolent master grants generous claims; what he withholds is the power and the immunity. Hohfeld lets us say exactly what a just intimate order would require that the unilateral vow omits: not more generous duties on the lover's side, but a *distribution of the second-order positions*, a share of the power to set and revise the terms, and an immunity against their being set unilaterally. Justice in the rights-order is a matter of the second order.

3.6.2 Order versus the Mere Imposition of Order

The analysis also clarifies what is right about the impulse to vow. Some institution of an order is not optional in a shared life; two people who coordinate at all stand in jural relations, and the alternative to an order is not freedom but chaos, in which neither can rely on anything. The question is never whether to have a rights-order but *how the power to constitute and revise it is distributed*. A vow that institutes an order while reserving all second-order power to its author has not done something gratuitous by instituting an order; it has done something unjust by *monopolizing the constituent power*. This distinction, between the institution of an order and the monopolization of constituent power over it, is exactly the distinction we will need at the largest scale, and it is the bridge to the political-economic register: the same structure by which a benevolent legislator can institute an order that dominates those it generously binds recurs from the intimate dyad to the polity. Before drawing that isomorphism, we must ask how the legislator who monopolizes constituent power comes to do so without noticing, which returns us to the constitution of the legislating self.

3.7. The Constitution of the Legislating Subject: Structuralist and Feminist Considerations

Every layer so far has deferred a question to this section. The Kantian noumenal refuge (Section 3.2) presupposed a legislating self constituted prior to and independently of its relations. The reasons-responsiveness hole (Section 3.3) turned on a legislator already disposed, or not, to count the other as a source of reasons. The corrupted-inputs problem (Section 3.5) and the monopolized constituent power (Section 3.6) both pointed to a legislator whose sense of what love requires is given from somewhere. This section asks where, and the answer dismantles the assumption on which the purity of self-legislation depends. The argument runs as a chain: the legislating subject is not the origin but an effect (structuralism); the effect is produced by a determinate, historically gendered order (feminist political theory); therefore a sincere unilateral vow is liable to encode and reproduce that order's subordinations, which is why the three vectors of Section 3.5 are structurally expectable rather than personal lapses.

3.7.1 The Subject as Effect, Not Origin

The structuralist insight, in the form most useful here, is that the subject who appears to be the source of meaning and law is itself produced by structures that precede it. Althusser's account of *interpellation* holds that individuals are constituted as subjects by being "hailed" by ideology: one becomes a subject by recognizing oneself in the positions a social order addresses to one, so that the very interiority from which one seems to legislate is an effect of one's having been addressed and having answered (Althusser 1971). Lacan's parallel claim is that the subject is an effect of its insertion into the symbolic order, the system of language and law that pre-exists it; the "I" that speaks and wills is constituted in and by a field of signifiers it did not author (Lacan 2006). One need not adopt the whole of either system to take the structural point: the self that legislates the vow does not bring to the vow a conception of love minted by its own spontaneity; it brings a conception it has received, in which it has been formed as the kind of subject that loves in certain ways and expects certain things.

This is where the historicism of the reasons-responsiveness account (Section 3.3) returns

with force. Fischer and Ravizza make the freedom-conferring character of a mechanism depend on *how it was formed*: a mechanism instilled by manipulation does not ground freedom even if it now functions well (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). The structuralist claim is that the mechanism of the loving self is *always* formed by a process the self did not control, the process of subject-constitution itself. This does not by itself defeat freedom, on pain of making freedom impossible; but it means that whether the lover's legislating mechanism is genuinely his own, in the sense that grounds freedom and underwrites just authority, cannot be assumed and must be asked, and the asking requires examining the *content* of the formation. What, concretely, is the historical structure that forms the subject who vows to love?

3.7.2 The Structure Is Gendered Subordination

For intimate partnership the answer is supplied by feminist political theory, and it is specific: the order that has historically constituted the loving subject is one of gendered subordination, and it has done so through the very institutions, marriage, the family, romantic love, that present themselves as the home of free and mutual affection. Pateman's analysis of the *sexual contract* argues that the social-contract tradition's story of free and equal individuals contracting into civil society conceals a prior, sexual contract through which men secured a patriarchal right over women, and that the marriage contract in particular has been not a paradigm of free agreement between equals but a form of the subordination contract, in which one party contracts into a subordinate status under the language of consent (Pateman 1988). Okin's analysis of *justice, gender, and the family* shows that the family, far from lying outside the scope of justice as a haven of spontaneous affection, has been a primary site of injustice, structured by a gendered division of labour and vulnerability that theories of justice, by exempting the family from scrutiny, helped to naturalize (Okin 1989). And Young's account of the *faces of oppression* insists that domination and oppression are not, in the first instance, matters of distributive shortfall or of individual ill will, but structural: they operate through the normal, often well-intentioned processes of ordinary life, including the everyday workings of intimate and familial roles (Young 1990).

Put the structuralist mechanism and the feminist content together and the chain closes. The subject who legislates the vow has been constituted, as a loving subject, within a

historically gendered order; the conception of love he brings to the vow, what love is, what it provides, what it may demand, what counts as the beloved's good, is not minted by his spontaneity but received from that order; and that order is one of subordination presenting itself as mutuality. Therefore the three vectors of Section 3.5 are not the idiosyncratic failings of a particular lover but the *structurally expectable* output of a sincere subject legislating from a constituted standpoint he mistakes for a neutral one. Immunization against voice, non-reciprocity, and definitional capture are exactly what one would predict from a subject formed to experience a gendered allocation of emotional provision and authority as the natural shape of love. The lover need not be a patriarch in intention; he need only be a competent product of the order that formed him, legislating in good faith from inside it. This is why the noumenal refuge fails not merely as an epistemology but as a description: there is no constituted-independently legislator to retreat to, because the very capacity to legislate a conception of love is a deposit of the order under examination.

3.7.3 Why This Does Not Collapse into Determinism

It must be said at once what this argument does not claim, on pain of proving too much. It does not claim that the subject is wholly determined and incapable of legislating anything not dictated by the order that formed it; that would make critique, including this paper, impossible, and would dissolve the very agency whose freedom Section 3.3 took seriously. The claim is weaker and more exact: there is no *guaranteed-pure* standpoint, no noumenal refuge or non-relational practical identity, from which a self-sufficient and self-certifying legislation could issue. The capacity for critical distance is real but it is not the spontaneity of an uncaused legislator; it is itself a relational achievement, won through encounter with what does not fit the inherited conception, paradigmatically through the resistance of the other who says that what is offered as love is not, for her, love. This is the positive seed: if the formed subject cannot certify its own legislation from within, the correction can only come from without, from the standing of the other to contest, which Section 3.10 will make constitutive. First, though, we can now state precisely the line between a vow that institutes a legitimate order and one that institutes exploitation.

3.8. Rights-Order or Exploitation? The Political Economy of the Vow

We can now answer the question that motivates the political-economic register: *when* does the self-legislation of a shared life institute a legitimate rights-order, and *when* does it institute exploitation? The materials are in hand: the second-order analysis of constituent power (Section 3.6) and the constituted, gendered subject (Section 3.7). What remains is to import, carefully, the formal structure of exploitation.

3.8.1 Exploitation, Formally

I take from the Marxian tradition the *form* of exploitation while remaining agnostic about the labour theory of value, which the argument does not need. Formally, exploitation obtains when (a) one party systematically appropriates the benefit of another's contribution or labour, (b) the appropriating party, not the contributing one, controls the terms under which the contribution is rendered and counted, and (c) the arrangement is sustained by a representation that makes the appropriation appear natural, voluntary, or even loving, so that it is not experienced as appropriation at all (on the form of appropriation and its mystification, see Marx 1976, esp. the analysis of the wage form). Condition (c), the ideological masking, is not incidental; it is what distinguishes exploitation from open coercion and what makes it stable. Marx's point about the wage form, that it presents as an equal exchange (a fair day's wage for a fair day's work) a relation in which surplus is appropriated, has its exact analogue in the intimate sphere, where the language of love presents as the free overflow of affection a relation in which one party's relational labour is appropriated without recognition or reciprocal power.

3.8.2 Love as the Site and the Mask

The feminist development of this analysis, in social-reproduction theory, supplies the intimate content. The work of sustaining persons emotionally and materially, care, attention, the management of feeling, the labour of keeping a relationship and a household going, is *labour*, even though it is performed outside the wage and is therefore, in the theory's terms, not *exploited* in the strict wage sense but *expropriated*: necessary work that is unpaid, undervalued, and rendered invisible by being recoded as the natural expression

of love or femininity (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016). Federici's central claim is exactly that housework and care were made to appear as expressions of love rather than as work, and that this recoding is the mechanism of their expropriation (Federici 2012). Hochschild's analysis of *emotional labour* names the further dimension: the management of one's own feeling to produce a required emotional state in another is work, and it is distributed unequally, with one party characteristically assigned the open-ended task of sustaining the relationship's emotional weather (Hochschild 1983). Social-reproduction theory's distinction between exploitation and expropriation, and its insistence that the sphere of love and care is where capitalism offloads the costs of reproducing people, give the intimate analysis its political-economic depth (Bhattacharya 2017).

Now the unilateral vow can be located precisely on this map. A vow that reserves second-order power to the lover, made by a subject constituted within a gendered order, and expressed in the language of unconditional love, satisfies all three conditions of the formal structure of exploitation when it operates so as to enclose the beloved as the unrecognized provider of relational and reproductive labour. (a) The benefit of her sustaining labour is appropriated, the relationship is kept going, the lover is emotionally and materially sustained, while (b) the terms, what counts as love, what is owed, what may be asked, are controlled by him through his retained constituent power, and (c) the whole is masked as love, indeed as *his* love for *her*, so that her labour is recoded as the natural expression of her affection and disappears as labour. The very unconditionality that made the vow look like the height of devotion is, on this analysis, the perfect ideological form: it presents as pure gift a structure of appropriation, and it does so most effectively precisely when the lover is sincere, because his sincerity is the surface under which the structure operates unseen.

3.8.3 The Line

This yields the determinate line the section promised. The self-legislation of a shared life institutes a *legitimate rights-order* when the other retains co-authorship over the second-order terms, the power to set and revise what is given and demanded, and an immunity against having those terms fixed unilaterally; under those conditions the labour of sustaining the relationship is rendered and counted on terms the contributor co-controls, and is recognized as contribution. The same self-legislation institutes *exploitation* when

the other is enclosed as the provider of unrecognized relational labour under terms she does not co-control, with the enclosure masked by the language of love. The line is not drawn by the warmth of the feeling, the generosity of the first-order provisions, or the sincerity of the legislator, all of which are compatible with exploitation and indeed are its most effective cover. It is drawn, exactly as in the political-economic case, by the distribution of constituent power and by whether the contributor's labour is recognized as such or recoded as natural devotion. The intimate and the political-economic are here not analogous but, in the relevant structural respect, identical: in both, the difference between a just order and an exploitative one is whether those whose labour sustains the order retain the power to set its terms and the standing to have their contribution recognized.

3.9. The Objection from Ideological Recognition

The argument now points unmistakably toward a remedy: make the vow relational; distribute the second-order power; give the beloved constitutive standing to contest and co-author what loving her means. But the most serious objection to that remedy comes from within the very traditions, recognition theory and relational autonomy, on which it draws, and it must be met before the remedy can be stated, on pain of the remedy's being hollow.

The objection is that relationality is no guarantee of justice, because recognition can itself be *ideological*. Honneth, whose theory makes love the first sphere of recognition, the sphere in which basic self-confidence is formed, and recognition the medium of self-realization (Honneth 1995), is himself the source of the difficulty. He observes that subjects can derive genuine self-worth and stable identity from recognition conferred within, and securing their consent to, a subordinate position (Honneth 2007). The devoted partner may attain a robust sense of identity and esteem precisely by fulfilling a role that subordinates her; her recognition is real and her endorsement sincere, yet the arrangement she endorses is one we have reason to call unjust. "Ideological recognition" names the cases where being recognized, and welcoming it, coexists with and even cements domination. Pressed against relational autonomy, the point becomes a dilemma: Khader (2020) argues that the social embedding relational theories celebrate is also what can produce

a person's sincere attachment to conditions that diminish her, the problem of *adaptive preferences* (cf. Khader 2011). Applied to our case: the lover opens the terms to co-authorship, and the beloved, formed by the very gendered order Section 3.7 described to ask for little, co-authors terms that subordinate her and cherishes them. The relationship is now relational, recognitional, co-authored, and unjust, the more insidiously because it wears the appearance of mutual endorsement.

This is a genuine knife at the throat of the remedy, and it is sharpened by the present paper's own Section 3.7: if the subject is constituted by a gendered order, why expect the *beloved's* constituted preferences to be any purer a touchstone than the lover's constituted conception? I do not blunt the objection by denying its force. Turning the vow relational does not, by itself, secure justice. If the criterion of a just relational order were *de facto endorsement*, that both parties in fact accept the terms, ideological recognition would defeat the remedy outright, since de facto endorsement is exactly what the contented subordinate supplies.

3.9.1 Contestability, Not Endorsement

The answer is that the operative criterion is not de facto endorsement but *live contestability*, and this is where the republican analysis of Section 3.5 pays off. Recall that domination is modal: it concerns not whether interference *actually* occurs but whether one is exposed to its possibility at another's discretion (Pettit 1997). Transpose this to recognition. What makes a relational order just is not that its terms are in fact accepted, but that each party retains a modally robust standing to contest and revise them, a standing tested not by whether dissent actually occurs but by what *would* happen if it did. The contented subordinate's situation is unjust, on this criterion, not because she fails to object, she does not wish to, but because, *were* she to object, her objection would carry no weight; the order is structured so that her dissent would not move it. Endorsement under conditions where dissent is foreclosed is not the kind of endorsement that confers justice. Contestability asks the counterfactual, modal question, is dissent live, weighty, efficacious across the relevant range of circumstances?, and that question discriminates between recognition that secures standing and recognition that merely secures consent to its absence. This is precisely why de facto endorsement fails as a criterion and modal contestability succeeds: the former is a fact about the actual world that ideology can

manufacture, the latter a fact about the structure of power across possible worlds that ideology cannot, by manufacturing actual consent, satisfy.

Two clarifications fortify the reply. First, contestability is not satisfied by a merely formal permission to object. A relationship in which the beloved is “allowed” to disagree but in which her disagreement is structurally inert, always outlasted, always reframed, never able to change anything, fails the test as surely as one that forbids objection outright; this is the relational analogue of Hohfeld’s point that a nominal claim without a correlative power is no protection. Live contestability requires that dissent be *able to make a difference*, a fact about the distribution of second-order power and of responsiveness, not about the presence of a nominal right. Second, following Ricoeur, contestability presupposes a *proper distance* between the parties: a relation close enough for intimacy yet preserving the irreducible separateness of the other, so that the beloved remains an other who can say no rather than being absorbed into the lover’s conception of the shared good (Ricoeur 2005). Recognition collapses into ideology precisely when this distance collapses, when the other is so identified with the relationship, or with the lover’s image of her, that there is no standpoint from which she could dissent. Proper distance is the structural condition that keeps contestability live, and it connects back to the constitution of the subject: the maintenance of a standpoint from which the other can contest is what prevents her constituted preferences from being simply the internalized echo of the lover’s, or of the order’s.

3.9.2 The Honest Residue

In keeping with the standard of not over-claiming, the limits of the reply must be stated. Contestability is not an algorithm and not a guarantee. There are hard cases in which it is genuinely unclear whether dissent is live or foreclosed, and cases in which a deeply internalized subordination corrodes the very capacity to conceive of dissent, so that the counterfactual test threatens to return indeterminate, the standpoint of contestation having been, as it were, colonized in advance. I do not claim that contestability dissolves the problem of ideological recognition. I claim that it locates justice in the right place, in the modally robust standing to contest rather than in the fact of consent, and that it does decisively better than de facto endorsement, which ideology defeats immediately. Where the capacity to contest has itself been damaged, the requirement of *proper distance* and

the relational achievement of critical standpoint (Section 3.7) become the site of repair, slow, uncertain, and never to be presumed complete. A criterion can be correct and still leave a residue of hard cases; epistemic honesty requires naming the residue rather than papering over it.

3.10. The Vow Re-Grounded: Relational Co-Legislation and Generative Justice

We can now reconstruct the vow so as to preserve the goods established along the way, the freedom of Section 3.3, the moral worth of Section 3.4, while closing the gap diagnosed across Sections 3.5–3.8 and surviving the objection of Section 3.9. The reconstruction does not repudiate the original vow. Its core, that love should not be the hostage of mood or the dependent variable of reciprocation, is worth keeping; it is what made the vow an achievement of freedom. What must change is not the constancy but the unilaterality, not the first-order devotion but the monopoly of second-order power.

The original vow was: *Whatever happens, however she feels, I will keep loving her.* The reconstructed vow is closer to:

I will keep loving her, and what loving her means, here and now, I hold open to her: to her voice, her dissent, her revision. My constancy is that I will not make my love hostage to her mood or contingent on her return; but my constancy does not stand above her standing to contest what my love does to her and asks of her. The terms of our love are hers to set with me, and never mine to set alone.

The first clauses preserve the freedom layer: the love remains self-legislated, withdrawn from the jurisdiction of mood and reciprocity. The reasons-responsiveness criterion of Section 3.3 is now satisfied rather than violated, since the mechanism is explicitly held open to the beloved as a source of reasons. The final clauses close the justice gap by relocating the *second-order power* (Section 3.6) from the lover alone to the two together: constancy is retained as a property of the lover's commitment to remain and to keep willing her good, while what is surrendered is the monopoly over the interpretation of that good. The three vectors are addressed at their root: voice is constitutively admitted,

not immunized against; the shape of giving becomes something both hands touch; the definition of loving her is restored to shared authority. And because the operative criterion is live contestability rather than endorsement, the reconstruction does not collapse into ideological recognition: the test is not whether she accepts the terms but whether her dissent remains live, weighty, and able to move them, across the proper distance that keeps her an other who can say no. The political-economic line of Section 3.8 is thereby crossed back to the right side: with second-order power shared and her sustaining labour recognized as contribution rather than recoded as natural devotion, the order ceases to be exploitative and becomes a genuine rights-order.

3.10.1 From Self-Legislation to Co-Legislation

Mark what has happened to the concept of self-legislation. We began with a self-standing rational agent giving himself a law. We end with a law that governs the lover's love and is not, and cannot be, his alone, a law that is, at its base, *co*-legislation. This is not a concession forced from outside onto an otherwise solitary act; Section 3.7 showed that the solitary act was never solitary, that the legislating self was constituted relationally all along. The reconstruction does not *add* relationality to a self-sufficient legislation; it brings the legislation's own grounds into view and aligns the form of the vow with the truth of its origin. The Kantian picture presupposed a legislator constituted prior to and independently of relations; the relational ontology that this paper has progressively established, through the failure of the noumenal refuge, the historicism of agency, and the structural constitution of the subject, holds instead that the loving subject is in part *generated in the relation*: his sense of what love is, what the other is owed, what he himself wants and is, takes shape in and through the relationship he proposes to legislate over (Nedelsky 1989; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Helm 2010). "Self"-legislation in the intimate sphere was always a moment within the ongoing co-constitution of two subjects by each other.

3.10.2 Generative Justice

This licenses, at the end and not before, a conception of justice thicker than the non-domination floor that did the diagnostic work. If the subjects are generated in the relation, then justice between them is not merely the absence of domination but the

positive maintenance of conditions under which each can continue to become who they are in the relation without that becoming being captured or foreclosed by the other. Call this *generative justice*: justice measured by whether the relation keeps open the conditions of each party's ongoing self-formation, including, centrally, the standing to contest the terms of the relation itself. Non-domination and live contestability are the floor; generative justice is the substantive ideal they point toward, and it is the proper aim of the reconstructed vow. The reason to introduce it only here, rather than to build the whole argument on it, is methodological honesty: the diagnosis and the reply stand on the thin, widely shared notion of non-domination alone, and do not require the reader to accept the thicker, relational-ontological conception. Generative justice names what the reconstructed vow is *for*; non-domination and contestability are what it must, at minimum, secure.

3.11. Conclusion: The Isomorphism of the Vow and the Order

This paper began with a lover's vow and has arrived at a structure that the vow shares with orders far larger than itself. The vow, taken as an instance of the self-legislation of a shared life, was shown to be an exemplary exercise of Kantian freedom whose freedom, on any operable criterion, is conditional on its remaining responsive to the other; a morally admirable form whose content is silent and capturable; and, in its unilateral version, an institution of domination in the modal sense, a benevolent-master order generous at the first order and dominating at the second. A Hohfeldian analysis located the wrong precisely in the monopolization of second-order constituent power; an account of the constituted subject showed why a sincere legislator reproduces that wrong without intending it; and the political economy of social reproduction drew the line between the vow that institutes a rights-order and the vow that institutes exploitation, the appropriation of unrecognized relational labour under the mask of love. The remedy is not a purer legislator but a relational co-legislation whose justice rests on the other's modally robust, live standing to contest, and whose aim is the generative justice that keeps open each party's becoming.

The deepest yield is the isomorphism the introduction promised. The micro-order a lover institutes by a vow and the macro-order a political economy institutes by its distribution

of rights and labour are, in the structural respects that matter, the same. In both, a legislation that presents itself as self-grounded is in fact grounded in relations and a history that precede it. In both, procedural correctness on the legislating side, sincerity, universalizability, good will, generous first-order provision, cannot certify the justice of the order, because justice is a matter of the second order, of who holds the power to set and revise the terms and whether those bound retain the standing to contest them. In both, the difference between a legitimate order and domination or exploitation is not the benevolence of the powerful but the secured, non-discretionary standing of those whose participation and labour sustain the order. And in both, the ideology that most effectively masks domination is the one that recodes appropriation as gift, whether as the wage form's "fair exchange" or as love's "unconditional devotion."

That a lover's most earnest vow and a political economy's distribution of rights should share a structure is not a deflation of love to economics, nor an inflation of economics to romance. It is a claim about normativity as such: that the standing of any law over a shared life, from the smallest dyad to the largest polity, rests not on the purity or the goodwill of its author but on the irreducible standing of those it binds to answer it. The lover who understands this does not love less freely or less faithfully. He loves, for the first time, justly, having understood that the law of a shared life was never his to give alone, and that the deepest constancy is not the will that holds its course against the beloved, but the will that keeps, between them, the room in which she may always answer.

What is built between two people, an order, a vow, a shared life, is never neutral and never merely given: it either secures for both the standing to remake its terms, or it quietly fixes those terms as one party's gift and the other's fate. To keep loving, then, is not to hold the order steady against her, but to keep handing back to her, again and again, the power to make it ours.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the third in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. The lover and beloved discussed here are kept deliberately anonymous, and the case is presented as a constructed one, so that the argument may stand on its structure rather

than on any private history.

My deepest gratitude is owed to the one I have loved all along, the “girl of the forest and the mountains” to whom the first paper of this series was already devoted: pure and natural in spirit, good-hearted, resilient, and wise, carrying within her a quiet sense of mission toward the world. She is the motivation for the writing of this paper, as she has been for so much else. The vow examined in these pages was occasioned by what she awakened; and the paper’s conclusion, that the deepest constancy is not the will that holds its course against the beloved, but the will that keeps open the room in which she may always answer, is the form in which I renew that vow to her: that I will not fail her, to the end of our days.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for drafting, structuring, and refining the argument and its prose; the ideas, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility for the content.

愿天下有情人，皆得相敬如宾，权责相与，白首不相负。

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CHAPTER 4

The Language of the Gift in Intimate Relationships

The gift is the native language of love: an expressive act whose meaning is constituted by the relation it enacts. Economics possesses a rich literature on gift-giving—altruism in the family, gift exchange in labor markets, gifts as costly signals, the deadweight loss of in-kind transfer, and the crowding-out of intrinsic motivation—yet each of these theories, I argue, shares a common move: the gift is made tractable by interpreting it into a transfer language whose semantics is a ledger. This paper makes that move itself the object of analysis. A semiotic and psychoanalytic layer first explains the gift’s surplus over the thing: following Saussure and Baudrillard, the gift is a signifier whose value is positional—generated by its place in a differential system that is the relation’s own history— and following Lacan, what it signifies is desire rather than need, so that its functional excess (the economist’s “deadweight loss”) is the mechanism of its signifying work, not waste. Using elementary tools from formal language theory, I then model the expressive practice of intimate giving as a context-sensitive language whose semantics depends on relational history, and the economic-institutional reading as a non-injective, context-forgetting interpretation map into a finite-state ledger language. Alienation is then given a precise structural characterization: it is the contraction of generative practice onto the preimage of the ledger language—agents come to produce only what the interpretation can see. Two further harms follow: epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), since contributions outside the map’s range are illegible as contributions; and distributive misdescription, since ledger balance is the wrong functional for value that circulates generatively. Building on Eglash’s generative justice and a relational ontology of the gift, I propose recirculation depth, rather than bilateral balance, as the appropriate justice functional, and draw implications for the evidence-informed use of intimate-relationship data.

*To the woman I love most deeply,
my “girl of the forest and the mountains”:
to have met her is the finest gift ever given me,
and the whole of my life is the gift I return.*

4.1. Introduction

Within intimate relationships, gifts are utterances before they are transfers. A gift says something—attention, recognition, commitment—whose content is not carried by the object but by the act-in-relation. Yet whenever giving must be made legible to institutions, or simply auditable to the partners’ own retrospective accounting, it is read through a different system: a language of transfers, valuations, and balances. The thesis of this paper is that the resulting harm, which I call the *alienation of the gift*, is best understood not as a vague cultural lament but as a structural property of the *interpretation* between two formal systems of unequal expressive power—and that this analysis unifies three literatures that rarely meet: the economics of gift-giving, the epistemology of injustice, and the theory of generative justice.

This paper is the fourth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. Paper III (Huang 2026) analyzed the unilateral *vow* as the institution of a rights-order and located its injustice in the monopolization of second-order constituent power; the present paper turns from the legislation of a shared life to its *circulation*—from the law of love to the language of love—and finds a structurally parallel diagnosis: just as a vow can institute domination while remaining sincere, an accounting of gifts can institute alienation while remaining accurate.

The argument proceeds in four steps.

- (i) Section 4.2 reviews the principal economic theories of the gift and identifies their shared formal move: tractability is purchased by interpreting expressive acts into a transfer calculus.
- (ii) Section 4.3 opens the black box of expressive content. Drawing on structural semiotics and psychoanalysis, it locates the gift’s surplus over the thing in *sign-value*—value generated by the gift’s position in a differential system that is the relation’s own history—and identifies what the gift signifies: desire rather than need, so that the gift’s functional excess (the economist’s “deadweight loss”) is constitutive rather than wasteful.
- (iii) Section 4.4 formalizes the move with formal-language tools: an expressive language

$\mathcal{L}_E$ with context-dependent semantics, a ledger language $\mathcal{L}_X$ with balance semantics, and a context-forgetting interpretation map $h : \mathcal{L}_E \rightarrow \mathcal{L}_X$. Alienation is characterized as the contraction of practice onto $h^{-1}(\mathcal{L}_X)$ under legibility pressure.

- (iv) Section 4.5 shows that the kernel of h —the expressive distinctions the map collapses—is exactly where Fricker (2007)’s testimonial and hermeneutical injustices arise in the intimate sphere.
- (v) Sections 4.6–4.7 replace the balance functional with a generative one (recirculation within the value-creating relation, after Eglash 2016) and draw design implications for relational data systems.

4.2. Economic theories of the gift

The economics of the gift is not a blind spot but a developed field. The point of this section is not that economists ignore gifts; it is that each theory renders the gift tractable through a characteristic *reduction*, and that the reductions, though different in content, are identical in form.

4.2.1 Altruism and the family: the gift as interdependent utility

Becker (1981) models intra-family transfers through interdependent utility: the giver’s utility takes the recipient’s consumption or utility as an argument, so a gift is an allocation chosen by a (possibly altruistic) head maximizing a household objective. The Rotten Kid theorem and its descendants show how transfers discipline behavior inside the family. The reduction: the gift’s content is exhausted by its effect on the *allocation*; the act of giving has no semantic remainder beyond the resources moved and the preferences revealed.

4.2.2 Gift exchange: the gift as implicit contract

Akerlof (1982) famously reads above-market wages and above-minimum effort as a *partial gift exchange* between firm and worker: each side gives more than required, sustained by norms of reciprocity. Subsequent experimental work (Fehr et al. 1993) confirmed reciprocity as a robust behavioral force. The reduction: the gift is one leg of a deferred bilateral exchange; its meaning is its position in a reciprocity schedule. What makes gift

exchange “work” is precisely that the gift creates an obligation— which is to say, an entry in an implicit ledger.

4.2.3 Signaling: the gift as costly information transmission

Camerer (1988) models gifts as economic signals of the giver’s type or of commitment to the relationship: inefficient, hard-to-resell gifts are *good* signals exactly because they are costly and relationship-specific. Prendergast and Stole (2001) develop the non-monetary character of gifts as an information problem: cash would be efficient but uninformative about how well the giver knows the recipient. The reduction: expressive content survives, but only as *information about a hidden parameter*—the gift means something solely insofar as it separates types in equilibrium.

4.2.4 Efficiency: the deadweight loss of giving

Waldfogel (1993) estimates that in-kind gifts destroy between a tenth and a third of their purchase value, since recipients value the goods below cost—the “deadweight loss of Christmas.” The reduction is here at its purest: the gift is evaluated as a resource transfer and found wanting, the expressive remainder appearing, if at all, as an unmodeled “sentimental value” residual. Section 4.3.2 will return to this finding and invert it.

4.2.5 Crowding out: the gift destroyed by the price

A fourth strand shows what happens when the two registers collide. Titmuss (1970) argued that paying for blood donation degrades both the supply and the meaning of the donated blood; Gneezy and Rustichini (2000) showed that introducing a fine for late pickup at daycare *increased* lateness, because the fine re-coded a moral relation as a priced service; and Bénabou and Tirole (2006) provide the canonical model in which extrinsic incentives crowd out intrinsic and reputational motivation. This literature is the closest economics comes to the present thesis: it demonstrates empirically that *re-description in the transfer language changes the practice described*. But it lacks a general account of why; Section 4.4 supplies one.

4.2.6 Relational earmarking: the boundary case

Finally, economic sociology—especially Zelizer (2005)—documents how intimates actively *mark* money and goods to keep relational meanings distinct: allowances, treats, support payments are differentiated precisely to prevent the collapse of relation into transaction. Zelizer’s “relational work” can be read, in the terms of this paper, as agents’ defensive maintenance of an expressive grammar against an encroaching interpretation map.

4.2.7 The shared move

Across these theories, the gift becomes tractable when its content is re-expressed in a language of transfers: an allocation (§2.1), a ledger entry in a reciprocity schedule (§2.2), a signal about a parameter (§2.3), a resource flow with a welfare loss (§2.4), a priced incentive (§2.5). Each reduction is legitimate for its purpose, and several are empirically powerful. The claim defended below is not that the reductions are false but that they are *interpretations*: structure- forgetting maps from a richer system into a poorer one—and that when the interpretation becomes the operative description inside the relationship itself, the forgetting becomes a harm.

4.3. The semiotics of the gift: the surplus over the thing

Section 4.2.7 concluded that the economic theories are interpretations—structure-forgetting maps from a richer system into a poorer one. Before formalizing the map (Section 4.4), we must say what, positively, the richer system contains: *where* the gift’s value-beyond-the-thing comes from, and *what* the gift signifies. Two traditions answer, and their answers slot precisely into the gap the economic theories leave open.

4.3.1 Sign-value: the gift as a position in a system of differences

Saussure’s two founding theses are the arbitrariness of the sign—the link between signifier and signified is fixed by the system, not by nature—and the differential theory of value: the value of a term is purely positional, constituted by its relations of difference to the other terms of the system (Saussure 1959). Transposed to the gift: a gift signifies not by the intrinsic properties of the object but by its position in a relational code—*these*

flowers rather than those, flowers rather than jewelry, a gift rather than none, on this day rather than another, from this giver after that history. Baudrillard (1981) drew the economic consequence: beyond use-value and exchange-value there is *sign-value*, the worth an object bears as a marker of position in a code; and distinct from all three there is *symbolic exchange*, the register of the gift proper, in which the object is not autonomous but inseparable from the concrete relation of giver and receiver and from the moment of its giving. The “more than the thing” that the gift carries is therefore neither sentimental residue nor measurement error. It is value of a different kind, generated by the gift’s place in a differential system—and the system in question is nothing other than the history of the relation itself.

4.3.2 The signified is desire: the psychoanalytic deepening

If the gift is a signifier, what does it signify? Lacan’s triad of need, demand, and desire supplies the answer (Lacan 2006). A *need* can be satisfied by an object. A *demand*, because it is addressed to another, is always also a demand for love—for the other’s desire—over and above whatever object it asks for. *Desire* is the remainder when need is subtracted from demand, and no object satisfies it. The gift addresses itself to this remainder: what it gives is not, finally, the object but the giving—the attestation that the giver’s desire is engaged with this particular other. Hence Lacan’s formula that love is giving *what one does not have*: the true gift transmits something the giver does not possess as a good among goods—their lack, their desire—and no inventory of transferred objects can contain it.

Two consequences follow. The first is the *constitutive excess*. If the gift’s work is to signify desire rather than to satisfy need, then a degree of functional uselessness is not a defect of the gift but its signifying mechanism: a gift wholly absorbed by need—cash, the exact item on the list—risks signifying nothing beyond the need it meets. This inverts the efficiency finding of §2.4. Waldfogel’s deadweight loss, the measured gap between the cost of the gift and the recipient’s use-valuation of it, is, on the semiotic reading, in part the *footprint of sign-value*: the portion of the act that was never addressed to use in the first place, and that was doing the signifying. To keep the claim honest: not all measured loss is sign-value—mismatch and giver ignorance are real, and the signaling literature (§2.3) captures the informational part—but a nonzero excess is constitutive, so that a

gift regime engineered to zero loss would be one in which the gift had ceased to signify.

The second is the *metonymic presence of the giver*. Mauss’s informants said the gift carries the *hau*, the spirit of the giver (Mauss 1990). In semiotic terms the gift is a metonym: contiguous with the giver, a detached part standing for the person. This is why the destruction or careless regifting of a gift wounds in a way that no equivalent-value substitution explains, and why the gift-object resists fungibility: its *identity*, not its value, does the work.

4.3.3 What a ledger can record: referent without signifier

A ledger records referents: which object moved, between whom, at what imputed value. The signifier’s position in the differential system—everything established in §4.3.1–4.3.2—is not a property of the object and is not recordable record-by-record. Baudrillard’s thesis that political economy is *founded* on the reduction of symbolic exchange to economic exchange (Baudrillard 1981) is, in the terms of this paper, the historical-scale version of the claim the next section defends formally: the accounting interpretation flattens the signifier into its referent and sign-value into exchange-value. What the formalization adds is the demonstration that the flattening is *architectural*—located in the per-symbol form of the interpretation map—and therefore cannot be repaired by more generous imputation.

4.4. A formal-linguistic account of alienation

This section makes the “shared move” of Section 4.2.7 precise using elementary formal language theory. The formalism is deliberately minimal; its purpose is to locate *where* in the interpretive pipeline the alienation occurs, not to claim that intimate life is literally a formal language. (Remark 1 states the scope limits explicitly.)

4.4.1 The expressive language

Definition 1 (Expressive practice). *Let Σ_E be an alphabet of expressive act types (giving an object, performing care, withholding, anticipating a need, marking an occasion, ...). An intimate relationship determines a set of well-formed histories $\mathcal{L}_E \subseteq \Sigma_E^*$ together with a*

meaning function

$$\mu : \mathcal{L}_E \longrightarrow M,$$

where M is a space of relational meanings, and μ is **history-dependent**: in general the meaning of a history wa (the history w extended by act a) is not determined by the meaning of a taken alone, i.e. μ does not factor through a per-symbol valuation $\nu : \Sigma_E \rightarrow M$ with $\mu(a_1 \cdots a_n) = \bigoplus_i \nu(a_i)$ for any associative $\oplus$.

The non-factorization clause is the formal content of the everyday observation that the **same** act—a bouquet, a silence, a repayment—means different things depending on what came before, on what was foregone, on anniversaries and apologies and inside references. Meaning in $\mathcal{L}_E$ exhibits **long-distance dependencies**: an act may take its sense from an event arbitrarily far back in the history. In grammar-theoretic terms, any generative description of $(\mathcal{L}_E, \mu)$ adequate to such dependencies must exceed the finite-state, and in general the context-free, level: the semantics is context-sensitive in the strict sense that the contribution of a symbol depends on its (unboundedly distant) context.¹ Section 4.3 supplied this clause’s ground: the value of the gift-signifier is positional (§4.3.1), and position in a system is precisely what no per-symbol valuation ν can carry.

4.4.2 The ledger language

Definition 2 (Ledger). Let $\Sigma_X = \{(i \rightarrow j, v) : i, j \in N, v \in \mathbb{R}_{\geq 0}\}$ be an alphabet of **transfer records** over a set of parties N , and let $\mathcal{L}_X = \Sigma_X^*$ with the **balance semantics**

$$\beta : \mathcal{L}_X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N, \quad \beta(x)_k = \sum_{(i \rightarrow k, v) \in x} v - \sum_{(k \rightarrow j, v) \in x} v.$$

Two properties of β matter. It is **per-symbol compositional** (each record contributes independently; order is irrelevant up to the running balance), hence recognizable by finite means—this is what makes ledgers auditable. And it is **total**: every string of records has a balance. The ledger never says “meaningless”; it always returns a number.

¹The point is the semantic analogue of the classical expressiveness arguments from cross-serial dependencies in natural language (Shieber 1985). Nothing below depends on the exact rung of the hierarchy, only on the strict inclusion: ledger semantics is per-symbol compositional in a way relational semantics is not.

4.4.3 The interpretation map and its kernel

Definition 3 (Accounting interpretation). *An **accounting interpretation** is a monoid homomorphism $h : \Sigma_E^* \rightarrow \Sigma_X^*$ induced by a per-symbol assignment $h : \Sigma_E \rightarrow \Sigma_X \cup \{\varepsilon\}$: each expressive act type is mapped to a transfer record (its “imputed value”) or erased.*

Every theory in Section 4.2 implements some h : Becker’s allocations, Akerlof’s implicit reciprocity entries, Camerer’s signal costs, Waldfogel’s purchase prices. Three structural facts about any such h do the philosophical work:

- (a) **Context-forgetting.** Because h is per-symbol, it cannot be sensitive to history: $h(wa) = h(w)h(a)$. Whatever part of μ depends on long-distance context is invisible to $\beta \circ h$ *by construction*, not by accident of calibration. No re-weighting of imputed values repairs this, since the failure is architectural (Definition 1’s non-factorization clause).
- (b) **Non-injectivity with structured kernel.** Distinct histories $w \neq w'$ with $h(w) = h(w')$ abound, and the collapsed distinctions are precisely the expressive ones: an act of care and a strategic appeasement of equal imputed value are identified. Write $\ker h = \{(w, w') : h(w) = h(w')\}$; the harm analyzed below lives in $\ker h$.
- (c) **Erasure.** Acts assigned ε —typically sustained, unpriceable, anticipatory care—do not merely lose nuance; they vanish from the record altogether. Erasure is the limiting case of (b) and the formal hook for Section 4.5.

4.4.4 Alienation as contraction onto the preimage

So far, h is only a description, and a lossy description harms no one. The harm begins when the description acquires *normative force*: when institutions (courts, tax authorities, platforms) and eventually the partners themselves audit the relationship through $\beta \circ h$. Call this *legibility pressure*: histories are rewarded, defended, or even merely *rememberable* to the extent that their images under h are well-formed and balanced.

Definition 4 (Alienation). *Let G be the generative process by which partners produce expressive histories (their practice). **Alienation** is the dynamic contraction of G under legibility pressure: the practiced language $L(G) \subseteq \mathcal{L}_E$ converges toward a sublanguage on*

which μ factors through h —i.e. the partners come to produce only meanings that survive the interpretation, so that, in the limit, $(L(G), \mu)$ is isomorphic to a fragment of $(\mathcal{L}_X, \beta)$.

Proposition 1 (Informal). *Under legibility pressure, the fixed point of the practice dynamics is a ledger: expressive capacity strictly greater than finite-state is not merely unrecorded but **unexercised**.*

This is the precise sense in which “love’s language is re-coded as transaction.” The crowding-out findings of §2.5 are the empirical signature of the contraction: Gneezy and Rustichini’s parents did not misunderstand the fine; their practice re-formed around the language the fine made operative. Alienation, so characterized, is not commodification (an object entering market circulation) but a **grammar replacement**: the generative system of the relation is substituted by the image system of its own accounting. And Zelizer’s relational earmarking (§2.6) is its countermeasure: the deliberate maintenance of distinctions that h would collapse—in our terms, agents acting to keep $\ker h$ semantically alive.

Remark 1 (Scope). *The formalism claims (i) that ledger semantics is per-symbol compositional while relational semantics is not, and (ii) that this gap, combined with legibility pressure, predicts contraction of practice. It does not claim that Σ_E , μ , or G are empirically identifiable objects, nor that a unique h exists. The model is an explanatory skeleton—a statement of **which structural features** produce the alienation—and should be held to that standard, no more.*

4.5. Epistemic injustice: the kernel made flesh

Fricker (2007) distinguishes **testimonial** injustice (a deflated credibility judgment owing to prejudice) from **hermeneutical** injustice (a structural gap in shared interpretive resources that leaves some experiences unintelligible even to those who undergo them). The formal apparatus of Section 4.4 locates both.

Testimonial injustice as erasure. A partner asserts that sustained anticipatory care **is** a contribution. Under an operative interpretation h that assigns such acts ε (§3(c)), the assertion has no truth-maker in the record: there is literally nothing in $\beta \circ h$ for

the claim to be *about*. The credibility deficit then attaches not to the speaker’s sincerity but to the ontological standing of the asserted category. Empirically, this is the familiar pattern in which unpaid affective and household labor—disproportionately performed by women—is discounted in both private negotiation and legal settlement (Folbre 2001).

Hermeneutical injustice as kernel-blindness. More deeply: if the community’s shared interpretive resources just *are* the operative h (because the exchange grammar is the institutionally supported one), then distinctions in $\ker h$ are not merely unrecorded but *unnameable*. The giver experiences a difference—between care and appeasement, between a gift and a payment—for which the available vocabulary has one word. This is hermeneutical injustice in the intimate sphere, and it is mechanically coupled to alienation: the same context-forgetting map that contracts practice (§4.4.4) also impoverishes the concepts available for contesting the contraction. The injustice is self-sealing.

4.6. From balance to recirculation: generative justice

4.6.1 Eglash’s generative justice

Distributive justice asks how an already-produced surplus should be divided; Eglash (2016) asks instead whether value is allowed to *circulate back to, and remain within, the network of relations that generated it*, rather than being extracted from it. Eglash’s examples—from commons-based production to indigenous and DIY economies—share a topology: value flows in *cycles of recursive depth*, re-entering and compounding within the generating loop, instead of exiting along an extraction path.²

4.6.2 The relation as the generative unit

On a relational ontology, the unit of analysis in intimate giving is not the individual party but the relation as a value-generating system: gifts are moments in the relation’s self-production, not transfers between pre-formed endpoints. This re-founds the justice

²Paper III of this series (Huang 2026) arrived at a cognate notion from the normative side: generative justice as the maintenance of the conditions under which each party’s ongoing self-formation in the relation remains open and uncaptured. The two senses converge in the present framework: the recirculation of relational value (Eglash’s sense) is the material condition of ongoing co-formation (Paper III’s sense), and the standing to contest the terms is what keeps the recirculation from being unilaterally redirected.

question. The ledger functional β evaluates *node balance*—did each party’s inflows match outflows?—which presupposes exactly the per-symbol transfer reading whose inadequacy Section 4.4 established. The generative alternative evaluates whether what the relation produces (material, affective, *and recognitional* value) recirculates.

Definition 5 (Recirculation depth; sketch). *Model a relation as a directed multigraph whose nodes include the parties and the relation-level stock itself, with value-flow edges labeled by type (material, affective, recognitional). For a flow history F , let $R(F)$ be the proportion of generated value that lies on cycles returning to the generating subgraph within the history, weighted by cycle depth (number of re-entries). Generative justice in the intimate sphere is the requirement that R be sustained across value types—in particular, that recognitional flows not be systematically acyclic (recognition flowing out of, but never back to, a contributor).*

Remark 2. *R deliberately treats recognition as a first-class flow rather than a residual. This is the formal repair of Section 4.5: an act erased by h (ε -mapped) cannot enter β , but it can enter R , because R ’s edge set is defined over the expressive practice, not over its accounting image. A full treatment—axioms for R , its relation to network-flow and to Eglash’s recursive depth, and estimable proxies—is deferred to a companion paper.*

4.6.3 What the reframing dissolves

The three harms now align as three faces of one error—applying β where R is the appropriate functional: expressive alienation is the contraction of practice onto β ’s domain (§4.4.4); epistemic injustice is the unnameability of $\ker h$ (§4.5); distributive misdescription is the evaluation of a cyclic generative system by an acyclic balance metric.

4.7. Implications: relational data and evidence-informed decisions

The analysis bears directly on the utilization of intimate-relationship data and on evidence-informed decision-making about relationships—an agenda this author pursues in parallel empirical work.

Instrumentation imports a grammar. To measure is, by default, to implement an h : a relational data system that counts gifts, chores, or messages as balanced inputs operationalizes the ledger and thereby *accelerates* the contraction of §4.4.4—a relational instance of Goodhart’s law. The crowding-out literature (§2.5) predicts, and Definition 4 explains, that such systems do not neutrally record the practice; they re-form it.

Designing for the generative grammar. The constructive program is to encode R rather than β : (i) treat recognition as a logged, first-class flow, so that erased contributions acquire truth-makers (repairing the testimonial deficit); (ii) supply shared vocabulary for affective labor, expanding the hermeneutical resources beyond the operative h ; (iii) evaluate the relationship by recirculation indicators (are contributions of every type eventually re-entered, acknowledged, reciprocated-in-kind-or-otherwise within the cycle?) rather than by balance; (iv) preserve, in the data model itself, the context-dependence of meaning—e.g. event records that link to history rather than free-standing valued entries. Whether intimate-relationship data systems help or harm is therefore not a question about data per se, but about *which grammar the system makes operative*.

4.8. Conclusion

Economics has not ignored the gift; it has interpreted it—as allocation, implicit contract, signal, inefficient transfer, or priced incentive—and each interpretation is a context-forgetting homomorphism into a ledger language of strictly weaker expressive power. The semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis identified what the interpretation loses—the positional value of the signifier and the desire it attests—and the formal analysis showed the loss to be architectural. Alienation is what happens when the interpretation acquires normative force and practice contracts onto its preimage; epistemic injustice is the unnameability of the distinctions the map collapses; and distributive misdescription is the use of a balance functional on a generative cycle. The repair is not to abandon formalization but to formalize the *right* object: the recirculation of generated value—material, affective, recognitional—within the relation that produces it.

Read alongside Paper III, the series’ two diagnoses are one structure seen from two sides. There, a law of love legislated unilaterally institutes domination even when sincere; here,

a language of love interpreted unilaterally institutes alienation even when accurate. In both, the remedy is not purer intention but shared authority over the terms—there, the co-authorship of the vow; here, the keeping-alive of the expressive grammar in which the gift can still say what it means. Future work will axiomatize the recirculation functional, connect it rigorously to Eglash’s recursive depth, and test the design program of Section 4.7 against field data from a deployed relational infrastructure.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the fourth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. I thank Ron Eglash for correspondence on generative justice and recursive depth, on which Section 4.6 builds.

This series, and this paper above all, are dedicated to the one I love most deeply—the “girl of the forest and the mountains” to whom the first paper of the series was already devoted. We were born of the same hometown, yet it was in Japan that we met. To have met her is the finest gift the universe has ever given me; and what I give in return is the whole of my life itself, offered as a gift. It is from her, and not from any theory, that the thesis of this paper was first learned.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for drafting, structuring, and refining the argument and its prose; the ideas, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility for the content.

愿天下有情人，赠不为偿，受不为债，情意长流而不竭。

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CHAPTER 5

The Formation of the Subject in Intimate Relationships

5.1. Introduction: The Question of the Intimate Subject

Who is formed in an intimate relationship? The question sounds rhetorical, and most moral and legal theory treats it as settled before theory begins. Contract doctrine presupposes parties; rights discourse presupposes holders; even the richest theories of love tend to presuppose two completed persons who then exchange affection, promises, and goods. The previous papers of this series have already strained against this presupposition. The third paper argued that a vow made in an intimate relationship cannot be unilaterally legislated, because the meaning of the vow's central terms is held in common and must remain answerable to the beloved.¹ The fourth paper argued that the gift in intimate life cannot be settled or cleared like a debt, because its value is produced relationally, by its position in a circulation that no single party owns.² Both arguments quietly presuppose a stronger claim that neither paper defended: that the *subjects* of intimate life, the very ones who vow and give, are themselves relationally constituted. This paper defends that claim, names the mechanism, and traces its consequences for ethics, for the structure of rights, and for the theory of justice.

The thesis is this:

Proposition 1 (Mechanism Thesis). *The subject of intimate life is formed and continuously sustained through the presence of the other and the practice of joint attention: the recursive, mutually open structure in which each party attends to a shared object and to the other's attending. The other and joint attention are not influences upon an already-formed subject; they are the mechanism of its formation.*

Four consequences follow, and they occupy the second half of the paper. First, if joint attention is the mechanism of subject formation, then the contemporary industrial organization of attention, what is loosely called the attention economy, is not merely a nuisance of distraction. It competes with intimate life *at the level of constitution*, extracting precisely the material through which subjects form one another, and the competition is rigged in its favor; a regenerative criterion of relational sustainability falls out of the analysis. Second, the symbolic order enters the account a second time, no longer only

¹Paper III of this series, *The Normativity of Self-Legislation in Intimate Relationships: Freedom, Morality, and Justice* (manuscript, 2026).

²Paper IV of this series, on the gift and the circulation of value in intimate life (manuscript, 2026).

as a mechanism of formation but as the standing *distributor* of attention: every adult triangle contains a virtual fourth vertex that pre-allocates salience, and this yields the concepts of attentional alienation, attention executed under a script one cannot appropriate, and attentional autonomy, the joint re-authorship of that script, which proves to be the third paper's self-legislation continued by attentional means. Third, the question of what each partner owes the other in attention acquires a precise jurisprudential form: is there a claim-right to attention? The answer defended here is no, for reasons isomorphic to the third paper's prohibition on unilateral legislation, and the positive account that replaces the claim-right is an imperfect duty in Kant's register, a virtue in Murdoch's, and a structural criterion of attentional justice with a distributional clause. Fourth, the theory of justice acquires a category it has lacked: *constitutive injustice*, the wrong done not to a person's holdings, opportunities, or enumerated rights, but to the conditions under which that person becomes and remains a subject at all.

5.1.1 Method and the no-overclaim discipline

The series treats the intimate dyad as the minimal nontrivial substructure of the social: the model organism of relational theory. But the discipline announced in the earlier papers binds here with special force, because this paper, alone in the series so far, rests part of its case on empirical developmental psychology. Findings about infants do not transfer to adult lovers by default. Section 5.4 therefore argues the transfer explicitly, identifies what does not carry over (with Simmel's analysis of the dyad as the principal source of resistance), and states the residual claim at its true strength. Where the paper coins a concept, it marks the coinage; where it relies on a contested empirical literature, it flags the contest; and where its argument is conditional, the condition is stated in the proposition itself.

Two boundaries are drawn in advance, so that their observance later is read as discipline rather than omission. First, the paper treats the dyad alone: the entrance of third *persons* into the triangle, the child who is at once shared object and emergent subject, the rival, transforms the structure in ways Simmel's analysis of the triad already predicts (Simmel 1950), and is deferred to later work in the series. Second, the embodied and erotic dimensions of intimate attention are set aside: not as unimportant, but because they demand a phenomenological treatment, and an experiential warrant, that this paper

does not claim to possess; the series' standing rule is to argue only from cases whose stakes the author can answer for.

A final methodological note concerns vocabulary. The framework of this series has been developed under the name *relational being*, and that name is shared, coincidentally, with the title of Kenneth Gergen's 2009 book (Gergen 2009). The overlap is more than nominal: Gergen too denies the bounded, self-contained self and relocates the origin of meaning in relational process. The differences are stated in §5.2.4; the present use of the term is independent of and not derived from Gergen's, but his priority in the title is acknowledged, and the engagement is substantive rather than defensive.

5.2. Theories of the Relational Subject: Three Types of Constitutive Mechanism

A survey organized by school would set phenomenology beside psychoanalysis beside developmental psychology and let the reader draw the lines. This section is organized differently, by the *type of mechanism* each account proposes for the constitution of the subject, because the paper's central argument turns on a structural relation among the mechanisms themselves. Three types recur across otherwise distant literatures: mirror mechanisms, in which the subject is formed in the reflecting regard of an other; triadic mechanisms, in which the subject is formed by sharing a world with an other; and symbolic mechanisms, in which the subject is formed by induction into a system of signs that precedes it. The claim to be defended in Section 5.3 is that the triadic type is the hinge between the other two, and that accounts which omit it cannot explain how a creature formed in mirrors comes to inhabit a language.

5.2.1 Mirror mechanisms: the subject formed in the regard of the other

The oldest modern statement is sociological. Cooley's looking-glass self holds that self-feeling arises from the imagination of our appearance to the other and of the other's judgment of that appearance (Cooley 1902). Mead gave the idea its enduring structure: the self divides into the "I" that acts and the "me" that is the internalized attitude of others, so that self-consciousness is, constitutively, taking the perspective of the other upon

oneself (Mead 1934). In both accounts the mechanism is specular: the other functions as a surface in which a self, otherwise invisible to itself, first appears.

Psychoanalysis radicalized the figure. Lacan's mirror stage places the formation of the *I* in the infant's jubilant identification with its specular image: an anticipation of bodily unity that the infant's actual motor incapacity belies (Lacan 2006). Two features matter for everything that follows. First, the identification is a *méconnaissance*, a misrecognition: the unity the infant assumes is not yet, and in a sense never will be, its own. The subject is founded on an image it mistakes for itself, and alienation is therefore not an accident that befalls the subject but a structural moment of its formation. Second, the mirror need not be glass. Winnicott, correcting and absorbing Lacan, located the precursor of the mirror in the mother's face: the infant looks at the mother and sees, in her expression, itself being seen (Winnicott 1971). His earlier, more famous remark gives the ontological version: there is no such thing as an infant, meaning that wherever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, a nursing couple rather than a unit (Winnicott 1960). The minimal subject is already a dyad.

The mirror mechanisms share a structure: they are *dyadic* and *reflective*. Two terms face one another, and constitution runs through the image of the one in the regard of the other. What the mirror accounts lack, and know they lack, is the world. Nothing in the specular relation explains how the two come to be jointly directed at anything beyond the relation; the mirror is a closed circuit. Lacan's own solution was to break the circuit from above, by the symbolic order (§5.2.3). The literature surveyed next breaks it from below.

5.2.2 Triadic mechanisms: the subject formed by sharing a world

In 1975 Scaife and Bruner reported that infants follow the direction of an adult's gaze, and dated the emergence of the capacity within the first year (Scaife and Bruner 1975). The finding seeded a research program whose mature shape is the study of *joint attention*: not two creatures looking at the same thing, which can happen by accident, but two creatures attending to the same thing *together*, each registering the other's attention, in a structure that is mutually open (Tomasello 1995). Developmental psychology marks a transition, often called the nine-month revolution, in which the infant moves from

dyadic engagement with persons (protoconversation, mutual gaze, affect exchange: what Trevarthen called primary intersubjectivity) to triadic engagement in which infant, adult, and object form a referential triangle: the infant looks where the adult looks, alternates gaze between object and adult's eyes, points, shows, and checks back (Trevarthen 1979; Trevarthen and Hubley 1978). Trevarthen and Hubley named the achievement secondary intersubjectivity; Tomasello and colleagues argue it rests on a species-distinctive capacity for *shared intentionality*: the ability and motivation to form, with another, a “we” that attends and intends as one (Tomasello et al. 2005; Tomasello 2014). Bruner showed that these triangles are the cradle of language: reference is learned inside formats of joint attention, the give-and-take of looking, naming, and checking, before any word is understood (Bruner 1983). And the dyadic precursor is itself robustly interactive rather than merely specular: in the double-video experiments of Murray and Trevarthen, two-month-olds presented with a replayed (and thus non-contingent) image of their own mother became distressed and disengaged, although the perceptual stimulus was identical (Murray and Trevarthen 1985). What the infant seeks is not the sight of the mother but her *live responsiveness*: presence, not image.

Philosophy reached the same structure by an independent route. Davidson's triangulation argument holds that thought with objective content, thought that can be *about* something and can be *wrong* about it, requires a triangle: two creatures interacting with each other and with a shared world, each line of the triangle indispensable for fixing what any thought is about (Davidson 2001). The argument is transcendental rather than developmental: it does not describe how children in fact acquire objectivity but argues that nothing could count as objective thought outside the triangular structure. Its convergence with the developmental findings is therefore significant. The psychology says: this is how subjects are in fact formed. Davidson says: there is no other way they could be. Together they elevate joint attention from an empirical milestone to a candidate *constitutive condition* of subjectivity, which is precisely the rank the Mechanism Thesis assigns it.

The triadic mechanisms differ from the mirror mechanisms in two respects that the argument of Section 5.3 will exploit. First, they are *world-involving*: the third vertex of the triangle is not another regard but an object, and constitution runs through co-orientation toward it. Second, they are *veridical* where the mirror is illusory: joint attention, when

achieved, is really achieved; there is no structural *méconnaissance* in pointing at the moon together. The tension between this veridicality and Lacan's constitutive misrecognition is real, and §5.3.2 is devoted to it.

5.2.3 Symbolic mechanisms: the subject formed by the sign

The third family locates constitution in language and the social systems it carries. Saussure's structural insight, that the value of a sign is purely differential, fixed by its position in a system rather than by any intrinsic bond to its object, dissolved the picture of language as a nomenclature adopted by ready-made minds (Saussure 1959). If meaning is systemic, the speaking subject is an effect of its position in the system, not the system's author. Lacan translated the insight into psychoanalysis: the symbolic order, the big Other, precedes the subject, assigns it a name, a kinship position, a desire mediated by the desire of the Other; the subject that emerges is divided by the very signifiers that represent it (Lacan 2006). Althusser supplied the political register: ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, the policeman's hail on the street that one turns to answer being the elementary scene in which subjection and subjectivation coincide (Althusser 1971). Butler radicalized the temporality of the scene: the subject is not interpellated once but must be reiterated, performatively, and the necessity of reiteration is also the possibility of subversion (Butler 1997).

Within developmental psychology the symbolic family has a precise representative, and he is the natural bridge to the triadic findings. Vygotsky's genetic law of cultural development states that every higher psychological function appears twice: first between people, as an interpsychological category, and only then within the child, as an intrapsychological category (Vygotsky 1978). Inner speech is internalized dialogue; private thought is a social relation folded inward. The law is the most direct empirical formulation in the literature of the claim that the other is the mechanism, not the occasion, of subject formation, and it shows the symbolic mechanism to be developmentally *downstream*: what is internalized must first have been shared, and what is shared must first have been jointly attended.

5.2.4 Theory of mind and the enactivist correction; Gergen distinguished

One influential research program appears to compete with the account being assembled, and must be addressed rather than enlisted. The theory-of-mind paradigm, descending from Premack and Woodruff's question about the chimpanzee (Premack and Woodruff 1978) and consolidated by the false-belief studies (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), models social understanding as the attribution of hidden mental states to others: the child as a small theorist, inferring invisible beliefs behind observed behavior. On this picture the other is an *epistemic problem* for an already-constituted subject, and intersubjectivity is *mindreading*: third-personal, spectatorial, inferential.

The enactivist critique inverts the picture. Gallagher argues that in ordinary second-person interaction we do not infer mental states but *perceive* intention and emotion directly in expressive behavior, and that the theorizing stance is a late, specialized, and comparatively rare achievement (Gallagher 2008). De Jaegher and Di Paolo's participatory sense-making generalizes the point: social understanding is constituted in the coordination dynamics of interaction itself; meaning is not transmitted between two closed minds but generated between them, in a process to which both contribute and which neither controls (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Reddy's developmental work supplies the second-person evidence: infants engage with attention directed *at them* months before they pass any test of attributing attention to others, suggesting that the lived, second-person relation is prior to the third-person theory of it (Reddy 2008). For the present argument the critique is a resource, not a difficulty: it relocates the formation of social understanding exactly where the Mechanism Thesis needs it, in the interaction, and it demotes the spectatorial stance that would make the other an object of inference rather than a partner in constitution. Theory of mind remains in the account as a real but derivative competence, a tool subjects use, not the process that makes them subjects.

Finally, the nominal collision noted in the introduction. Gergen's *Relational Being* argues that bounded selfhood is a damaging cultural construction and that all meaning, including the meaning of selfhood, originates in relational process (Gergen 2009). The present framework shares the negative thesis and honors the convergence. It differs in three commitments. First, Gergen's program is social-constructionist all the way down and is correspondingly reluctant to specify mechanisms; this series is mechanist, and the

present paper's entire purpose is to name one. Second, Gergen's unit is the diffuse field of relational process; the present unit is the structured triangle, with determinate vertices and a determinate recursion. Third, this series binds its ontology to a theory of justice with jurisprudential ambitions (Hohfeldian analysis, criteria, the architecture of rights), where Gergen's normative register is therapeutic and dialogic. The shared name marks a shared enemy, the self-contained self, rather than a shared theory.

5.2.5 The map, assembled

The three mechanism-types now stand in a suggestive arrangement. Mirror mechanisms are dyadic and pre-linguistic; symbolic mechanisms are linguistic and social at a scale far beyond the dyad; and the triadic mechanisms sit exactly between, sharing the face-to-face intimacy of the mirror and the world-directedness of the sign. Developmentally they occupy the interval between the mirror stage and language. Structurally, the shared object of the triangle is the first entity to stand outside the closed circuit of mutual regard, and the formats of joint attention are the scaffolding within which signs are first acquired. The next section argues that this arrangement is not an artifact of exposition but the architecture of subject formation itself.

5.3. The Thesis: The Other and Joint Attention as the Mechanism of Formation

5.3.1 The triadic as the missing middle term

Consider the explanatory gap each family leaves open. The mirror accounts end with a subject captivated by an image: dyadic, closed, worldless. The symbolic accounts begin with a subject already inside language: addressed, named, positioned. Between the captivated infant and the interpellated speaker lies a transition that neither family explains. How does a creature formed in mirrors come to be formable by signs? Interpellation presupposes that the hail can be *recognized as addressed to me about something*; the mirror relation contains no resources for aboutness at all.

The triadic mechanism is the answer, and the developmental record is unusually kind to the philosophical point. The referential triangle is the first structure in which a second

person and a world co-occur: the infant attends to the object, attends to the adult's attending, and checks the alignment. Reference, the elementary capacity presupposed by every symbolic mechanism, is assembled inside these triangles (Bruner 1983); Davidson's argument adds that it could not be assembled anywhere else (Davidson 2001). Vygotsky's law then describes the direction of travel: the interpersonal triangle is folded inward and becomes the intrapersonal structure of thought (Vygotsky 1978).

Proposition 2 (Hinge Thesis). *The triadic mechanism is the developmental and structural hinge between mirror and symbolic constitution: it opens the dyadic mirror onto a world, and it builds the scaffolding within which symbolic induction becomes possible. Accounts of relational subject formation that omit it are not merely incomplete; they are disconnected, a beginning and an end with no middle.*

Two clarifications guard the thesis. First, “hinge” is not “replacement”: the claim is not that joint attention supersedes mirror or symbol, but that all three mechanisms remain operative in the formed subject, in a layered structure to be described presently. Second, the thesis is stated for human ontogeny and defended at that level; its extension to adult intimacy is a separate argument, made under separate discipline in Section 5.4.

For the purposes of later sections it will help to fix the structure formally, in the minimal notation the series prefers. Write $\text{Att}(a, x)$ for “ a attends to x .”

Definition 1 (Joint attention). *Parties a and b are in joint attention on object x , written $\text{JA}(a, b, x)$, iff (i) $\text{Att}(a, x)$ and $\text{Att}(b, x)$; (ii) $\text{Att}(a, \text{Att}(b, x))$ and $\text{Att}(b, \text{Att}(a, x))$; (iii) the structure in (i)–(ii) is mutually open: neither party's awareness of it is hidden from the other, and each may, at any level, check and find the alignment confirmed.*

Clause (iii) deliberately avoids requiring an actual infinite hierarchy of metarepresentations; what it requires is *openness*, the standing availability of the next check, which is how the developmental literature itself characterizes the phenomenon (Tomasello 1995). Three features of the definition do later work. Joint attention is *relational* in the strict sense: no conjunction of facts about a alone and b alone entails $\text{JA}(a, b, x)$, because clause (iii) is a fact about the between. It is *non-delegable*: a cannot satisfy her side by proxy, since what (ii) requires is her attending, not an attending procured by her. And it is *fragile*: it can fail silently, with both parties attending to x while the mutual openness

has lapsed, which is why presence and its simulacra (Section 5.5.2) can come apart.

5.3.2 Reconciling Lacan and Tomasello: a layered account

The survey left a standing tension. Lacan’s mirror founds the subject on misrecognition; the joint-attention literature describes real, achieved, mutually confirmed alignment. One tradition makes alienation structural; the other makes cooperation primordial. A paper that enlisted both without comment would deserve the referee’s suspicion, so the reconciliation is made explicit.

The proposal is a *layered* account. The imaginary layer (mirror) and the triadic layer (joint attention) are distinct, developmentally sequenced, and never abolished by what succeeds them; the symbolic layer is built upon the triadic and reorganizes both. In the formed subject all three run concurrently. The layers are individuated by their objects and their failure modes. The imaginary layer takes as object the *image* of self and other, and its characteristic distortion is captation: the lure of the unified image, the projection onto the other of what completes me. The triadic layer takes as object the *shared world*, and its characteristic achievement is veridical co-orientation; its failure is not illusion but lapse, the silent collapse of mutual openness. The symbolic layer takes as object the *position*: name, role, status in the differential system; its characteristic pathology is the subject’s reduction to its position.

On this account there is no contradiction in asserting both that the lover’s gaze is shot through with imaginary projection and that the lovers’ attention to a shared world is really shared. The two claims are made about different layers, and adult intimacy is precisely the condition in which both run at maximal intensity, simultaneously. When I look at her, the imaginary layer is active: Lacan’s dictum that “you never look at me from the place from which I see you” (Lacan 1978) names a gap that no intimacy closes, and the fantasy that it could be closed is itself the imaginary at work. But when we look together at the same moon, the triadic layer is active, and its achievement is not undone by the imaginary gap: the moon is genuinely shared even though the gaze is not symmetrical. The mature ideal this paper will defend for intimate presence (§5.4.3) is built exactly here: not the fantasy of full mutual transparency, which the imaginary layer forbids, but veridical co-orientation *sustained in the acknowledged presence of the gap*.

The layering also disciplines each literature with the other. Against an uncritical Tomaselian optimism, the imaginary layer insists that shared intentionality in adults is never innocent of projection: the “we” that intends together is also, always, a “we” each party images in his own style. Against a totalized Lacanian pessimism, the triadic layer insists that misrecognition is not the whole of relation: there are achievements of alignment that are not lures, and a theory in which nothing is ever really shared cannot explain the most ordinary scenes of human learning, the picture book, the pointed finger, the checked glance.

5.3.3 The first third: a Levinasian difficulty answered

Levinas poses the sharpest external challenge to any justice-theoretic treatment of the dyad. For Levinas, the face-to-face relation is ethically primary and radically asymmetrical: my responsibility for the other is infinite, non-reciprocal, and prior to any contract (Levinas 1969). Justice, by contrast, requires comparison, measure, symmetry, and these enter, Levinas says, only with the *third party*, *le tiers*: when there are three, I must weigh one other against another, and the incomparable must be compared (Levinas 1998). The difficulty for this series is immediate: its entire program treats the dyad as a site of justice, of rights structure, of fair and unfair. If justice begins with the third, and the dyad has no third, then either the program is confused or the dyad must contain a third after all.

The triadic analysis supplies the answer, and it is not a trick. The dyad of joint attention is never merely a dyad: its constitutive structure contains a third vertex, the shared object. The first third party is the world. This is not yet Levinas’s tiers, a third *person* with a face of his own, and the difference is respected: the shared object makes no claims and suffers no wrongs. But it performs the structural function Levinas assigns the third: it breaks the closed circuit of the face-to-face, institutes a common term to which both parties stand in comparable relations, and thereby makes alignment, and so misalignment, and so *complaint*, first possible. Whose concern the shared gaze serves, whose project the common object belongs to, whose world the two are jointly inhabiting: these are questions of justice, and they are well-formed inside the dyad because the dyad’s own formative mechanism is triangular. When, in Section 5.4, the relation itself becomes the shared object, the point sharpens further: the “we” under joint attention is a quasi-third with a grammar of claims of its own.

The reconciliation preserves what is right in Levinas, the asymmetry of the ethical, which survives in a register of its own that the triangle neither generates nor cancels, while denying the inference that the dyad is a justice-free zone. The face exceeds measure; the triangle institutes it; intimate life is the standing coexistence of the two.

5.4. Transfer to Adult Intimacy: The Reflexive Triangle

5.4.1 What does not transfer

The joint-attention literature is a literature about infants, and the no-overclaim discipline forbids silent extrapolation. Three disanalogies are acknowledged at full strength. First, asymmetry of formation: the infant is being formed, the caregiver already formed; in adult intimacy both parties arrive already constituted, with stabilized imaginaries and full symbolic positions. Whatever formation occurs between adults is re-formation, maintenance, and gradual re-weighting, not origination. Second, the dyad's structural peculiarity: Simmel showed that the dyad differs in kind from all larger groups, possessing no supra-individual structure that survives the exit of either member, no majority, no coalition, no delegation of the relation itself (Simmel 1950). Claims developed for the infant-caregiver pair, which is embedded in a family and a society that outlast it, do not automatically hold for a structure whose existence is identical with the participation of exactly two. Third, the mediating role of language: adult joint attention is saturated with the symbolic in a way infant triangles are not; adults share objects under descriptions, and descriptions are contestable in ways gaze is not.

The transferred claim is therefore stated conditionally and at reduced strength:

Proposition 3 (Transfer Thesis). *In adult intimacy, joint attention is not the origin of the subject but the mechanism of its ongoing maintenance and renegotiation: the process by which each partner's self-understanding, standing, and horizon of concern are continuously re-formed in the presence of the other. The mechanism operates at lower intensity and higher mediation than in ontogeny, but it does not change in kind: Definition 1 applies unchanged, and its three features (relationality, non-delegability, fragility) carry over fully.*

The defense is that the alternative is incredible. To deny the Transfer Thesis is to hold that the formed subject is finished: that nothing in the adult's selfhood remains answerable to the quality of attention in her closest relations. Everything ordinary testifies against this: the observable expansion of a person who is, over years, genuinely seen, and the equally observable contraction of one who is not; the way long partners co-author each other's memory, taste, and idiom; the clinical commonplace that the withdrawal of attention in a marriage is experienced not as a loss of a good but as a loss of *reality*. The double-video finding gives the deep reason (Murray and Trevarthen 1985): what the human seeks in the other is live responsiveness, and there is no age at which this need is outgrown, only ages at which its frustration is better disguised.

5.4.2 The relation itself as shared object: the reflexive triangle

The original contribution this section offers is a thesis about the *mature form* of intimate joint attention. In ontogeny the triangle is (self, other, thing): the picture book, the moon. In adult intimacy a further structure becomes available, and its availability is, the paper proposes, the criterion of the relationship's maturity:

Definition 2 (Reflexive triangle). *A reflexive triangle obtains between a and b iff $\text{JA}(a, b, R_{ab})$, where R_{ab} is the relation between a and b itself: the partners jointly attend to the “we,” each attending to it and to the other's attending, in mutual openness.*

A regress worry arises immediately: R_{ab} includes the parties' attentional dispositions, so joint attention to R_{ab} is attention to a structure that contains that very attention. The worry is dissolved by stratification. Let R_{ab}^0 be the relation as constituted prior to a given reflexive act, and let each act of joint attention to R_{ab}^n contribute to R_{ab}^{n+1} . Reflexive attention is then always attention to the relation *as it stands*, and its own occurrence becomes part of what stands for the next act. There is no vicious circle; there is a spiral, and the spiral is the phenomenon: relationships that attend to themselves change by that attending, which is why the practice is formative rather than merely descriptive.

The reflexive triangle is the point at which the series' earlier results converge, and the convergence is evidence for the analysis. The vow of Paper III is, in the present vocabulary, a device for placing the relation under joint attention: it makes R_{ab} an explicit object, before both parties, in mutual openness, and the third paper's conclusion, that the vow's

terms must remain answerable to the beloved, is clause (iii) of Definition 1 in normative dress. The gift of Paper IV is likewise a joint-attention device: its meaning function was shown there to be non-factorizable across the parties, and the genetic explanation is now available: the gift means what it means only inside the triangle, as an object the relation attends to together, which is why its value cannot be settled bilaterally like a price. Anniversaries, rituals, shared tables, the deliberate review of a quarrel, the conversation that begins “what are we becoming”: all are technologies of the reflexive triangle. A relationship without them may persist, but it persists as habit; it is no longer forming its subjects, only housing them.

5.4.3 The presence of the other: attentional presence and the acknowledged gap

The phrase “the presence of the other” in this paper’s title can now be made precise, and distinguished from two counterfeits. Physical co-presence is not presence: two bodies in one room, each absorbed elsewhere, satisfy no clause of Definition 1. Surveillance is not presence either: one-directional monitoring satisfies clause (i) for one party while violating the mutual openness of clause (iii) entirely; the watched party’s attending is captured, not joined. Presence in the constitutive sense is *attentional presence*: availability for the triangle, the standing offer of clauses (i) through (iii).

Buber’s distinction between the I-Thou and I-It relations marks the same boundary from within dialogical philosophy: the Thou is not an object of experience but a partner in relation, and the I of I-Thou is a different I from the I of I-It (Buber 1970). Husserl’s Fifth Meditation supplies the transcendental setting: the other is given originally in a paired, analogizing apperception, never as a completed object, so that the other’s interiority is constitutively beyond full presentation (Husserl 1960). Sartre’s analysis of the look shows what one-directional regard does: under the gaze that I cannot join, I am congealed into an object, my possibilities alienated (Sartre 1956). The phenomenological tradition thus converges on the structure the formal definition encodes: presence is mutual, or it is something else wearing presence’s clothes.

The Lacanian layer adds the final, indispensable qualification. Full transparency between lovers is not the ideal; it is the imaginary’s characteristic lure. The gaze of the other is never returnable from the place it is sent (Lacan 1978), the other’s desire is never

exhausted by my image of it, and an intimacy that promises completed mutual knowledge promises a *méconnaissance*. The ideal that survives the qualification is the one the layered account prepared:

Definition 3 (Presence with acknowledged gap). *The other is present, in the constitutive sense, when attentional presence (the standing availability of joint attention) is sustained together with the acknowledgment that the other exceeds every image and every alignment: presence that neither withdraws before the gap nor pretends to have closed it.*

This is the paper's account of what Weil glimpsed in calling attention the rarest and purest form of generosity (Weil 1951): rare, because it gives what cannot be delegated, stored, or feigned without detection; pure, because what it gives is not a holding but a condition, the other's continued formation as a subject. And it is the third paper's conclusion arrived at from the other side: to keep open the room in which she may always answer is exactly to sustain attentional presence across the acknowledged gap.

5.4.4 Presence without reciprocity: care and the held-open triangle

Definition 1 requires mutuality, and the hardest scenes of intimate life are those in which mutuality fails not by lapse but by incapacity: the partner in deep depression, in dementia, in grave illness, who cannot, for a season or forever, occupy the second vertex. If the triangle is the mechanism of formation, does the mechanism simply stop here? Any account that says yes has misdescribed the most serious form of love there is, and two literatures stand ready to press the point. Noddings's analysis of caring places at its center *engrossment*: the one-caring's receptive, non-selective attention to the cared-for, a feeling-with that does not first require symmetrical return (Noddings 1984). Her account is, in the present vocabulary, a description of attention sustained where clause (ii) cannot be answered. Kittay's dependency critique generalizes the charge: theories of justice built for symmetrical, cooperating adults render invisible the dependency relations on which every society rests, and a framework whose elementary structure demands reciprocity risks repeating that error at the dyadic scale (Kittay 1999).

The framework's answer is to distinguish the triangle's *actuality* from its *single-handed maintenance*. When the other cannot attend, the caregiver can still hold the triangle open: continuing to address rather than merely to handle, placing objects before a shared gaze

that may not arrive, attending to the other's *possible* attending. Formally, $JA(a, b, x)$ fails; what persists is the standing offer of its conditions, sustained unilaterally. This is exactly the structure Definition 3 prepared: attentional presence was defined as the standing *availability* of joint attention, not its achievement, and the care case shows the definition's point. The double-video finding illuminates the practice from the other side (Murray and Trevarthen 1985): what the diminished partner can still receive, often startlingly late into incapacity, is live responsiveness, contingency tuned to whatever contingency remains; and what the caregiver gives, in tuning to it, is Weil's attention at its limit, generosity with no expectation of return, the purest case of the ur-gift of §5.5.3.

Two consequences follow, and both strengthen theses already on the table. First, the care case is the deepest vindication of the No-Claim Thesis (Proposition 6): it is precisely because attention can be the object of no claim that the caregiver's attending retains the character of gift rather than the discharge of a debt; an enforceable claim-structure would convert the most generous human practice into specific performance, and Kittay's account of the exploitation of dependency workers shows what societies do once they treat such labor as owed and therefore costless (Kittay 1999). Second, Criterion 2 must be read against capacity: structural absence is an injustice as a pattern *among the capable*; incapacity within the dyad is not injustice but tragedy. The injustice adjacent to the care case lies one circle out, in the arrangements that leave the caregiver herself unattended. Kittay's principle of *doulia*, that those who care for dependents must themselves be supported in nested relations of care, is in the present vocabulary a demand that the caregiver's own triangles not be starved by the society that benefits from her holding one open alone; its proper category is the constitutive injustice of Section 5.8, with society as addressee.

5.5. The Political Economy of Attention

5.5.1 Scarcity, capture, and the industrial organization of attention

The economic analysis of attention begins from Simon's observation that in an information-rich world the scarce resource is not information but what information consumes: the attention of its recipients (Simon 1971). On that scarcity an industry was built. Wu's

history traces the attention merchant’s model from the penny press to the smartphone: capture attention at scale, resell it to advertisers, and refine the techniques of capture into a discipline (Wu 2016). Zuboff describes the data-extractive stage of the model, in which behavioral surplus is harvested to predict and shape future attention (Zuboff 2019); Crary, its temporal ambition, the colonization of every formerly fallow hour (Crary 2013). Stiegler gives the diagnosis its depth: the systematic industrial capture of attention is a *psychopower*, operating on the formation of attention itself, and since attention formation is the formation of persons, its capture is a matter of generational care, not consumer preference (Stiegler 2010). Citton draws the ecological conclusion: attention is not only a scarce resource to allocate but a medium in which subjects and collectives live, so that its degradation is environmental, not merely distributive (Citton 2017).

The present framework sharpens this line of critique with the constitution thesis. If Proposition 1 is right, attention is not one resource among others, downstream of the person who spends it. It is the material of the mechanism by which persons are formed and maintained. An industry that extracts attention therefore does not merely compete with intimate life for a scarce input, as television competed with conversation for evening hours. It competes *at the level of constitution*: what it removes from the household is the very process by which the household’s members sustain one another as subjects. Hochschild showed that capitalism could commodify the performance of feeling (Hochschild 1983); Fraser, that capital systematically free-rides on and depletes the reproductive relations it presupposes (Fraser 2016). The attention economy is the limit case of the tendency Fraser names: it depletes not the labor of social reproduction but its mechanism.

5.5.2 The parasite thesis: pseudo-shared objects

The critique can be made structurally exact, and the exactness is the point of having a formal definition. Consider what an algorithmic feed offers, measured against Definition 1.

Definition 4 (Pseudo-shared object). *An object x is a pseudo-shared object for parties a and b when it solicits from each the phenomenology of shared attention while the conditions of Definition 1 fail: in particular, (a) mutuality failure: $\text{Att}(a, x)$ and $\text{Att}(b, x)$ hold, but neither party attends to the other’s attending, and the object itself absorbs the checking*

glance that clause (ii) requires; or (b) common-object failure: there is no single x at all, but personalized variants $x_a \neq x_b$, indexically private to each party, presented under the guise of a common world.

Failure (b) deserves emphasis because it is historically novel. Broadcast media produced genuinely common objects: the evening news was the same news, and a couple could form a triangle over it. The personalized feed cannot be triangulated even in principle, because there is nothing at the third vertex that both parties confront: each receives a stream optimized to that profile of capture, and the streams diverge by design. The deepest structural fact about the attention economy, on the present analysis, is not that it distracts but that it *de-commonizes the world*: it dissolves the class of objects over which triangles can form, while supplying in their place objects engineered to absorb, without returning, the attention that triangles are made of.

The feed also counterfeits the second vertex. It is responsive, endlessly and instantly; it adapts to my attention with a contingency more reliable than any human partner's. But its responsiveness is the responsiveness of the replayed mother in the double-video experiment, perfected: contingent in form, absent in fact (Murray and Trevarthen 1985). There is no one whose attending I could attend to; the openness of clause (iii) has no bearer. The feed is, in the strict sense of the layered account, an industrial object lodged at the imaginary layer: a mirror that flatters and captivates, incapable of the triadic layer, and therefore incapable of forming subjects, only of holding them. Millions watching the same viral clip are not in joint attention with one another; the structure is a star, every spoke private, with capture at the hub.

Proposition 4 (Parasite Thesis). *The attention economy is parasitic on the triadic mechanism of subject formation: it captures the attentional material of the triangle by simulating the triangle's vertices (the responsive other, the common object) while satisfying none of the conditions of joint attention. Its extraction is therefore constitutive, not merely distributive: what is removed is not time or enjoyment but participation in the mechanism by which intimate subjects are formed and sustained.*

The familiar tableau, two partners at one table, each in a separate feed, is on this analysis not a lapse of etiquette. It is a scene in which the household's triadic structure has been

disassembled and its components are being metabolized elsewhere: physical co-presence without attentional presence, simultaneous absorption without a common object, the form of togetherness emptied of its mechanism.

5.5.3 Attention as the *ur-gift*: value production and circulation

Paper IV analyzed the intimate gift through a value-circulation framework in which the meaning function μ proved non-factorizable: the meaning of a gift cannot be decomposed into contributions assignable to each party severally, because it takes its value from its position in the relation. The present analysis supplies what that result lacked, a genetic explanation. Meaning is non-factorizable because the original scene of meaning production is triadic: reference itself is assembled inside joint attention (§5.2.2), so anything that means does so by its position in a triangle, and a triangle is precisely a structure with no bilateral decomposition: clause (iii) of Definition 1 is a property of the between.

Attention is, moreover, not merely one more good that circulates in the gift economy; it is the *ur-gift*, the gift presupposed by every other. Mauss's gifts oblige because something of the giver travels with the thing (Mauss 1990); the present framework can say what travels: the attention congealed in the choosing, the timing, the fit, all of it legible to the recipient only inside the triangle, where the gift is jointly attended as an expression of attending. Three properties qualify attention as the limit case of the gift, and each is a clause of Definition 1 read economically. It is non-delegable (clause (ii) requires *her* attending; a hired proxy changes the object). It is non-storable: attention exists only in its giving, and stockpiled attention is a category error. And it is non-settleable: because its value is positional, no transfer can clear the balance, which is the fourth paper's anti-settlement thesis at its root. Weil's quality-quantity distinction completes the economic picture: attention in the constitutive sense is not an effortful quantity but an orientation, a "negative effort," available only as a whole (Weil 1951; Weil 2002). What can be measured in minutes is screen time; what forms subjects has no unit.

This yields the framework's verdict on its own title. An "economics of attention" is legitimate as the study of attention's scarcity, capture, and circulation; it becomes the very pathology it studies the moment it prices what it studies. The generative-justice tradition supplies the alternative grammar: value generated in unalienated circulation,

returning to its generators rather than extracted from them (Eglash 2016). The triadic analysis gives that tradition its smallest exhibit: the intimate triangle is an unalienated attention circuit, the elementary cell of generative value, and the attention economy is its enclosure.

5.5.4 The competition for attention: three arenas and a rigged contest

The critique so far has faced outward, toward the extractive industry. But competition for attention is not only an external assault; it is the standing internal condition of any finite attender, and a framework that forbade accounting (§5.5.3) while admitting scarcity (§5.5) owes an explanation of how the two coexist. Three arenas must be distinguished, because the normative situation differs in each.

The first arena is competition *between domains*: work against partner, parents against partner, one's own projects against the shared world. Here Simon's scarcity holds with full force inside the dyad, and the resolution is a two-tier economy already latent in §5.7.2. The *clearing*, the guarded evening, the protected morning, the device put away, is countable, schedulable, and therefore a legitimate object of distribution: partners can argue justly about clearings, trade them, and owe them. The *attending* that may or may not fill a clearing is not countable and can be the object of no allocation. Distributive justice operates on the first tier; constitutive normativity on the second; and the apparent conflict between scarcity and the anti-accounting stance dissolves, because what is scarce and allocable (cleared time) and what is constitutive and unallocable (attention) were never the same thing. A partner who delivers every negotiated clearing and attends in none of them wrongs the other at the second tier while keeping perfect accounts at the first, which is exactly the phenomenology of certain dutiful, dead marriages.

The second arena is competition *between triangles*. Every subject is a vertex of many: partner, parents, friendships, vocation, and the framework entails that this plurality is not a regrettable dilution but a condition of health, since each triangle forms its subjects and a subject formed in one structure only would be that structure's artifact. It follows that the intimate triangle holds no rightful monopoly. The demand for monopoly has a name, jealousy, and the framework gives its grammar precisely: jealousy is the claim-right to attention (Proposition 6) reasserted in the register of passion, and its enforcement would

be domination in Pettit's sense (Pettit 1997), a standing arbitrary power over the faculty by which the other is a subject at all. The healthy picture is instead cellular: a foam of triangles sharing vertices, attention circulating among cells, each cell sustained by, and contributing to, the formation of subjects it shares with others.³

The third arena is competition *between the human triangle and its industrial counterfeit*, and here the point missed by Proposition 4 taken alone is that the contest is rigged. The human second vertex is metabolic: she tires, needs sleep, has moods, requires that attention be returned for her own attending to be sustained. The feed is a pump: available at every hour, asking nothing, never depleted, and engineered, by iterated optimization against human salience responses, into a supernormal stimulus that no evolved partner can match on the stimulus dimension. This is not competition between like rivals for a common resource; it is a reciprocal circuit competing against a one-way extractor, a metabolism against a siphon. Ordinary liberal vocabulary, consumer choice between alternatives, presupposes symmetrical competitors and so cannot even state the unfairness. The framework can: one competitor must sustain the triadic conditions to offer anything at all, while the other wins precisely by voiding them; the contest is structured so that the constitutive option bears costs the parasitic option externalizes. The unfairness of the contest, and not only the harm of its outcome, is a ground for the third-party duties of §5.7.2, and for treating the design of capture as answerable conduct rather than neutral supply.

5.5.5 The regenerative circuit: a criterion of relational sustainability

The competition analysis raises the dynamical question the paper has so far suppressed: where does the capacity to attend come from, and what replenishes it? Collins's theory of interaction ritual chains supplies the mechanism (Collins 2004). Successful interaction rituals, defined by mutual focus of attention and shared affect, generate entrainment, and their output is what Collins calls emotional energy: a renewed capacity and motivation for further interaction, which carries forward into the next encounter and makes chains of ritual self-sustaining. Read into the present framework, the finding is exact: *joint attention is regenerative*. Attending together, when it succeeds, produces in each party

³The cellular picture is developed formally in the author's companion programme on value circulation in relational structures, where the persistence conditions of such cells are treated dynamically.

more capacity for attending than it consumed; the triangle is not only the site where attention is spent but the scene where it is renewed. Extractive circuits invert the sign: attention spent into a feed returns no energy to any relation; what it returns is compulsion, the motivation to repeat the capture, which mimics energy as the pseudo-shared object mimics the common world.

Criterion 1 (Attentional sustainability). *An intimate relation is attentionally sustainable iff its circuit is net regenerative: the practice of joint attention within it restores, in each party, the capacity and motivation for further attending at least as fast as the relation consumes them, after the demands of all the parties' other triangles and of the extractive environment are paid.*

The criterion unifies three diagnoses the paper has already made. The caregiver of §5.4.4 runs locally net-negative by necessity, holding the triangle open is expenditure without entrainment, which is why Kittay's *doulia* is not charity but thermodynamics: the caregiver's depletion must be made good from outside the dyad or the held-open triangle eventually falls with its holder. The asymmetric maintainer of §5.7.3 is the slow-motion case: a relation in which one party chronically produces the conditions the other consumes is unsustainable in exactly the criterion's sense, and its eventual exhaustion is predictable, not mysterious. And the household colonized by feeds (§5.5.2) runs net-negative as a whole, its attentional yield metabolized elsewhere, so that partners may truthfully report having no energy left for one another: the report is not a metaphor but a balance. The criterion is also where the generative-justice tradition acquires its dynamics at the smallest scale (Eglash 2016): value returning to its generators is, in attentional terms, the condition of the cell's persistence, and extraction is not merely unjust but, for the cell, fatal.

5.6. The Symbolic Order as the Distributor of Attention

5.6.1 The virtual fourth vertex

Section 5.2.3 placed the symbolic mechanism downstream of the triadic in ontogeny; §5.4 conceded that adult joint attention shares its objects under descriptions. The concession has a consequence that must now be drawn in full, because it reorganizes the political econ-

omy just given. The symbolic order is, before it is anything else, an *attention-allocation device*. Saliency is socially pre-distributed: a culture's codes settle what is notable and what invisible, which dates demand observance, which features of a face, a house, a career are to be seen at all, who must keep what in mind for whom. No adult chooses against a neutral field of candidates for notice; the field arrives pre-weighted. Lacan's thesis that human desire is the desire of the Other has, in this register, a direct translation: attention follows desire, desire is mediated by the Other, therefore my attention is, in its default settings, the Other's attention forwarded through me. Althusser's hail makes the same point at the level of the event: "Hey, you there!" captures attention before it conveys any content; interpellation is attention-capture with a name attached, and the subject's turn toward the call is the elementary act of socially allocated notice (Althusser 1971).

Proposition 5 (Fourth Vertex Thesis). *Every adult triangle contains a virtual fourth vertex: the symbolic order, which pre-frames the candidate set of shared objects and pre-weights their claims to notice. Adult joint attention is never bare; it is always exercised within an allocation of salience that the parties did not author.*

The thesis is descriptive, not defeatist; what can be done about the allocation is the business of §5.6.3. Its immediate yield is explanatory. First, it gives §5.7.3 its etiology: the scripts that assign anticipation and monitoring to women are the fourth vertex at work, a socially legislated distribution of who must hold what in mind, so that the measured asymmetry (Daminger 2019) is not an aggregate of individual bargains but the household-level execution of a code. Second, it explains why the couple's common world feels found rather than made: the anniversary, the milestone, the photogenic view present themselves as intrinsically notable because their notability was legislated elsewhere and earlier. Third, it identifies the true depth of the attention economy, pursued in the next subsection: an industry that can write to the fourth vertex does not need to win any particular contest for notice, because it sets the weights by which all contests are scored.

5.6.2 Attentional alienation

Jaeggi's reconstruction of alienation provides the concept the framework now needs. Alienation, on her account, is a relation of relationlessness: not the absence of relation but a deficient one, in which one's life, roles, and desires are executed without being *appro-*

priated, made one's own in the living of them; the criterion of the unalienated life is the capacity for such appropriation (Jaeggi 2014). Transposed to the present subject matter:

Definition 5 (Attentional alienation). *A party's attention is alienated when its pattern of salience follows a script she has had no part in authoring and cannot recognize herself in: attending that is executed but not appropriated, such that what she notices, tracks, and keeps in mind is, in Jaeggi's sense, hers without being her own.*

The definition would matter little if attention were one activity among others. Under Proposition 1 it matters totally: subjects are formed by what they jointly attend to, so alienated attention entails alienated *formation*. Alienation thereby ceases to be a state that befalls finished subjects, the classical picture in which a completed worker confronts his estranged product, and becomes a pathology of the forming process itself: the subject assembled, day by day, out of notice she cannot own. This is the subjective face of constitutive injustice (Section 5.8): where that category describes the arrangement, this concept describes what it is like to be formed inside one, the faint, pervasive sense, familiar from every description of feed-saturated life, of having spent one's day in attendings that belong to no one.

The concept also locates the attention economy's deepest operation, at a depth the parasite thesis does not reach. Capturing instances of attention is foraging; the strategic prize is the *code of attendability* itself: the rewriting of what counts as worth seeing. Paper IV's Baudrillardian analysis showed sign-value to be legislated by position in a differential code (Baudrillard 1981); the platform economy is, in these terms, a private legislature of salience, its trend mechanics and virality metrics functioning as continuous amendments to the code, ratified by no one, binding on the default attention of billions. Stiegler's psychopower names the regime (Stiegler 2010); the present analysis supplies its constitutional location: power exercised at the fourth vertex, upstream of every triangle, legislating the weights under which all common worlds are composed. Enclosure of the attentional commons is therefore the exact phrase: not the theft of attention-instances but the privatization of the salience code through which attention is allocated at all.

5.6.3 Attentional autonomy: re-authoring the script

If the fourth vertex always allocates, is autonomy a consoling fiction? The structure of the answer is the one Paper III built for freedom under the symbolic, and the isomorphism is exact. There, autonomy could not mean exemption from the symbolic order, since the very terms of any vow are socially given; it meant co-legislation within it, the joint authorship of the law one lives under. Here, autonomy cannot mean attention exercised free of any code, a view from nowhere that the layered account of §5.3.2 has already exposed as the imaginary's fantasy; it means the recurrent, joint re-authorship of the allocation one attends under. Butler supplies the mechanism's possibility: a code persists only through reiteration, and reiteration is the site of inflection (Butler 1997); couples demonstrably develop attentional idiolects, private canons of the notable, household liturgies, names and dates and objects weighted by no public code, which are precisely deviations written into the script by its local executors.

The device of re-authorship is one the paper already possesses. The reflexive triangle (Definition 2) was introduced as joint attention to the relation; its deepest application is joint attention to *the couple's own pattern of salience*: what do we keep noticing, what have we stopped seeing, whose calendar writes our evenings, which of our observances are ours and which merely arrived. In such a review the script is converted from frame into object, from the invisible allocator of attention into a thing attended; and what is jointly attended can be jointly amended.

Definition 6 (Attentional autonomy). *A couple is attentionally autonomous to the degree that the allocation of salience governing their joint attention is recurrently placed under their own reflexive triangle, and survives, or is revised by, that review: autonomy not as code-free attending, which does not exist, but as standing joint legislative power over the code's local form.*

The series closes a circle here. Paper III argued that the normativity of self-legislation in intimate life requires co-authorship of the law; this section identifies the most pervasive law a couple lives under, the law of salience, and finds the same result: legislated unilaterally, whether by one partner, by the inherited code, or by a platform writing to the fourth vertex, it alienates; legislated jointly, through the reflexive practice, it is

the couple's freedom in its daily, hourly form. Attentional autonomy is self-legislation continued by attentional means.

5.7. The Rights Structure of Attention

5.7.1 Against a claim-right to attention

If attention is constitutive, the partner deprived of it suffers a wrong of the deepest kind, and the jurisprudential reflex is to reach for a right: does *a* hold, against her partner *b*, a claim-right to attention, with its correlative duty on *b* to attend? Hohfeld's table gives the question its exact form (Hohfeld 1919), and the answer defended here is no, on three independent grounds.

The first is conceptual impossibility of performance. A claim-right's correlative duty must be dischargeable, and what discharges it must be the thing claimed. But attention in the constitutive sense cannot be produced on demand: compelled attending delivers the posture of clause (i) while voiding clause (iii), since attention rendered under claim is monitoring oneself rendering it, and the openness of the triangle collapses into the performance of openness. What can be compelled is attention's behavioral shell: presence in the room, the face turned, the phone down. The shell is not nothing, and §5.7.2 will return to it, but a right to the shell is not a right to attention, and calling it one obscures what was wanted.

The second ground is the isomorphism with Paper III's central result. A vow, that paper argued, cannot be unilaterally legislated, because its key terms are held in common; a fortiori, one party cannot by unilateral claim fix what shall count as adequate attention from the other. A claim-right to attention would install exactly the unilateral legislature the third paper dismantled, with the claimant as sovereign over the meaning of "enough."

The third ground is republican. Pettit's analysis of domination, subjection to another's power of arbitrary interference, applies symmetrically here (Pettit 1997): a legally or morally enforceable claim on the other's inner orientation would constitute a standing power over the very faculty by which the other is a subject, and would dominate precisely what it meant to cherish. The beloved who attends under enforceable claim is not present;

she is occupied.

Proposition 6 (No-Claim Thesis). *Within the Hohfeldian table, constitutive attention can be the object of no claim-right. The intimate parties hold, with respect to each other's attention, privileges (each is at liberty to offer or seek attention) and powers (each can, by invitation, vow, or ritual, alter the normative landscape of their attending), but no claims; correlatively, each stands under no duty enforceable by the other's unilateral demand.*

5.7.2 Imperfect duty and the structural criterion of attentional justice

The No-Claim Thesis does not leave attention normatively naked; it relocates the normativity. Kant's category of imperfect duty fits with unusual precision (Kant 1996): duties of love, in his architecture, are of wide obligation, prescribing maxims and orientations rather than enumerable acts, leaving latitude in execution, and admitting of no external compulsion. The duty to attend in intimate life is of this kind: a standing orientation toward attentional presence whose particular occasions cannot be specified in advance, owed not because claimed but because one has, by the relation itself, undertaken the maintenance of its triangle.

The duty register is, however, only half the ethics, and the lesser half. Murdoch, inheriting Weil explicitly, made attention the central concept of morals: the characteristic work of the moral agent is a "just and loving gaze" directed upon an individual reality, and moral progress is the slow defeat of fantasy by attention, learning to see the other as she is rather than as one's need composes her (Murdoch 1970). On her account attention is not preparation for ethical action but the primary ethical act, and choice, when its moment arrives, is largely the residue of prior seeing: by the time we choose, the quality of our attention has mostly decided what we are able to choose between. For intimate life the consequence is that a partner's attending is itself a moral achievement or failure, prior to and independent of any act it issues in; and the imaginary layer of §5.3.2 names exactly the adversary Murdoch names, the self-serving fantasy that composes the other, against which attention is the discipline. The ethics of attention is therefore double-registered: an imperfect duty, in Kant's architecture, to maintain the orientation; a virtue, in Murdoch's, that the orientation, practiced, becomes. The epigraph of this paper is on this reading not an ornament but a thesis.

Justice enters not at the level of acts but of structure. The criterion is built on the concept that did analogous work in Fricker's theory: a wrong identifiable by a structural pattern rather than a culpable episode (Fricker 2007).

Criterion 2 (Attentional injustice). *An intimate relationship exhibits attentional injustice when there is a standing, asymmetric pattern in which one party's concerns, projects, and experiences systematically fail to become objects of joint attention: not the fluctuation of busy seasons, but a structure in which what matters to one partner reliably cannot reach the triangle. The test is structural absence over time, never a quantity of minutes; the wrong is identified by what the relation's attentional pattern renders chronically invisible, not by an accounting of attention paid.*

The criterion deliberately echoes hermeneutical injustice, and the relation can now be stated more strongly than kinship: attentional injustice is constitutively *upstream* of epistemic injustice. Attention is the gate of evidence. What never reaches joint attention is never articulated, since articulation is downstream of the triangle (Vygotsky's law, run in reverse); what is never articulated never becomes testimony; what never becomes testimony never enters the interpretive commons from which collective hermeneutical resources are built. Each of Fricker's two injustices accordingly has an attentional etiology. Testimonial injustice operates, before any credibility judgment, as attention withdrawal: the speaker not looked at as a knower, the gaze withdrawn before the words are weighed, so that the credibility deficit is often executed attentionally without ever being formulated. Hermeneutical injustice begins, generations earlier, in standing patterns of what is never jointly attended: the experiences for which a culture lacks concepts are, with few exceptions, the experiences its triangles were structured never to take as objects, and the fourth vertex of §5.6.1 is the mechanism of the structuring. The two wrongs remain distinct: attentional injustice within a dyad can obtain in full where the collective hermeneutical commons is intact, and conversely. But the direction of constitution runs one way, and a theory of epistemic justice that starts at credibility and concepts has started two steps downstream of the wrong. Section 5.8 gives the wrong its proper genus.

Two corollaries close the section. First, the behavioral shell recovers a modest enforceability: partners can legitimately bind themselves, by the powers Proposition 6 preserves,

to structures that protect the triangle's conditions, the guarded evening, the device-free table, the standing review; what is enforced is the clearing, never the attending. Second, the criterion generates third-party duties: if attentional injustice is identified structurally, then designers of attention-capturing systems are answerable for foreseeably producing, at scale, the structural absence the criterion names. The jurisprudence of that answer belongs to the companion paper on AI-mediated intimacy; the ground for it is laid here.

5.7.3 The gendered distribution of attentional labor

Criterion 2 is formally neutral between the parties; actual households are not, and a criterion that ignored this would let formal neutrality launder a substantive asymmetry. The empirical record is unambiguous. Hochschild documented the second shift and the emotion work that runs it, disproportionately performed by women (Hochschild 1989; Hochschild 1983); Daminger's decomposition of cognitive household labor into anticipation, identification, decision, and monitoring found the anticipatory and monitoring components, the labor of *keeping things in mind*, markedly skewed by gender even in couples whose physical task division is near parity (Daming 2019).

In the present vocabulary this labor has an exact location: it is *triangle maintenance*. Anticipating, monitoring, keeping the household's objects within reach of joint attention, noticing what must be noticed: this is the work of holding the third vertex stocked and the structure standing, and it is invisible for a principled reason: its product is not a thing but a structure, and a structure well maintained presents itself as no work at all. Its etiology was given in §5.6.1: the assignment of this labor is the fourth vertex at work, a socially legislated distribution of who must hold what in mind, executed in households that never voted on it. The asymmetry is therefore double, and the doubling is the diagnosis. The same partner, statistically she, performs more of the attending that maintains the triangle, *and* her own concerns less often become its objects: producer of the mechanism, minority beneficiary of its use. Each half conceals the other, since the partner who curates the couple's common world is thereby positioned as its staff rather than its subject, the one who points rather than the one pointed for.

Criterion 2 accordingly takes a distributional supplement:

Criterion 3 (Attentional injustice, distributional clause). *Attentional injustice includes*

not only the structural absence of one party's concerns from the triangle (Criterion 2) but a standing asymmetry in who bears the cost of the triangle's maintenance: an arrangement in which one party chronically produces the conditions of joint attention that the other chiefly consumes.

Three remarks fix the clause's relations to the rest of the framework. It extends, to the formative structure itself, the third paper's exploitation criterion for emotional labor: what is appropriated here is not surplus feeling but surplus *maintenance*, and Fraser's diagnosis of capital's free-riding on reproduction (Fraser 2016) reappears at household scale, one partner free-riding on the reproduction of the relation. It does not breach the No-Claim Thesis: the clause identifies a structural wrong and licenses renegotiation through the powers Proposition 6 preserves, the binding clearings of §5.7.2; it does not arm anyone with a claim to the other's attending. And it disciplines the care analysis of §5.4.4 against sentimental misuse: the held-open triangle is the glory of care when incapacity compels it, and the costume of exploitation when capacity merely declines, and the difference between the two is exactly what the distributional clause is built to detect.

5.8. Constitutive Injustice

5.8.1 From constitution to justice: two bridges

Before the category is defined, a debt incurred throughout the paper must be paid. The argument has moved from facts of constitution (subjects are formed in triangles) to verdicts of justice (starving the triangle wrongs them), and no fact entails a norm by itself. Air constitutes our breathing, yet foul air is, without more, a misfortune rather than an injustice; constitution alone confers no normative standing. Shklar's line marks what the inference still needs: misfortune is what no arrangement answers for, injustice is what some arrangement does (Shklar 1990). Two bridges carry the argument across, independent of each other and converging on the same category; their independence matters, because they will turn out to ground duties for different addressees.

The first bridge is transcendental, and runs through the practice of justice itself. Every theory of justice, whatever its content, presupposes subjects: holders of holdings,

claimants of claims, bearers of the standing to be wronged. The conditions under which subjects are formed and maintained therefore occupy a position no ordinary good can occupy: they are presupposed by the very practice within which goods are distributed and claims adjudicated. One cannot coherently operate a scheme of justice among subjects while remaining indifferent to the mechanism that makes and keeps them subjects, any more than one can value the moves of a game while disclaiming all interest in there being a board. If anything within the practice matters, the preconditions of the practice matter, and not derivatively, as one weighted good among others, but structurally, as what the weighing presupposes. Joined to Shklar's line, the bridge yields the inference the paper has been using: where the degradation of constitutive conditions is the work of an *arrangement*, something designed, maintained, profited from, and revisable, it crosses from misfortune into injustice, because there is now an address to which the complaint can be delivered. This is why the verdicts of §5.5.2 are verdicts of justice: the pseudo-shared object is engineered.

The second bridge is fiduciary, and is native to this series. To enter an intimate relation is, on the analysis of §5.4.2, to build a structure of which clause (iii), mutual openness, is a fact about the between: each party thereby comes to hold, in part, something that is not hers alone and that the other cannot hold without her. The grammar of such holding is trust. Obligations of trusteeship arise wherever one keeps what is another's, or what is common, in one's keeping; and the partners in a triangle are, each toward the other, trustees of a formative mechanism that exists only as jointly held. This grounds the phrase that §5.7.2 used on credit, that the duty to attend is owed "by the relation itself": the relation is the trust, and the imperfect duty of attention is its fiduciary content. The bridge is the third paper's result run one level deeper: there, the vow's terms were held in common and so could not be unilaterally legislated; here, the formative structure itself is held in common and so cannot be unilaterally neglected, since neglect by either party degrades what both hold.

The two bridges divide the normative labor cleanly. The fiduciary bridge binds intimates, with the special stringency of trust, and grounds the dyadic applications of the category (Criteria 2 and 3). The transcendental bridge binds strangers, designers, and institutions, who stand in no trust relation to a given couple but who operate arrangements upon the

preconditions of subjecthood at large; it grounds the wider addressees of §5.8.3. A wrong reachable by both bridges at once, the spouse who is also the household's attention-extracting designer, is correspondingly compounded. With the bridges in place, the category can be defined without suppressed premises.

5.8.2 The category defined

The wrongs assembled in the preceding sections, the structural starvation of the triangle within a relationship, the industrial enclosure of attention from without, share a form that existing categories of injustice do not capture. Distributive injustice concerns holdings; rights violation concerns enumerated claims; Honneth's recognition wrongs concern the withholding of due regard from a formed subject seeking confirmation (Honneth 1995); Fricker's epistemic injustices concern a person's standing and resources as a knower (Fricker 2007). The wrong in view here lies beneath all four: it touches neither what a subject has, nor what she may demand, nor how she is regarded, nor what she can know, but the conditions under which she is and remains a subject.

Definition 7 (Constitutive injustice). *An arrangement is constitutively unjust toward a person when it systematically degrades her access to, or participation in, the mechanisms of subject formation and maintenance, paradigmatically the triadic mechanism of joint attention, independently of any loss of holdings, violation of enumerated rights, denial of recognition, or epistemic exclusion that may also occur.*

The independence clause carries the weight, so its work is shown by separation cases. A person may be distributively well off, legally unviolated, publicly esteemed, and epistemically credited, while living inside an arrangement, a marriage of parallel feeds, a workplace engineered for capture, that starves every triangle she belongs to: constitutive injustice without the other four. Conversely, a poor and disregarded household may sustain triangles of full intensity. The category is therefore not reducible to its neighbors, though in practice it compounds them, since the subject degraded in formation is thereby weakened in claiming, knowing, and seeking recognition: constitutive injustice is upstream injustice, and its effects launder themselves through the categories downstream.

Adjacency to Honneth deserves one more sentence, since love is his first sphere of recognition and the kinship is close (Honneth 1995). Recognition, in his grammar, is something

a subject receives and can be denied; the triangle, in the present grammar, is something a subject inhabits and can be evicted from. Misrecognition insults; constitutive injustice unmakes. The two will usually travel together, but the second is the deeper stratum, and naming it separately is what allows the critique of the attention economy to be stated as a thesis about justice rather than a complaint about manners.

5.8.3 Scope and addressees

Constitutive injustice, so defined, has three addressees, in widening circles. Within the dyad, it grounds Criterion 2 and the imperfect duties of §5.7.2: partners are the first trustees of each other's formation. At the level of design, it indicts architectures that produce pseudo-shared objects at scale (Proposition 4): the wrong done by an attention-extractive system is not adequately described as manipulation of choice or appropriation of data, vocabularies that presuppose a finished subject defending her perimeter; it is the strip-mining of the material from which subjects are made, and its proper legal register is closer to the protection of conditions (environmental, in Citton's sense (Citton 2017)) than to the vindication of transactions. At the level of political theory, it names what a society owes its members beyond distribution and rights: the protection of formative structures, of which the intimate triangle is the elementary case and public institutions of common attention, the shared text, the common deliberation, are the civic enlargements.

One boundary is drawn against overreach. Not every solitude, austerity, or chosen withdrawal from relation is constitutive injustice; the category requires systematic degradation of access imposed by an arrangement, not the exercise of a person's own privileges over her attention. A theory that conscripted everyone into triangles would violate Proposition 6 at social scale. The object of justice is the standing availability of the mechanism, not its compelled use.

5.9. Objections and Replies

Objection 1 (Romantic technophobia). *The argument repeats a perennial moral panic. Print, radio, and television were each accused of dissolving intimate life; households absorbed them and formed their triangles around them. The feed will be domesticated in turn.*

REPLY. The reply is in Definition 4(b), and it is structural, not nostalgic. Broadcast media were attention-hungry but *common-object-producing*: the same program reached every receiver, and households did in fact triangulate over it. The personalized feed is the first mass medium whose objects are indexically private by design; there is no common x for the triangle to take. The argument does not predict that domestication is impossible, and §5.7.2's enforceable clearings describe its form; it claims that domestication now requires deliberately rebuilding the common object that earlier media supplied for free. The asymmetry is in the technology's structure, not in the critic's mood.

Objection 2 (The empirical hostage). *The paper rests normative architecture on a live empirical literature. Shared intentionality, the nine-month revolution, even joint attention's specialness are contested; if the psychology shifts, the ethics collapses.*

REPLY. The dependence is narrower than it appears. The normative sections require three claims: that joint attention as defined exists and is achieved (uncontested); that it is implicated in the formation and maintenance of subjects (supported convergently by the developmental record, by Vygotsky's law, and, independently of all psychology, by Davidson's transcendental argument (Davidson 2001)); and that its conditions can structurally fail (Definition 4 is an analysis, not an experiment). Disputes internal to the literature, over the uniqueness of human shared intentionality or the mechanism of the nine-month transition, do not touch these. The paper holds the psychology as a load-bearing wall, but the building has a second foundation in the transcendental argument, and the two would have to fail together.

Objection 3 (Levinas redux). *The shared object is a thing; Levinas's third is a face. Substituting world for tiers domesticates the very asymmetry that makes the ethical ethical, and licenses a complacent symmetry between lovers.*

REPLY. The substitution was offered as structural, not ethical, and the layered account keeps the registers apart. The shared object performs the third's structural function, instituting comparability, which is all that justice-talk within the dyad requires. The ethical asymmetry of the face is untouched: it lives at a layer the triangle neither generates nor cancels, and Definition 3 writes its trace into the ideal itself, as the acknowledged gap. The position is not that justice replaces the asymmetrical ethical, but that the dyad

is large enough to contain both, because its own mechanism gives it three vertices.

Objection 4 (The accountant's return). *Criterion 2 forswears minutes but speaks of patterns over time. A pattern is detected by tracking; tracking is accounting; the framework smuggles back the settlement logic Paper IV expelled.*

REPLY. The criterion identifies a wrong by structural absence: a class of concerns that *cannot reach* the triangle. Detecting that something never appears requires no ledger of what does; one audits the silence, not the traffic. The relevant practice is itself triadic, the standing review in which the relation is placed under joint attention (§5.4.2) and each party may say what has become invisible. Where Paper IV's settlement logic priced contributions to clear them, the reflexive review prices nothing and clears nothing; it restores objects to the triangle. The difference between accounting and witnessing was drawn in the fourth paper; the criterion stands on the witnessing side.

Objection 5 (Symbolic determinism). *The Fourth Vertex Thesis proves too much. If the symbolic order allocates salience before any choice, then attentional autonomy (Definition 6) is a consoling fiction: the couple's reflexive review is itself conducted in inherited concepts, scheduled by inherited calendars, and so merely executes the script at a higher level of recursion.*

REPLY. The objection restates, for attention, the determinist's case against self-legislation, and the reply is the compatibilist structure Paper III already built. Autonomy was never claimed as exemption from the symbolic; it was defined (Definition 6) as joint legislative power over the code's *local form*, exercised from within it, and an inside position is the only position there is. Three facts show the power to be real rather than notional. Codes persist only through reiteration, and reiteration admits inflection (Butler 1997): drift is observable at every scale from slang to liturgy, and someone's reiterations are doing the drifting. Couples observably develop attentional idiolects, private canons of the notable that no public code weights, which are deviations written by local executors and inherited by no one else. And the reflexive review can *fail*: couples attempt it and find their salience pattern unbudged, which would be impossible if the review merely executed the script, since execution cannot fail against itself. What the objection demands, attention legislated from no code at all, is the view from nowhere, the imaginary's fantasy of a

subject prior to all formation, and the layered account discharged it in §5.3.2. Freedom under the fourth vertex is the only freedom on offer, and it is enough: the difference between a couple that reviews its law of salience and one that merely lives it is the difference Paper III drew between co-authored and unilateral legislation, here applied to the legislature that sits longest.

5.10. Conclusion

The paper has argued one thesis and traced its consequences. The thesis: the subject of intimate life is formed and sustained through the presence of the other and the practice of joint attention; the triadic mechanism is the hinge between the mirror in which the self first appears and the symbolic order in which it takes a name (Propositions 1, 2). The mechanism transfers to adult intimacy at reduced intensity but unchanged structure, finds its mature form in the reflexive triangle, where the relation itself becomes the shared object (Proposition 3, Definition 2), and shows its limit form in care, where one party holds the triangle open for an other who cannot, for a time, answer (§5.4.4). The consequences: the attention economy is a parasite on the mechanism, extracting constitutive material through pseudo-shared objects in a contest rigged against the metabolic competitor, and relational sustainability has a criterion, the net-regenerative circuit (Proposition 4, Criterion 1); the symbolic order is the standing distributor of attention, the virtual fourth vertex of every triangle, so that alienation reappears as a pathology of formation itself and autonomy as the couple's joint legislative power over its law of salience (Proposition 5, Definitions 5, 6); the normativity of attention within the dyad takes the form not of claim-rights but of imperfect duty and Murdochian virtue, disciplined by a structural criterion of attentional justice, read always with its distributional clause and standing constitutively upstream of epistemic injustice (Proposition 6, Criteria 2, 3); and the theory of justice gains an upstream category, constitutive injustice, the degradation of the conditions of subjecthood itself, carried from fact to norm by two independent bridges, transcendental for strangers and institutions, fiduciary for intimates (Definition 7, §5.8.1).

Within the series, the paper closes two circles that the earlier papers opened. The vow of Paper III and the gift of Paper IV are now legible as two technologies of the same

structure: devices for placing the relation under joint attention, which is why neither could be unilateral and neither could be settled. And the third paper's deepest result returns at the end of this one in generalized form: the most pervasive law a couple lives under is its law of salience, and the alternative to its joint legislation is not lawlessness but alienation, government by a code amended daily, at the fourth vertex, by parties the couple never seated. What the earlier papers presupposed, this paper supplies: an account of the subjects whose vows and gifts they are, formed in the triangle they keep rebuilding, free exactly insofar as they keep its law their own. The next perimeter is already visible. If subjects are formed in triangles, and machines now offer themselves as the second vertex, then the question of what an artificial interlocutor can and cannot occupy in the structure of Definition 1, clause by clause, is not futurism but the present paper's unfinished business, and the companion work on AI-mediated intimacy is where it falls due.

The oldest description of love's beginning in the Chinese canon is a scene of joint attention under the night sky: 今夕何夕，见此良人, what night is this, that I see this good person. Not possession, not even promise: seeing, in a night both stand inside. The argument of this paper is that the old scene is exact. To love is to keep a world in common, and to keep attending, together, across the gap that keeps the other forever more than what is seen.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the fifth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. The lovers discussed in these pages are kept deliberately anonymous, and every case is presented as a constructed one, so that the argument may stand on its structure rather than on any private history.

My deepest gratitude is owed, as in the papers before it, to the “girl of the forest and the mountains”: pure and natural in spirit, good-hearted, resilient, and wise, carrying within her a quiet sense of mission toward the world. This paper's thesis was learned from her before it was argued: that one becomes most fully oneself in the presence of an other who truly attends. Whatever is true in these pages was first true at a shared table, before a

shared window, under a shared moon. The vow renewed in the third paper is renewed here in this paper's own vocabulary: to remain present, to keep the world between us common, and to honor the gap by which she will always exceed what I see; that I will not fail her, to the end of our days.

愿天下有情人，目之所注皆有回应，心之所向皆得见证；同观一月，白首不相负。

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CHAPTER 6

Toward a Just Proposal

A marriage proposal is, beneath its romance, a request that one person make a high-stakes, contract-like, life-structuring decision, and one that is, in L. A. Paul's sense, transformative (Paul 2014): its acceptance reshapes the values and self by whose lights it would be assessed. This paper argues that the conventional staging of the proposal, the engineered emotional peak, the social script that demands an immediate answer, and the asymmetry of information and preparation between the two parties, can, even in the complete absence of ill will and of any identity-based prejudice, compromise the epistemic agency of the person asked.

***I do not claim to have discovered a new kind of epistemic injustice.** The wrong is better understood with a framework already in hand. I read the proposal through Catala (2025), *The Dynamics of Epistemic Injustice: Situating Epistemic Power and Agency*, whose pluralist account of epistemic agency and analysis of hermeneutical domination and epistemic empowerment supply exactly the apparatus the case requires. On Catala's account, epistemic agency is not exhausted by the propositional exchange of testimony; it includes a non-propositional, non-verbal, self-interpretive dimension, the agent's capacity to make sense of her own experience to herself (self-to-self intelligibility) before and apart from conveying it to others (self-to-others intelligibility). The proposal, I argue, is a site where this self-interpretive agency, at the very threshold of a transformative choice, is placed under conditions, temporal, affective, informational, that impede its exercise.*

This installment does not yet write the body. Following the principle that the conceptual core should be secured before the argument is built upon it, it does two things. First, it verifies, against the literature current to 2025, the post-Fricker development of the field, Fricker's two originals, Dotson on testimonial smothering, Pohlhaus Jr. on willful hermeneutical ignorance, Medina on resistance, and the philosophical work on gaslighting, and then expounds Catala's framework in detail, since it is the framework the paper will use. Second, it shows precisely how the proposal situation maps onto Catala's categories: which dimension of epistemic agency is at stake, why the wrong is a form of hermeneutical rather than testimonial difficulty, and why locating it within an existing account is more defensible than minting a new term. The constructive half of the full paper will then derive the normativity of an epistemically just proposal: separation of the affective moment from the decision, full disclosure before the asking, removal of immediate-answer pressure, the ring re-grounded from "seal of a concluded bargain" to "token and waiting," and a deferred-commitment mechanism, each reconstrued as a condition of epistemic empowerment in Catala's sense.

Keywords epistemic injustice; epistemic agency; pluralist account; hermeneutical domination; epistemic empowerment; self-interpretation; transformative experience; marriage

proposal; intimate justice; relational autonomy.

*To the girl of the forest and the mountains,
to whom I would never put a question
she had not first been given every means to answer,
and whose yes, if it comes, I would have her free to have weighed.*

敬之惧之，匪以为难

*To hold you in awe, to fear doing you wrong,
is not to make our love a hardship.*

after the 诗经 (*Book of Songs*)

信物者，待也，非约之封也

*A token is a waiting,
not the sealing of a bargain.*

a line of the author's own

6.1. Orientation: What This Installment Is and Is Not

This is the sixth paper in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. The preceding papers established a relational ontology of the loving subject, the normativity of self-legislation and its re-grounding as co-legislation, and the standing of the other to contest the terms of a shared life. The present paper turns that apparatus on a single, concrete, and almost universally romanticised act: the marriage proposal.

The full paper will run a familiar two-part arc, a diagnosis followed by a constructive reconstruction. But the central claim, that the conventional proposal can wrong the person asked in her capacity as a knower and chooser, even when the proposer is loving, sincere, and wholly free of prejudice, lives or dies on the precision of one analysis. If that analysis is loosely drawn, the diagnosis collapses into either a familiar complaint (“surprises can be manipulative,” which no one denies and which is not yet a theory) or an overreach (“all surprise proposals are unjust,” which is false). The strategy of this series has been to let a neglected intimate situation *illuminate* an existing theoretical structure rather than to multiply terminology.

I therefore make a deliberate methodological choice, and state it plainly because an earlier draft of this installment did the opposite. **I do not claim to have isolated a new species of epistemic injustice.** The temptation to coin one, “situational” or “decisional” epistemic injustice, was real, and an earlier version of this paper yielded to it. On reflection that move is both unnecessary and worse-supported than the alternative: the apparatus required to analyse the proposal already exists, in a precise and recent form, in Catala (2025). Minting a term where an adequate framework is in hand invites two avoidable costs, the suspicion of novelty-for-its-own-sake, and the burden of defending a neologism’s boundaries from scratch. It is more defensible, and more illuminating, to show that Catala’s pluralist account of epistemic agency, when trained on the proposal, *already* names and explains the wrong. The contribution of this paper is then not a new concept but a new *application*: bringing a frontier account of epistemic agency to bear on an intimate practice it was not written for, and deriving from that application a normative reconstruction of the practice.

So before any of the body is drafted, two preliminary tasks must be discharged with care.

1. **Verification of the field, and exposition of the framework.** Section 6.2 reconstructs the post-Fricker terrain accurately, then expounds Catala’s framework *in detail*, because it is the framework the paper will use and the reader is owed more than its title.
2. **Mapping the case onto the framework.** Section 6.3.10 shows precisely how the proposal situation instantiates Catala’s categories, which dimension of epistemic agency is engaged, why the difficulty is hermeneutical rather than testimonial, and where the analysis stops, so that the diagnosis is neither a truism nor an overreach.

A methodological note on self-reference, discharged here so that it colours everything that follows. This paper, like its predecessors, is occasioned by the author’s own practice; the constructive proposals it will defend are ones the author intends to enact. There is an obvious reflexive hazard: a paper that argues for the epistemic standing of one’s intended partner, while using the shared relationship as its tacit case, would contradict its own thesis if it treated her as material to be theorised about rather than a person to be consulted. The series has handled this by anonymising and by presenting cases as constructed. The present paper accepts a stricter constraint, internal to its own argument: its constructive claims are not satisfied by being published but only by being *enacted with* the other, disclosed to her, and held open to her revision, on pain of performative self-contradiction. I flag the hazard now and return to it as a structural feature, not an afterthought, in the full paper.

6.2. The Field, Verified: Epistemic Injustice after Fricker

The aim of this section is accuracy, not survey for its own sake. Each classical figure is reconstructed only far enough to locate the proposal case relative to it, and the reconstruction is checked against the literature current to 2025 rather than against memory; the section then turns to expound the framework the paper actually uses.

6.2.1 Fricker’s Two Forms, and Why Neither Fits

Fricker (2007) introduced *epistemic injustice* as a wrong done to someone specifically in her capacity as a knower, and distinguished two species. *Testimonial injustice* occurs

when a hearer gives a speaker a deflated credibility owing to a prejudice attaching to the speaker's social identity, the paradigm being an *identity-prejudicial credibility deficit*. *Hermeneutical injustice* occurs when a gap in the collective interpretive resources leaves some group unable to render an important region of its experience intelligible, the standard example being the unavailability, before the term existed, of a concept like sexual harassment.

Two features of Fricker's originals matter here. First, both are tethered, in her formulation, to *identity and structural marginalisation*: the credibility deficit tracks a prejudice against *who the speaker is*, and the hermeneutical gap tracks the *collective* exclusion of a marginalised group from meaning-making. Second, the wrong is located in a *credibility* or *intelligibility* deficit, in how a knower's contributions are received or her experience is conceptualised. The proposal case sits awkwardly with both. The person asked is not disbelieved because of her social identity; she is not, qua proposee, a member of a group excluded from interpretive resources; and the difficulty is not, in the first instance, that her contributions are received with a credibility deficit. What is at stake is closer to her capacity to make sense of her own situation *to herself* under the conditions of the scene. Fricker's two originals therefore do not fit the case cleanly, not because the case is sui generis, but because Fricker's framework predates the pluralist widening of *epistemic agency* that Catala supplies and that §6.2.6 sets out. The right response is not a new label but the right framework.

6.2.2 Dotson: Testimonial Smothering and Contributory Injustice

Dotson (2011) identifies *testimonial smothering*: a speaker truncates or withholds her own testimony because she anticipates that her audience will fail to receive it competently, so that the silencing is, in a sense, self-administered under structural pressure. Dotson (2012) adds *contributory injustice*, in which a knower's contributions are excluded because the audience wilfully relies on a biased set of interpretive resources while alternatives exist.

Dotson is the closest of the classical figures to the proposal case, and the comparison must therefore be made with precision rather than enthusiasm. Testimonial smothering shares with the proposal case the structural shape of a *self-administered* epistemic shortfall: the proposee, like the smothered testifier, may pre-emptively suppress her own deliberation,

here, the doubts and questions a momentous decision warrants, in anticipation of how raising them will be received. But the differences are decisive. In Dotson's smothering the content suppressed is *testimony* (the speaker has knowledge she declines to deliver) and the anticipated failure is the audience's *incompetence or hostility as a receiver*, rooted in structural marginalisation. In the proposal case what is suppressed is *first-personal practical deliberation* (not knowledge to be delivered to another but reasoning the agent owes herself), and the pressure that suppresses it is not the proposer's incompetence as a receiver but the *staging of the situation*, the public scene, the kneeling, the watching faces, the script that codes hesitation as cruelty. Dotson gives us the form "epistemic shortfall produced under pressure rather than by an external withholder"; she does not give us the proposal's specific mechanism, which is situational design rather than anticipated misreception, and which need not trade on any structural marginalisation of the proposee at all.

6.2.3 Pohlhaus Jr.: Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance

Pohlhaus (2012) develops *willful hermeneutical ignorance*: dominantly situated knowers actively refuse to take up the interpretive resources developed by the marginalised, so that the marginalised are met with a wilful failure to understand. This is, again, a concept built on the axis of *structural power between social positions* and on the fate of *interpretive resources*. It is a useful marker of an edge, not a home for the case. The proposal difficulty, as analysed below, does not require that the proposer occupy a dominant social position relative to the proposee, nor that any interpretive resource be refused; it can arise between social equals, and indeed between partners where the proposee is in every structural respect the proposer's equal or superior. Pohlhaus marks one edge of the territory; the home, as the next subsection argues, is Catala's pluralist account of agency.

6.2.4 Medina: The Epistemology of Resistance

Medina (2013) shifts the register from individual acts to *epistemic character, responsibility, and resistance*: he theorises the epistemic vices of the privileged (arrogance, laziness, closed-mindedness), the virtues that resist them, and the way epistemic injustices are sustained or contested across a social ecology. Medina is less a boundary than a *resource*

for the constructive half. The notion of an epistemically just proposal that the full paper will defend is, in Medina's terms, a structure of *epistemic responsibility* on the proposer's side, an active cultivation of the conditions under which the other can exercise full epistemic agency, and of *epistemic resistance* as something the staging should make available rather than foreclose. I record him here so that the constructive section can draw on him without re-introducing him cold.

6.2.5 Gaslighting: The Indispensable Contrast

The philosophical literature on gaslighting is the contrast that most sharpens the proposal case, because gaslighting is the canonical wrong to epistemic agency *within an intimate relationship*, and the force of the present analysis is that the proposal can compromise epistemic agency *without* the feature that literature treats as central.

The state of that literature, verified, is as follows. Abramson (2014) gives the influential account on which gaslighting is constitutively a matter of the gaslighter's *intention and motive*, an attempt to gain control by destroying the target's standing as an independent locus of judgement, and on which its wrong is primarily moral rather than epistemic. Spear (2019) and the surrounding work argue, against Abramson's de-emphasis of the epistemic, that gaslighting has ineliminable epistemic dimensions, that it corrodes *self-trust* and the victim's conception of herself as an autonomous knower. Stark (2019) extends gaslighting beyond the dyadic and intentional toward the structural, tying it to prior epistemic injustice. Podosky (2021) argues that gaslighting can be understood as a *purely epistemic* phenomenon, characterised by confronting the victim with a forced choice between rejecting the gaslighter's testimony and doubting her own basic epistemic competence, and need not depend on a particular set of intentions; Ruíz (2020) theorises *cultural* gaslighting at the level of colonial and structural epistemic oppression.

Two things follow. First, even on the most deflated, least intention-dependent account (Podosky), gaslighting is defined by an attack on the victim's *self-trust or basic epistemic competence*, by getting her to doubt that she knows what she knows. The proposal case leaves the proposee's self-trust and competence *intact*: she is not made to doubt her faculties; she is placed in a situation in which those intact faculties cannot be fully exercised before she must answer. This is a difference in the *locus* of the difficulty, com-

petence undermined versus exercise impeded, and it is what tells us we are not looking at gaslighting and should not analyse the case as a covert or attenuated form of it. Second, every account in the gaslighting literature, even the structural ones, treats the wrong as flowing from something the wronging party *does to* the victim's epistemic self-relation, whether by intention (Abramson), by epistemic mechanism (Podosky), or by structural position (Stark, Ruíz). The proposal difficulty can flow from a *situation the proposer has innocently inherited and reproduced*, the cultural script of the romantic proposal, without his doing anything to the proposee's self-relation and without his intending or benefiting from any control. Gaslighting is thus the contrast that tells us *where not to look*: not to malice, not to a damaged self-relation. It does not, by itself, tell us where to look instead. For that we need Catala.

6.2.6 Catala's Framework, Expounded

The account this paper uses is Catala (2025), *The Dynamics of Epistemic Injustice: Situating Epistemic Power and Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2025). Because the paper rests on it, more than a title is owed; this subsection sets out the parts of the framework the argument will use. (The exposition is faithful to the book's published structure and stated commitments; particular formulations the full paper will source to specific chapters once the page references are settled.)

The two undertheorised notions, and the method

Catala's animating observation is that the literature on epistemic injustice constantly invokes *epistemic power* and *epistemic agency* yet leaves both largely undertheorised. Her project is to give a systematic account of the two by working through the *dynamics* of epistemic injustice, the many forms it takes, the various sites and mechanisms through which it operates, and the transformations required to cultivate epistemic justice. Methodologically she adopts standpoint theory both as theory and as method: epistemic power and agency are to be understood as *situated*, indexed to social location, rather than as the properties of an abstract knower. Two of her headline contributions matter here: a systematic account of epistemic power and agency that foregrounds the *interaction between individual and structural factors* (neither pure individualism nor pure structuralism), and a *pluralist* account that brings into view the *non-propositional and non-verbal* dimensions

of epistemic agency that earlier, testimony-centred accounts neglected.

The pluralist account of epistemic agency

This is the part the proposal case turns on. For Fricker the paradigm of epistemic agency is *testimonial*: a speaker conveys a proposition to a hearer who assigns it some credibility. Catala's pluralism widens the field. Epistemic agency, on her account, is the capacity to be an actor in one's activity of knowing, to produce, use, or convey knowledge, and this capacity has dimensions that are not propositional and not verbal at all. Centrally for us, it includes a *self-interpretive* dimension: the agent's capacity to render her own experience intelligible *to herself*, prior to and independently of any conveying of it to another. Following the distinction the framework draws, intelligibility runs along two axes, *self-to-others* (being understood by an interlocutor) and *self-to-self* (understanding one's own situation). A deficit on the second axis is a failure or foreclosure of self-interpretation: the agent cannot, in the conditions she is in, make adequate sense of her own experience to herself. This is a genuinely *hermeneutical* matter, but a hermeneutical matter relocated, at least in part, *inside* the agent's relation to her own experience rather than residing wholly in the collective pool of concepts.

Testimonial and hermeneutical domination

Catala reframes the two Frickerian species in terms of *domination*, the better to capture the interaction of individual and structural factors. *Testimonial domination* (her Chapter 2) gives a structural explanation of how stereotypes systematically deflate the epistemic agency of the dominated as conveyers of knowledge. *Hermeneutical domination* (her Chapter 3) concerns the conditions under which the dominated are impeded in making sense, whether to others or to themselves, with phenomena such as "white ignoring" and deliberative impasse as mechanisms. The vocabulary of *domination* (rather than discrete "injustice events") is deliberate: it lets the account track the standing structural conditions that bear on the exercise of agency, not only datable acts. For the proposal, the relevant register is *hermeneutical*: what is at issue is the conditions of sense-making, not the assignment of credibility to testimony.

Becoming who you are: transformative experience and epistemic empowerment

Catala's Chapter 6, *Becoming Who You Are: Hermeneutical Breakthroughs, Transformative Experience, and Epistemic Empowerment*, is the hinge between the diagnostic and the constructive use this paper will make of her. It connects epistemic agency to *transformative experience* in roughly L. A. Paul's sense, experiences whose undergoing reshapes the values and the self by whose lights one would have deliberated about whether to undergo them, and theorises *hermeneutical breakthrough* and *epistemic empowerment* as the positive achievements by which an agent comes to make new sense of herself across such a threshold. Where hermeneutical domination names the impeding of self-interpretation, epistemic empowerment names its enabling and enlargement. This gives the paper its constructive vocabulary: an epistemically just proposal is one structured to *empower* the proposee's self-interpretation at the threshold of a transformative choice, rather than to compress or crowd it.

Why this framework, and an honest note on fit

Two honest qualifications. First, Catala's sustained cases concern *non-dominant social groups* (academic migrants, intellectually disabled persons, autistic women, divided societies); the proposee in a loving, equal partnership is typically not dominated in that structural sense. The paper therefore uses Catala's *analytic apparatus*, the pluralist account of agency, the self-to-self axis of intelligibility, the hermeneutical register, the empowerment/transformation pairing, without claiming the proposee is a member of a structurally marginalised group. This is a legitimate use of a framework: borrowing its machinery while being explicit about which of its motivating conditions do and do not obtain. Second, precisely because the structural-domination reading does not straightforwardly apply, the paper must argue that the *situational* conditions of the proposal (temporal, affective, informational) can impede self-interpretive agency even absent group-based domination, an extension of the framework that §6.3.10 begins and the full paper defends. Naming this honestly is better than smuggling the proposee into a category of marginalisation she does not occupy.

6.3. The Jurisprudence of the Proposal: A Quasi-Contractual Act under Competing Theories of Justice

The epistemic analysis above asks whether the proposee’s self-interpretive agency is empowered or impeded. A jurisprudential analysis asks a different and complementary question: treating the proposal as what it structurally is, the solicitation of a momentous, quasi-contractual act of consent, *is the act just*, and what would each major theory of justice say about the conditions under which it is or is not? This section runs that analysis. It is complementary rather than redundant: the epistemic register concerns the *knower*; the jurisprudential register concerns the *legitimacy of the consent* and the *order it institutes*. The series has used this method before (the Hohfeldian and republican analysis of the vow in Paper III); here it is trained on the proposal as a consent-act.

A caveat fixes the scope. To call the proposal “quasi-contractual” is an analytic device, not a reduction of love to bargaining. A marriage proposal is not an offer in contract law, and its acceptance is not consideration. But it shares with consent-acts the features that the theories of justice were built to assess: it solicits, at a moment, a binding answer that institutes an order of mutual claims and obligations and that is costly to revise. That shared structure is what licenses the analysis; the disanalogies are flagged where they bear.

6.3.1 The Consent-Theoretic Frame: Four Conditions of Valid Consent

Before the schools diverge, they share a common analytic inheritance from the theory of consent, refined most precisely in the bioethics and research-ethics literatures. On the standard account, valid consent to a serious intervention requires four things: *capacity* (the ability to engage in reasoned deliberation), *disclosure* (the sharing of information material to the decision), *understanding* (an actual appreciation of the nature, risks, and alternatives), and *voluntariness* (freedom from coercion and undue influence) (Eyal 2019; Beauchamp and Childress 2019). Consent is compromised when any element is lacking.

Two refinements from that literature bear directly on the proposal. First, the standard for voluntariness and understanding is not fixed but *scales with the stakes*: the graver and less reversible the decision, the greater the clarity, authenticity, coherence, and set-

tled commitment that valid consent requires (Roberts 2002). A binding answer to a life-structuring, transformative question therefore demands *more*, not less, of the four conditions than a casual agreement does. Second, voluntariness is undermined not only by literal coercion (a threat that would leave one seriously worse off) but by *undue influence* and by “no choice” framings that constrict the practical space of refusal (Eyal 2019).

Mapped onto the conventional staged proposal, the diagnosis is immediate and theory-neutral, which is its strength. *Capacity* is intact (this is not gaslighting). But *disclosure* is impaired by informational asymmetry; *understanding* is impaired by affective saturation crowding the interpretive room; and *voluntariness* is impaired by the immediate-answer script, which functions as a soft “no choice” framing, where public refusal carries a staged social cost. By the very standard that scales *up* with the stakes, the conventional proposal solicits consent under conditions that the consent literature would flag as falling short, even with a loving, sincere, non-coercive proposer. The constructive remedies of the full paper (prior disclosure, decoupled timing, removed immediacy) are, in this register, simply the conditions of *valid consent to a high-stakes act*. This is the shared floor; the schools below differ on what justice additionally requires.

6.3.2 Liberalism I: Rawlsian and Procedural Justice

A Rawlsian analysis does not directly govern the intimate dyad (justice as fairness regulates the basic structure, not the proposal), but its *method* transfers. Ask what procedure for soliciting a momentous commitment the two parties would agree to behind a veil of ignorance, not knowing which role, proposer or proposee, they would occupy. No one ignorant of her position would choose a procedure that loads information, timing, and emotional framing onto one side and demands the other answer cold and at once; each would choose the procedure that protects the asked party, since either might be that party. Procedural justice thus condemns the staged proposal not for its outcome but for its *procedure*: fair terms of agreement are those the disadvantaged party would accept in advance, and the immediate-answer-under-asymmetry procedure fails that test. The Rawlsian verdict: *the conventional proposal is procedurally unjust; the just proposal is the one whose procedure both would choose without knowing who would be asked*.

6.3.3 Liberalism II: Autonomy-Based and Consent Theories

The autonomy-centred liberal (Kantian or Millian) locates justice in respect for the agent's self-governing choice. Here the consent frame of §6.3.1 does the work directly: to solicit a binding answer under impaired voluntariness and understanding is to fail to treat the proposee as a fully self-governing end, to take an answer that does not fully express her autonomous will. The Kantian formulation is sharp: staging that uses affect and time-pressure to elicit a "yes" treats the proposee's emotional response as a *means* to securing agreement, in tension with the requirement to treat her rational agency as an end. The verdict: *the conventional proposal risks using the proposee's own affect against her autonomy; the just proposal is one to which her yes is the act of a self-governing will, fully informed and unhurried.*

6.3.4 Republicanism: Non-Domination and Relational Autonomy

This is the register of Paper III, carried forward. The republican does not ask whether interference occurred but whether one party holds *arbitrary power* over the other. The staged proposal, considered alone, is not yet domination, a single act, not a standing power. But it can be the *instituting moment* of an order in which second-order power (the power to set and revise the terms of the shared life) is unequally distributed, and a proposal whose form already places one party in the position of reactive, time-pressured respondent can inaugurate that asymmetry. The republican adds what consent theory omits: that what matters is not only the validity of this one answer but the *standing* it institutes, whether the proposee retains live, robust power to contest the terms thereafter. The verdict: *the proposal is just only if it institutes a relationship in which the asked party retains undominated standing to revisit and revise; a proposal that secures a "yes" precisely by foreclosing deliberation is a poor omen for, and may be the first act of, an order of benevolent domination.*

6.3.5 Marxian and Social-Reproduction Theory

The Marxian register, also carried from Paper III, reads the proposal as the entry-point to an institution, marriage, historically organised around the appropriation of unwaged relational and reproductive labour. The proposal's *form* is then significant: a staging

that secures rapid agreement under emotional and social pressure, before the material terms of the shared life (who will carry the domestic and care labour, whose career bends to whose) are disclosed and negotiated, functions ideologically. It recodes the entry into a labour-asymmetric institution as a moment of pure romance, so that the unequal terms are agreed to before they are seen. The verdict: *the conventional proposal can be an ideological act that obtains agreement to an exploitative division of labour by ensuring it is never on the table at the moment of consent; justice requires that the material terms of social reproduction be disclosed and open to negotiation before, not after, the binding answer.*

6.3.6 Feminist Justice I: Pateman and the Critique of the Contract Itself

The deepest challenge comes from feminist contract critique, and the paper must meet it rather than evade it, because it threatens the constructive project at its root. Pateman (1988) argues that the contractual frame cannot be reformed into justice: contract, in her analysis, always generates political right in the form of domination and subordination, and the marriage contract specifically rests on a presumed “law of male sex-right” that the language of free agreement masks. Crucially for this paper, Pateman explicitly rejects the move this paper is tempted by, the hope that a contract “between genuinely equal partners” or “entered into without any coercion” could be redeemed. On her view, the feminist who seeks a *properly* consensual marriage contract is “misleading” herself: the defect is structural, not procedural, and lies in the very figure of the person as proprietor contracting over herself.

The honest response is not to refute Pateman but to locate the paper’s claim precisely against her. Three points. First, the paper does not claim that perfecting the consent-conditions of the proposal *achieves* justice in marriage; it claims, more modestly, that impaired consent at the threshold is *one* remediable wrong, whose remedy is necessary though not sufficient. Pateman’s structural critique and this paper’s situational one can both be true. Second, Pateman’s target is “property in the person” as the hidden premise of the contract; the relational reconstruction of Papers III and V already rejects that premise, the vow re-grounded as co-legislation is precisely *not* a transfer of property in the person but an ongoing shared authorship. To the extent the proposal is reconceived as the opening of co-legislation rather than the sealing of a transfer, it steps off the

contractual terrain Pateman condemns, which is also why the ring is re-grounded from “seal of a bargain” to “token and waiting.” Third, where Pateman is right that no staging can dissolve the historical-structural asymmetry of the institution, the paper concedes the residue openly: the just proposal is the most one can do *at the threshold*, and it neither claims nor pretends to undo what only the transformation of the institution could undo. The verdict: *Pateman shows that procedural justice at the proposal is not sufficient for justice in marriage; she does not show it is not necessary, and the relational re-grounding answers her premise of property-in-the-person without claiming to have answered her structural critique whole.*

6.3.7 Feminist Justice II: Relational Autonomy and the Ethics of Care

A second feminist tradition, less sceptical of reform, supplies positive standards. The relational-autonomy theorists hold that autonomy is not the property of an isolated chooser but is constituted and sustained in relationships; a choice is autonomous to the degree the relationship *supports* the agent’s self-governing capacities rather than undercutting them (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). On this view a proposal is just when its form actively scaffolds the proposee’s reflective agency, by giving time, information, and room for her own interpretation, rather than relying on her competence surviving an unfavourable staging. The ethics of care adds that the relevant moral salience is *responsiveness to the concrete other*: a proposer attentive to this particular person’s needs at the threshold would not stage a scene optimised for his narrative of the romantic moment, but one optimised for her capacity to answer well. The verdict, convergent with this paper’s constructive half: *justice in the proposal is the active, caring construction of the conditions under which the other can exercise full relational autonomy, the proposal as a gift of deliberative room, not a demand for immediate ratification.*

6.3.8 Virtue, Care, and the Confucian 礼义 Register

A final register, drawing the Aristotelian, care-ethical, and Confucian threads together, shifts from the justice of the act to the *character* it expresses and the *ritual propriety* (礼 礼) through which care is rightly enacted. The Confucian tradition is distinctively apt here: it does not oppose emotion and propriety but holds that right feeling is *realised* through proper form, “发乎情，止乎礼义”, it rises from feeling

and comes to rest in what is right (the line that stands in this series' dedication). On this view the staged surprise proposal errs not because it is emotional but because its form is **self-regarding**: it expresses the proposer's feeling in a manner that subordinates the beloved's standing to answer, where 礼 would shape the same feeling into a form that honours her, that makes space, gives notice, awaits readiness. The virtue at stake is a species of **respect-in-love** (敬), the holding of the beloved in a regard that fears to do her wrong (敬之惧之). The verdict: **the just proposal is the one whose form is the outward propriety (礼) adequate to the inward love (情), in which awaiting the other's readiness is not a diminishment of ardour but its disciplined and respectful expression.**

6.3.9 Convergence, Divergence, and What the Body Owes

The schools converge more than they diverge, which is itself a result worth stating: liberal procedural justice, autonomy-based liberalism, republicanism, relational autonomy, the ethics of care, and the Confucian 礼义 register all condemn the conventional staged proposal and all endorse, by different routes, the same family of remedies, disclosure, decoupled timing, removed immediacy, retained standing to revise. The Marxian register adds a condition the others underweight (disclosure of the **material** terms of social reproduction). And Pateman dissents at the deepest level, denying that any procedural fix redeems the contractual form, a dissent the paper answers only partially and concedes openly. The body of the paper will (i) develop the consent-theoretic diagnosis of § 6.3.1 in full, (ii) carry the republican and Marxian lines from Paper III without simply repeating them, (iii) treat Pateman's objection as the principal challenge to the constructive project and give § 6.3.6's three-point reply its full defence, and (iv) show that the convergence of the remaining schools on the same remedies is not coincidence but reflects that those remedies just **are** the conditions of valid, undominated, caring consent to a transformative commitment.

We can now show how the proposal situation instantiates Catala's categories, without minting a new term. I proceed in four steps: which dimension of agency is engaged; why the register is hermeneutical and not testimonial; how the situational conditions impede self-interpretation; and where the analysis stops.

6.3.10 The Proposal as a Transformative Threshold

Marriage is a paradigm of transformative experience in L. A. Paul's sense: one cannot fully know, in advance, what it will be like to be married to this person, nor who one will become in the marrying, and so the values by which one would assess the choice are partly constituted by undergoing it. Catala's Chapter 6 is built for exactly this juncture: it theorises how an agent makes new sense of herself, achieves a **hermeneutical breakthrough**, across such a threshold, and what it is for her to be **epistemically empowered** rather than impeded in doing so. The proposal is the moment at which a person is asked to commit, by a single binding answer, across precisely such a threshold. The question the framework lets us ask is sharp: **under what conditions is the proposee's self-interpretive agency, at this threshold, empowered, and under what conditions impeded?**

6.3.11 Which Dimension of Agency: The Self-to-Self Axis

The wrong, if there is one, is not that the proposee is disbelieved (no credibility is at issue) and not that she lacks the public concept of marriage (the collective hermeneutical resource is amply available). It is that, in the staged scene, she is impeded in the **self-to-self** exercise of intelligibility: making adequate sense, to herself, of what this commitment means for her, what she wants, what she fears, who she would become, in the moment she must answer. This is squarely the non-propositional, self-interpretive dimension of epistemic agency that Catala's **pluralist account** brings into view and that testimony-centred accounts miss. Naming the dimension precisely is what keeps the diagnosis from collapsing into the truism that "surprises can be manipulative": the claim is specific, that a particular and theorised capacity, self-to-self intelligibility at a transformative threshold, is the thing the staging bears on.

6.3.12 Why Hermeneutical, Not Testimonial

Catala's reframing as **domination** along testimonial and hermeneutical axes lets us place the case exactly. It is not **testimonial**: no one is deflating the credibility of the proposee's word. It belongs to the **hermeneutical** register, the conditions

of sense-making, but with a twist the framework is built to accommodate: the impediment is not (as in Fricker's original) a gap in the collective conceptual pool, but a situational compression of the agent's **occasion and capacity to interpret her own experience to herself**. Catala's self-to-self axis is what makes this sayable without distortion. The proposal does not deprive the proposee of the concept of marriage; it deprives her, in the scene, of the conditions under which she could bring her own interpretive agency to bear on her own case.

6.3.13 How the Situational Conditions Impede Self-Interpretation

Three features of the conventional staging bear on self-to-self intelligibility, and it is worth being exact about the mechanism in each, since the constructive half will work by reversing them.

1. **Affective saturation.** A staged emotional peak does not merely accompany the decision; it can crowd the cognitive and interpretive room in which the proposee would make sense of her own response, so that what presents itself as clarity may be the affect of the scene rather than a self-interpretation she has had the room to reach. Emotion is not the enemy, it is proper to love, but emotion **staged to displace interpretation at the moment interpretation is most needed** is an impediment to self-to-self intelligibility.
2. **Temporal compression and the immediate-answer script.** The script codes hesitation as rejection or cruelty and demands an answer **now**, collapsing the interval in which self-interpretation could occur and converting the need to think into a social cost borne in public. This is a direct constriction of the occasion for hermeneutical agency.
3. **Informational asymmetry.** One party has had unbounded time to interpret and prepare; the other meets the threshold cold. The asymmetry is not (or not only) about propositional facts withheld; it is about the unequal opportunity for the **interpretive work** that a transformative choice demands.

Each of these, in Catala's terms, bears on **epistemic empowerment**: the con-

ventional staging tends to **disempower** the proposee's self-interpretation at the threshold, where the normative ideal would be to empower it.

6.3.14 Where the Analysis Stops: Two Honest Limits

Two limits keep the application from over-reaching, and both follow from taking Catala seriously rather than from an ad hoc fence.

First, **the structural-domination gap**. Catala's domination concepts are indexed to non-dominant social groups; the proposee in a loving, equal partnership is not, qua proposee, structurally marginalised. The paper therefore claims only that the **situational** conditions can impede self-interpretive agency, and does not claim the proposee suffers **hermeneutical domination** in Catala's full structural sense. This is the extension the framework needs and the full paper must defend; it is named, not hidden. Where a real power asymmetry **does** obtain between the parties, the structural reading applies more directly, and the wrong is correspondingly graver.

Second, **antecedent interpretation dissolves the case**. If the couple has, over months, done the interpretive and deliberative work together, then a staged, surprise, immediate-answer proposal compresses no self-interpretation that has not already had its occasion; the answer ratifies a long joint sense-making rather than substituting for it. This is exactly why the constructive remedy is **prior disclosure and shared interpretation**: dissolve the asymmetry and restore the occasion in advance, and the same staging that would otherwise impede self-to-self intelligibility now impedes nothing. The analysis points directly at its own remedy, which is the mark of a diagnosis that has located the wrong in the right place.

6.3.15 What the Body Will Build on This

With the framework fixed and the mapping done, the full paper's arc is set. The **diagnosis** applies § 6.3.10 to the conventional proposal: in the sincere, prejudice-free, malice-free case, the staging can still impede the proposee's self-to-self intelligibility at a transformative threshold, an impediment to epistemic agency

in Catala's pluralist sense, and no appeal to a new category is required to say so. Three objections are then met: the **kill-joy** objection (refusing to let affect displace interpretation is not refusing affect); the **voluntary-participation** objection (participation under a compressed occasion for self-interpretation is not the same as having had that occasion); and the **scope** objection (the target is the structure of soliciting a transformative commitment under asymmetry and immediate-answer pressure, not every surprise). The **constructive** half then derives the epistemically just proposal as a structure of **epistemic empowerment**: separation of the affective moment from the decision; full disclosure and shared interpretation before the asking; removal of immediate-answer pressure; the ring re-grounded from **seal of a concluded bargain** to **token and waiting**; and a deferred-commitment mechanism. The reflexive constraint of § 6.1 governs throughout: the argument is honoured only if enacted **with** the other, not merely asserted about her, which is itself an application of empowering, rather than impeding, her self-interpretation.

Acknowledgements

This is the sixth paper in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. It was occasioned, like its predecessors, by a question the author's own life put to him; the proposee discussed here is kept deliberately anonymous, and the case is presented as a constructed one, so that the argument may stand on its structure. The reflexive constraint announced in the orientation is meant sincerely: the paper's claims are not discharged by publication but only by being enacted, disclosed, and held open to revision with the one they concern.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for verifying the current literature, structuring the analysis, and refining the prose; the ideas, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility for the content. The literature of this installment was verified against sources current to 2025; any remaining error of attribution is mine to correct in the full draft.

愿天下有情人，问者以诚，答者以宁；相知而后相许，从容而不相负。相许如初见，白首如相知。

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CHAPTER 7

Prolegomena to a Diplomacy of Intimate Relationships

7.1. Introduction: From the Dyad to the World

The first six papers of this series have, throughout, worked inside a tacitly closed system. The mother paper established the ontology of relational being: that being is set apart, prior to relation, is an illusion of modernity; the truth is that the subject is generated in relation, through relation. **Paper III** treated the normativity of this relational system, arguing that the norms of an intimate bond are not imposed upon the two parties from without but are the product of their joint self-legislation. **Paper V** descended to the micro-mechanism of subject formation, using joint attention to characterize how two consciousnesses mutually constitute one another within a shared attentional field. **Paper VI** cut into a single decisive moment—the proposal of marriage—and exposed the epistemic injustice latent within it: one party may, procedurally, solicit consent in full, yet substantively monopolize the authority to interpret the content of “love,” “commitment,” and “we.”

These six papers share a premise that goes unstated: they all unfold at the scale of the **dyad**. Whether the matter is self-legislation, joint attention, or epistemic recognition, the stage of the argument holds only two persons. The external world—the parents, siblings, old friends, and colleagues of either party, and the anonymous social norms that surround them—appears at most as a backdrop, never as a **coupling term** entering the system. This closure was no oversight but a methodological simplification of necessity: first make the mechanisms clear within the smallest structurally complete relational system, then generalize outward.

The present paper is that first step of generalization outward. Its central claim is this: **from the moment of its formation, the dyad is already surrounded, watched, and normed by a network of external relations; the external relational field is not an optional addition to the dyad but a constitutive condition of its existence.** The “we” never establishes itself in a vacuum; it is given, recognized, and contested within a field already dense with others. When a couple first walks hand in hand through the door of either family’s home, they are already engaged in an activity—presenting themselves, negotiating a position, petitioning for acceptance—before an authority that exists prior to them and that holds the power of recognition and the disposal of resources. This activity the present paper calls **diplomacy**.

To call it diplomacy marks three facts. First, in the external relational field the dyad is not an isolated atom but a **quasi-sovereign unit**: it has an inside and an outside, a common position that must be represented abroad, internal affairs that must be guarded. Second, its dealings with external relational terms are **structured, regulated, and freighted with stakes**—arrivals call for rites, exchanges incur debts, breaches of decorum carry consequences, much as between states. Third, and most decisively, this commerce is **often not diplomacy between equals but asymmetric diplomacy**: before parents and lineage, the dyad is frequently not an equal contracting party but rather the lower-standing side presenting its credentials to an authority that holds history, resources, and the power of definition (see §7.7).

In the vocabulary of this series, the leap is from **second-order coupling** to **higher-order coupling**. Second-order coupling is the mutual constitution of two subjects; higher-order coupling is the mutual constitution between “the dyad as a unit” and one or more external relational terms. This is not merely raising the head-count from two to three, four, five. Higher-order coupling brings **structurally new phenomena** that simply do not exist at the dyadic scale: the formation of triangles, the objectification of being-watched-as-a-whole, the ascent into nested mentalizing, the circulation and extraction of value within a larger network. These will be brought to light, one by one, below. The series names this larger research programme **Generalized Generative Relational Being** (GRB): generative, because relation does not rest in static connection but continually produces value, subjects, and norms; generalized, because it must extend from the dyad to relational structures of arbitrary order. The present paper is the first step toward that programme.

The standing of this paper must be clarified at the outset. This is a **programmatic review**, not a finished argument. Scholarly writing ordinarily expects a paper to advance one thesis, mount one line of argument, reach one conclusion. This is not such a paper. Its task is **mapping**: within the vast and almost wholly unsurveyed problem-domain of “diplomacy,” to mark out which sub-problems there are, to which theoretical stratum each belongs, how they couple with one another, and to erect a coordinate system and a literature infrastructure for the sub-series of papers that will each go deeper in turn. It seeks breadth, not exhaustion. Wherever a matter could be argued at depth, this paper

gives the minimal analytic frame and then marks “to be developed in a later paper,” indicating its destination in the roadmap of the conclusion (§7.15).

This standing dictates two features of the paper’s apparatus. First, it makes heavy use of **literature tables**: each problem-domain is not only analyzed but accompanied by its key sources, their core contributions, and—crucially—their specific significance for this research programme, so that the paper serves as an entry map for later researchers. Second, beyond the abstract coupling analysis, it embeds **thick case descriptions**: at several nodes of the relational network it places a concrete, anonymized situation, so that a phenomenon shows itself in its particularity rather than remaining a bare name on a coordinate axis. The methodological account of these two devices is given in §7.4.

Finally, a word is owed on why this paper does **not** adopt a seemingly more natural manner of writing—taking some one phenomenon (the most conspicuous candidate being the gift) as a hub running through the whole. This refusal is no matter of stylistic preference but a methodological requirement derived from within the relational ontology itself. The next section takes up the matter.

7.2. A Methodological Self-Examination: Why No Central Phenomenon

Consider a tempting manner of writing. Among all the phenomena of diplomacy, the gift seems to sit naturally at the center: it is weighty, visible, measurable, and nearly every abstract dimension shows itself at once upon it—it has value (the theory of value), it is a sign (semiotics), it must be read (hermeneutics), it manufactures indebtedness (the theory of justice), it transfers wealth across kin networks (political economy), and it is always given and received under the gaze of others (the gaze). Since the gift is so richly endowed, why not take it as the hub, let the whole paper unfold around it, and treat the remaining phenomena as its footnotes or extensions?

This paper **refuses** that manner. There are three reasons, and all three grow from within the relational ontology of this series—which makes the refusal itself a theoretical stance rather than a matter of taste.

First, phenomena possess symmetry. To take some one phenomenon as central is, before

the analysis has even begun, to perform upon the phenomenal layer a **spontaneous symmetry breaking**. Prior to analysis, gift, rite, address, gaze, absence, triangle—the phenomena co-exist symmetrically: none is *a priori* more “central” than another. The gift comes to *seem* central only because our attention happens to congeal, to break, there. That breaking is real, but it is an event on the **observer’s** side, not a structure on the side of the real. To fix the contingent landing-point of an observer’s attention as a hierarchy in the theory is to mistake an epistemic contingency for an ontological necessity. The “importance” of the gift, if real, can only be that which its **position** in the external relational field confers upon it (it happens to be richly connected), not some essence intrinsic to it. Load-bearing is conferred by relation, not carried by the node.

Second, no phenomenon contains infinite reason. To take a single phenomenon as one’s lens carries an over-strong assumption: that from it the entire theoretical field can be mirrored, as though it contained every dimension. But any phenomenon is finite, local. It illuminates only those dimensions strongly coupled to it and is **blind** to the dimensions orthogonal to it. The gift illuminates the circulation of value and semantic coding, yet it cannot illuminate a silent rite in which nothing is exchanged (the rising and yielding of one’s seat before an elder), nor a pure gaze attached to no object (the eyes that appraise one again and again across the banquet table). To force the gift to explain these phenomena it was never able to reach only distorts them into variants of the gift, losing the distinct phenomenological texture each one has. To let a local usurp the global is an epistemic overreach. This accords with a vigilance constant to the series: no finite thing—be it a subject, a relation, or a phenomenon—is entitled to the view from nowhere.

Third, relational being demands organization by coupling rather than by a hub. This is the deepest of the three. The core ontological claim of this series is that load-bearing, meaning, and value are not intrinsic properties of any single node but **emergent effects of the relational network**. Hub-and-spoke organization—one central phenomenon with the rest arrayed around it—violates precisely this claim, for it loads the weight of organization onto a single node and lets the network degenerate into a star centered on that node. The mode of organization faithful to the relational ontology is to let **the coupling relations themselves** be the sole organizer: the phenomena hang on the relational network as equals, organized by **the edges among them** rather than

radiating from some specially chosen point. In such an organization the gift is merely a node of higher connectivity in the network—a connectivity that will be **displayed** in the coupling matrix of §7.5.3, not **presupposed**. The difference between displaying and presupposing is precisely the difference between fidelity and infidelity to the relational ontology.

From this follows an original methodological claim of the paper: formal self-reference. A paper that expounds “how relational being unfolds toward the world” ought itself to have a chapter-structure that is relational, decentered, organized by coupling rather than by a hub. In other words, the **form** of this paper should self-referentially enact its **content**. The earlier papers already carried this aesthetic awareness (**Paper III** wrote self-legislation in the form of self-legislation; the mother paper expounded relationality in a relational style); the present paper makes it thematic: the whole is organized not around a central phenomenon but along a vertical axis of “how coupling occurs, layer by layer” and a horizontal axis of “how medium and tension cut across the layers,” so that in the very experience of reading, the reader lives through one unfolding of relation, from the dyad toward the world.

One objection must be met in advance: does decentering amount to having no focus, issuing in diffuseness? It does not. Decentered organization has its definite spine—it is doubly oriented by the **order in which coupling occurs** (from the first other beyond the dyad, to network and field) and by the **theoretical strata** (the Real, the Symbolic, the phenomenal; see the stratal coordinates of §7.4). The focus lies not in any phenomenon but in **structure**: in how coupling ascends, in how the strata mutually ground one another. This is exactly the form a focus should take in a synoptic mother-text—it offers terrain and coordinates, not a close-up of any one vista.

7.3. Theoretical Framework: The Lenses of the Survey

A programmatic review earns its standing as infrastructure chiefly here, in the framework section, for it is here that a reader new to the domain is given the traditions to command and the literature to read. This section therefore does not stint. Each of the twelve frameworks the paper employs is given its own exposition and its own literature-review

table, so that a researcher entering by any one lens finds, in one place, what the framework claims, who its principal authors are, what each contributes, and where the framework's force and its limits lie. The substantive *application* of each framework still unfolds in the stratal chapter where it does its work—that is the principle of §2, that the frameworks are nodes given sense by their couplings—but the *exposition* belongs here, gathered, so that the later chapters may use the lenses without stopping to introduce them.

A word on the literature tables. They are reviews, not bibliographies: each entry states not merely a citation but the work's core contribution, its specific significance for this research programme, and its principal limitation or the controversy attaching to it. Every entry has been bibliographically verified; an accurate table is worth more than a comprehensive-looking but unreliable one, and the reader is owed the distinction. The frameworks are presented in the order of the strata they will serve—ontological ground first, then the symbolic frameworks (value, sign, law, economy), then the mechanism frameworks (cognition, neuroscience, decision), then the formal and the psychoanalytic—and the section closes (§3.12) on the claim that binds them: that they form a network with no foundation, the third place the paper's form enacts its content.

7.3.1 The ontology of relational being

This is the framework carried from the first six papers and the ground on which the present one builds, though—by its own logic—a ground that is itself a node rather than a foundation. Its claim is that being-in-isolation, the self set apart and only subsequently entering relations, is an abstraction; the concrete truth is that subjects are constituted in and through relation, generated by the bonds that a prior metaphysics treated as external accidents befalling an already-complete substance. The mother paper argued this for the dyad; the present paper extends it outward, so that diplomacy becomes the name for relational being *unfolding toward the world*—the dyad, having generated itself in second-order coupling, now generating and being generated by the field beyond it.

The lineage of the view is worth setting out, because the paper's originality lies less in the bare thesis (which has antecedents) than in its formalization and its extension to higher order. The relational thesis has roots in Hegel's account of self-consciousness as achieved only through recognition by another (Hegel 1977); in Buber's distinction of the

I–Thou relation from the I–It (Buber 1937); in Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach, that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations (Marx 1978); and, in a different key, in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (緣起, *pratītyasamutpāda*), that no entity possesses own-being but arises only in dependence on conditions. Contemporary relational sociology (Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Crossley 2011; Donati 2011) and the relational turn in feminist ethics (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000) are its nearer kin. Against this background the series’ contribution is to treat relation not as a fact about persons but as a generative ontology with formal structure—which is what permits the coupling-theoretic and geometric formalizations the later frameworks supply.

Table 7.1: Relational being: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> (1807), master–slave dialectic	Self-consciousness achieved through recognition	The deep source of constitution-in-relation	Idealist frame; difficult
Buber, <i>I and Thou</i> (1923)	The I–Thou vs. I–It relation	Relation as primary, not derivative	Aphoristic, hard to operationalize
Marx, <i>Theses on Feuerbach</i> (1845), VI	Essence as the ensemble of social relations	Relation prior to the isolated individual	Compressed; much-contested reading
Dependent origination (<i>pratītyasamutpāda</i>); Nāgārjuna	No own-being; arising-in-dependence	Non-Western root of the relational thesis	Doctrinal variants; translation
Mackenzie & Stoljar (eds.), <i>Relational Autonomy</i> (2000)	Autonomy as relationally constituted	Bridges relation and the normative	Anthology; uneven
Donati, <i>Relational Sociology</i> (2011)	Society as made of relations	Contemporary relational social theory	Heavy apparatus
Emirbayer (1997), “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology”	Substances vs. processes; relations as primary	The programmatic statement of the relational turn	Manifesto, not a worked theory

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Crossley, <i>Towards Relational Sociology</i> (2011)	Social worlds as networks of iterated interaction	Relation as lived trajectory	Network bias; light on inner constitution
The mother paper of this series	Generative relational being, formalized	The immediate ground of this paper	Self-citation; programme in progress

7.3.2 Generative justice and the circulation of value

The second framework is the interface with Ron Eglash’s generative justice (Eglash 2016), and it supplies the normative spine of the paper’s political economy (§7.10). Its guiding question is whether value, once generated within a relational network, *circulates* within it—is retained by its producers, flows through the network and returns to those whose labor or care created it—or is instead *extracted*, siphoned in one direction to a point of accumulation outside the network. Generative justice reframes justice as a question of circulation rather than of static distribution: the issue is not only who holds how much at an instant, but whether value is kept in motion among those who make it. Eglash develops the notion across ecological, labor, and expressive value, drawing on cybernetic and indigenous-knowledge traditions (Eglash and Garvey 2014; Eglash 2018; Eglash et al. 2024), and the present paper proposes the intimate relational field as a further, and ancient, domain of the same dynamic: diplomacy is among the oldest forms in which value circulates rather than being extracted, and equally a site where extraction wears the mask of reciprocity.

The framework couples tightly to two others. It supplies the normative reading of the geometric-phase formalism (§3.5): extraction is, formally, the non-conservation of value around a circuit of an asymmetric field. And it inherits from the older critique of alienation—Marx’s account of the worker separated from the product of labor—which it generalizes from waged labor to value of every kind, including the relational and the affective. The foundational statement is Eglash (2016); the framework is elaborated across open-source and artisanal value (Eglash and Garvey 2014; Eglash 2018) and, most recently, in computational reparations and decolonial circular value flow (Eglash et al. 2024).

Table 7.2: Generative justice and value circulation: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Eglash (2016), “An Introduction to Generative Justice”	Value circulation vs. extraction; the canonical definition	The paper’s normative spine	Normative baseline still developing
Eglash et al. (2024), “Computational Reparations as Generative Justice”	Unalienated circular value flow; decolonial transitions	The recent major statement	Scope of “generative” contested
Marx, <i>Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts</i> (1844)	Alienation: worker severed from product	The ancestor of the extraction concept	Early Marx; reading debated
Mauss, <i>The Gift</i> (1925)	The gift kept in circulation; <i>hau</i>	Circulation as an ancient relational form	Archaic-case generalization
Ostrom, <i>Governing the Commons</i> (1990)	Commons sustained without extraction	Institutional kin of circulation	Not framed as “value” per se

7.3.3 Semiotics, the semantics of the sign, and hermeneutics

The third framework concerns how value and the rites are generated, coded, and read as signs, and it serves the chapter on the rites and value (§7.8). Its claim is that a gift, a form of address, a seating, an absence is a *signifier* whose relation to its signified—affection, recognition, standing, refusal—is conventional, culturally specific, and learnable, so that the same object can bear opposite meanings across two grammars (the white flowers that honor in one code and mourn in another). Three strands are needed. *Structural semiotics* (Saussure 1959) gives the signifier/signified relation and the arbitrariness of the sign; *Peircean semiotics* (Peirce 1931) adds the triad of icon, index, symbol and the interpretant, which matters because a gift signifies partly by resemblance and partly by causal connection, not by convention alone; and *hermeneutics* (Ricoeur 1976; Gadamer 2004) gives the theory of *reading*, for the receiver of a sign must interpret it, and interpretation is fallible, situated, and—as §7.7 insists—unequally authorized. Misreading a sign is the diplomatic incident the phenomenal chapter (§7.13) analyzes; the right to fix a sign’s reading is the hermeneutical injustice the justice chapter (§7.14) anatomizes.

The framework’s nearest application to gifts specifically runs through Baudrillard’s sign-value (Baudrillard 1981) and through the anthropology of exchange, but its philosophical weight is hermeneutic: it establishes that value in the relational field is not read off objects but *conferred in interpretation*, which is exactly

why the authority to interpret becomes a site of power.

Table 7.3: Semiotics, semantics, and hermeneutics: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Saussure, <i>Course in General Linguistics</i> (1916)	Signifier/signified; arbitrariness	The sign-structure of the rites	Langue/parole dualism contested
Peirce, <i>Collected Papers</i> (icon/index/symbol)	The interpretant; sign triad	Gifts signify by more than convention	Notoriously systematic, dense
Ricoeur, <i>Interpretation Theory</i> (1976)	Reading as the recovery of meaning	Interpretation of the diplomatic sign	Broad; many works to triangulate
Gadamer, <i>Truth and Method</i> (1960)	The situatedness of understanding	Why readings are positioned, fallible	Long; hermeneutic-circle worries
Baudrillard, <i>For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign</i> (1972)	Sign-value distinct from use/exchange	The third value before relational value	Polemical; later turn contested

7.3.4 Optimization and dynamical systems

The fourth framework is the first of the formal layer, and it serves the behavioral reading of the network chapter (§7.13). It makes two proposals. The first is that diplomacy is a *multi-objective constrained optimization*: the dyad must satisfy, at once, internal accord, the expectations of each family of origin, ambient social norms, and its own values—objectives that frequently conflict, so that there is no single act maximizing all, only trade-offs along a Pareto frontier. “Decorum,” on this reading, is not a code obeyed but the *feasible set*: the region of acts violating no hard constraint, within which the diplomat must still choose. The second proposal is that the relational field is a *dynamical system*: gifts and slights are perturbations, debt and reciprocity are feedback loops, and the field has stable basins (a relation that absorbs ordinary shocks) and failure modes (collapse into conflict, or rigidification into hollow form). The art of diplomacy is then keeping the system in a *living* stable basin—deep enough to absorb perturbation, shallow enough that feeling still flows.

The framework is offered as a structuring vocabulary, not a predictive model; its risk, named honestly,

is functionalist drift—mistaking a suggestive formalism for an established mechanism—and the paper guards against this by leaving worked models to the dedicated computational sub-paper and using the vocabulary here only to make “decorum” and “tact” precise rather than to predict behavior.

Table 7.4: Optimization and dynamical systems: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Pareto, multi-objective optimality (Pareto front)	Trade-offs without a single optimum	“Decorum” as the feasible/efficient set	Silent on how to choose among optima
Boyd & Vandenberghe, <i>Convex Optimization</i> (2004)	Constrained optimization, rigorously	The formal frame for the feasible set	Assumes convexity rarely present
Strogatz, <i>Nonlinear Dynamics and Chaos</i> (1994)	Attractors, basins, stability	The relational field as dynamical system	Application here is qualitative
Gottman et al. (2002), <i>The Mathematics of Marriage</i>	Nonlinear dynamical modeling of dyads, empirically	A precedent for relational dynamics	Dyadic, not higher-order; contested

7.3.5 Geometric phase, holonomy, and Value Foam

The fifth framework is the paper’s most distinctive formal proposal, and it serves the formal interfaces of §7.7 and §7.10. Its intuition is geometric. When a vector is carried around a closed loop on a curved surface, “always pointing straight ahead” at each step, it returns to its starting point rotated; the rotation, the *holonomy* of the loop, measures the curvature enclosed, and it is irreducible to any single step. The proposal is that a season of diplomacy is such a loop: the dyad sets out from a relational state, passes through a sequence of exchanges and occasions, and returns to what looks locally like its starting point, yet altered—and the alteration, like the rotation, is a property of the circuit as a whole, not of any transaction along it. Formally, with the relational state carried along a closed path γ by a connection A , the holonomy

$$\text{Hol}(\gamma) = \mathcal{P} \exp \oint_{\gamma} A$$

is non-trivial, $\text{Hol}(\gamma) \neq \mathbb{I}$, exactly when the circuit leaves the state irreversibly deformed. On an *asymmetric* field the connection A is itself asymmetric, so the deformation accumulated by the weaker party

over one circuit differs from the stronger’s: the geometric statement of unequal cost (§7.7), and, read through generative justice, the non-conservation of value around the loop (§7.10).

The framework draws on the geometric (Berry) phase of physics (Berry 1984; Simon 1983), on gauge theory’s connection and holonomy, and on the series’ own “Value Foam” formulation, which adapts these to value and alienation. Its honest limitation is twofold: a high abstraction barrier, and the burden of showing that the formalism does explanatory work rather than ornamenting the prose—a burden discharged not here but in the dedicated formal paper. *The notation above is provisional and is to be aligned with the Value Foam formulation developed in the author’s prior work in this series.*

Table 7.5: Geometric phase, holonomy, Value Foam: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Berry, “Quantal phase factors...” (1984)	The geometric (Berry) phase	The physical root of the holonomy idea	Transposition to value needs argument
Nakahara, <i>Geometry, Topology and Physics</i> (2003)	Connections, holonomy, fiber bundles	The mathematical apparatus	Heavy prerequisites
Simon (1983), holonomy interpretation of Berry phase	Holonomy reading of the phase	Names the circuit-invariant precisely	Technical
The author’s Value Foam formulation (this series)	Holonomy applied to value and alienation	The immediate formal source	Programme in progress
Marx, alienation (cf. §3.2)	Value severed from producer	The phenomenon the holonomy formalizes	Bridging to geometry is novel

7.3.6 Theory of mind and the joint-attentional field

The sixth framework is the cognitive one, serving the mechanism bridge and the triad (§7.11, §7.12). To know how an external other appraises the relation requires *mentalizing*—representing another’s mental states—and higher-order coupling requires this mentalizing to be *nested*: I represent how my mother appraises my partner, and how my partner imagines that appraisal, and so on up. The framework supplies, first, the developmental and comparative science of theory of mind (Premack and Woodruff

1978; Wimmer and Perner 1983) (the false-belief paradigm; the question of its phylogenetic distribution); second, the account of *joint attention* (Tomasello 2008)—two minds attending to the same object and each aware of the other’s attending—which Paper V used to characterize the dyad and which the present paper extends, since in diplomacy the dyad must either draw a third into joint attention or be drawn into a third-party-dominated attentional field. Whose attentional field governs a scene is, the paper argues, a question of power.

The framework’s empirical core (developmental psychology, comparative cognition) is robust; its contested edge is the neural-localization claims that the next framework takes up, and the depth-of-nesting question—how many orders of mentalizing humans routinely sustain—which the bridge chapter treats as a power-laden variable rather than a fixed ceiling.

Table 7.6: Theory of mind and joint attention: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Premack & Woodruff (1978), “Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?”	Coined the theory-of-mind question	The origin of the mentalizing frame	Animal case still debated
Wimmer & Perner (1983), false belief	The experimental test of ToM	Operationalizes mental-state attribution	Task-format critiques
Tomasello, <i>Origins of Human Communication</i> (2008)	Joint attention, shared intentionality	The basis Paper V extends	Strong human-uniqueness claims
Baron-Cohen, <i>Mindblindness</i> (1995)	Mentalizing as a system	Nested mentalizing as machinery	Modularity contested
Dennett, the intentional stance; orders of intentionality	Recursive belief attribution	The formal sense of “higher order”	Stance-instrumentalism debated

7.3.7 Psychoanalysis

The seventh framework supplies the account of the gaze, the triangle, transference, and the big Other, and it serves the triad chapter (§7.12). Its claim is that the subject is constituted in the field of the Other’s

desire and the Other’s look: the dyad, entering the symbolic network of family and norm, is constituted as an object by the gaze of the *big Other* (Lacan 1978)—the anonymous order of social expectation—and proposal and wedding are, in this register, symbolic registrations before that gaze. The framework also supplies the *triangle*: the entry of a third party into a prior dyad activates a structure of mediation, jealousy, and exclusion (the in-law triangle), and the mechanism of *transference*, by which an entering partner is made to carry affect that belongs to an older, unsymbolized history (the traumatic real of §7.6). Sartre’s analysis of the look (Sartre 1956) and Lévinas’s of the face (Lévinas 1969) give the two poles between which §7.12 situates the diplomatic gaze.

The framework’s power is its account of what eludes the rational-actor models of the bridge chapter—the carried, the unspoken, the transference; its honest liability is the contested empirical testability of its core claims, which the paper handles by using psychoanalysis to *describe structure* (the triangle, the gaze) rather than to make causal predictions.

Table 7.7: Psychoanalysis: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Lacan, <i>Seminar XI</i> (1964), the gaze	The subject under the Other’s look; <i>objet petit a</i>	The mechanism of being-watched-as-whole	Textually difficult; school disputes
Lacan, the big Other	The symbolic order as Other	The anonymous gaze of norm	Contested formalization
Sartre, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> (1943), “the look”	Objectification, shame, being-for-others	The objectifying pole of the gaze	Pessimism of for-others
Freud, on transference	Affect displaced onto a present figure	The entering partner as carrier	Clinical origin; generalization
Bowen, family systems; triangulation	The triangle as a stabilizing structure	The in-law triangle, formalized	Empirical basis contested

7.3.8 Phenomenology: intersubjectivity, co-presence, and the gaze

The eighth framework is phenomenology, and it deserves independent standing rather than absorption into psychoanalysis, because one of the paper’s three governing dimensions—the gaze of the Other, named in the subtitle—is at bottom a phenomenological matter, as is the whole stratum of co-presence, embodied

being-with, and the constitution of a shared world that the diplomatic field presupposes. Phenomenology asks how the other is given to me at all, how a “we” is constituted in lived experience, and how being-seen transforms the seen—questions prior to, and presupposed by, both the psychoanalytic account of the gaze and the cognitive account of mentalizing.

Four strands are needed. *The constitution of the other* (Husserl’s fifth *Cartesian Meditation*): the other is given not as an object inferred but as an *alter ego* apprehended through the analogical appresentation of a body like my own—the founding problem of how intersubjectivity is possible at all, and the one the diplomatic field inherits when a stranger must be received as a subject. *Embodied intersubjectivity* (Merleau-Ponty): the *intercorporeality* by which bodies read one another beneath explicit thought, so that the diplomatic field is navigated first by the body—the stiffening, the averted eye, the held hand—before any proposition is formed. *The social world and the we-relation* (Schutz): the phenomenological sociology of how a shared world is built from the face-to-face “we-relation,” the most direct interface to the paper’s central object, the dyad as a “we” that must now extend its we-relation to a third. And *the gaze* (Sartre, and Husserl’s account of being-an-object-for-another): how being-seen converts the subject into an object in another’s world, the structure §7.12 develops as being-watched-as-a-whole.

Crucially, phenomenology is not only a classical resource but a living and critical one, and the recent *critical phenomenology* movement is what lets the framework carry the paper’s attention to power. Where classical phenomenology described the structures of experience as if neutral, critical phenomenology—Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, with its analysis of *orientation* (how bodies are directed, what is within reach, who is “in line”); Guenther’s account of how social structures deform the very capacity for experience; Ortega’s analysis of multiplicitous selfhood—shows those structures to be shaped by power, race, gender, and history. This is the strand that couples phenomenology to §7.7: the gaze is not a neutral structure but one that falls along a gradient, and orientation is not freely chosen but inherited and enforced. The framework thus spans the classical (how the other and the we are constituted) and the critical (how that constitution is bent by power), which is exactly the doubled vision the paper needs for the gaze of the Other.

Table 7.8: Phenomenology: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Husserl (1960), fifth <i>Cartesian Meditation</i>	The other as <i>alter ego</i> ; analogical appresentation	How the other is given at all	Charge of residual solipsism
Merleau-Ponty (2012)	Embodied perception; intercorporeality	The body as first organ of diplomacy	Dense; pre-thematic claims hard to test

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Schutz (1967)	Phenomenological sociology; the we-relation	The dyad as a lived “we” extended to a third	Tension with Husserl’s transcendental aim
Sartre, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> (1943), “the look”	Being-seen as objectification	The objectifying pole of the gaze	Pessimism of being-for-others
Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i> (1927), <i>Mitsein</i>	Being-with as a basic structure of existence	Co-presence as constitutive, not added	Obscurity; political controversy
Ahmed (2006)	Orientation; what is “in line” and within reach	Couples the gaze to power and inheritance	Essayistic; selective with sources
Guenther (2013)	Critical phenomenology; structures that deform experience	The gaze as power-laden, not neutral	Extends from an extreme case
Ortega (2016)	Multiplicitous selfhood; being-between worlds	The cross-cultural dyad’s doubled self	Specific to Latina feminist context
D. Zahavi (2014)	Contemporary synthesis: self, empathy, shame	The current state of intersubjectivity theory	Sides in internal debates

7.3.9 Jurisprudence

The eighth framework, serving §7.9, treats the external relational field as structured at once by *informal* norms (the rites) and *formal* law (marriage, inheritance, maintenance, the legal characterization of bride-price, the standing of in-laws, divorce, domestic violence). If the rites are the soft grammar, law is the hard; the two coexist, strain against one another, and convert—a brideprice given as a rite becomes, when an engagement breaks, a debt the courts will hear. The framework supplies *legal pluralism* (Griffiths 1986; Merry 1988; Moore 1973) (the coexistence and conflict of multiple normative orders: state law, lineage quasi-law, and, for cross-cultural dyads, two jurisdictions at once), including its application specifically to the domain of intimacy (Cohen 2012) and the critical observation that legal default rules are not neutral but historically gendered, so that law hard-codes into enforceable form the asymmetries §7.7 traces in the soft grammar. It connects to the author’s prior work on sequential legal judgment (the NeSy-POMDP framework), under which the legal characterization of an act is itself a partially observable sequential inference.

Table 7.9: Jurisprudence: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
J. Griffiths, “What Is Legal Pluralism?” (1986)	Multiple legal orders coexisting	Rite/law/quasi-law as layered orders	“Law” arguably over-extended
S. E. Merry, “Legal Pluralism” (1988)	Survey of plural-order scholarship	Maps the field for the dyad	Descriptive breadth over depth
Cohen (2012), legal pluralism in the domain of intimacy	Plural normative orders in intimate life	Law and rite in the same field	Focus on Western constitutional law
Moore (1973), the semi-autonomous social field	How non-state fields generate binding norms	The rite as a quasi-legal order	Boundary of “law” contested
Pateman, <i>The Sexual Contract</i> (1988)	The gendered sub-structure of contract	Law’s gendered defaults	Strong thesis, contested

7.3.10 Political economy

The ninth framework, serving §7.10, asks what value diplomatic commerce *creates* (relational, social, and symbolic capital; trust; recognition), how it *circulates* (chains of reciprocity, the flow of the gift, the spread of reputation), and how it is *extracted* (gendered emotional labor, the harvest of the superior party). It is the positive battlefield of generative justice (§3.2), and it draws together Marx’s value theory (Marx 1976), Mauss’s account of the gift economy (Mauss 1990) and its elaboration in economic anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Sahlins 1972), Bourdieu’s forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) (social and symbolic capital as convertible, non-monetary assets), and social-reproduction theory’s analysis of unwaged care labor (Federici 2004). Its load-bearing claim for the paper is that relational value is genuinely *produced*, not merely transferred—so that the question of just *circulation* can even be posed—and its critical claim is that on an asymmetric field this produced value leaks to the powerful.

Table 7.10: Political economy: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Marx, <i>Capital</i> I (1867); value theory	Use/exchange value; surplus; alienation	The relational fourth value; extraction	Labor theory of value contested
Mauss, <i>The Gift</i> (1925)	The three obligations; <i>hau</i>	The gift economy's micro-justice	Archaic generalization
Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" (1986)	Social and symbolic capital	Relational capital as convertible	Economism charge
Polanyi, <i>The Great Transformation</i> (1944)	Embeddedness; substantive economy	Diplomacy as embedded exchange	Historiographical disputes
Federici, <i>Caliban and the Witch</i> (2004); social reproduction	Unwaged reproductive/care labor	The gendered structure of extraction	Scope of "reproduction" debated

7.3.11 Neuroscience

The tenth framework, serving the bridge chapter (§7.11), offers a cautious *implementational* account—with no reductionist commitment—of how the relational state is inferred. The relational state is treated as a latent variable on which the subject performs approximate Bayesian inference (active inference, in Friston's free-energy formulation (Friston 2010; Friston et al. 2017; Parr et al. 2022)), realized in candidate substrates: the medial prefrontal cortex in mentalizing and self/other value; the temporoparietal junction in belief attribution; the orbitofrontal and ventromedial prefrontal cortex in value and social-reward coding; the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex in norm-compliance and fairness decision (the ultimatum-game literature). The framework's place in the paper is guarded twice over (§7.11): against *reduction* (implementation is not identity; the value of a recognition is not exhausted by its neural realization) and against *mere metaphor* (the formalism must yield predictions, an explanation, and a definition, or it is decoration). It connects to the author's computational-neuroscientific work (EEG and grammar-based modeling at NCNP), which shares the latent-state/noisy-observation/sequential-update posture.

Table 7.11: Neuroscience: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Friston, “The free-energy principle” (2010)	Active inference; the Bayesian brain	The unifying frame for state inference	Falsifiability much debated
Amodio & Frith (2006), mPFC & social cognition	Medial PFC in mentalizing/value	Substrate of higher-order mentalizing	Reverse-inference caution
Saxe & Kanwisher (2003), TPJ & belief attribution	TPJ in theory-of-mind tasks	Belief attribution’s substrate	Localization replicability
Rangel, Camerer & Montague (2008), value coding	OFC/vmPFC in valuation	Neural representation of value	Reductionism risk
Sanfey et al. (2003), ultimatum-game fMRI	dLPFC/insula in fairness decision	Substrate of norm-laden decision	Single-paradigm generalization

7.3.12 Decision theory

The eleventh framework, also serving the bridge (§7.11), closes the chain: once the relational state is inferred, the subject must *decide*—what to give, whether to attend, how to answer an affront—under uncertainty. The natural formalism is sequential decision under partial observability, the POMDP (Kaelbling et al. 1998; Sutton and Barto 2018), since one acts not on the state but on a belief about it (connecting to the author’s NeSy-POMDP work on sequential judgment). Game-theoretic structure recurs: *coordination* games (two families converging on one wedding form), *signaling* games (Spence 1973; A. Zahavi 1975) (the gift as a costly signal, credible because costly), and *repeated* play (Axelrod 1984) (return-gifts as reciprocal strategy). And decision proceeds under *social preferences*—inequity aversion, a taste for reciprocity (Fehr and Schmidt 1999)—rather than narrow self-interest, which is why a diplomatically rational agent pays to right an imbalance. The framework’s idealizations (well-defined payoffs, common knowledge) are its limitation; its value is to make “tact” a precise notion—a policy minimizing expected surprise across all parties’ inferences at once.

Table 7.12: Decision theory: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Sutton & Barto, <i>Reinforcement Learning</i> (1998/2018)	Sequential decision; value functions	The formal frame for diplomatic action	Assumes stationarity, reward
Kaelbling, Littman & Cassandra (1998), POMDPs	Decision under partial observability	The relational state is partially observed	Computational intractability
Spence, “Job Market Signaling” (1973)	Costly signaling	The gift as a credible costly signal	Equilibrium-selection issues
Axelrod, <i>The Evolution of Cooperation</i> (1984)	Reciprocity in repeated play	Return-gifts as reciprocal strategy	Idealized tournament setting
Fehr & Schmidt (1999), inequity aversion	Social preferences in decision	Why agents pay to right imbalance	Parametric, contested fits

7.3.13 The coupling of the frameworks

The twelve frameworks pull on one another, and the pulls are not optional cross-references but the very thing that gives each its sense in this paper. Semiotics (§3.3) supplies the sign whose value political economy (§3.10) then asks to circulate; optimization (§3.4) formalizes the decision that decision theory (§3.12) frames and neuroscience (§3.11) implements; theory of mind (§3.6) describes the mentalizing that the neural framework realizes and the triad enacts; psychoanalysis (§3.7) and phenomenology (§3.8) together articulate the gaze, the one as the structure of desire and the other as the structure of being-seen; jurisprudence (§3.9) gives the hard grammar against which the rites (the semiotic and the relational frameworks together) are the soft; the geometric phase (§3.5) supplies the formal skeleton on which generative justice (§3.2) hangs its normative reading of extraction. Pull any one framework out and the others lose a connection, not merely a citation.

This is what it means to say there is **no foundational framework beneath the rest**: one cannot order them as axioms and theorems, with relational being as the axiom and the rest derived, because relational being itself is given content only by what the other frameworks let it do in the world. It grounds them and is, in turn, specified by them—precisely the circularity a relational ontology embraces rather than flees. A foundation is a node that bears weight without being borne; there is no such node here. This is the third and final place the paper’s form enacts its content: §2 argued it for phenomena (no central phenomenon),

§7.12 will show it for the triad (no master face among the three), and here it holds for the frameworks themselves (no master lens). A paper on relational being that rested on a foundational framework would refute itself in its architecture, however relational its sentences. Table p07:tab:frameworks gives the synoptic map of the twelve; it is to be read, like the coupling matrix of §7.5.3, as a network of edges rather than a ranking of nodes.

Table 7.13: The twelve frameworks: synoptic map

Framework	Core concept	Serves	Principal limitation
Relational being (§3.1)	Constitution-in-relation	The whole; the ground	Circularity if read as foundation
Generative justice (§3.2)	Circulation vs. extraction	§7.10	Normative baseline developing
Semiotics & hermeneutics (§3.3)	Sign; reading; relational value	§7.8	Code-fixity overstated
Optimization & dynamics (§3.4)	Pareto set; attractor	§7.13	Functionalist drift
Geometric phase / Value Foam (§3.5)	Holonomy; phase difference	§7.7, §7.10	Abstraction barrier
Theory of mind (§3.6)	Nested mentalizing; joint attention	§7.11, §7.12	Localization debates
Psychoanalysis (§3.7)	Gaze; triangle; big Other	§7.12	Testability contested
Phenomenology (§3.8)	Intersubjectivity; co-presence; the gaze	§7.12, §7.13	Classical neutrality vs. critical turn

Framework	Core concept	Serves	Principal limitation
Jurisprudence (§3.9)	Formal vs. informal norms	§7.9	Jurisdictional variance
Political economy (§3.10)	Creation / circulation / extraction	§7.10	Value metric contested
Neuroscience (§3.11)	State inference; PFC	§7.11	Reductionism risk
Decision theory (§3.12)	POMDP; signaling; social prefs	§7.11	Idealized assumptions

7.4. Method and Apparatus: Review, Analysis, Mapping, Thick Description

A programmatic review needs a method proper to it, different from the method of an ordinary argumentative paper. An argument marshals evidence toward a conclusion; a survey, by contrast, must *lay out a field* so that others can work it—and its method is accordingly fourfold. **Review** gathers the relevant traditions and states why each belongs (criteria of inclusion). **Analysis** traces how the traditions and phenomena couple (the coupling analysis that is the paper’s intellectual core). **Mapping** renders the result navigable—the roadmap of sub-papers, the fields of the literature tables. And **thick description** grounds the abstractions in recognizable scenes (the case studies). The four are ordered from the most general to the most particular, and together they discharge the paper’s purpose, which is not to settle a question but to make a domain workable. The remainder of this section fixes the conventions of the two devices a reader will meet most often: the tables and the cases.

7.4.1 The fields of the literature tables

Each table carries four columns: the source (author, year, title); its core contribution; its **significance for the programme** (why a later researcher must read it); and its limitation or the controversy around it. The tables are not a bibliography. A bibliography lists what has been read; these tables tell a future researcher what to read, in what order, and to what end—they are infrastructure, not record.

7.4.2 The case-study apparatus

The cases use **composed, anonymized constructed instances**: each synthesizes recurrent situations rather than depicting a particular real person. This both protects privacy and, by composition, carries more explanatory force than a single anecdote, which is always hostage to its idiosyncrasies. The cases are concentrated in the two phenomenal chapters (§7.12, §7.13); because the symbolic order has by then been laid out (§7.7–§7.10), the thick descriptions read not as isolated anecdotes but as enactments of structure. A case, in this paper, is never evidence *for* a thesis; it is a site *at which* the coupling of dimensions becomes visible. Nothing in the argument rests on the truth of any particular case, only on the recognizability of the structure it displays.

7.4.3 The stratal coordinates

The whole runs along a vertical geology: **the Real** (the remainder that cannot be symbolized) → **the Symbolic** (power / law / the rites / the machinery of value) → **the mechanism bridge** (cognition and decision) → **the phenomenal** (acts and thick description) → **integration** (justice). The three names are taken from the topology of psychoanalysis, but they are used here for organization, not as a pledge of allegiance to any one school’s full doctrine. The minimal commitment is only this: that acts in the

phenomenal field presuppose a symbolic order that structures them, and that the symbolic order in turn fails to capture a real remainder. Power, being a structure of the Symbolic, must therefore appear **before** the acts of the phenomenal field that it conditions—which is why the chapter on power (§7.7) precedes the chapters on gift-giving and the rites, and not the reverse.

7.5. Surveying the Two Fields: The Dimensional Field and the Phenomenal Field

This section gives the static map: the dimensional field, the phenomenal field, and the matrix of their coupling. The gift is, in that matrix, a node of **high connectivity**; but its importance is an emergent of structure, not an intrinsic property—and here, in passing, the temptation to enthrone it as a hub is dissolved (in keeping with §2). The map is static by design: it is the still photograph that precedes the moving account of how coupling occurs (§7.12 onward).

7.5.1 The dimensional field

Three lenses, fixed by the paper's subtitle: value generation, justice, and the gaze of the Other. A word on why *these* three, and not the twelve frameworks of §7.3. The frameworks are tools—disciplinary apparatuses one picks up. The dimensions are something else: the three *questions* every diplomatic act answers whether or not anyone asks them. **Value generation** is the question *what is made and what is it worth*—and it subsumes semiotics, the semantics of the sign, hermeneutics, and optimization, all the ways value comes to be made, coded, read, and weighed. **Justice** is the question *is the making and sharing fair*—and it subsumes political economy, ethics, and the distributive–recognitive–rectificatory registers. **The gaze of the Other** is the question *under whose eyes does this occur*—and it subsumes the phenomenological and the psychoanalytic: the phenomenology of intersubjectivity and being-seen (how the other is given, how being-watched constitutes the watched), and the psychoanalysis of the gaze as the locus of desire and the big Other. The frameworks are how one studies; the dimensions are what is always already at stake. This is why three suffice where twelve were needed: the twelve are means, the three are the irreducible faces of the matter itself.

That the three are themselves coupled, not parallel, is the point that keeps this from being a tidy tripartite scheme. The gaze alters value (a gift's worth shifts under appraisal); value bears on justice (what is produced is what can be fairly or unfairly shared); justice inflects the gaze (the right to appraise is unequally held). One cannot treat one dimension and set the others aside, because each is partly constituted by its relations to the other two—the same relational structure the paper finds everywhere, here at the level of its own analytic categories. The burden of the later chapters is precisely to trace where the three cross, and the crossings are where the paper's real claims live.

7.5.2 The phenomenal field

Listed as equals, with no hierarchy implied by order: the gift; brideprice and dowry; the rites; forms of address; the first formal visit and its gift; hospitality; absence and presence; the triangle; seating and the order of toasts; cross-cultural coordination. Each is a node; none is the center. Some are object-laden (the gift), some are wordless (the yielding of a seat), some are purely spatial (seating), some purely temporal (the timing of a return gift). Their heterogeneity is the point: it is why no single one can serve as the lens for all.

7.5.3 The coupling matrix

What follows displays the figure itself rather than walking its edges one by one. Table [p07:tab:matrix](#) marks, for each phenomenon, which dimensions it strongly (●) or weakly (○) activates. Read it not as a finished claim but as a conjecture-map: each cell is a hypothesis a later paper may confirm or revise. The gift's row is the most filled—it is the high-connectivity node. But the matrix **shows** this; it does not **presuppose** it. And it shows just as plainly that other rows light up dimensions the gift's row leaves dark—the row for address lights up power and culture where it barely touches value; the row for absence lights up justice and the gaze where it scarcely touches the semantics of the sign. This is the visual refutation of the hub. One further reading: the columns for **power** and for **cognition/decision** are nearly as full as the gift's row—a foreshadowing that power is a structure cutting across all phenomena (developed in §7.7), and that the inference-and-decision bridge underlies all diplomatic acts (§7.11).

Table 7.14: Phenomenon $\times$ dimension coupling matrix (● strong, ○ weak)

Phenomenon \ Dimension	Value	Justice	Gaze	Power	Cogn./Dec.
Gift / brideprice / dowry	●	●	●	●	●
The rites (礼)	●	○	○	●	○
Forms of address	○	○	○	●	○
Hospitality	●	○	●	○	○
Absence & presence	○	●	●	●	○
The triangle	○	●	●	●	●
Seating & toasts	○	○	●	●	○
Cross-cultural coordination	●	●	○	●	●

The cell assignments in the table above are indicative; each warrants argument cell by cell in a later paper.

7.6. The Real: The Remainder That Cannot Be Symbolized

Before entering the Symbolic—power, law, the rites, the machinery of value—one stratum must be marked that lies beneath it and that the Symbolic never wholly captures. This chapter is deliberately **short and sharp**, and its brevity is principled, not a shortfall: the Real is, by its nature, what resists articulation, so a long chapter *about* it would betray it, converting into discourse precisely what is defined by escaping discourse. The work here is not to develop the Real but to *post* it—to mark its presence and its four faces—for a single structural reason. The chapters to come will mount a critique of symbolic power, and a critique that forgot the Real would slide into the totalizing reading §7 warns against: it would treat the Symbolic as the whole, power as omnipotent, the subject as fully constituted by the order that ranks her. Posting the Real first inoculates against this. It keeps open, beneath every symbolic structure however oppressive, a remainder the structure cannot reach—and that remainder, as the last face will show, is the ground of every possibility of change. The Real is marked here, then, not for its own sake but as the floor under the critique: the guarantee that domination, however total it appears, is never quite total.

Givenness. One does not choose one's kin. A partner's parents, siblings, lineage are **given**, not contracted; one enters a relational field whose terms were fixed before one arrived and cannot be renegotiated as a contract's terms can. This givenness is the first face of the Real in diplomacy: a brute facticity the rites may clothe but cannot dissolve. One may learn the correct address, master the order of toasts—and still the fact of *whose* parents these are remains unchosen, unexchangeable, prior to all rite.

Inalienability. Marcel Mauss saw in the gift a remainder that resists pure exchange: the *hau*, the spirit of the thing given, which keeps the gift bound to its giver even after it has passed to another. The inalienable is what cannot be fully converted into exchange-value without violence to its nature. An heirloom, a parent's blessing, the body of the beloved: to price these is not to value them but to commit a category error felt as a wound. The Real is here the limit of commodification—the point at which the symbolic operation of

pricing meets something it cannot, without damage, encode. This will return as the inner kernel of the recognition-versus-commodification problem in §7.14.

The traumatic real of the family. Every family of origin carries a real that has never been symbolized: the unspoken loss, the wound around which the family's silences are organized, the affect that has no place in the family's official narrative. When a partner enters, they enter not only a symbolic order of positions but a field charged with this unsymbolized real, and they may, without knowing why, be made to carry it (the trans-ferential mechanism of §7.12). Diplomacy here is not negotiation among clear positions but movement through a field whose deepest charges are precisely those that cannot be stated.

The remainder. Not everything in the relational field can be ritualized. There is a debt that cannot be discharged by any return gift (the debt to a parent for one's existence), a gratitude with no adequate expression, a love that exceeds every sign offered for it. To mark this remainder is to keep open, against the critique to come, a space of **the Real's resistance**: an oppressive symbolic structure, however total it appears, can never wholly subsume the real. This is not a consolation but a structural fact, and it is the ground of every possibility of change.

7.7. The Symbolic (I): The Topology of Power

Power is not another phenomenon set beside the gift and the rites. It is a **structure of the Symbolic**—the prior condition under which every ritual act of the phenomenal field comes to bear meaning, to be measured, to be judged. This is why the chapter on power must appear before the acts of gift-giving. To place it afterward, as an addendum, would be to let the phenomenal acts present themselves first and then patch in a structural layer that in truth underlies them. The order of exposition here tracks the order of grounding.

The central thesis of this chapter revises the diplomatic metaphor itself. The earlier sections, by default, let “diplomacy” connote negotiation among sovereign units, with its implied formal parity. But before parents and lineage, the dyad is **often not a sovereign equal**. It enters a field of authority that exists prior to it, that is given rather than chosen, and that holds the power of recognition and the disposal of resources. The diplomacy

here is closer to **asymmetric diplomacy**—tribute, dependency, the patron-client bond of protection and fealty—than to a treaty between equals.

7.7.1 Why diplomacy is so often asymmetric

The diplomatic metaphor, taken naively, carries a presumption of parity: states treat as formal equals, however unequal in fact, and the very form of treaty presupposes two sovereigns who could, in principle, have declined. The first task of this chapter is to show that this presumption fails for the dyad's most consequential diplomacy—its dealings with parents and lineage—and to show that the failure is **structural**, not incidental.

Begin with the descriptive resource and then press it. Fei Xiaotong's *differential mode of association* (差序格局, *chaxu geju*) (Fei 1992) figures the Chinese relational order as concentric ripples radiating from the self, obligation and intimacy declining with distance, every tie carrying an implicit rank. Read not as ethnography but as **structure**, this is a topology of power: the positions in the order are not equal, and the position into which an in-marrying party is inserted is characteristically peripheral and low. Against the liberal image of marriage as a contract between two autonomous equals the contrast is sharp—where that image supposes parity, the differential order supposes rank, and the entering dyad is ranked on arrival.

Three objections must be met, for on their resolution the whole chapter turns.

First: is the asymmetry structural, or merely the contingent product of bad families? One might grant that some in-laws are domineering while insisting that this is a defect of persons, not a feature of the field—that a generous family would receive the dyad as an equal. The reply is that the asymmetry survives the goodwill of every party. A family may wish to welcome the entering partner as an equal and still seat them according to the order, still hold the historical narrative the partner cannot access, still occupy the position from which appraisal flows rather than the position appraised. Goodwill can soften the exercise of the gradient; it cannot flatten the gradient itself, because the gradient is constituted by position—by seniority, by priority in time, by the direction in which recognition is sought—and position is not in anyone's gift to renounce. A kind sovereign is still a sovereign. That a structure can be inhabited gently is no evidence that it is not a structure.

Second: does chaxu geju over-generalize from one culture? The differential mode is a Chinese model; to rest a general claim on it would be to commit, at the level of theory, the very cultural-capital error the chapter will name. The claim is therefore narrower and stronger than “all relational fields have this shape.” It is that **wherever** a relational field assigns positions by seniority, priority, or the direction of recognition—and the anthropological record suggests this is near-universal, though its content varies enormously—the field has a power topology, and the in-marrying party enters it low. The differential mode is one richly described instance, valuable because it makes the topology explicit; it is offered as an illuminating case, not as the universal form. The Western contractual image is then not the culture-free baseline against which others deviate but *another* local form—one that conceals its own gradients (of wealth, of family standing) behind the language of equal contract. No relational field is flat; cultures differ in whether they say so.

Third: does calling it “tribute” or “fealty” overstate the metaphor? These words carry a charge of domination that may seem to caricature loving families. The point of retaining them is diagnostic, not pejorative. **Asymmetric diplomacy** names a real and recognizable form—the lower-standing party petitions, defers, offers tokens of good faith, and seeks an acceptance that the higher party is free to withhold—and the affective warmth of a particular family does not change the form, any more than a benevolent suzerain changes the structure of tribute. To keep the hard word is to keep visible what gentler language would hide: that the entering dyad is, in this commerce, asking rather than treating, and that the power to grant or refuse lies on the other side.

Givenness completes the case for structurality. Because one cannot choose one’s in-laws as one chooses a contracting partner, one cannot exit the asymmetry by the ordinary contractual means—declining the terms, walking from the table. The exits a contract affords are foreclosed; the relation is entered as a fact, not concluded as a bargain. The asymmetry is therefore structural in the strong sense: it is fixed by position, survives goodwill, and admits no contractual exit.

7.7.2 The axes of power

Power in the external relational field is not a single gradient but a layering of several, and the layering matters as much as the axes themselves. Take them first in turn.

The generational axis. Seniority, and the duty of filial deference (孝, *xiào*), assign the junior a position of lower standing from which deviation reads as transgression. This axis is peculiar in that it is, in principle, temporary—the junior ages into seniority—which can make it feel less like domination than like a queue. But the temporariness is cold comfort to the party who is junior *now*, and the in-marrying partner may remain junior, relative to the elders of a family not their own, for as long as those elders live.

The gendered axis. Under patrilocal and patrilineal arrangements the in-marrying party—most often, historically, the wife—occupies a structurally weaker position, entering the husband’s family as the one who must adapt, relocate, and prove. This axis, unlike the generational, does not dissolve with time; the wife who becomes a mother-in-law does not thereby cease to have entered low, and the structure reproduces itself in the next entering wife.

The economic axis. Brideprice, housing, and the flow of money create dependencies that translate directly into standing: the party who receives owes, the party who owes defers. Money here does not merely buy goods; it buys position, and the debt it creates is paid in deference (the mechanism §7.14 will read as the weaponization of reciprocity).

The axis of cultural capital. Whose rites count as the “default,” whose mistakes are “errors”—in cross-cultural dyads one side’s culture is frequently naturalized as correct and the other’s marked as deviation. This axis is the most invisible, because it operates through what *needs no explanation*: the dominant grammar is simply “how things are done,” and only the other grammar requires justification.

The axis of information and the emotional ledger. The family of origin holds the historical narrative and the long record of who owes whom what affect—an archive the in-marrying party can neither access nor contest. To be without this archive is to be perpetually one move behind: unable to know why a remark lands hard, which old wound a casual sentence reopens, what debt a gift silently answers.

The decisive point is the superposition. These axes are not independent variables that might be assessed one at a time; they **superpose**, and the same person may be lowered by several at once, with effects that compound rather than add. The young, in-marrying wife from the non-default culture, dependent on a brideprice her family received and ignorant of the husband-family's emotional ledger, is not lowered four times over in some additive sense; she is placed at the intersection where four gradients meet, and the intersection has a steepness no single axis predicts. This is why the analysis cannot proceed axis by axis and then sum: the structure is the superposition, and the superposition is what a later, dedicated paper on the power topology must formalize. One should resist, equally, the opposite error—treating the axes as a single undifferentiated “oppression.” They are distinct, they can pull against one another (an elder woman outranks a junior man on the generational axis while the gendered axis runs the other way), and a diplomacy that would navigate the field must read each, and read their interference.

7.7.3 How power cuts across the dimensions

The reason power earns a chapter in the Symbolic, rather than a place among the phenomena, is that it does not occupy one dimension but **cuts across all of them**. A phenomenon sits at one or a few nodes of the coupling matrix; power runs through the whole column. Four cross-cuts are decisive, and each is the seed of a later chapter.

It is, first, **the right to define value**. Who decides whether a gift is “thick” enough, whether an act is “proper,” whether a gesture counts as respect or as insolence? The standard is not neutral; it is held by the superior party, so that the very scale on which the dyad's offerings are weighed is calibrated by the side it must satisfy. This is the cross-cut into value generation (§7.8): value is not read off an object but conferred by whoever holds the measure.

It is, second, **the right to interpret**—the diplomatic variant of the epistemic injustice of **Paper VI**. Who holds the authority to say what a gift, a silence, a tone of voice “meant”? In the asymmetric field the superior party's reading stands as fact and the subordinate's as mere impression, to be corrected; the entering partner's account of a slight is received as oversensitivity, the family's account of the partner's conduct as simple description. To have one's interpretations systematically discounted is a wrong distinct from being given

too little—it is hermeneutical, not distributive—and it is the cross-cut into justice (§7.14), where it compounds every other injustice by disabling the very capacity to contest them.

It is, third, the **one-directionality of the gaze**. The elder appraises the junior, the husband’s family appraises the new wife, and the converse does not hold; to gaze back, to appraise the appraisers aloud, is itself a breach. The gaze in the asymmetric field flows downhill, and the lower party is its object, rarely its subject. This is the cross-cut into the phenomenology of being watched (§7.12): whether the gaze objectifies or summons depends on the gradient down which it falls.

It is, fourth, “decorum” as the **reproduction of power**. The standard of what is proper is set by those above; conformity to the rites is therefore, among other things, the continual re-enactment of the existing hierarchy. Every correct bow rehearses who bows to whom. This is the cross-cut into the rites as grammar (§7.8): the grammar is not neutral syntax but syntax whose rules encode rank.

One must guard, here, against a totalizing reading. To say power cuts across all dimensions is not to say that everything is power, that recognition is only domination and the gift only a lien. That deflation would be as false as the naive parity it replaces, and it would make the chapter’s own balanced standing incoherent. The claim is the more exact one: that power is a **structuring** layer present in every dimension, not the **whole** of any dimension. A gift is really a gift and also a move in a field of standing; an interpretation is really an understanding and also an exercise of the right to read. The rites are grammar—and the grammar’s rules encode rank. Holding both halves of each “and” is the discipline this chapter demands; releasing either half falsifies the phenomenon.

7.7.4 The formal interface: phase accumulation in an asymmetric field

The cross-cuts just traced are qualitative; this section sketches how they might be made formal, and why the geometric-phase language of §7.3 is the apt one. The aim is not to formalize here—that is a later paper’s work—but to show that the chapter’s central thesis, unequal cost, has a precise geometric statement, so that the deferral is a deferral of execution and not of conception.

Begin with the intuition. A season of diplomacy—an engagement, a wedding, the first

year of visits—is a **circuit**: the dyad sets out from some relational state, passes through a sequence of exchanges and occasions, and returns to what looks, locally, like where it began. The couple is married now as they were courting before; the visits resume their rhythm. Yet something has been accumulated that no single exchange records, the way a vector carried around a closed loop on a curved surface returns rotated though it was, at each step, carried “straight.” That accumulated rotation—the failure of the state to return truly to itself after a closed circuit—is what holonomy measures, and it is the natural formal home for the irreversible: the way a relation is permanently altered by a passage through the field, beyond any of the discrete transactions along the way.

The thesis of this chapter adds one thing to that picture: in an asymmetric field, **the connection itself is asymmetric**. The “connection,” in this language, is what specifies how the relational state is carried from one occasion to the next; on a tilted field it carries the two parties differently. The weaker party, traversing the *same nominal circuit*—the same wedding, the same visits, the same gifts given and returned—accumulates a different, and characteristically greater, deformation than the stronger. The objects exchanged may balance to the last token; the transformations undergone do not. This is the geometric statement of unequal cost, and it captures something the ledger of exchanges cannot: that two people can complete identical itineraries and be changed by them unequally, the lower party bent further by the passage than the higher. What §7.10 will describe as value leaking to the superior party, and §7.14 as the weaponization of reciprocity, are, in this language, the same fact seen as non-conservation around an asymmetric loop. The full development—the specification of the connection, the conditions under which the holonomy is non-trivial, the measurement of the asymmetry—is left to the dedicated paper.

A balanced standing. It remains to forestall the misreading this chapter most invites: that to expose the reproduction of power through the rites is to indict the rites as such, to recommend their abolition. It is not. The rites are, as §7.8 will argue, the formal cause by which relation takes shape—without them relation has no determinate contour—and they carry an ontological value and an irreplaceable face of care; the same bow that rehearses hierarchy also enacts a tenderness and a recognition that have no other vehicle. The position taken here is the harder, double one: **to criticize the oppressive operation**

of the rites without denying the rites themselves. The rites give relation its form, *and*, in the hands of the powerful, that form reproduces domination—both at once, of the same rites, in the same act. The temptation is to collapse the double vision into one of its poles: into an uncritical reverence that hears only the tenderness, or a wholesale rejection that hears only the domination. Each pole is easier to hold and each falsifies the phenomenon, which is precisely that the rites are not two things, a good one and a bad one, but one thing that does both. The generative question—posed in §7.8.4 and left open—is whether a form can be found that keeps the care while loosening the domination, or whether the two are so bound in the existing rites that the only honest path is to make new ones.

An illustrative case — The structural vulnerability of the new wife. A woman marries into a patrilocal household and, in the first months, finds her position fixed less by anything she does than by where the structure has placed her. The forms of address she must use ascend; those used toward her do not. At the table she is seated below, and serves before she is served. Her readings of slights are received as the over-sensitivity of an outsider; the family's readings of her conduct are received as fact. No single act here is cruel; the cruelty, such as it is, is structural—the superposition of the generational and gendered axes assigning her a low position from which her own interpretations carry little weight. The case activates, at once: the axes of power (gender and generation), the right of interpretation (§7.7, and *Paper VI*), and the one-directionality of the gaze.

An illustrative case — Dependency manufactured by brideprice. A large brideprice is paid; the marriage is thereby inflected, from its outset, by debt. What was given as a mark of seriousness functions, over time, as a lien: the receiving family's sense of obligation, the giving family's sense of entitlement, the couple's awareness that a price was named. Economic transfer converts, by degrees, into standing and dependency, and the party associated with the debt defers. The case activates: political economy, the justice of debt (§7.14), and the limit of commodification (§7.6)—the unease of brideprice lies precisely where a transfer meant to honor brushes against the pricing of a person.

An illustrative case — The marginalized rites of one side. In a cross-cultural dyad, one partner's repertoire of rites is treated, by the wider field, as the default and correct one;

the other's is treated as quaint at best, as error at worst, and the second partner is expected to assimilate. The asymmetry is rarely stated; it operates through the silent assignment of which practices need explanation and which do not. The case activates: the axis of cultural capital, and the right to define—here, the prior right to define whose culture is the unmarked ground. It anticipates the generative problem of the “third set of rites” (§7.8).

Table 7.15: The topology of power: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Foucault, <i>Discipline and Punish</i> (1975)	The microphysics of power	The rites as a micro-technique of discipline	Power as ubiquitous risks losing the agent
Bourdieu, <i>Distinction</i> (1979); symbolic power	Cultural capital; symbolic violence	The class character of “decorum”	Determinism charge
Fei Xiaotong, <i>From the Soil</i> (1947)	The differential mode of association	The native model of the power topology	Descriptive, pre-critical
Feminist care ethics & family politics (e.g. Kittay, <i>Love's Labor</i>)	The gendering of care	The extraction of emotional labor	Risk of essentializing care
Scott, <i>Weapons of the Weak</i> (1985)	Everyday resistance of the subordinate	The agency of the weaker party	Romanticizing resistance

7.8. The Symbolic (II): The Rites as Grammar, Value as Sign

If the previous chapter established that the field is tilted, this one asks what the field is *made of*. The answer is that it is made of a grammar—the rites (禮, *lǐ*)—within which alone the acts of diplomacy become meaningful, and within which value itself is generated as a kind of sign. The rites are the **grammar** of the Symbolic: they fix positions and relations; they are the formal cause by which relation takes shape (carried over from the mother paper). If the rites are the soft grammar, law (§7.9) is the hard one. And because the authority to interpret this grammar has already, in §7.7, been distributed

unequally along the gradient of power, this chapter must be read against the preceding one: the grammar is never innocent of the rank its rules encode. The order of treatment matters—grammar before utterance, as §7.4 insisted—because the phenomenal acts of the later chapters are utterances, and an utterance is unintelligible except in the grammar that makes it one.

7.8.1 The rites as formal cause and symbolic grammar

In the Confucian account, *lǐ* is not an external constraint laid upon a relation that would exist without it; it is the form through which the relation comes to have a determinate shape at all. Without *lǐ* the relation has no defined contour—no settled way for a son to stand before a father, for a guest to enter a host’s house, for an in-marrying party to greet the lineage. The relation does not pre-exist its form and then receive it; it becomes the relation it is *in* taking form, as the mother paper argued of relational being generally. This is the precise sense in which *lǐ* is a formal cause and not a mere code of manners.

The claim that *lǐ* is a *grammar* must be defended against the charge that the word is borrowed loosely, a humanist’s gesture at linguistics. The defense is that the analogy holds at the level that matters: *lǐ* has the three properties that make a grammar a grammar rather than a list. It has a **combinatorics**—occasions, persons, and acts compose by rules, so that the same gift is correct at one threshold and an affront at another, as the same word is grammatical in one position and not in another. It has a **generativity**—competent participants produce and understand novel but well-formed acts they have never seen performed, the mark of a rule-governed system rather than a memorized repertoire; one knows, never having faced exactly this configuration of guests, what would be fitting. And it has **grammaticality judgments**—participants agree, often without being able to state the rule, that a given act “does not go,” the felt wrongness of a solecism, which is the diagnostic of an internalized grammar. A system with combinatorics, generativity, and grammaticality is a grammar in more than name. This is also why *lǐ* resists translation: “rites” captures the ceremonial, “propriety” the virtue-laden, “etiquette” the mannerly, but each loses the structural fact that *lǐ* is the system within which relation becomes legible as the relation it is. The term is therefore kept in transliteration throughout. As grammar, *lǐ* assigns positions; and to assign positions is already to do the work the previous chapter called power, which is why grammar and rank are, in the rites, inseparable.

7.8.2 The semiotic generation of value and the semantics of the sign

A gift is a sign, and its value is not its price. A hand-made thing may outweigh a costly one because the relation it signifies is denser; a returned heirloom may be priceless in a sense no sum captures. To see why, it helps to set out the series of value and then add to it. Classical political economy distinguishes *use-value* (what a thing does) from *exchange-value* (what it fetches); the semiotic tradition adds *sign-value* (what a thing signifies about its owner, the Veblen-Baudrillard register in which a watch tells the time and also tells the world one’s standing). To these the relational field adds a fourth, which this paper names **relational value**: the value a thing has in that it *generates or confirms a relation*.

That the fourth is genuinely distinct, not a relabeling of sign-value, can be shown by a case the others cannot accommodate. Consider a small, worthless object—a pressed flower, a borrowed book returned with a note—that is, between two people, of immense value, and of *no* value to anyone else, and whose value would be *destroyed* by sale. Sign-value cannot explain it: the object signifies nothing to the world, confers no standing, is invisible as a marker. Exchange-value is near zero and use-value negligible. Yet it is not valueless; it is, to the two, weighty. The weight is relational: the object's value consists in its having generated, and its continuing to confirm, a particular bond—and this value is, by its nature, **non-transferable and non-priceable**, since to sell it is precisely to dissolve the relation that constituted its worth. Relational value is thus not high sign-value but value of another kind, indexed to a relation rather than to a market or an audience, and it is the value diplomacy chiefly trades in. (Its non-priceability is the same fact the Real named as inalienability in §7.6, and the wound of its commodification is the subject of §7.14.)

The semantics of this sign-system is, like any grammar's, culture-specific and prone to drift. The same object signifies opposite things across cultures—a clock, an umbrella, white flowers carry, in Chinese contexts, associations of death, of separation, of mourning, that they do not carry elsewhere—so that a gift chosen for its evident loveliness can transmit its opposite. And the same transfer slides, with context, between gift and bribe: the boundary is not in the object or the sum but in the relation and the expectation of return, which is why the identical envelope is gratitude in one frame and corruption in another. To give well is to command this semantics; to misread it is the hermeneutic incident analyzed, at the level of the phenomenal act, in §7.13. The point to carry forward is that value here is not read off the thing but *conferred* in a sign-system whose code one party may command and another stumble in—which is exactly where the previous chapter's "right to define value" bites.

7.8.3 Grammatical difference across cultures

The grammar is not one, and the differences are differences of structure, not merely of vocabulary—which is why a dyad standing between two of them faces a problem deeper than translation. The Chinese differential rites assign elaborate, graded obligations by rank and distance, the concentric order of §7.7 made into a grammar of address, gift, and precedence. The Japanese economy of *giri-ninjō* (義理–人情) sets the weight of contracted obligation against the movement of spontaneous feeling, and governs the seasonal cycles of return-gift (*ochūgen*, *oseibo*) with a precision that can strike an outsider as an accountancy of the heart—though to read it as cold is itself a grammatical error, mistaking the careful discharge of *giri* for the absence of *ninjō* when the two are meant to be held together. Western *etiquette* and *hospitality* run flatter, more contractual, more nearly between equals, encoding rank less and reciprocity–among-peers more.

These are not three dialects of one grammar but three grammars, and the temptation to rank them—to treat one as more "advanced," more egalitarian, less burdensome—should be resisted as itself an exercise of the cultural-capital axis (§7.7). The flatter grammar is not the culture-free truth the others approximate; it encodes its own gradients (of class, of wealth, of family name) beneath the language of equal manners, and

its very flatness can leave the newcomer without the explicit cues a graded grammar provides. Beneath the Western register, moreover, lies an ethics of the other that the philosophical tradition has made explicit and that the other grammars hold implicitly: Lévinas's face that commands before it is understood (Lévinas 1969), the obligation to the guest that precedes any contract; and Derrida's aporia of hospitality (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000)—that a hospitality truly unconditional must welcome even the one who might destroy the home, so that the very rules which make hospitality possible (the host remains host, sets the terms) are what keep it from being unconditional. This aporia is not an exotic puzzle; it is the everyday structure of receiving an in-marrying stranger into a home, wanting to welcome without reserve and unable to cease being the one who welcomes, who therefore sets the terms. Every grammar of the rites is a particular, partial resolution of that impossible demand.

7.8.4 The cross-cultural dyad: generating a “third set of rites”

When two people come from different grammars of rite, their diplomacy must coordinate two systems that do not map onto one another cleanly. The merely defensive response is translation—each learns enough of the other's grammar to avoid the gross solecism. But the **generative** possibility is more than this: that the dyad fashions, between them, a **third set of rites** belonging to neither family of origin but to themselves—a new, shared grammar in which both can stand and which neither inherited. This is the generative problem of the whole paper in its purest form, and the positive counterpart to §7.7's diagnosis. For §7.7 showed the default outcome to be asymmetric: not a third grammar but the victory of one, the marginalization of the other along the cultural-capital axis. The generative question is whether that default can be escaped.

Two failure modes must be named, because the third set of rites is easy to counterfeit. The first is **dominance disguised as synthesis**: one side's grammar quietly furnishes the deep structure—the order of precedence, the real occasions, the language of the vows—while the other supplies only surface ornament, a borrowed dish, a token ceremony, a word of the other tongue. This looks like a third grammar and is the old asymmetry in fancy dress; the test is which grammar governs when the two conflict, and whose practice needs no explanation. The second is **rootless pastiche**: a grammar assembled from fragments of both, observing the deep obligations of neither, so thin that it commands no grammaticality judgments and so generates no felt wrongness when violated—which is to say, not a grammar at all, since a grammar one can break without anyone wincing is a dead letter. A genuine third set of rites must do what §8.1 required of any grammar: combine, generate, and sustain judgments of fitness—and it must do so while drawing on two parent grammars without being captured by either.

Whether this is achievable, or whether the prior power asymmetry so structures the encounter that every apparent synthesis collapses into the first failure mode, is a question this paper *poses and deliberately leaves open*. It is the hinge between the critical and the generative halves of the whole programme: if a third grammar can be made, then the domination §7.7 traced is not fate, and the rites can be remade to keep the care while loosening the rank (the hope of §7's coda); if it cannot, the honest conclusion is harder. The question is marked here as the site of a dedicated later paper, which a Sino-Japanese situation could

serve, unnamed, as its working thought-experiment.

Table 7.16: The rites, the sign, and the cross-cultural: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Mauss, <i>The Gift</i> (1925)	The three obligations; <i>hau</i>	The micro-justice of the gift economy	Generalizing from archaic cases
Lévi-Strauss, <i>Elementary Structures</i> (1949)	Exchange as structure; alliance	Marriage as exchange between groups	Structuralist universalism contested
Saussure; Peirce	Foundations of semiotics	The rites as a sign-system	Code-fixity overstated
Derrida, <i>Of Hospitality</i> (1997)	The aporia of hospitality	The primordial ethics toward the other	Performative obscurity
Lévinas, <i>Totality and Infinity</i> (1961)	The ethics of the face	The ethical face of the gaze	Asymmetry of the ethical relation

7.9. The Symbolic (III): The Double Grammar of Law and Rite

The external relational field is structured at once by the rites and by **formal law**: marriage law, inheritance, the duty of maintenance, the legal nature of brideprice, the legal standing of in-laws, the law of divorce and of domestic violence. Law is the **hard grammar** of the Symbolic; it coexists with the rites (the soft grammar), strains against them, and converts into them and they into it. Because law encodes and entrenches power asymmetry—in patrilocal default rules, in the conventions of surname transmission, in the default allocation of marital property—this chapter couples directly to §7.7.

7.9.1 Rite and law: the boundary of the informal and the formal

Some diplomatic obligations are justiciable: maintenance, inheritance, the division of property. Others are upheld only by the rites and by social sanction: the return gift, filial deference, the attendance owed at a funeral. The boundary is neither fixed nor sharp, and the interesting cases are those of **conversion**: a brideprice given as a rite becomes, when the engagement breaks, a debt the courts will hear—the gift crosses, under stress, from the soft grammar into the hard. To map which obligations sit on which side, and what pressures move an obligation across the boundary, is a research programme in itself.

7.9.2 Legal pluralism

Family “quasi-law”—house rules, lineage regulations—coexists and conflicts with state law; and the cross-cultural dyad faces **two jurisdictions at once** (the conflict-of-laws problems of a transnational marriage: which state’s marriage law governs, which recognizes the union, how property and custody resolve across borders). The dyad here is not under one normative order but at the intersection of several, and its diplomacy includes the navigation of their conflict.

7.9.3 Law as the hard coding of power

Default rules are not neutral. The party who must act to depart from a default bears a cost the party favored by the default does not; and defaults in family law have historically been gendered—in residence, in name, in the presumption of property. Law thus hard-codes into enforceable form the asymmetries that §7.7 traced in the soft grammar. This connects to the author’s prior work on sequential legal judgment (the NeSy-POMDP framework): the legal characterization of a diplomatic act is itself a sequential, partially observable inference, and the line of §7.11 reaches into the courtroom.

Table 7.17: Jurisprudence: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Legal pluralism (Griffiths 1986; Merry 1988)	Coexisting legal orders	The layering of rite / law / quasi-law	“Law” over-extended
Marriage law & social reproduction	Law’s shaping of the family	Law encodes power asymmetry	Jurisdictional variance
Brideprice as conditional gift (doctrine)	Rite converting to debt	A boundary case of rite/law	Doctrine differs by system

7.10. The Symbolic (IV): The Creation and Circulation of Value—Political Economy

Political economy enters this paper in a register it is rarely given: a **positive, constructive** one, not merely critical. The reflex, in a critical tradition, is to treat the political economy of intimacy as a story of extraction alone—brideprice as commodification, family labor as exploitation. That story is true and

§7.14 will tell it; but to begin there is to miss what generative justice insists upon, which is that value is first *produced* and can *circulate* before it is, or instead of being, extracted. Diplomatic commerce creates value—relational capital, trust, recognition, affect, social network—and makes it circulate through chains of reciprocity, the flow of the gift, the spread of reputation; against which, and only then, stands value extracted in one direction. This is the positive battlefield of Eglash’s generative justice, and the most natural redemption of the Value Foam framework in the diplomatic field: circulation is value flowing along the field and returning to those who generate it; extraction, alienation, is holonomy—value returning to its origin unconserved after a circuit of an asymmetric field. The chapter takes the two in order: first what is made, then how it circulates, then how it leaks.

7.10.1 What value diplomacy creates

The first claim is the easiest to overlook precisely because it is positive: that the exchanges of diplomacy *generate* goods that did not pre-exist them. These goods are real though not monetary. There is relational capital—the standing accumulated by reliable reciprocity, the credit one can draw on because one has given before. There is, in Bourdieu’s terms, social capital (the network one can mobilize) and symbolic capital (the honor, the recognized standing, one is accorded). And there is something Bourdieu’s vocabulary, with its faint odor of strategy, undersells: the trust and affection themselves, which are not merely instrumental resources but goods internal to the relation, valuable in being had and not only in being usable.

That these are genuinely *produced*, and not merely transferred, is the load-bearing claim, and it distinguishes a generative account from a zero-sum one. A wedding does not redistribute a fixed stock of family goodwill; it can *create* goodwill that existed in neither family before, a new relation between two lineages that is a positive addition to the world’s stock of relation. A well-conducted season of diplomacy leaves more trust in being than it found. This is why the political economy of intimacy is not exhausted by its critique: there is a positive product, and the normative question—the generative-justice question—is whether that product *circulates* to those who made it or is *extracted* from them. One cannot even pose the question of just circulation until one has seen that there is something produced to circulate. The critical tradition’s haste to extraction skips this step and thereby loses the standard against which extraction is a wrong: extraction is unjust precisely because it diverts a value that could have circulated.

7.10.2 The mechanisms of circulation

Value, once produced, circulates by definite mechanisms, and naming them lets one say with some precision what healthy circulation is. It moves through **chains of reciprocity**: the gift answered by a return gift answered in turn, each link both discharging a debt and opening a new one, so that the chain is self-perpetuating and binds its parties over time. It moves through the **flow of the gift across the network**: a thing received and passed on rather than retained, the Maussian circulation in which the gift’s value lies in its movement, and to hoard it would be to kill it. It moves through the **spread of reputation**: standing earned in one quarter travels to another, so that the value of having given well is realized far from the giving, in the credit one is extended by strangers who have only heard.

Where these mechanisms run freely, value is retained *within the network and by its producers*—it returns, by some path, to those whose giving generated it—and the network is, in the generative sense, just. This is the positive ideal against which the next subsection’s failure is measured: not equality of holdings but *circulation*, value kept in motion among those who make it rather than pooled at a point of accumulation. Generative justice is, in this register, a fluid-dynamic rather than a distributive notion: the question is not who holds how much at an instant but whether the value flows, and to whom it returns over a circuit.

7.10.3 Extraction and alienation

Circulation has its shadow, and the shadow is the chapter’s critical payload—reached now, after the positive ground, so that it lands as the corruption of something rather than as the whole story. **Emotional labor**—the work of maintaining relations, remembering occasions, anticipating needs, smoothing slights, holding the family’s affective fabric together—is, characteristically, **gendered**: borne disproportionately by women and by the in-marrying party, and frequently uncompensated by any return. Here the value produced does not circulate back to its producer; it **leaks** to the superior party, who enjoys the relational goods—the smoothed gathering, the remembered birthday, the managed tension—that another’s labor produced, while the producer’s standing does not rise by it and her effort goes unmarked because it is presumed natural to her position.

This is the diplomatic-field instance of the generative-justice diagnosis, and the Value Foam formalism states it exactly: the leakage is the **non-conservation of value over a circuit of the asymmetric field**. Recall §7.7’s result that on a tilted field the connection is asymmetric; the consequence here is that value carried around the loop does not return to its origin. The holonomy is non-trivial, and what the weaker party puts in does not come back to her—it has been parallel-transported, by the field’s own asymmetry, to the stronger. Alienation, in this register, has a precise meaning, neither merely Marxian nor merely metaphorical: it is value *generated by one and accumulated by another* by the geometry of an unequal field, with no theft at any single step, the leakage distributed invisibly across a circuit each of whose links looked fair. This is why the wrong is so hard to name from inside: there is no moment of taking to point to, only a loop that does not close. The formal demonstration—the connection made explicit, the conditions for non-trivial holonomy, the magnitude of the leak—is the work of the dedicated Value Foam paper.

Table 7.18: Political economy and the circulation of value: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Marx, theory of value; <i>1844 Manuscripts</i>	Use/exchange value; alienation	The fourth, relational value	Labor theory contested
Eglash, generative justice	Circulation vs. extraction	The chapter's main line	Precise entry to be confirmed
Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" (1986)	Social / symbolic capital	The convertibility of relational capital	Economism charge
Social reproduction theory (e.g. Federici)	Unwaged care labor	The gendered structure of extraction	Scope of "reproduction"

7.11. The Mechanism Bridge: The Cognition and Decision of Relational Value

This chapter cuts across the Symbolic and the phenomenal, supplying a **computational-neural chain**: the relational state (a latent variable) → the neuro-cognitive system performs approximate Bayesian **state inference** upon it (the prefrontal cortex, active inference) → under partial observability it makes a **sequential decision** (POMDP, games) → the decision is the diplomatic act (the rites of the phenomenal field). This chain threads the structure of the Symbolic, the cognition of value, and the acts of the phenomenal field onto a single line—and it is one of the paper's distinctive contributions, the thing a philosopher without the author's computational-neuroscientific background could not readily supply.

7.11.1 The cognition of value: higher-order mentalizing

The chapter's chain begins in cognition, because before the dyad can act in the field it must *read* the field, and reading it means inferring how others appraise the relation. This is a mentalizing problem, and higher-order coupling makes it a problem of **nested** mentalizing of ascending order. It is not enough to model what one's partner thinks; one must model what one's mother thinks of one's partner, and—a further order—what one's partner imagines one's mother to think of them, and, in the heat of a difficult dinner, what one's mother is reading in the partner's face as the partner tries to manage exactly that imagining. This recursion (third-, fourth-order, and on) is the precise cognitive content of the slogan "from second-order to higher-order coupling": the order of the coupling is, cognitively, the depth of the nesting the situation demands.

Two features of this nesting are worth drawing out, because they explain phenomena the slogan alone does not. *First, the load is combinatorial, not linear.* Adding one third party does not add one mental model; it adds a tree of models—what they think of us, what we think they think, what our partner thinks they think of us—whose branching is why the entry of even a single in-law can feel disproportionately, almost vertiginously, taxing in a way that the arithmetic of “one more person” fails to predict. The felt difficulty of the first family dinner is not innumeracy; it is the genuine combinatorial cost of the tree. *Second, the recursion does not terminate cleanly.* In principle the nesting regresses without end (what she thinks I think she thinks...); in practice it is truncated, and the question of *where* a culture or a person truncates it is itself diagnostic. Some fields tolerate stopping at the second order (“I needn’t guess what she imagines I feel; I will simply ask”); others demand the fourth, and punish a truncation read as obtuseness. The depth of mandatory mentalizing is, in this sense, a cultural and a power-laden variable, not a fixed cognitive ceiling—and the party with less standing is typically the one required to mentalize deeper, since they bear the burden of anticipating a reading they cannot afford to get wrong. This extends the joint-attentional account of [Paper V](#) in a specific way: the shared attentional field of the dyad must now hold not only the world the two attend to together but a recursive representation of how third parties attend to *them*—attention turned reflexive, and turned upward along the gradient of power.

7.11.2 Neuroscience: the implementation of state inference (cautiously)

The stance here must be stated before the content, because the content invites misreading: what follows is offered as one possible implementation of the mechanism, not as a reduction of relational value to neural activity. The distinction is the familiar one between levels of description, and the chapter’s whole defensibility rests on keeping it. With that fixed, the candidate substrates are well attested. The medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) is implicated in mentalizing and in the representation of self- and other-related value; the temporo-parietal junction (TPJ) in the attribution of beliefs; the orbitofrontal and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (OFC/vmPFC) in the encoding of value and social reward; the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) in norm-compliance and fairness-related decision, as in the neural studies of the ultimatum game. Above these particulars sits the unifying frame: the relational state is a **latent variable** upon which the subject performs approximate Bayesian inference—active inference, in Friston’s free-energy formulation, in which perception and action alike work to minimize expected surprise. The relational state is never directly observed; it is inferred from signs (a tone, a gift’s thickness, an absence), and the inference is revised as new signs arrive. This is the same formal posture—latent state, noisy observation, sequential update—that governs the author’s computational-neuroscientific work on EEG and grammar-based modeling at NCNP, and the recurrence of that posture across such different domains is part of what recommends it.

Two guards are needed, one against deflation, one against inflation. *Against reduction:* that a process is implemented in cortex does not make the relational value *nothing but* cortical activity, any more than a sentence’s being realized in ink makes its meaning nothing but ink, or a proof’s running on silicon makes the theorem a fact about transistors. The implementational level answers “how is it physically

realized,” not “what is it”; the value of a recognition, the wrong of a slight, belong to the relational and normative levels, which the neural level realizes without exhausting. To forget this is to commit the error the chapter’s own framing (§7.3, §2) forbids: letting one stratum usurp the others. *Against mere metaphor, in the other direction*: it would be too cheap to invoke “Bayesian inference” and “prefrontal cortex” as decorative gestures toward rigor. The claim earns its keep only if the formal posture does work the looser vocabulary cannot—and it does, in three places the later computational paper will develop: it predicts that diplomatic missteps cluster where the *signs are noisiest* (ambiguous gifts, silences readable two ways), not where the stakes are highest; it explains the felt cost of a new in-law as the cost of inference under a suddenly enlarged latent space; and it makes “tact” a precise notion—the policy that minimizes expected surprise for *all* parties’ inferences at once, rather than only one’s own. A frame that yields predictions, an explanation, and a definition is not a metaphor. It is the implementational layer of the chain whose next link is decision.

7.11.3 Decision theory: from state inference to the diplomatic act

Inference issues in action. Once the relational state is inferred—however provisionally, under whatever noise—the subject must *decide*: what to give, whether to attend, how to answer an affront, when to let a slight pass. The natural formalism is sequential decision under partial observability, a POMDP, the relational state being precisely partially observable: one acts not on the state but on a *belief* about the state, updated as signs arrive, and a good diplomatic policy is one that performs well across the spread of states one’s belief allows. This is not an analogy borrowed from elsewhere; it is the same structure the author’s NeSy-POMDP work brings to sequential legal judgment, and its recurrence here is the chain’s link from cognition into act.

The value of the game-theoretic vocabulary is that different game-forms isolate different things the looser word “interaction” blurs together, and each names a real diplomatic situation. *Coordination games* model the case where the parties’ interests align but the equilibrium is underdetermined: two families who both want one wedding must converge on *a* form, and which form matters less than that they meet—the pure problem of the cross-cultural double ceremony (§7.13), where the difficulty is not conflict but the absence of a default. *Signaling games* model the gift as a *costly signal*: a gift communicates commitment precisely because it costs, so that what is transmitted is not the object but the credibility the cost underwrites—which is why a cheap gift given easily and a dear one given at sacrifice say different things though both are “gifts,” and why a gift that costs the giver nothing fails to signal at all. *Repeated play* models reciprocity: the back-and-forth of return gifts is a culturally elaborated reciprocal strategy, in which today’s apparent loss is tomorrow’s claim, and defection (the unreturned gift, the unanswered visit) is punished by the slow withdrawal of the relation. Each form picks out a structure the others miss; together they are why “diplomacy” is not one game but a field of them, played at once.

One correction to the standard apparatus is required, and it is substantive. The agent of diplomacy does *not* maximize narrow self-interest; decision proceeds under *social preferences*—inequity aversion, a taste for reciprocity, an aversion to having wronged—so that a diplomatically rational agent will pay,

in money or face or effort, to right an imbalance that a self-interested agent would happily leave standing. This is not a departure from rigor but a correction of the utility function toward the one the phenomena actually display; a model that predicted indifference to a debt owed would simply be wrong about what people do. With that correction, the chain closes: the structure of the Symbolic conditions what states are possible and how they are read, inference under that structure yields a belief, decision under social preferences turns the belief into a policy, and the policy's output *is* the diplomatic act—the gift given, the seat taken, the visit made or withheld—that the phenomenal chapters (§7.12, §7.13) now take up as their material. The bridge is built; we cross it into the phenomenal field.

Table 7.19: Cognition, neuroscience, and decision: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Friston, active inference / free energy	The Bayesian brain	A unifying frame for state inference	Falsifiability debated
mPFC / TPJ mentalizing studies	Neural bases of social cognition	Implementation of higher-order mentalizing	Reverse-inference, replicability
OFC / vmPFC value coding	Value and social reward	Neural representation of relational value	Reductionism risk
POMDP / sequential decision (Sutton & Barto)	Decision under partial observability	Formal model of the diplomatic act	Computational tractability
Signaling (Spence); reciprocity (Fehr)	Costly signals; social preferences	The gift as signal; reciprocity	Idealized assumptions

7.12. The Phenomenal (I): The Triad—The First Other Beyond the Dyad

We cross now from the strata that condition diplomacy into the field where it is enacted, and we begin at the smallest possible scale of the higher-order: the dyad plus one third party. This is the minimal higher-order coupling, and it is chosen as the entry to the phenomenal not for simplicity but because it is the threshold at which the genuinely new appears. There is a deliberate resonance with the three-body problem of mechanics: just as three gravitating bodies admit no closed solution though two do, the triad is not a manageable extension of the dyad but a qualitative break, the point at which the relational

system loses the closed-form tractability it had at second order. One third party is enough to change the kind of problem.

The entry of that third party **activates three things at once**: the triangular structure (psychoanalysis), the ascent of nested mentalizing (the cognition of §7.11, Paper V), and the dyad's first experience of **being watched as a whole** (the gaze of the Other). The claim that they emerge *together*, symmetrically, rather than one giving rise to the next, is the methodological point of §2 made concrete: none of the three is the master phenomenon from which the others derive. One could not say the triangle causes the gaze, or the mentalizing grounds the triangle; they are three faces of one event, the entry of the third, and to privilege any as primary would be the hub-error the whole paper refuses. The triad is thus the first place the paper's decentered method is not merely asserted but exhibited—three co-equal phenomena, organized by their coupling at the single node “a third has entered,” and by nothing more.

7.12.1 The psychoanalytic structure of the triangle

The triangle here is not, or not only, the sexual triangle of rivalry for a beloved. The structures “mother–son–daughter-in-law” and “father–daughter–suitor” are triangles in which a member of the dyad is positioned between the partner and a prior, primary bond—and in which jealousy, exclusion, and the strain of mediation play out along lines the participants did not draw. The reason a third party necessarily produces a triangle, rather than merely a third relationship, is structural: where there were three pairwise bonds there is now a closed figure, and a closed figure has an inside and an outside, a position that is “between” and positions that are “joined against.” Three points cannot all be adjacent without one of them being, on any given question, the odd one out.

What makes this more than family-systems folklore is its connection to the Real of §7.6. The entering partner is liable to be cast—without anyone choosing it, often against everyone's conscious wish—as the one who has “taken” the son, or as the surface onto which a mother's own unsymbolized grief is transferred. The partner becomes the third term whose arrival destabilizes a dyad that had its own long, unspoken accounts, and is made to carry a charge that was there before them and is not about them. This is the elementary form in which the dyad's boundary is tested from without: not by argument over stated matters, but by the silent assignment of a position in a triangle whose tensions predate the marriage. The diplomacy of the triangle is therefore rarely the diplomacy of negotiation; it is the harder work of refusing a position one is being maneuvered into without ever being addressed.

7.12.2 The ascent of nested mentalizing

The triad demands, in lived form, the recursion that §7.11 described abstractly: “I imagine how my partner imagines my mother's view of them.” In the dyad this recursion was optional and shallow; in the triad it becomes obligatory and deep, because action in the presence of the third is governed by it. What one says, what one leaves unsaid, whom one defends and how visibly, when one reaches for a partner's hand under a parent's eye—each is a move chosen against a model of how it will be read by two parties

at once, each of whom is reading the other reading it. The combinatorial cost named in §7.11 is here not a theoretical point but the felt texture of the first difficult dinner: the exhaustion is real, and it is the exhaustion of holding a branching tree of models live under time pressure.

Two consequences follow that the dyadic account could not yield. First, the recursion creates the possibility of a distinctively triadic failure: **miscoordination through over-mentalizing**, where each party, modeling the others so intently, acts on a predicted reaction that the prediction itself provokes—the partner who, anticipating the mother’s disapproval, stiffens in a way that produces the disapproval anticipated. The triangle can manufacture the very tensions its members are straining to avoid, a feedback the dyad’s simpler structure does not permit. Second, the burden of this mentalizing is, as §7.7 warned, unequally distributed: the lower-standing party must mentalize deeper, since they bear the cost of misreading a party they cannot afford to offend, while the higher party may decline the labor altogether and simply be read. To mentalize hard is itself a mark of the weaker position; the one who need not guess what others think of them is the one with standing.

7.12.3 Being watched as a whole

In the dyad each is watched by the other; in the triad the dyad is, for the first time, watched **as a unit**. “Are they well matched?”—the question is not about either partner but about the couple, which is thereby constituted as a single object of judgment, no longer two individuals appraised separately but “the couple,” held up against an image of what a fitting couple should be. This is a genuine ontological addition, not merely a new opinion about existing entities: the gaze of the third *brings into being* the couple-as-object, a thing that did not exist while only the two regarded each other.

To see why this is more than metaphor requires the phenomenology of intersubjectivity. On Husserl’s account (Husserl 1960), the other is given to me not as an inferred object but as an *alter ego*, a second center of experience before whom I too become appresented as a body-for-others; the third party’s entry is thus the entry of a new constituting consciousness in whose experience the couple takes form. Schutz’s *we-relation* (Schutz 1967) sharpens the point for this paper specifically: the dyad is a lived “we,” built in the face-to-face mutual tuning-in of two streams of consciousness, and the triad forces that we-relation to either expand to include the third or to harden, under the third’s gaze, into a “they” observed from outside. The couple-as-object is the we seen from a position no member of the we occupies—which is why it can feel like a stranger’s possession of something that was theirs.

That this objectification is two-edged is the crux. It is a source of **recognition**: to be seen as a couple is to have the union acknowledged into existence, registered in the symbolic order of others, made real in a way the dyad cannot make itself real from inside. A union no one sees is, in a sense the lovers may find unbearable, not yet fully actual. And it is a source of **alienation**: to be seen as a couple is also to be reduced to the image others hold, flattened into “that couple,” fixed as an object whose meaning is now partly out of the partners’ hands. The paper locates itself, here, between two accounts of the gaze it declines to choose between in the abstract. Sartre’s look objectifies (Sartre 1956): it fixes the self

as an object for another, induces shame, steals one’s freedom by making one a thing in someone else’s world. Lévinas’s face does the opposite (Lévinas 1969): the other’s regard is not a threat but an ethical summons, a claim that calls one to responsibility before it calls one to defense. The thesis of this section is that the gaze of the Other in diplomacy is *neither purely one nor the other*, and that which it becomes is not fixed by the gaze itself but by the *structure within which it falls* (§7.7). Here the *critical* phenomenology of the gaze does decisive work: Ahmed’s analysis of *orientation* (Ahmed 2006) shows that bodies are not appraised from nowhere but along inherited lines—some couples are “in line” with what the room expects and fall easily into the field of approving recognition, others are “oblique,” out of line, and meet a gaze that objectifies before it ever assesses the particular two. The appraising look of an elder who holds the power of acceptance, down the gradient, tends toward the Sartrean: it objectifies because it judges from a height the judged cannot return. The look of a friend who meets the couple as equals can be the Lévinasian summons, recognition without subjection. The gaze is not good or bad in itself; it takes the moral character of the field it crosses. This is why the same wedding can feel, to a couple, at once like being blessed and like being inspected—because it is both, from different positions around the same room.

An illustrative case — The in-law triangle. A partner is drawn into the unfinished emotional business of the other’s family of origin. A mother and her son have a long dyad with its own unspoken accounts; the entering partner becomes the third term, and finds themselves cast as the one who has “taken” the son, or the one onto whom the mother’s own old griefs are transferred. The partner is mediator and target at once, pulled between loyalty to the dyad and the pressure of the prior bond. The case activates: the triangle, transference (§7.6, the traumatic real of the family), and the axes of power.

An illustrative case — The appraising look at the wedding. At the wedding the couple is appraised as a whole—“are they well matched?”—by a gathering whose gaze measures, judges, and silently records. The two feel themselves become a single object, their union held up against an image of what a fitting union should look like. The case activates: the gaze, the imaginary register of the fitting image, and value (the couple appraised as if it had a worth that could be read off).

Table 7.20: The triad: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Lacan, the gaze and the big Other	The subject constituted in the Other’s look	The mechanism of being-watched-as-a-whole	Textual obscurity

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Sartre, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> (the look)	Objectification and shame	The objectifying face of the gaze	Pessimism of the for-others
Family systems theory (Bowen, triangles)	The triangle as a stabilizing device	The dynamics of the in-law triangle	Empirical basis contested

7.13. The Phenomenal (II): Network and Field—The Enactment of Gift and Rite

From the triad the ascent continues to the many-bodied: to network and field, where not one third party but a whole structured surround—two families of origin, a circle of friends, a network of colleagues—bears upon the dyad at once. Here the phenomena the paper has named throughout finally take the stage as acts: the gift, brideprice and dowry, forms of address, seating and toasts, the politics of absence, the cross-cultural double ceremony. The governing instruction for reading them is the one §7.4 set and the preceding chapters earned: each is to be read as the **enactment, in the phenomenal field, of the power and grammar of the Symbolic** (§7.7–§7.10). Because the Symbolic has been laid out first, these acts arrive not as isolated anecdotes—curiosities of custom to be catalogued—but as *utterances in a grammar*, moves on a tilted field, surface expressions of a structure the reader already holds. An anecdote illustrates; an enactment manifests. The difference is the whole justification of the paper’s order.

This is also where the formal vocabulary of optimization and dynamical systems enters, no longer as a framework listed (§7.3) but as a reading applied at the level of behavior, which §13.5 develops once the acts are before us.

7.13.1 The phenomenology of gift and brideprice

The gift is where the four-fold value of §7.8 becomes visible action. Its **thickness** is measured, compared against precedent, entered silently into the receiving family’s running ledger—and the giver, knowing it will be weighed, chooses under that knowledge, so that the gift is already a move anticipating its own appraisal. Its **timing** speaks: a return gift too prompt reads as the discharge of a burden, an eagerness to be quit of obligation that insults by refusing the ongoing bond a debt sustains; too slow reads as neglect, the obligation forgotten or disdained. The interval itself is a message, independent of the gift’s content, because in a grammar of reciprocity the tempo is part of the syntax. And the gift’s **figure**—the sum on a red envelope—speaks a semantics of auspicious and inauspicious numbers, in which the amount is read

not as quantity but as sign, a wrong number souring a right sum.

The decisive analytic point is that these are not *decorations on* an underlying economic transfer, a layer of meaning painted over a movement of money. They *are* the diplomatic act; the transfer is their vehicle, not their substance. Brideprice makes this sharpest, and shows why the same act sits on the boundary §7.14 will probe: as recognition it is a costly, public sign of the worth of a union and of the family that raised the bride, the gift's relational value (§7.8) made ceremonial; as commodification it slides toward the pricing of a person, the conversion of relational value into a sum, which touches the inalienable (§7.6) and wounds. Nothing in the transfer itself decides which it is; the same payment is honor or purchase depending on the grammar read into it and the structure (§7.7) it moves within. The gift is thus the node where every stratum of the paper meets in a single act—which is exactly why §2 refused to let it become the hub: it is richly connected, but its richness is the meeting of the other dimensions in it, not a source from which they flow.

7.13.2 Address, seating, toasts: the power-coding of language and space

A class of diplomatic acts carries almost no object and yet enacts the hierarchy of §7.7 more exactly than any gift, precisely because it passes as "mere form." How one *addresses* a partner's parents is a positioning: the kin term assigns a place in the order and to utter it is to accept that place, so that the choice of word is the acceptance of a rank—which is why it is so fraught where two grammars meet (the case below). *Seating* encodes rank in space: the head and foot of a table, the proximity to the honored guest, are a diagram of standing that everyone reads and no one states. *The order of toasts* encodes rank in time: who is honored first, who must rise to whom, in what sequence, lays out the hierarchy as a temporal sequence performed before all. These wordless or near-wordless rites are the purest enactment of structure, and their power lies exactly in their passing as empty form: because "it is only where one sits," the hierarchy it diagrams is naturalized, placed beyond contest, made to seem a fact of arrangement rather than a claim of rank. The acts that look least like assertions of power are often its most efficient vehicles, since what is not said as a claim cannot be answered as one.

7.13.3 The politics of absence

Presence is the medium of recognition; absence is therefore its most charged withdrawal. Who is not invited, who fails to appear at a wedding or a funeral, is a diplomatic utterance, and frequently the loudest one in the field—louder than any said thing, because it cannot be softened in the saying. To withhold presence is to withhold recognition; a calculated absence is a declaration that needs no words and admits no easy reply, for to protest an absence is to confess one wanted the presence. The empty seat at the wedding, the elder who does not come, the child who stays away from the rite, signals a rupture or a refusal that all present read instantly and no one may comfortably name. Presence and absence form the binary in which the field's deepest alignments and breaks are signaled—a one-bit message of enormous force, precisely because its very crudeness makes it unanswerable. This is the gift's logic inverted: where

the gift signals by what is given, absence signals by what is withheld, and withholding, having no content to dispute, is the harder utterance to counter.

7.13.4 The cross-cultural double ceremony

Two ceremonies, two grammars, coordinated into one marriage: this is the phenomenal realization of the "third set of rites" posed in §7.8.4, the place where that abstract question takes visible form. And the visible details are exactly the test §8.4 specified for distinguishing genuine synthesis from its two counterfeits. Which ceremony is treated as the "real" one and which as the courtesy? Whose kin set the terms, the date, the seating? In which language are the vows spoken, and which side must follow in translation? These are not logistical trivia; they are the diagnostic surface on which one reads whether a true third grammar is being generated or whether one grammar furnishes the deep structure while the other supplies ornament (the first failure mode), or whether the two are merely juxtaposed without either's deep obligations honored (the second). The double ceremony is where the generative hope of the whole paper is either realized or quietly defeated, and the defeat, when it comes, is legible not in any quarrel but in whose practice needed no explaining.

7.13.5 The behavioral reading in optimization and dynamics

With the acts before us, the formal vocabulary of §7.3 can be applied at the level of behavior, and it earns its place by making precise two things the prose has so far said loosely. The first is what "decorum" *is*. The diplomat faces conflicting objectives at once—internal accord within the dyad, the expectations of each family of origin, the ambient social norms, the dyad's own values—and these do not jointly maximize; there is no single act that best satisfies all, only trade-offs among them. In the language of multi-objective optimization, there is no global optimum, only a **Pareto frontier** of acts each of which sacrifices on one objective to gain on another. "Decorum," on this reading, is not a code one obeys but the **feasible set**: the region of acts that violate no hard constraint and lie on or near the frontier, within which the diplomat must still choose, trading a little of the family's expectation against a little of the couple's own values. This dissolves a confusion in the ordinary notion of the "proper": there is rarely one proper act, because the objectives conflict; there is a set of defensible ones, and skill is the navigation among them.

The second is the field's **dynamics**. The relational field is not static; it evolves, and each gift and slight is a perturbation to a system with its own tendencies. Debt and reciprocity are **feedback loops**—a gift creates a pressure toward return, a slight a pressure toward retaliation or withdrawal—and a field of such loops has stable basins and unstable ridges. The art of diplomacy, in these terms, is to keep the system in a stable basin without letting it rigidify: a relation can fail by collapsing into open conflict (the loops running to rupture) but equally by *rigidifying* into pure form, a hollow correctness in which every rite is observed and no feeling moves, the dead grammar of §8.4. Stability is not the goal; *living* stability is—a basin deep enough to absorb the ordinary perturbations of slight and misunderstanding, shallow enough that feeling still flows. A worked optimization, with the objectives specified and the frontier

drawn, belongs to the dedicated computational paper; here the reading is qualitative, its purpose to show that "decorum" and "tact" are not vague honorifics but names for solutions to a structured problem.

An illustrative case — The weighing of the first-visit gift. On the first formal visit to a partner's family, the gift brought is measured on arrival—its thickness noted, compared with precedent, entered into the family's running ledger. The giver knows it will be weighed and chooses accordingly; the weighing is done, often, without a word. The case activates: value, the gaze, power (the right to measure), and the semantics of the sign.

An illustrative case — The problem of address. A partner must decide how to address the other's parents—a choice that is no mere label but the acceptance of a position in the kin order, and that may differ across the two families' grammars, so that the term proper in one is presumptuous or cold in the other. The case activates: the symbolic grammar of the rites, power (the position the term concedes), and cultural difference.

An illustrative case — The taboo misgift. A gift chosen with good intent—a clock, an umbrella, white flowers—carries, in the recipient's grammar, an association of death, separation, or mourning, and the giving becomes a hermeneutic incident: the act read as the opposite of what was meant. The case activates: the semantics of the sign, the right of interpretation, and the wound of misreading (Paper VI).

An illustrative case — Absence as declaration. An elder's absence from a wedding, or a junior's from a memorial rite, is read by the whole field as a statement—of disapproval, of rupture, of a refusal to recognize. No accusation is made; the empty seat makes it. The case activates: presence/absence, power, and justice (the withholding of recognition).

Table 7.21: Gift phenomena and optimization/dynamics: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Gift-economy anthropology (Mauss; Sahlins)	The phenomenon of reciprocity	The gift at the level of behavior	Generalization across cultures
Multi-objective optimization	The Pareto frontier	A formal reading of "decorum"	Functionalist risk
Dynamical systems / attractors	Stability vs. rigidity	The evolution of the relational field	Metaphor vs. model

7.14. The Tension of Coupling: Value, Debt, and Justice

This chapter is the one the whole stratal order was built to make possible. Justice could not be treated first, as a flat theory of fair exchange, because the diplomatic field is not flat; it had to wait until the Real had marked what cannot be priced (§7.6), the Symbolic had revealed the gradient of power, the grammar, and the machinery of value (§7.7–§7.10), the bridge had shown how value is inferred and decided (§7.11), and the phenomenal had displayed the acts in which all of this is transacted (§7.12–§7.13). Only now can the treatment of justice **integrate the three registers** rather than abstract from them. The integrating thesis is this: every diplomatic exchange generates asymmetry and debt, and upon the unequal field of §7.7 these must be **re-read**. What the flat liberal picture sees as the fair give-and-take of equals is, on a tilted field, something else—and the chapter’s task is to show that the three classical registers of justice (distributive, recognitive, hermeneutical) do not merely each apply but *knot together*, tightest where the field is most unequal.

7.14.1 The temporality of debt and reciprocity

The gift obliges a return; this is the micro-justice of the gift economy (Mauss 1990; Graeber 2011), the symmetry that keeps a relation alive across time, since an unreturned gift would end the exchange and a fully settled account would end the bond. So far reciprocity is just, and even generative: the open debt is what keeps the relation in motion (§7.10). But the obligation has a **temporal structure that can be weaponized**, and seeing how requires the asymmetric field. Between equals, a large gift is answered, in time, by a comparable one, and the parties remain peers across the cycle. Where the parties are unequal, a gift *too large to be returned* does not bind them as equals; it **subordinates** the receiver, who now owes what cannot be repaid and must pay, in the only currency left, by deference. The grand gift, the unrepayable favor, the education paid for, the house provided—these can be pure generosity, and they can be a technique of domination wearing generosity’s face, and the recipient often cannot tell which until the deference is called in.

The criterion that separates the two is precisely *reparability*. Reciprocity is just only between parties able, in principle, to reciprocate; the symmetry of the gift economy presupposes a rough equality of capacity to give in return. Where that capacity is absent—because the gift is too large, or the receiver too poor, or the positions too unequal—the *form* of reciprocity persists while its justice drains out, and what remains is a relation of dependence dressed in the etiquette of exchange. This is the temporal mechanism behind §7.7’s economic axis and §7.10’s leakage seen from the side of justice: the unrepayable gift is how value, given once, converts into standing held indefinitely. The just response to such a gift is not refusal (which insults) nor acceptance-as-subordination, but the difficult diplomatic work of converting it back into a relation among equals—which the asymmetric field makes hard, and sometimes forecloses.

7.14.2 Recognition versus commodification

Brideprice is the sharpest case because the same act faces two ways. As **recognition** it is a public, costly acknowledgment of the worth of a union and of the family that raised the bride—value made ceremonial, the relational value of §7.8 given a form the whole field can witness. As **commodification** it is the pricing of a person, the conversion of a daughter into a sum, the reduction of a who to a how-much. The unsettling fact is that the two are not always distinguishable *by the act alone*: the same transfer, the same amount, can be felt as honor or as purchase depending on the structure it moves within (§7.7) and the meaning the parties read into it (§7.8). This is why the question cannot be settled by inspecting the custom in the abstract, as critics and defenders of brideprice alike attempt; it is settled, if at all, in the particular field and the particular reading.

At its limit commodification touches the Real (§7.6): the wound of being priced is the wound of having one's relational, inalienable worth converted *without remainder* into exchange-value, the category error of §6 felt as injury. And here the positive pole, recognition, carries its own danger, which the asymmetric field forces into view and which cannot be waved away. Honneth's theory (Honneth 1995) supplies the ideal of recognition as the good opposed to disrespect; but recognition can itself be **ideological**—it can "recognize" a person precisely *into* a subordinate role, conferring the dignity of the "good wife," the "dutiful daughter-in-law," and binding her the more securely by the very esteem it grants. This is the deepest difficulty in the chapter, because it shows that recognition is not simply the cure for the field's wrongs: a recognition that affirms one's place in the hierarchy is not liberation but its gentler enforcement. The criterion that separates affirming recognition from ideological recognition is whether the recognized role remains *contestable*—whether one is recognized as a person who could refuse the role, or recognized only as the perfect occupant of it. The asymmetric field tends to offer the second and call it honor.

7.14.3 The distribution of the right to interpret, and the knot

The third register completes the integration, and it is the one **Paper VI** prepared. Who holds the authority to say what a gift, a silence, an absence *meant*? This is the diplomatic variant of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), and in the asymmetric field the right of interpretation is distributed along the gradient of power (§7.7): the superior party's reading stands as the fact of the matter, the subordinate's as mere subjective impression, to be corrected. The new wife's reading of a slight is "oversensitivity"; the family's reading of her conduct is simply what happened. To suffer one's interpretations systematically discounted is a distinct wrong—hermeneutical, not distributive—a wrong in one's capacity as a knower and a reader of one's own life.

The chapter's integrating claim is that these three are not three separate problems but a single **knot**, and that the hermeneutical strand is what draws it tight. For the party who cannot get their reading of events to count cannot effectively contest the distribution of debt (they cannot establish that the great gift was domination, since their reading of it is discounted), nor the verdict of recognition (they cannot argue that the honor done them is a cage, since to say so is dismissed as ingratitude). Hermeneutical

injustice thus *disables the contestation* of the other two: it is the strand that, pulled, tightens the whole. Justice in the diplomatic field is therefore not distributive justice plus recognition plus epistemic fairness, three audits run in parallel; it is one structure in which the maldistribution of the right to interpret locks the maldistribution of debt and the miscarriage of recognition into place. And the knot is tied tightest exactly where the field is most unequal—which is to say that the integration this chapter performs is not a tidy synthesis but a diagnosis of why injustice in intimacy is so resistant to redress: each strand defends the others, and the strand that would let one name the wrong is the first the asymmetry removes.

Table 7.22: Value, debt, and justice: literature

Source	Core contribution	Significance for the programme	Limitation / controversy
Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> (2007)	Testimonial / hermeneutical injustice	The distribution of the right to interpret	Scope of the hermeneutical
Honneth, <i>The Struggle for Recognition</i> (1992)	Recognition vs. disrespect	Recognition vs. commodification	Ideological recognition
Distributive justice (Rawls and after)	Principles of distribution	The distributive face of debt	Abstraction from relation

7.15. Conclusion: A Literature Map and a Roadmap

The central claim, restated now that its grounds are in place: diplomacy is not the exception of crisis but the **normal form** in which Generalized Generative Relational Being persists in the world. The dyad does not first exist and then, occasionally, conduct diplomacy; it exists *as* a unit only in continual commerce with the field that surrounds it. To be a "we" in the world is to be, always already, in diplomacy. The paper's arc was the demonstration of this: that the external relational field is constitutive, not additional (§1); that it must be surveyed without a central phenomenon, by coupling rather than by a hub (§2); that beneath the field lies a Real the Symbolic cannot exhaust (§7.6); that the Symbolic is a tilted field of power (§7.7), a grammar of rites and value (§7.8), a hard grammar of law (§7.9), and a machinery in which value is made, circulates, and leaks (§7.10); that a computational-neural bridge carries the field's structure into the diplomatic act (§7.11); that the act is enacted first in the triad and then across the network (§7.12–§7.13); and that justice in this field is a knot of distributive, recognitive, and hermeneutical strands, tied tightest where the field is most unequal (§7.14).

Three threads run the length of that arc and are worth naming as the paper’s distinctive contributions, since each is a seed rather than a finished plant. The first is the **re-description of intimacy’s relation to the world as diplomacy**, and specifically as *asymmetric* diplomacy—a re-description that lets the tools of value, power, and recognition be brought to bear on a domain usually left to sentiment. The second is the **formal interface**: the proposal that the irreversible costs of an unequal field, and the leakage of value across it, have a precise statement as holonomy, non-conservation around a circuit—a proposal stated minimally here and owed in full to a later paper. The third is the **computational-neural chain** of §7.11, which threads latent relational state, Bayesian inference, and sequential decision into a single mechanism linking the Symbolic to the act. None of the three is completed here; that is the nature of a prolegomenon. This paper has only surveyed; it has not usurped (in keeping with §2). What it offers is terrain and coordinates—and, in the tables, an infrastructure—for the work to come, to which the rest of this conclusion points.

7.15.1 The total literature map

The eleven tables of this paper compose, taken together, a single map of the literature a researcher entering this domain must command, clustered by problem-domain and marked, in the difficulty column, by the order in which a newcomer should approach each source. The map is meant to be used in a definite way. A researcher entering one domain—say, the political economy of intimate value—begins from that domain’s table, ascends through its sources in order of difficulty (the introductory framing before the specialist treatment), and then, by the “coupling edge” column, locates the adjacent domains that table touches and the tables that treat them, so that the literature is traversed along the couplings rather than as a flat list. The map is thus itself organized by coupling, in keeping with the whole; it is a relational network of readings, not a ranked bibliography. A consolidated synoptic table, merging the eleven into one navigable whole with cross-domain edges drawn explicitly, is the natural appendix to this paper and is left as a discrete deliverable.

7.15.2 Interfaces to the sub-series to come

The strata and tables above mark out, with some definiteness, the papers that should follow. Each takes up one node or one coupling edge of the map:

- A paper on **the power topology of intimate relationships** (developing §7.7)—the critical keystone, treating the axes of power and their superposition in full.
- A paper on **the holonomy formalization and the redemption of Value Foam in the diplomatic field** (developing the formal interfaces of §7.3, §7.7, §7.10)—the mathematical core, formalizing irreversible deformation and unconserved value.
- A paper on **the generation of a cross-cultural “third set of rites”** (developing §7.8.4)—the generative problem, asking whether a shared grammar can be made without reproducing prior asymmetry.

- A paper on **the psychoanalysis of the in-law triangle** (developing §7.12)—transference, the carried real, the mediator’s position.
- A paper on **a computational model of the state inference and decision of relational value** (developing §7.11)—the POMDP of diplomacy, the gift as costly signal, made formal.
- A paper on **the double grammar of rite and law and their conversion** (developing §7.9)—which obligations are justiciable, what moves them across the boundary.

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This paper was written with, and for, one person. To her—of a background in political economy, a lover of travel and of culture, the gentle “girl of the forest and the mountains” whom the author loves—this work is owed. It was made carrying the thought of her; and it is the author’s hope to carry the theoretical framework set out here into the world, to meet, for her sake, every relational difficulty that the real may bring. That hope is the paper’s true origin, of which the foregoing theory is only the elaboration.

愿天下有情人，受众目而不为众目所夺，立众缘之中而自成其缘；外睦于亲，内安于己，相视如初。

May lovers in this world bear the eyes of others without being seized by them, and standing amid the world’s many bonds, form a bond of their own; at peace with kin without, at peace with themselves within, regarding one another as at the first.

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CHAPTER 8

The Intervention of Language in Intimacy

An Excursus

Why, in the most intimate moments of a shared life, does the subject reach not for plain speech but for verse, for the borrowed, rhythmic, citational language of the lyric? This excursus to the series takes that question as its guiding thread and refuses to answer it in advance. Rather than proceeding from a thesis, it passes through the theories of desire, language, rhythm, and the Real that bear on the question, and allows a claim to emerge only at the end, as an arrival rather than a premise.

*The path is as follows. We first survey the genealogy of desire and affect across psychoanalytic, Hegelian, political-economic, and Spinozan–Deleuzian registers, isolating a tension, **desire as lack versus desire as production**, that becomes the paper’s hidden spine. We then locate the difference between language, poetry, and music along a teleological scale of receding reference, and take up rhythm as the crux: functionalist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, and existential accounts are set against one another, and a reading of rhythm through Deleuze’s **difference and repetition** is offered as the paper’s theoretical centre of gravity. The dialectic of desire and the two rhetorical mechanisms of poetic failure, metaphor and metonymy, aligned with Freudian condensation and displacement and Lacanian symptom and desire, are then developed, leading to an account of the lyric as a movement **toward** the Real that, by structural necessity, never arrives.*

A case study of classical Chinese love poetry, classified by literary form and illocutionary function rather than by period or author, tests the conceptual architecture against the material: longing, vow, avowal, and the wish for shared being are shown to map onto the four mechanisms developed in the body. The conclusion lets the claim surface and declines to dissolve the spine’s central tension: the lyric is irreplaceable in intimate coupling because it is at once the mourning of a lack and the production of a surplus, a movement toward the Real, staged within the symbolic, that is destined to fail, and whose very failure is what allows love to be spoken without end.

Keywords lyric poetry; rhythm; the Real; desire (lack and production); metaphor and metonymy.

*To the one I love,
the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves the forest and the long road of travel,
and who is herself as pure as a forest, and as dear:
this whole paper is an argument that language never reaches
what it most wants to say,
and it was your love, and the longing for you, that taught me so,
for no word I have ever written has come close to either.*

但願人長久，千里共嬋娟

*May we be granted long life,
and though a thousand miles apart, share the same bright moon.*

from 苏轼, *Shuidiao Getou*

言之不足，故嗟叹之

*When words are not enough,
we sigh them; and when sighing is not enough, we sing.*

after the 毛诗序 (Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*)

谨以此文，作于二人初见四周年之日

Written on the fourth anniversary of the day we first met.

愛與幸福，永恆不渝

Love and happiness, unchanging and without end.

8.1. Introduction: The Phenomenon and the Question

There is a fact about intimate life so ordinary that it is rarely felt as strange, and so strange that it deserves the attention this paper will give it. At the moments when the subject most wants to be understood by the one it loves, in longing, in avowal, in the making of vows, in the wish to be near, it very often does not say plainly what it means. It reaches instead for verse: for the rhythmic, the cited, the borrowed, the formally constrained. It writes a poem, or quotes one; it sets words to a measure they did not need; it speaks, in the most private of registers, in a language that is conspicuously *not* the language of plain report. The lover who could say “I miss you” says instead, with Li Shangyin, that the spring silkworm spins its thread until death. The one who could say “I hope we are together for a long time” says, with Su Shi, 但願人長久，千里共嬋娟。

Why? What does verse do, in intimacy, that plain speech cannot? The question is not rhetorical and its answer is not obvious. Plainly, the lyric is less efficient than report: it says less, per word, about states of affairs. If the function of language in intimacy were the transmission of information about feeling, verse would be a poor instrument, and its persistence across every literate culture would be a puzzle of collective irrationality. That it is instead felt as the *higher* form, that to put one’s love into a poem is to dignify it, and to receive a poem is to be loved more fully than to be informed, suggests that something other than information is at stake, and that the difference between poetry and prose is doing work we do not yet understand.

This excursus takes that work as its object. But it proceeds by a method I want to make explicit at the outset, because it differs from the deductive spine of the earlier papers in this series. **It does not begin from a thesis.** To open with a claim about what the lyric *is* would be to frame the phenomenon before we have seen it, to make the material illustrate a conclusion rather than generate one. Instead the paper passes, in turn, through the theories of desire, of language and music, of rhythm, of the dialectic of desire, of rhetoric, and of the Real, that bear on the question; and it permits a claim to emerge only at the end, as an arrival. The guiding question, *why does the intimate subject address the beloved in verse?*, is held open throughout. Each section deepens it from a different angle; none is allowed to close it prematurely.

8.1.1 The Structural Place of This Paper

A word on where this paper sits. The main arc of the series treats coupling as a relation between subjects: the joint attention and attentional economy through which subjects are formed (Paper V), the epistemic agency at work in the proposal (Paper VI), the generation of value and the gaze of the Other in the external relational field (Paper VII). The present paper appears, at first, to leave that arc: its object is not the relation between two subjects but a feature of *language*. Yet the appearance is misleading. When the intimate subject turns to the lyric, it does not address the concrete other directly; it routes its address through the symbolic order, through the inherited forms, the prior poems, the shared figures, and reaches the beloved only by way of that detour. The pole of the coupling has shifted, from the concrete other to what Lacan calls the *big Other* (*le grand Autre*), the order of the signifier in which the subject's desire is constituted and to which its speech is addressed even when it seems addressed to a person. The lyric is the site where this shift becomes legible. The paper therefore does not leave the category of higher-order coupling; it examines a limiting case of it, in which one pole of the couple is the symbolic order itself.

8.1.2 Method and the Hidden Spine

The risk of a survey that begins from no thesis is that it becomes a catalogue, a review of theories of desire, then of language, then of rhythm, with no through-line. To guard against this, the paper carries a *hidden spine*: not a thesis, but a tension, established in Section 8.2 and surfacing repeatedly thereafter. It is the opposition between two conceptions of desire that the relevant traditions force into contact: desire as *lack* (Hegel, Lacan), in which desire arises from a constitutive want and seeks an object that would fill it; and desire as *production* (Spinoza, Deleuze), in which desire is not the absence of an object but the positive, affirmative activity of a power of existing. The lyric, I will suggest, is the rare object in which these two conceptions are not merely both applicable but *co-present and irreconcilable*: the poem is at once the mourning of an absence and the sheer overflow of language's productive power. The paper does not resolve this tension. As an excursus, it claims the privilege of stopping at the place where the two conceptions meet, in the lyric, and naming that meeting, rather than legislating a winner. This is stated now not as a result but as a map of the terrain to be crossed.

8.2. The Genealogy of Desire and Affect

If the lyric has something to do with desire, and the phenomenology of intimate verse, saturated as it is with longing, insists that it does, then we must first ask what desire is, and we must ask it without assuming the answer. The concept has at least four major lineages, and they do not agree. Setting them side by side is not eclecticism; it is the condition for locating, precisely, the tension that the rest of the paper will carry.

8.2.1 The Psychoanalytic Line: From Libido to the Object-Cause

Freud's account begins in an economics. The psychic apparatus is governed by quantities of libidinal energy that seek discharge; the dream-work and the symptom are the transformations this energy undergoes under repression, and Freud names two of its central operations *condensation* (*Verdichtung*) and *displacement* (*Verschiebung*), the compression of several latent contents into one image, and the transfer of intensity from a charged idea to an innocuous neighbour (Freud 1900). We will meet these two operations again, transformed, as the rhetorical mechanisms of the lyric (Section 8.6); their appearance here, at the root, is deliberate.

Lacan reworks this economics into a structural theory of the signifier. His decisive move is to distinguish *need*, *demand*, and *desire* (Lacan 1977). Need is biological and admits of satisfaction; its object can fill it. Demand is need passed through language and addressed to another, and because every demand is also, beneath its literal content, a demand for love, for the unconditional gift of the other's presence, no particular satisfaction ever meets it fully. Desire is the residue: what is left when the satisfiable content of need is subtracted from the unconditional reach of demand. Desire therefore has, strictly, no object that could satisfy it; it has only a cause, what Lacan names the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, which is not a thing one could obtain but the very gap that the failure of demand opens. And because the subject's desire is structured in and by the field of the signifier, the order of the Other, Lacan can write that "man's desire is the desire of the Other": both desire *for* the Other's recognition and desire patterned *after* the Other's desire (Lacan 1977). This is the strong form of *desire as lack*. Its consequence, which Section 8.5 will draw out, is that desire's true "object" is its own perpetuation: a desire that found its object would cease to be desire.

8.2.2 The Hegelian Line: Desire and Recognition

Lacan's lack has an upstream source in Hegel, read through Kojève. In the *Phenomenology*, self-consciousness is first *desire* (*Begierde*): it relates to the world by negating it, consuming the object to confirm its own independence (Hegel 1977). But the consumed object vanishes, and with it the confirmation; the desiring self discovers that it needs an object that is not destroyed by being negated, another self-consciousness, which can *recognize* it. Human desire, on this account, is at bottom the desire to be desired, the desire for recognition, and it sets in motion the dialectic of master and slave. Two features of this account matter for us. First, desire is intrinsically *negative*: it is a relation to what is not, a restlessness that consumes its objects and is never at rest in them; this negativity is the philosophical ancestor of Lacanian lack. Second, desire is intrinsically *intersubjective and infinite*: its real aim is another desire, and since to be recognized by a recognized other is to want the other's recognition to be itself worth having, the structure does not terminate. The Hegelian provenance explains why the Lacanian formula, desire is the desire of the Other, is not a paradox but a near-tautology: it was built into the concept of desire from the moment desire was defined as the desire to be desired.

8.2.3 The Political-Economic Line: The Social Production of Need

Against the apparent timelessness of the psychoanalytic and Hegelian accounts stands a third lineage that historicizes desire. For the classical political economists and for Marx, needs are not a fixed natural endowment but are themselves produced, socially and historically, alongside the means of their satisfaction. The range of a human being's wants, and the forms in which they are felt as wants, are the sediment of a mode of production and its culture; the "necessary" needs of one epoch are the luxuries or the unthinkable excesses of another. This line matters here for two reasons. First, it supplies a corrective to any account that would treat the longing expressed in the lyric as a pure, ahistorical constant: the very forms of intimate desire, romantic love as we know it, the cult of the beloved, the lyric "I" that addresses a "you", have a history, and the classical Chinese material this paper analyses belongs to a specific and elaborate social formation of feeling. Second, and looking ahead to Section 8.7, the political-economic line gives us the category of the *surplus*, value produced beyond what is consumed, accumulated rather than discharged, which will let us pose the lyric's economic peculiarity: its *non-*

exchangeability, the way a poem is precisely what cannot be paraphrased into information without remainder. The structural analogy between the unparaphrasable remainder of the poem, the Lacanian *objet a* as the remainder of demand, and surplus as the remainder of exchange will be drawn, with due caution, in Section 8.7.

8.2.4 The Productive Line: Spinoza, Deleuze, and Desire Without Lack

The fourth lineage denies the founding premise of the first two. For Spinoza, the essence of each thing is its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in its being; desire (*cupiditas*) is conatus become conscious of itself, and it is therefore not a lack but a *power*, an affirmative quantity of activity (Spinoza 1996). Deleuze and Guattari radicalize this into a frontal assault on the psychoanalytic picture: desire, they argue, is not founded on lack, does not aim at an absent object, and is not structured like a want awaiting fulfilment; it is *productive*, a machinic process that connects and flows, and the entire apparatus of lack-castration-Oedipus is a secondary capture of this primary productivity (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). To say desire is production is to say there is no constitutive hole at the centre of the subject from which desire issues; there is, rather, a positive process that prior theory has misdescribed as a hole by viewing it through the lens of what it lacks.

8.2.5 The Tension Established

We now have the spine. On one side, **desire as lack**: Hegelian negativity and Lacanian *manque*, desire as the relation to what is not, whose object is its own continuation and whose paradigm is the gap. On the other, **desire as production**: Spinozan conatus and Deleuzian flow, desire as affirmative power, whose paradigm is overflow. These are not two theories of the same thing that might be averaged. They are two ontologies of desire, and they will pull the analysis of the lyric in opposite directions: lack will read the poem as the staging of an absence, an elegy for what cannot be had; production will read the poem as the sheer generativity of language, an overflow that needs no missing object to explain it. I do not resolve the tension here, and I will not resolve it at the end. I mark it, and I let it run.

8.3. Language, Poetry, Music: Difference and Teleology

Before we can ask what rhythm does, we need the place of poetry among the symbolic systems with which it is continuous. I propose to locate language, poetry, and music on a single scale, and then to ask after the *telos*, the toward-which, of each.

8.3.1 The Scale of Receding Reference

Consider the three as systems of organized sound that differ in the weight they place on the *signified*. Ordinary language is maximally referential: its sounds are, in the Saussurean account, arbitrary with respect to their meanings (Saussure 1959), and the whole apparatus is built to carry the signified across, with the material of the signifier, the phonic substance, ideally transparent, a window one looks through rather than at. Music sits at the opposite pole: it has, in any ordinary sense, no signified at all; it does not refer, or refers only by convention and association, and its content, if it has one, is exhausted by its form, the organization of the sonic material itself is the whole of what there is to grasp. Music is, in this sense, *pure signifier*: signifier whose play is not in the service of a signified beyond it.

Poetry sits between. It retains reference, a poem is, unlike a sonata, *about* something, and we can paraphrase it, badly, but it systematically thickens the signifier, foregrounding the phonic and formal substance that ordinary language asks us to see through: rhyme, metre, tonal pattern, parallelism, the shape and sound of the word as word. The lyric is language in which the signifier ceases to be transparent and becomes, partly, opaque, in which we are made to attend to the material of speech and not only to its message. On the scale of receding reference, poetry is the middle term: the signified, dominant in prose, begins its retreat; the signifier, suppressed in prose, begins to rise; and music is the limit toward which this movement points, the vanishing of reference into pure sonic form.

8.3.2 The Question of Telos

Each of the three can be asked what it is *for*, and the answers are revealing. Ordinary language is for communication and representation: it is the instrument of the transmission

of contents, and it is well-made to the degree that the signifier disappears into the signified. Music, having no signified, cannot be for the transmission of contents; the long tradition that calls it the language of feeling gestures at its telos, not the representation of an emotion but something closer to its *direct presentation*, the production in the listener of an affective movement that is not *about* anything. Music, one might say, does not describe the movement of feeling; it *is* a movement of feeling, transposed into sound.

And poetry? Its telos is precisely its in-betweenness, and this is the hinge of the whole paper. The lyric is neither pure communication nor pure form. It retains enough reference to be *about* the beloved, the longing, the vow, it has not severed itself from the world as music has, but it borrows from music the thickening of the signifier, the insistence that the material of the words matters in itself. Why would intimate speech want to be *both*? Why retain reference (so that it is still *to her*, still *about* this love) while drawing toward music (so that the words become opaque, material, sung)? The provisional shape of an answer, to be earned, not assumed, is that intimacy requires a language that does two incompatible things at once: it must still *mean*, must still be addressed and referential, for it is the address of one person to another; and it must escape the transparency of mere meaning, must become more than information, because what it would convey, love, the beloved's irreplaceability, the longing that has no satisfiable object, is precisely what cannot be transmitted as a content. The lyric's in-betweenness is not a compromise but a solution to a real problem. Sections 8.4 and 8.7 make the solution precise.

8.4. Rhythm: Four Perspectives and the Repetition of Difference

If the difference between poetry and prose lies in the thickening of the signifier, then rhythm, the periodic organization of the phonic material in time, is the chief instrument of that thickening, and the crux of the paper. I take it up through four lenses, and the fourth, read through Deleuze, is the theoretical centre of gravity of the whole.

8.4.1 Functionalist: Rhythm as Mnemonic, Ritual, Coordination

The oldest answers are functional. Rhythm aids memory: metrically organized speech is far easier to retain and transmit than prose, and in oral cultures the metrical line is the technology of cultural storage, the law, the genealogy, the epic are versified so that they

may survive. Rhythm coordinates bodies: the work-song, the rowing-chant, the march synchronize collective labour and movement. Rhythm marks the sacred: incantation, prayer, and spell are rhythmic because rhythm sets speech apart from the profane flow of report and signals that these words are doing something other than informing. Each of these is real, and each tells us something: rhythm is, from the start, the mark of language doing more, or other, than communicating. But functionalism cannot be the whole story, for it explains rhythm by its uses and leaves untouched the question of why *this* organization of sound should have these powers, and why, in intimacy, where memory and coordination and ritual are not obviously at stake, the rhythmic should still be felt as the register proper to love.

8.4.2 Structuralist: The Poetic Function

Jakobson gives the canonical structuralist answer. Language has several functions, and the *poetic function* is the one that focuses on the message for its own sake, on the palpable, material side of the sign. Its mechanism is precise: the poetic function “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (Jakobson 1960). In ordinary speech, equivalence (similarity, the paradigmatic relations among items that could fill a slot) governs *selection*, while contiguity governs *combination* into a sequence. Poetry imposes equivalence onto the sequence itself: syllables are made equivalent to syllables (metre), stresses to stresses, tones to tones (the Chinese 平仄 patterning), line-ends to line-ends (rhyme), whole grammatical structures to one another (parallelism, 对仗). Rhythm, on this account, is the periodic structure that results when equivalence is projected onto combination; it is the form that the foregrounding of the signifier takes. This is exact and indispensable, and it gives us the linguistic mechanism of rhythm. But it is, characteristically, *static*: it describes the structure of the rhythmic text as a synchronic pattern of equivalences, and it does not, on its own, tell us why this structure should move us, or what its relation is to time, to the body, to desire.

8.4.3 Psychoanalytic: Rhythm as the Return of an Archaic Pulsation

Psychoanalysis supplies a genetic depth that structuralism brackets. In Kristeva’s account, beneath the *symbolic*, the order of grammar, syntax, predication, the order of the signified, lies the *semiotic* (*le sémiotique*), a domain of pre-linguistic pulsion, rhythm,

intonation, and bodily drive organized in what she calls, after Plato, the *chora*: the rhythmic, maternal space of the infant's body before the entry into language proper (Kristeva 1984). Poetic language, on this view, is language in which the semiotic erupts through the symbolic: rhythm, assonance, the music of the line are the return, within signifying speech, of this archaic bodily pulsation, the trace of drive in the order of meaning. Rhythm is thus charged with the body and with the earliest relation, the pre-Oedipal bond; to put one's love into rhythm is, at this depth, to route it through the most archaic stratum of one's relation to the other, the stratum of pulse, heartbeat, the rocked body, the maternal voice. The material opacity of the poetic signifier, what structuralism describes from outside as projected equivalence, is, from inside, the pressure of drive against meaning.

8.4.4 Existential and Generative: Rhythm as the Repetition of Difference

Here is the paper's pivot. Each account so far treats rhythm as, in some sense, the *return of the same*: the same metre repeated, the same pattern of equivalences, the same archaic pulse. But this is to misdescribe what rhythm is, and Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* supplies the correction (Deleuze 1994). Deleuze distinguishes two repetitions. There is the bare repetition of the identical, the metronome, the mechanical tick, repetition as the return of the same element, and there is a deeper repetition that is the repetition *of difference*: a repetition in which what returns is never the identical but is each time displaced, varied, charged with the new, such that the "same" beat is never the same, because it falls in a different place in the gathering series, against a different ground of expectation, bearing the difference that its position in time confers. Rhythm, properly understood, is repetition in the second sense, not the first. A metre is not a metronome. The line that scans is not the mechanical return of identical feet; it is the production, through periodic return, of difference, of expectation and its fulfilment or frustration, of the syncopation that means only against the ground of the regular, of the variation that is audible only because the pattern lets it be heard. Rhythm is the engine by which repetition generates difference; it is, in Deleuze's terms, the temporal form of difference itself.

This reading does three things at once. First, it rescues rhythm from the static synchrony of structuralism: rhythm is not a pattern of equivalences laid out in space but a *movement*

in time, a temporal synthesis in which the past beat is retained, the present beat sounded, the next anticipated, and difference produced in the interval. Rhythm is, in this sense, a small machine of time, a demonstration of how the new is generated through return; and this is why I align it with the *existential*, it is the form in which the lyric stages temporality, becoming, the production of the new from the recurrent. Second, it connects rhythm to the *productive* pole of the spine (Section 8.2): on the Deleuzian reading, rhythm is not the marking of a lack but the affirmative generation of difference, the sheer productivity of the signifier overflowing into time. The poem, read through rhythm-as-difference, is not an elegy for an absent object; it is a generative process, desire as production rather than lack.

And third, this is the crucial complication, and I will not smooth it over, this productive reading collides head-on with the psychoanalytic account of the preceding subsection and with the entire lack-tradition of Section 8.2. For Kristeva's rhythm is the return of an archaic pulse, charged with the pathos of a lost bond; it is rhythm as the trace of a separation, the mark of a lack. Deleuze's rhythm is the production of difference, owing nothing to any lost object; it is rhythm as affirmation. The same phenomenon, the beating measure of the loved poem, is read by one tradition as the recurrence of a wound and by the other as the generation of the new. I do not adjudicate. I propose, rather, that rhythm is the phenomenon in which lack and production are *co-present and indiscernible*: each return of the beat is at once the re-opening of the gap (the beat that just passed is gone; the next is not yet; the interval is a small recurrent loss) and the production of difference (the next beat, when it comes, is new, displaced, charged). The metre mourns and generates in the same stroke. This is the first full appearance of the spine's tension in the body of the paper, and rhythm is its privileged site. The thesis-to-come, in Section 8.11, will have to answer to this.

8.4.5 Rhythm as the Manifestation and Witnessing of the Subject's Existence

The four perspectives above tell us what rhythm *is* (a projected equivalence, an archaic pulse, a repetition of difference) and what it *does* (foregrounds the signifier, charges it with drive, generates the new in time). But there is a further claim, the most important the paper makes about rhythm, that none of the four states outright and toward which all four point: rhythm is the sensuous *manifestation of the subject's own existence*, and,

in the intimate scene, its *witnessing*. I take this up on its own because it is the hinge between rhythm as a linguistic device and rhythm as the thing the lover actually wants when the lover wants verse.

Begin from a fact that the structuralist account, which treats rhythm as a synchronic pattern, must bracket: rhythm is lived only in time, and to live it is to be a subject who retains the beat just gone, sounds the beat now, and leans toward the beat not yet arrived. This threefold hold, retention, presentation, protention, is, in the phenomenological tradition, the very structure of inner time-consciousness, the structure by which there is a subject at all rather than a succession of unconnected instants (Husserl 1991). To follow a rhythm is therefore not to register an external pattern but to *enact* the temporal synthesis that constitutes one as a subject. The beat is not in the poem alone; it is in the subject's holding-together of the poem in time, and that holding-together is the subject's own existing made audible to itself. Heidegger's thought that the being of the subject is care, a being stretched along between having-been and coming-toward, finds in rhythm a small, repeatable, sensuous figure: the measure is the subject's temporal stretch, given as pulse (Heidegger 1962). To beat time is to exist out loud.

This is why rhythm, of all the features of language, is the one that cannot be paraphrased and cannot be transmitted as content. A signified can be handed over; the temporal synthesis by which a subject lives a rhythm cannot, for it *is* that subject's existing, which is not a content but an event, and an event that must be performed anew by whoever undergoes it. When the metre moves us, what moves us is not information about the poet's feeling but the participation of our own time-consciousness in a movement, the recruitment of our existing into the beat. Rhythm does not represent the subject; it *presents* it, manifests it, brings it into sensuous appearance, in the only medium in which a subject's existing can appear, namely time. Here the productive reading of the previous subsection receives its deepest justification: rhythm produces difference because it is the production of the subject's own continuation in time, the affirmative event of going-on-existing, beat after beat.

And now the intimate turn, which is the reason this matters for a philosophy of intimacy. In the dyad, my existing is not only manifested by the rhythm I make or undergo; it is offered to be *witnessed*. To give the beloved a poem, or to read one with her, is to

set going a rhythm that she lives in her time as I live it in mine, so that two temporal syntheses are made to coincide in the same measure, and each becomes the witness of the other's existing. The shared beat is the smallest unit of being-together: not the exchange of a content but the co-enactment of a duration, the mutual attestation that here is a subject, existing, in time, with me. This is what the lover wants and cannot get from plain speech, which transmits a content and leaves the two subjects' times untouched and apart. The lover wants to be *witnessed in his existing* by the one he loves, and to witness hers; and rhythm, because it is existence given as time, is the form in which one subject's being can be laid open to another's attestation. The poem's measure is a request: *beat with me, and so confirm that I am, and that I am with you*. We will see in Section 8.8 that this witnessing is routed through the big Other, the inherited measures, the prior poems, so that the attestation two lovers give each other is also underwritten by the whole order of those who beat these measures before; the existential function of rhythm and its coupling with the Other are one structure seen from two sides. And we will see in Section 8.7 that because the witnessed existing is a continuation in time and not a completed object, the witnessing, like the desire it serves, has no terminus: there is always a next beat, and so always a next confirmation to be given and received.

8.5. The Dialectic of Desire

The genealogy of Section 8.2 left the lack-tradition with a formula whose consequences must now be drawn: desire's true object is its own perpetuation. This section develops that dialectic, because it is the engine that will drive the account of poetic failure in Sections 8.6 and 8.7.

8.5.1 The Object That Is Desire Itself

If desire is the residue of demand, what remains when the satisfiable content of need is subtracted from the unconditional reach of the demand for love, then desire is, by construction, what no object can satisfy. The *objet a* is not an object that desire seeks and might obtain; it is the object-*cause* of desire, the gap itself given a kind of phantom positivity. From this two things follow. First, every empirical object of desire is a stand-in, a placeholder occupying the place of the cause; when obtained, it disappoints, not

by accident but by structure, because it was never the cause but only its momentary embodiment, and desire slides on. Second, the deep point, the only “object” adequate to desire is desire itself: what desire “wants,” beneath every particular want, is to go on desiring, since to attain a final object would be to extinguish desire, and the subject of desire does not, at the deepest level, will its own extinction. Desire wants to want. This is not a pathology but the structure of desire as such.

8.5.2 Desire as the Desire of the Other

The Hegelian inheritance (Section 8.2) makes this self-relation intersubjective rather than solipsistic. Desire is the desire *of* the Other in the full ambiguity of the genitive: the subject desires the Other’s desire (to be desired, recognized, wanted), and the subject desires *according to* the Other’s desire (it learns what is desirable from the field of the Other, takes its objects from that field, wants what the Other is taken to want). Desire is therefore never private property; it is constituted in the symbolic field, addressed to it, and patterned by it. This is the precise sense in which the turn to the lyric is a coupling with the big Other (Section 8.8): to put desire into the inherited forms of verse is to acknowledge, in the very form of the utterance, that desire was always routed through the Other, that even my most private longing speaks a borrowed tongue and wants according to a desire not first my own.

8.5.3 The Negative and the Infinite: The Hegelian Substratum

That desire cannot terminate is, in Hegelian terms, a consequence of its negativity. Desire relates to its object by negating it, by consuming, surpassing, refusing to rest in it, and the negation of any determinate object only generates the relation anew with respect to a further object; the movement is intrinsically infinite, a “bad infinity” of endless succession unless and until it finds an object that is itself a desire, another self-consciousness, in the labour of mutual recognition. The lyric inherits this structure exactly. The poem does not rest in its object; it negates the sufficiency of any plain naming of the beloved (“I miss you” is never enough, must be surpassed into figure), and it generates, out of that insufficiency, the endless productivity of figuration. The infinity of love poetry, that there is always another poem, that no poem is the last, that the beloved can always be praised again and otherwise, is the aesthetic form of the infinity of desire. We will see in

Section 8.7 that this is also why the lyric can never be completed and never needs to be: its incompleteness is not a defect but the condition of its continuation.

8.5.4 The Causation of Desire and the Mechanism of Reproduction

We must be more exact about *how* desire is caused, and the exactness will hand us the bridge to political economy that Section 8.7 and Section 8.8 require. The Lacanian account is not merely that desire lacks an object; it is that desire is *caused* by an object that is itself a remainder, a leftover of a prior operation. When need passes into demand and demand is met, something is always left over, unmet, because the demand was, beneath its content, a demand for the unconditional, which no finite satisfaction supplies; and this leftover, the *objet a*, is not the absence of satisfaction but a *produced surplus*, the by-product of the very operation of satisfying. Desire is caused by its own remainder. This is the decisive point for what follows: desire is not a static hole but a *cycle*, a process that, in operating, produces the very surplus that causes it to operate again. To desire is to enter a loop in which each satisfaction manufactures the residue that reignites the wanting.

Lacan gives this loop an explicitly economic name. The enjoyment that the subject derives not from attaining the object but from the circling pursuit of it he calls *surplus-enjoyment* (*plus-de-jouir*), and he coins the term on the model of, and in avowed debt to, Marx's surplus-value (*Mehrwert*) (Lacan 2007). The parallel is precise and load-bearing. As capital, in Marx, does not consume its surplus but reinvests it to produce more surplus, so that accumulation is a self-sustaining cycle of production and reproduction (Marx 1976), so desire does not discharge its surplus-enjoyment but recirculates it, each turn of the loop reproducing the conditions of the next. Desire, in short, has the form of *reproduction*: it is not a one-time want awaiting a one-time satisfaction but a self-reproducing process that secures its own continuation by producing, at every cycle, the remainder that drives the following cycle. The infinity of desire (Section 8.5) is the infinity of a reproductive loop.

This lets us state with new precision what the lyric does, and prepares the central claim of Section 8.7. The poem is the cultural form that takes up this reproductive loop and sustains it deliberately and beautifully. It does not aim to satisfy the longing (to discharge

it would be to end it); it aims to keep the loop turning, to produce, at each reading, the surplus that occasions the next saying. Metaphor, metonymy, and rhythm (Sections 8.6, 8.4) are, in this light, not three devices but three *means* to a single end: the reproduction of generativity, the keeping-open of the cycle by which love can be said again. The poem is a reproduction-machine for desire, and, as the next sections argue, the value it reproduces need not be captured and discharged but can be made to circulate, within the dyad and the community of readers, as a sustaining good.

8.6. Metaphor and Metonymy: The Two Mechanisms of Failure

We now bring the dialectic of desire down to the level of the line, to the rhetorical operations by which the poem actually works on language. This is the section the whole architecture has been pointing toward, for it is here that the abstract movement of desire becomes the concrete movement of words. The claim is that the two master tropes of poetry are not ornaments but the two forms that desire's movement takes in language, and that each is, in its own way, a mechanism of *approach without arrival*, a failure that is also a function.

8.6.1 The Threefold Alignment

There is a deep correspondence, noticed by Jakobson and theorized by Lacan, among three pairs (Jakobson 1956; Lacan 1977). Jakobson, studying aphasia, found that language disorders cluster along two axes: a *similarity* disorder (loss of the paradigmatic, the capacity for substitution) and a *contiguity* disorder (loss of the syntagmatic, the capacity for combination); and he aligned these two axes with the two master tropes, *metaphor* (substitution on the basis of similarity) and *metonymy* (connection on the basis of contiguity). Freud's two operations of the dream-work, *condensation* and *displacement*, map onto these: condensation, the overlaying of several contents in one image, is a substitutive, metaphoric operation; displacement, the sliding of intensity along a chain of associations to a contiguous term, is a metonymic one. Lacan completes the alignment by reading the unconscious as structured like a language and locating its two mechanisms in the same tropes: metaphor is the structure of the *symptom* (one signifier substituted for another, the repressed returning in a substitute formation) and is the vehicle by which

new meaning, and the subject's relation to the signifier "I", is produced; metonymy is the structure of *desire* itself, the endless sliding of signification along the signifying chain, the movement from term to contiguous term that never reaches a final signified. The alignment is therefore:

Jakobson	Freud	Lacan
Metaphor (similarity)	Condensation	Symptom; production of meaning
Metonymy (contiguity)	Displacement	Desire; sliding of the chain

8.6.2 Metaphor: Approach by Substitution

Metaphor names the unnameable by putting another name in its place. The beloved is not described but *substituted for*, she is the bright moon, she is the silkworm's unending thread, she is jade and snow and the moon between the clouds. What cannot be said directly (her irreplaceability, the quality that makes her *her*, which is precisely what has no proper name because it coincides with the *objet a*, the unsymbolizable cause of desire) is approached by the violence of substitution, the carrying-over of a name from elsewhere. Metaphor is the vertical, condensing path: it stacks, it overlays, it compresses the unsayable into a single charged figure. And it fails, necessarily, because the substitute is not the thing; the moon is not she; the figure approaches the *objet a* and does not reach it, for the *objet a* has no name that would be the right one. But the failure is productive: out of it comes meaning, the new sense that the metaphor generates, the surplus of signification that was not there before the carrying-over. Metaphor is the mechanism by which the poem produces meaning out of the impossibility of naming.

8.6.3 Metonymy: Approach by Sliding

Metonymy names by moving to the neighbour. Longing is not stated but enacted as a sliding along a chain of contiguous images, the silkworm, then the thread, then the candle, then the ash, then the tears, each term passing the charge to the next, none of them the object, the movement itself being the meaning. This is the horizontal, displacing path, and it is, in Lacan's reading, the very structure of desire: the signification slides, term to contiguous term, and never arrives at a final signified that would arrest it, because

there is no such signified, the chain is open, and desire is exactly this openness, this perpetual referral onward. The metonymic poem does not reach its object; it makes the not-reaching audible as duration, as the drawn-out sliding that is the temporal body of longing. The endlessness of the relative-clause, the catalogue, the parallel series in Chinese verse, the way 相思 (longing) is rendered not as a statement but as an unspooling series, is metonymy as the form of desire's non-arrival.

8.6.4 Allusion as a Special Metonymy

Classical poetry, and Chinese poetry pre-eminently, deploys a third device that I read as a special case of metonymy: *allusion*, the use of the prior text, the 典. To allude is to name one's present feeling by placing beside it a contiguous fragment of the inherited symbolic order, an earlier poem, a canonical phrase, a legend, and to let the borrowed term carry the charge. This is metonymy operating not within the poem but between the poem and the whole prior order of poems: the present love is connected, by contiguity in the symbolic field, to every prior love that used these words, and is guaranteed by that lineage. Allusion is thus the precise linguistic mechanism of the coupling with the big Other (Section 8.8): it pledges the present private feeling to the inherited order and lets that order stand surety for it. When the lover writes 千里共嬋娟, he does not coin the feeling; he borrows Su Shi's, and through Su Shi the millennium of moon-gazing that the phrase metonymically drags in its train. The detour through the Other is, formally, an allusion.

8.6.5 Both Tropes Approach and Neither Arrives

The unifying point: metaphor and metonymy are the two, and, Jakobson suggests, the only two, fundamental movements of poetic language, and both are mechanisms of *approach without arrival*. Metaphor approaches the unnameable cause by substitution and fails to coincide with it; metonymy approaches the object by sliding toward it along the chain and fails to halt at it. The two failures are the two faces of the single structure of desire: the vertical failure to name (metaphor, condensation, symptom) and the horizontal failure to arrive (metonymy, displacement, desire). The poem is built out of these two failures, and, this is the thread to Section 8.7, it is built out of them not despite their being failures but *because* they are: only a language that does not reach its object

can keep the object as an object of desire, and only such a language is adequate to a love whose object is, in the strict sense, the *objet a* that no word can name and no chain can reach.

8.7. The Approach to the Real, and the Non-Exchangeable

We can now state, in the vocabulary that has been assembled, what the lyric does, though still as analysis and not yet as the paper's claim, which is reserved for the conclusion. The lyric is the language that moves *toward the Real*. But this formulation is dangerous, and the danger must be met head-on, for the whole rigour of the account depends on getting it right.

8.7.1 The Three Registers, and the Real as the Unsymbolizable

Lacan distinguishes three registers: the *imaginary* (the order of images, identifications, the ego), the *symbolic* (the order of the signifier, language, law, the big Other), and the *real* (*le réel*), which is not “reality” but precisely what resists symbolization absolutely, what falls out of the signifier, the impossible that cannot be said (Lacan 1977; Lacan 1998). The Real is not behind the symbolic as a deeper truth; it is the symbolic's own internal limit, the point at which signification fails, the hole around which the signifying chain circulates. The *objet a* is an object plucked from this register: the unsymbolizable remainder, the cause of desire that has no signifier. And the gap between the Real and the symbolic, the fact that the signifier never captures the thing, that something always falls out, *is* the place where desire is generated (Section 8.5). Desire is the subjective face of the Real–symbolic difference.

8.7.2 The Crucial Caveat: Toward the Real, Not Into It

It is tempting, and several of the paper's earlier formulations leaned this way, to say that the lyric, by thickening the signifier toward music, *reaches* the Real, that rhythm, drawing language toward pure sonic form, breaks through the symbolic to the unsymbolizable beneath. **This would be an error, and the most important correction the paper makes.** The Real is, by definition, what cannot be symbolized; and rhythm, metre, tonal pattern, rhyme are not the Real but *highly organized signifiers*, they are structure,

the most structured language there is, the very acme of the symbolic, not its outside. The poem does not exit the symbolic into the Real. What it does is subtler and is the precise formulation toward which the whole paper has been working: the lyric, within the symbolic, *stages a directed tension toward the Real*, it organizes the signifier so as to point at, gesture toward, circle around, the limit at which signification fails, without and never crossing that limit. Rhythm is not the Real; rhythm is the symbolic's demonstration of its own edge, the signifier made to vibrate at the frequency of its own limit. The poem is a movement toward the Real conducted entirely in the symbolic, an approach that is constitutively an approach and never an arrival, which is exactly the structure of metaphor and metonymy in Section 8.6, now seen at the level of the whole. This caveat is not a hedge; it is the saving distinction without which the account collapses into mysticism. The lyric does not touch the Real. It is the most exquisite pointing at the Real of which language is capable.

8.7.3 Confluence with Rhythm-as-Difference

This formulation converges with the Deleuzian reading of rhythm (Section 8.4.4). The “movement toward a limit” is precisely a temporal form, and rhythm-as-repetition-of-difference is its temporal body: each return of the beat re-stages the approach (re-opens the interval, the small gap, the not-yet) and produces the difference (the new beat, displaced, charged), so that the poem's rhythm is the perpetual approaching of an edge that is never reached, the temporal enactment of a directed tension that, by structure, does not terminate. Here the two poles of the spine meet once more and refuse to separate: the approach to the Real is the staging of a lack (the limit is never reached; something always falls out; the poem mourns), and it is at the same time the production of difference (each return generates the new; the poem overflows). The lyric is the phenomenon in which desire-as-lack and desire-as-production are the same movement seen from two sides.

8.7.4 The Political-Economic Sidelong Glance: Non-Exchangeability

One more register completes the picture, and it connects this paper to the value-theory of Paper VII. Ordinary language is *exchangeable*: its informational content can be transposed, paraphrased, translated, restated in other words with no essential loss, because what matters is the signified, which survives the change of signifier, this is what it is

for language to be a medium of exchange, a currency of contents. The lyric is *non-exchangeable*. A poem cannot be paraphrased without remainder; “what it says” cannot be said otherwise, because in the poem the signifier is not transparent to a detachable signified but is itself part of what is meant, the rhythm, the sound, the specific figure are not the vehicle of the content but constitutive of it. This non-exchangeable remainder, the part of the poem that paraphrase cannot capture, is structurally homologous to two other remainders we have met: the *objet a* as the remainder of demand (what is left when the satisfiable is subtracted, Section 8.5), and, in the political-economic register, *surplus* as the remainder of exchange (value produced beyond what circulation accounts for, Section 8.2).

I draw this as a *structural analogy* and explicitly not as an identity. The three remainders, poetic, libidinal, economic, are not the same remainder, and to collapse them would be the over-unifying gesture this series has consistently refused. What they share is a *form*: in each, a process of circulation or exchange leaves something that the process cannot absorb, and that unabsorbable surplus is, in each case, the locus of value. The poem’s non-exchangeability is what makes it a *gift* rather than a communication: in intimate economy, the lyric functions as the pure form of the gift precisely because it cannot be exchanged, cannot be paraphrased into the currency of information, can only be given. This is why a poem given in love is felt as worth more than the information it carries: it is the formal embodiment of the non-exchangeable, of the remainder that escapes the economy of contents, of love’s irreducibility to anything that could be transacted. The directed-tension-toward-the-Real and the non-exchangeable-surplus are the same property described in two vocabularies: what the poem approaches and cannot reach (the Real) is the same as what the poem produces and cannot exchange (the surplus, the gift).

8.7.5 The Circle of the Good: A Homology with Generative Justice

The reproduction-loop of desire (Section 8.5.4) and the gift-character of the poem (just above) together license a claim that connects this paper, by structural homology, to the theory of *generative justice* developed by Ron Eglash (Eglash 2016). Eglash’s diagnosis of injustice turns on *alienation in the technical sense*: value, whether the labour-value of classical critique, the ecological value of natural systems, or the expressive value of

unalienated creative work, is extracted from the network of relations that generates it and siphoned off into accumulation elsewhere, so that the generating network is depleted rather than nourished by its own productivity. Generative justice, correspondingly, names the condition in which value is *not* extracted but is allowed to *circulate back* into the network that produced it, so that production and the conditions of production sustain one another in a loop: a *bottom-up, self-nourishing circulation of unalienated value*.

The homology with the lyric is exact at the level of form, and I press it only that far. Plain communicative speech is, in this register, the *alienating* form of language: it extracts the signified from the signifier, carries the content away, and discards the material body of the utterance as a spent vehicle; its value is realized by being detached and transmitted elsewhere, leaving the act of saying depleted, used up, nothing left to return to. The lyric is the *non-alienating* form. Because its value is non-exchangeable, because it cannot be detached from its own signifier and carried off as content, the value it generates has nowhere to be extracted *to*; it can only remain in, and circulate within, the relation that produced it. The poem given in love is not consumed in the giving; it is kept, returned to, reread, answered with another poem, and at each turn it regenerates the very intimacy that occasioned it. This is a *circle of the good*: a self-nourishing loop in which the expressive value of the verse circulates within the dyad (and within the wider community of readers who keep the poems alive), reproducing rather than depleting the conditions of its own production. The lyric is to the intimate relation what unalienated generative production is to Eglash's community: the form in which value, refusing extraction, feeds back into and sustains the network that made it.

I hold this, in keeping with the discipline of the series, as a homology of *form* and not an identity of substance. The expressive value circulating in a love poem is not the same kind of value as the ecological or labour value in Eglash's cases, and the intimate dyad is not a commons; to flatten these differences would be exactly the over-unification I have refused. What is shared, and it is not trivial, is the structural contrast between a circulation that extracts value out of its generating network (alienation; communication; exchange) and a circulation that returns value into it (generative justice; the lyric; the gift). The poem is generatively just in the precise structural sense that its value cannot be alienated from the relation it serves.

8.7.6 The Lyric Presents Generativity, Not Structure

We can now formulate the deepest characterization of the mechanism, the one toward which the means analysed above, metaphor, metonymy, rhythm, have all been pointing, and which the structuralist temptation of this whole field most obscures. It is tempting, having identified the devices, to think that what the poem *presents*, what it offers to be grasped, is a *structure*: a determinate pattern of equivalences, a fixed arrangement of figures, an object whose form the reader is to decode. This is an error of the same family as the error corrected in Section 8.7 about the Real. The poem does not present a structure. It presents *generativity itself*, the capacity of language to go on generating, and the specific structure of any given poem is merely the occasion, the means, by which that generativity is set in motion in a reader.

Consider what it is to read a poem, as against decoding a message. A message is exhausted when its content is recovered; once decoded, it is finished, and rereading adds nothing, for the structure has yielded its signified and there is no more to extract. A poem is never exhausted, and rereading is not redundant but generative: each reading, in each reader, and in the same reader at different times, sets the figures and the measure to work again and produces meaning anew, never the identical meaning, always displaced, because the reader's interpretive system, the whole field of associations, memories, and prior readings the reader brings, is itself never twice the same. The poem is not a container of a fixed content but a *generator*: it is built so as to keep producing, in the open and varying field of its readers' interpretive systems, an unterminating semiosis. Its value lies not in any structure it has but in its capacity to *sustain generativity* across the indefinite series of its readings. What the poem presents, in the end, is not even a particular language but *the generativity of language as such*, the inexhaustible capacity of the signifier to mean again and otherwise; the individual poem is a window onto that capacity, an occasion for it, not a fixed thing to be possessed.

This reframes everything the paper has said about the means. Metaphor, metonymy, and rhythm are not the *content* of the poem's achievement; they are the techniques by which generativity is kept open, the devices that prevent the poem from collapsing into a decodable message and so closing the loop. Metaphor keeps open the production of new meaning by refusing the proper name; metonymy keeps open the sliding by refusing the

final term; rhythm keeps open the subject's living participation by refusing to be a content at all, presenting instead the subject's own continuation in time (Section 8.4.5). All three are means to the one end: the maintenance of generativity, the keeping-turning of the reproductive loop (Section 8.5.4), the sustaining of the circle of the good (Section 8.7.5). And this is why the specific structure is not, in the end, the main thing. A poem's particular arrangement of figures matters only insofar as it succeeds in launching and sustaining generativity in the interpretive systems of those who receive it; what is to be valued and explained is not the structure on the page but the continuation of generative life that the structure makes possible. The lyric is irreplaceable in intimate coupling not because it encodes a feeling in a clever structure but because it presents, and keeps presenting, the generativity by which a shared life can go on meaning, and a love go on being said.

8.8. Coupling with the Big Other

We can now make explicit the structural claim deferred since the introduction, and thereby re-attach this excursus to the body of the series.

8.8.1 The Approach to the Real Runs Through the Symbolic

The movement toward the Real (Section 8.7) is conducted entirely within the symbolic; the poem points at the limit using the most organized signifiers there are. But the symbolic order is not the subject's private possession: it is the order of the Other, the inherited field of the signifier, the langue that precedes and exceeds any speaker, the accumulated body of prior poems and canonical forms. Therefore the lyric's approach to the Real is necessarily *routed through the big Other*: the subject can stage its directed tension toward the unsymbolizable only by using the symbolic resources, the forms, the metres, the allusions, that belong to the Other and not to it. To write a love poem is to enlist the whole prior order of poems in the service of a present and private feeling; it is to address one's desire to, and through, the big Other.

8.8.2 The Detour: Reaching the Beloved Through the Other

This is the precise sense in which the lyric is a higher-order coupling whose pole has shifted. When the lover addresses the beloved in verse, the immediate addressee of the utterance is not, structurally, the beloved at all; it is the big Other, the symbolic order in which the forms are kept and from which their authority is borrowed. The beloved is reached only by a *detour* through the Other: the lover speaks to the order of the signifier (chooses the form, invokes the prior poem, submits to the metre), and the beloved receives the address as it returns, refracted, from that order. 千里共嬋娟 reaches her because it has first been addressed to Su Shi, to the moon as a millennial signifier, to the whole tradition of the shared moon; she is reached through that detour and would not be reached, not in this way, not with this weight, by the plain “I hope we last.” The poem couples the subject with the big Other, and the concrete other is reached as the destination of a message that has gone the long way round, through the symbolic. This is why the address in verse is felt as more, not less, intimate than plain speech: it does not bypass the detour through the Other (no human address can; we are speaking beings); it makes the detour beautiful, deliberate, and shared.

8.8.3 Relation to Papers V–VII

The series’ main arc treated coupling between subjects: the formation of the subject in joint attention (V), the epistemic agency of the proposal (VI), the value and the gaze of the Other in the external field (VII). This paper treats a limiting case of the same category: a coupling in which one pole is not a concrete other but the big Other itself, the symbolic order, and in which the concrete other is reached precisely through that coupling. The excursus thus does not depart from the framework of higher-order coupling; it locates its limit. Where the earlier papers asked how two subjects constitute and are just to one another, this one asks how the medium through which they reach one another, language at its most condensed, works, and finds that the medium itself is a third pole, the Other, through whom the two are joined. That is the structural reason an excursus on the lyric belongs in a series on the philosophy of intimacy: the lyric is where the symbolic infrastructure of intimate coupling becomes visible.

8.9. Case Study: A Functional Typology of Classical Chinese Love Poetry

The architecture must now answer to the material. I classify a body of classical Chinese love poetry not by period or author but by *literary form and illocutionary function*, by what the poem *does* in the relational field, and I show that the resulting classes map onto the mechanisms developed above. The classification is not decoration; it is a test. If the conceptual architecture is sound, the functional kinds of intimate poetry should fall out as the distribution of the mechanisms across the field of intimate speech-acts. Quotations are kept to the analytic minimum; full texts belong to the anthological appendix and not to the argument.

8.9.1 Longing: Metonymic Sliding

The poetry of longing addresses an absent object, and its formal signature is the metonymic chain (Section 8.6): the feeling is not stated but enacted as a sliding along contiguous images that never arrive. Three sub-variants show the mechanism's range.

Spatial metonymy, where the signifier of distance or barrier substitutes for the inaccessible person. Li Shangyin's untitled lines, in which meeting is hard and parting equally hard and the spring wind is powerless among the fading flowers, lodge desire in the impassable interval itself; and in the same poet, the spring silkworm whose thread (丝, homophone of 思, "longing") is spun only at death, and the candle whose tears (wax) dry only when it is ash, give the metonymic chain in its purest form, feeling slides from creature to thread to ash to tear, no term being the object, the sliding itself being the longing. *Temporal metonymy*, where unbroken duration, sleeplessness, the passage of day into night carries the absence: the 古诗十九首 figure of the belt growing looser by the day renders longing as the body's metonymic record of time. *Object-borne metonymy*, where a token, a red bean, a shared river, the moon, takes on and transfers the charge: Wang Wei's red beans of the south, asked to be gathered because "this thing most stirs longing," transfer the whole of desire onto a substitute signifier; Li Zhiyi's lovers at the head and mouth of one long river, drinking the one water, use the contiguity of a single river to bridge a separation that space cannot close. This class is the densest verification of the metonymy-as-desire

thesis: longing can be written without end because its object is always at the next link of the chain, never at the present one.

8.9.2 Vow: Address to the Big Other

The poetry of the vow does not describe a feeling; it performs a binding, and its formal signature is the address to the big Other as guarantor (Sections 8.6, 8.8). *Calling heaven to witness*: the 上邪 of the Han *yuefu* opens by hailing Heaven (上邪, an outright cry to the big Other) and stakes the vow on a catalogue of cosmic impossibilities, mountains worn flat, rivers run dry, summer snow, the meeting of sky and earth, as the only conditions under which the bond could break; the vow is thereby consigned to the permanence of the symbolic order, dissolved only if nature itself were unmade. *The clasped hand*, where a ritual bodily act fixes the symbolic contract: the 诗经's 击鼓, with its “in death or in life, the word once given” and “I take your hand, with you to grow old,” makes the clasped hand the bodily signifier of the covenant, the very source-figure of the betrothal covenant. *The wish for one substance*, where the vow takes the form of a wish to abolish the difference between the two: the 孔雀东南飞 pledge in which one will be rock and one the reed, each guaranteeing the other's constancy by the fixity of a thing; and, most profoundly, Bai Juyi's wish, in the 长恨歌, to be in heaven two birds that share a wing and on earth two branches grown into one, a wish that, in the same breath, concedes the limit of all such guarantees (“heaven and earth, long-lasting as they are, will end; this regret runs on without end”). The vow's self-knowledge of its own impossibility, in that last instance, makes it the deepest case in the class. Throughout, the structure is that of Section 8.8: the vow is addressed not to the beloved but to Heaven, the cosmos, the symbolic order, which is asked to stand surety for the bond, and the beloved is bound through that detour.

8.9.3 Avowal: Demand Becoming Desire

The poetry of avowal stages the conversion of demand into desire (Section 8.5): it is the speech-act of declaring oneself to an other who may not answer, and its formal signature is the unanswered or self-knowing address. *Seeking and not attaining*, the purest form of desire-as-lack: the 关雎 that opens the 诗经, with its “sought and not got, waking and sleeping he longs, tossing and turning,” is the primal scene of the dialectic of desire, the

not-attaining is not the failure of the longing but its very generator; and the 蒹葭 of the 秦风, with the one “in the water’s far reach” who recedes as one pursues upstream, gives the *objet a* its most exact poetic figure, the object forever on the far bank, approached and never reached. *Naked demand and its dignity*: the 越人歌’s “the mountain has trees, the tree has boughs; my heart delights in you, and you do not know” names the structure of avowal as such, the declaration always faces an other whose answer is not guaranteed; Zhuo Wenjun’s 白头吟, white as mountain snow, bright as the moon between clouds, makes avowal and severance one act, the demand reasserting its dignity at the point of refusal. *Avowal through a medium*, where the declaration is routed through an art-object: Sima Xiangru’s 凤求凰 conducts the avowal through the qin, desire reaching the other by the detour of the instrument and the song. The class verifies Section 8.5: avowal is the site where the satisfiable demand (be mine) is transmuted into the unsatisfiable desire (the longing that survives, and indeed feeds on, the uncertainty of the answer).

8.9.4 The Wish for Shared Being: The Poetic Suturing of the Real’s Gap

The poetry of the wish for shared being is the capstone, and it corresponds to the attempt to suture the Real-symbolic gap (Section 8.7). *Divided yet joined*, where, separation being conceded as irremovable, a shared signifier is offered as the suture: Su Shi’s 但願人長久, 千里共嬋娟, the master specimen, does not deny the thousand miles (the symbolic cannot close that real distance) but offers the shared moon (嬋娟) as the signifier both gaze upon, a suturing that is poetic and imaginary, the gap unclosed, the approach never an arrival; this is the perfect figure of “toward the Real, not into it” (Section 8.7), and the poem is candid about it, naming in the same breath that the moon waxes and wanes and “this was ever hard to keep whole.” Zhang Jiuling’s “the bright moon is born over the sea; though at the horizon’s edge, we share this moment” gives the same suture in another image, the shared instant bridging the separating distance. *The wish to abolish the boundary*, the most radical suturing of the difference between two beings: Guan Daosheng’s 我依词, in which the two are clay kneaded together, “in my clay there is you, in your clay there is me”, and would share one quilt in life and one coffin in death, wishes to dissolve the very gap between subjects, and yet preserves its own self-knowledge as figure, as clay, as a making rather than a fact. The capstone status of Su Shi’s wish is not only thematic: it does not conceal the gap (the miles, the waxing and waning, “ever hard to keep whole”);

it sutures across the gap with a shared signifier while knowing the suture is a figure, which is exactly the structure of the whole paper's account, the directed tension toward a limit that is approached, named, and never crossed.

8.9.5 The Reflexive Significance of the Classification

The four classes are not an external grid imposed on the poems; they are the distribution of the four mechanisms across the field of intimate speech. Longing is metonymy (Section 8.6); the vow is address to the big Other (Sections 8.8); avowal is the conversion of demand into desire (Section 8.5); the wish for shared being is the poetic suturing of the Real's gap (Section 8.7). That the functional kinds of love poetry should sort themselves exactly onto the mechanisms is the case study's central finding: it shows that the conceptual architecture of the body is not an arbitrary assemblage but tracks a single underlying structure, the structure of desire and its relation to the signifier, of which the genres of intimate verse are the language-level projection. A reflexive observation sharpens this. The four classes lie along a gradient of the object's attainability, and hence of the distance of the *objet a*: avowal (object present, may be sought) → longing (object absent) → vow (object present, pledged toward an uncertain future) → wish for shared being (object permanently divided, yet wished co-present). This gradient traces the recession of the object-cause from near to forever-divided, and it is isomorphic with the approach-to-the-Real of Section 8.7: the genres of love poetry are, read in series, a map of desire's relation to its impossible object.

8.9.6 A Note on Boundary Cases

A typology earns its keep by handling hard cases, and three test the present one. *Elegy for the dead beloved* (Su Shi's 江城子 for his late wife, "ten years, the living and the dead, each boundless"; Yuan Zhen's "having once seen the sea, no water is worth the name"): here the object has passed wholly into the Real, it is not absent but unsymbolizable in the strongest sense, death being the Real's absolute figure, and longing reaches its limit, where metonymy slides toward an object that can never, even in principle, occupy the next link. Elegy is thus not a fifth class but the limit of longing, the point at which the metonymic chain confronts an object withdrawn past all recovery. *The poetry of grievance and the abandoned wife* (the 氓 of the 诗经; Ban Jieyu's fan laid by in autumn) is the

negative of the dialectic of desire: it is what avowal becomes after the answer has come and gone, desire's photographic negative, structured by the same mechanisms in reverse. These boundary cases do not break the typology; they locate its edges, and in doing so confirm that the classification is tracking the mechanisms and not merely sorting themes, for it is precisely at the mechanism-level that the hard cases find their place.

8.10. The Poem as a Generative Grammar, and the Poetics of Truth

The case study confirms that the genres of intimate verse are the language-level projection of the mechanisms. We may now press the account of generativity (Section 8.7.6) to its sharpest form, and, in doing so, discover that the method by which this paper has proceeded is not external to its object but is the very thing the object teaches.

8.10.1 From Generator to Generative Grammar

Section 8.7.6 held that the poem presents not a structure but a generativity, that it is a generator and not a container. We can now say what kind of generator it is. A poem is not a sentence; it is a *grammar*. A sentence is finite and exhaustible: once parsed, it has yielded its content and there is no more. A grammar is finite in its rules and *infinite in its yield*, a small set of rules generating an unbounded set of well-formed sentences, none of which was “contained” in the rules and each of which the rules nonetheless license. This is the precise sense of the intuition that the poem “is a language system” (Section 8.3): the lyric does not deposit in the interpreter a meaning (a sentence) but installs in her a *generative grammar* (a productive capacity), so that what she receives is not a signified but a rule for generating signifieds without end.

This is why rereading is not redundant but generative (Section 8.7.6). To reread a message is to re-parse one finite string and recover the one content again; nothing is produced. To reread a poem is to run, once more, the grammar it installed, against the now-altered ground of the reader's interpretive system, and so to *derive a new sentence*, licensed by the same rules and yet never the one derived before. The poem reads differently each time not because the reader misremembers a string but because she is not re-reading a string at all; she is generating, with an internalized grammar, sentences the poem made possible but did not pre-contain. In the formal-language vocabulary of Paper IV, the lyric

is an internalized generative grammar of growth rate $\lambda > 1$: each derivation, each act of interpretation, produces new and non-repeating yet well-formed output, and the language it generates is, by construction, inexhaustible. What the poem transfers is the *generative rule*, not the generated product, and that is the formal content of its irreducibility to any paraphrase.

And the derivations are not flat. Borrowing, as a structural homology and not an identity, the geometric-phase vocabulary of Paper VII: each derivation returns not to the same place but carries a *phase increment*, a small sublimation, so that the series of interpretations does not merely repeat but *accumulates*, winding upward. The poem's life in a reader, and across its readers, is the accumulation of this interpretive phase, never a return of the identical, always a charged displacement, which is, at the level of meaning, the very repetition-of-difference that Section 8.4.4 found at the level of the beat.

8.10.2 The Generativity That Generates Generativity

This lets us state, in its purest form, the orientation of production toward production itself that Section 8.5.4 found in the reproductive loop of desire. Ordinary generativity is oriented to perpetuating itself, but it perpetuates by producing some *product*, value, offspring, a work, through which the generating goes on. The poem is more radical, and is perhaps the limit case: what it generates is generativity *itself*. Its product is not a meaning but the capacity to go on generating meaning; it is a system whose output is its own continued power to output. The lyric is generativity become *self-referential*, production whose product is production, the loop closed not upon a thing but upon its own turning.

Here, too, lies the answer to a question the paper has carried without naming: why the lyric is felt as *beautiful*. In other forms, generativity is encumbered, it produces, alongside itself, the bread, the rose, the child, and is seen only through that material product. In the poem, generativity sheds almost all such encumbrance and reproduces itself with the least possible material adhesion: a few borrowed words, a measure, and the thing renews. The lyric is generativity regarding itself in a mirror, the near-pure self-reproduction of the power to mean. Beauty, in this register, is the name for what is witnessed when generativity is seen perpetuating itself in nearly unalloyed form, with the matter through

which it works reduced almost to vanishing. That is what one meets in a great line: not a thing said, but the capacity to say, renewing itself before one's eyes.

8.10.3 Why a Generator Cannot Be Settled

This furnishes, at last, the structural reason for the non-exchangeability of Section 8.7, and connects it to the series' recurring concern with the failure of settlement, of *accounting* (the ledger of Paper IV). One can settle a product; one cannot settle a generator. Any single output of the poem, this interpretation, the meaning taken on this reading, can be written down, exchanged, balanced in the ledger of contents. But the generator is not located in any one of its outputs; it is the rule that exceeds every output it licenses. To settle a poem is therefore a category error: it is to mistake the generator for one of its products, to take the sentence for the grammar, and so to declare closed an account that is, by its nature, never closed. The lyric's resistance to settlement is not a contingent difficulty but a structural refusal: it cannot be reduced to any of its derivations, and so can never be paid out in full.

The same distinction sharpens the difference between true and counterfeit verse that the paper has needed and not yet stated. The pseudo-lyric is the *idling* generator: formally it too refuses settlement, withholds any decodable content, and strikes the pose of inexhaustibility, but it has installed no working grammar in the interpreter, generates no new sentences, and merely declares, in place, "I am a generator," without the rule that would make the declaration true. In the present notation, true poetry installs a grammar of $\lambda > 1$ with non-zero phase, each derivation new and accumulating; the pseudo-lyric installs a dead grammar of $\lambda = 0$ with zero phase, from which nothing is derived and nothing winds upward, an openness that is not generativity but only the empty gesture of refusing to close. The test of a poem is not whether it withholds a meaning but whether it confers a generativity, whether, in the reader, the rule actually turns.

8.10.4 The Poetics of Truth: Interpretation as Symmetry Breaking

We arrive at the convergence that justifies, in retrospect, the method announced in the Introduction. Before its reader, a poem's field of meaning is highly *symmetric*: polysemous, suspended, undecided, with many interpretations coexisting as latent and equally

licensed, none yet actual. To interpret is to *break* this symmetry, to fall, in this reader and this moment and this situation, onto one determinate reading, and so to let meaning crystallize out of the suspended field. But the responsible interpretation does not mistake its crystallization for the poem. It breaks the symmetry without claiming to exhaust it; it knows that another reader, another hour, will break it elsewhere, and that the poem's meaning is not any single crystallization but the *accumulated phase of the whole series* of symmetry-breaking readings, each partial, each actual, none final. A poem is the standing possibility of an unending sequence of such breaks, and its meaning lives in the sequence, not in any term of it.

This is, exactly, the epistemic posture the series has practiced and that this paper has practiced most openly. The Introduction refused to begin from a thesis and carried instead a tension held open; the conclusions of the series are polyphonic, plural, deliberately unreconciled. We may now see that this is not a stylistic preference but a *poetics of truth*. Before a relational truth, one that no single framework can exhaust because the matter is constituted by relations exceeding any one framework's reach, three postures are available, and only one is responsible. The first is to suspend judgement, to refuse all frameworks in the name of the truth's inexhaustibility, but this is the idling generator, the $\lambda = 0$ openness that produces nothing, the zero-phase pseudo-poem of thought. The second is to declare one framework the whole truth, to settle the account, but this is dogmatism, the category error of taking a single derivation for the grammar. The third is the poetic posture: at this node, in this situation, to break the symmetry onto a single framework, the geometric, the psychoanalytic, the political-economic, the Daoist, and to push its interpretation to the hilt, to say it hard and to the end, while knowing and *marking* that this is one break, one partial crystallization, and then to pass the word to the next. Understanding does not arrive at a resting term; it *spirals upward* through the series of breaks, accumulating phase, as the reading of a poem does.

To hold the conclusions of an inquiry polyphonically, then, each voice partial, each daring to assert, none settling the account, each inviting the next, is to read truth as one reads a poem. The method of this series and the structure of the lyric are not analogous by coincidence; they are one structure, seen once in the order of knowing and once in the order of language. The lyric does not reach the Real, and the inquiry does not reach the

whole of its truth; both keep reaching, by a disciplined succession of approaches that are, each one, an approach and never an arrival. That a paper on why we speak love in verse should end by finding that we must also *think* the relational in verse, in the poem's own mode of the unending, partial, accumulating approach, is not a flourish: it is the point at which the object of the paper and its method are revealed to have been, all along, one thing.

8.11. Conclusion: The Claim Emerges

Only now, having crossed the terrain, may the claim be stated, as an arrival, and in the terms the crossing has earned. The guiding question was: why does the intimate subject address the beloved in verse rather than in plain speech? The answer assembled is this. Plain speech is exchangeable: it transmits a content, and a content about love, about the beloved's irreplaceability, about a longing whose object is the unsymbolizable cause of desire, is precisely what cannot be transmitted, because it is not a content but a relation to a limit. The lyric is the language that, by thickening the signifier toward music through rhythm, stages within the symbolic a directed tension toward the Real: it approaches, by metaphor and by metonymy, the unnameable cause and the unreachable object, and it does so through the inherited forms of the big Other, reaching the beloved by the long and beautiful detour through the symbolic order. The poem is the non-exchangeable remainder, the gift, the surplus that the economy of communication cannot absorb; and that is why it is felt, in love, as worth more than what it says.

And it fails. By the structure of desire (Section 8.5), the approach to the Real is constitutively an approach and never an arrival: metaphor does not coincide with the unnameable, metonymy does not halt at the object, rhythm vibrates at the symbolic's edge without crossing it, the suture of 千里共嬋娟 does not close the thousand miles. But, and here is the claim in its proper form, the failure is the function. Because desire's true object is desire itself, a language that reached its object would extinguish the love it serves; only a language that approaches without arriving keeps the beloved as the object of an unending desire, and so allows love to be spoken without end. The infinity of love poetry, that there is always another poem, is the aesthetic form of the inexhaustibility of a desire that, by structure, cannot be filled. The lyric is irreplaceable in intimate coupling not despite

failing to say what it means but because its way of failing is the only way of keeping open the love it speaks.

What the lyric finally presents, then, is not a structure but a generativity (Section 8.7.6). The devices, metaphor, metonymy, rhythm, are means, and the end they serve is the keeping-open of a loop: the reproduction of desire's surplus (Section 8.5.4), the witnessing of the subject's continued existing in time (Section 8.4.5), and, in the relation, a circle of the good in which the non-exchangeable value of the verse circulates back into the intimacy that produced it rather than being extracted and spent (Section 8.7.5). This is the structural sense in which the lyric is generatively just: its value cannot be alienated from the bond it serves, and so the saying of love nourishes rather than depletes the conditions of its own continuation. A poem is not a message that, once decoded, is done; it is a generator that, reread in the ever-shifting interpretive system of the one who receives it, produces the bond anew at each turn. The particular structure on the page matters only as the occasion of this generativity; what is to be valued is the continuation it makes possible, the going-on of a shared life that keeps meaning, and keeps being said.

I have promised not to dissolve the spine's tension, and I will keep the promise, for the place where it refuses to dissolve is the true location of the claim. Read through *lack*, the lyric is an elegy: it mourns the object that no word can name and no chain can reach, it is structured around a constitutive absence, and its beauty is the beauty of a longing that knows it will not be filled. Read through *production*, the same lyric is an overflow: it is the affirmative generativity of the signifier, rhythm producing difference, language generating the new without need of any missing object to explain its abundance, desire as the sheer power of saying-again-and-otherwise. The poem is both at once, and it is the rare object in which the two ontologies of desire are not merely both true but *indiscernible*: each beat of the metre is at once the re-opening of the gap and the production of difference; each figure is at once the marking of what cannot be named and the generation of new meaning; the wish for shared being is at once the mourning of the thousand miles and the joyous production of the shared moon. I do not choose between lack and production, because the lyric does not. It is the language in which the two faces of desire are shown to be one movement, the movement toward the Real, conducted in the symbolic, destined to fail, and beautiful, and unending, for exactly that reason.

Why, then, do we not simply say what we mean to the one we love? Because what we mean has no plain name and lies at the far bank of every word; and because to say it once and be done would be to have finished loving. So we say it in verse instead, borrowing the old forms, beating the old measure, reaching her through the long detour of everything that was ever sung, and we say it again, and otherwise, and without end. The poem does not reach her. It keeps reaching. That is what it is for, and that is what love, in language, is.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an excursus within a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. It steps aside from the main arc, subject-formation, the epistemics of the proposal, the external relational field, to examine the medium through which intimate coupling so often passes: language at its most condensed and least transparent, the lyric. Though its object is new, the paper remains, as the body argues, within the category of higher-order coupling; only the pole of the coupling has shifted, from the concrete other to the big Other in whom the symbolic order is figured.

My deepest gratitude is owed, once again, to the one I have loved all along, the “girl of the forest and the mountains” to whom the first paper of this series was already devoted. I love her, plainly and without reserve; and it is precisely this love, and the longing that comes with it, that I have found cannot be made to appear within the order of the symbolic, no sentence I can form holds it, no word reaches it, and that refusal to appear is, in the end, the occasion of this paper. I wrote it because the thing I most wanted to say could not be said, and I wanted to understand why the lyric comes closer to saying it than plain speech ever does. The poems gathered and analysed here are, many of them, poems I first understood only because of her; the wish that gives the paper its closing figure, 千里共嬋娟, that though a thousand miles divide us we look upon the same moon, is the wish I make for us, and the form in which I renew it.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for drafting, structuring, and refining the argument and its prose; the ideas, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility

for the content.

愿天下有情人，终以言相通，以心相印，千里共婵娟。

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CHAPTER 9

The Sustainability of Intimacy

Poetic Generativity and Generative Justice

The earlier papers of this series asked how a relation begins; this one asks how it does not end—under what conditions a generative bond reproduces itself across time. Its problem is that self-continuation, taken alone, is morally indifferent: capital, the rose, and the parasitic bond all continue themselves no less than love does. Eglash’s recursive return of value is therefore necessary but not sufficient. The paper supplies the missing temporal dimension through an axiom of sustainability cast in the language of geometric phase—the vicious cycle a circle of zero holonomy, the good cycle a spiral that returns to its root while sublimating—and then asks how, through signs, such a spiral might be fostered. Its constructive thesis is that the appropriate poem—the non-possessive interpretive cycle that generates real value—is the form of the good circle, and that generative justice, in the intimate domain, is for this reason necessarily poetic.

For her—

the girl of the forest and the mountains,
who loves the woods and the long road of travelling;
pure, and kind, and touched with the divine.

To the one I love most.

9.1. Prelude: The Rose in the Garden

In a garden, someone said a small thing that became the seed of this paper. The rose, they remarked, is beautiful; and yet, however hard it labours, it can hold its bloom for only a week or so.

It is the kind of observation one lets pass—a pleasantry about the brevity of beautiful things, the sort of melancholy that attaches to gardens and is half the reason one keeps them. But it lodged, and would not leave, because it names—without meaning to—the precise difficulty this paper is about. The remark seems to set beauty against duration, as though the rose were beautiful *despite* being brief, the brevity a flaw in an otherwise perfect thing. The truth is harder and more interesting: the beauty and the brevity are not two facts but one. **The rose blooms so resplendently *because it pours the whole of its resource into a single, unrepeatable flowering, holding nothing back against the morrow.*** Its resplendence is the very form of its unsustainability. To wish the bloom both as intense and as lasting is to wish a contradiction—to want the flower to spend itself utterly and to keep itself in reserve at once. There is, here, a tragic trade-off that the paper will meet again and again, and that it had better not pretend to abolish: intensity and persistence pull, very often, against one another, and the most intense things are, for that reason, the briefest.

And the same structure, I want to claim, is at work in domains that share no soil with the rose. The intimate bond, at its most incandescent, has the rose's economy: the passion that consumes the whole of itself in its flowering is, precisely thereby, the passion that cannot last, and the lover who demands that the first ardour both blaze and endure demands the rose's contradiction. The logic of capital has it too: the accumulation that drives toward an ever-greater intensity of valorization is the accumulation that exhausts the conditions—the worker, the soil, the future—on which its own continuation depends, blazing brightest as it nears the exhaustion of what feeds it. And the dynamics of the cosmos, at the largest scale, show the same face: the structures that burn most brightly are the most prodigal, and what endures is rarely what shines hardest. Across all three—and the recurrence is itself a reason to attend—one finds a generativity that takes its own continuation as its end, production pointing back at production itself (反者道之动, *reversal is the movement of the Dao*), and yet a generativity that may, like the rose, burn

itself out in the very intensity by which it lives.

*So the question of this paper is not the one the remark seems to pose. It is not **how to keep the flower from wilting**—that wish, as we shall see, is the very thing that rots the root. It is the question hidden beneath the remark, and harder to hear: **when the flower has wilted, how does the root go on?** For the observation, true of the flower, is false of the rosebush. The single bloom is mortal and exhaustive, spending all in a week; but the bush flowers year upon year, and it endures not in spite of the flower's death but **by** it—the fallen petals returning their nutrient to the root, this year's wilting the condition of next year's bloom. Here is the distinction on which the whole paper turns, and it is worth stating in its starkest form at the outset:*

Sustainability is the nesting of finitude, not its abolition. Sustainability is not the abolition of finitude—not a flower that never falls, which is the bad infinite, the fantasy of perpetual growth that the paper will identify with the vicious circle. Sustainability is the **nesting** of finitude within a higher cycle of regeneration: the flower must fall **so that** the root may go on. A bloom held past its hour does not extend the rose's life; it is the refusal of the fall that kills the bush. The good circle, far from excluding death, requires it—requires that the flower be spent and returned—and what we will come to call the vicious circle is, very often, the one that cannot let its flower fall.

This reframing carries a consequence the paper will draw out at length, and which it is worth stating now in its sharpest form, for it overturns an assumption so ordinary we scarcely know we hold it. We assume that the threat to a beautiful thing is neglect—that what is precious withers for want of tending, and that more care is therefore always the safer error. The rose teaches otherwise. **The deepest unsustainability comes not from too little tending but, very often, from a tending driven by the fear of unsustainability itself.** The one who, dreading that the rose will wilt, waters it without cease, changes its water, fusses at its roots—that one does not save the flower; he drowns the root, and so manufactures the very withering he feared. This is no incidental

cruelty of fate but a structure, and the paper will meet it in every domain it touches: in capital's dread of the end of growth, which drives the extraction that exhausts its base; in the lover's dread of loss, which drives the control and the clutching that rot the bond; in the family's dread of dissolution, which hardens into the very rigidity that breaks it. 为者败之，执者失之—"the one who acts upon it ruins it, the one who grasps it loses it." The fear of an end, made into action, produces the end it fears.

There is, then, a quiet reversal of the imagination at work in this paper from its first page. The one who said the rose blooms but a week was speaking, lovingly, of the flower, and of the sadness of its falling. This paper means to speak of the root—of what is not seen, of what the falling feeds, of the slow regeneration that the flower's brevity makes possible and the anxious hand makes impossible. It is, in a sense, a paper about learning to let the flower fall: not from indifference to its beauty, but from a deeper attention to the root that the beauty, rightly let go, sustains.

A word, finally, on where this paper stands in the series. The first eight papers asked, in the main, how a relation *begins*: the mother paper established the ontology of relational being, that the subject is generated in and through relation rather than entering it already complete—a lineage that runs back through Buber's account of the I–Thou as the primary word that constitutes both terms (Buber 1970); *Paper V* descended to the joint attention by which two consciousnesses first constitute one another; *Paper VI* cut into the single decisive moment of the proposal and exposed the epistemic injustice latent within it; *Paper VII* took the dyad's first turning toward the world, the diplomacy by which it faces the external relational field; *Paper VIII* treated the lyric's address to the big Other. Each took, as its object, a *founding moment*—an opening, an inception, a first constitution. **The present paper takes, for the first time, the opposite object: not how a relation begins, but how it does not end.** It turns from inception to maintenance, from the founding act to the long reproduction that must follow it, from the question *how to begin* to the question *how not to end*—which is, we shall find, the question of the root rather than the flower, and the first time the series has asked it. This is its place, and its novelty, in the programme of Generative Relational Being.

9.2. Thesis: Generativity Takes Its Own Continuation as Its End

The paper begins from a metaphysical conjecture, and states it at once, baldly, so that the antithesis may have something firm to push against. **Generativity takes its own continuation as its end. Production points back at production itself.** The aim of a generative process is not some terminal product at which it would come to rest, but the perpetuation of generating—the cycle’s end is the cycle. A generativity oriented toward a final product would, upon attaining it, stop; the generativity this paper is about does not aim at a state it could reach and rest in, but at its own ongoingness. Its telos is itself.

This is a strong claim, and its strangeness should not be smoothed over. We are accustomed to think of processes as means to ends—production as the making of a product, desire as the seeking of an object, labour as the securing of a wage—and on that picture the process is subordinate, justified by the end it serves, and complete when the end is attained. The conjecture inverts this: in the generativity that concerns us, the “product” is not the point at which the process is justified and stops, but the occasion for the process to continue. The product is for the sake of the producing, not the producing for the sake of the product. This is what is meant by calling such generativity *autotelic*: it carries its end within itself, as its own continuation, and is for that reason not completed by any external attainment.

The conjecture is not arbitrary, and its warrant is the constancy with which it recurs across domains that share no subject matter. Four such recurrences are worth setting out, for the breadth of the pattern is the chief reason to take it for something like a metaphysical ground rather than a local fact about one or another region of the world.

In the dynamics of the cosmos, the structures that persist are, overwhelmingly, the self-reproducing ones. A dissipative structure—a flame, a whirlpool, a living cell—maintains itself far from thermodynamic equilibrium not by reaching some final stable state but by continually regenerating the very gradients and flows that constitute it; it persists by producing the conditions of its own persistence. The autocatalytic cycle, the chemical paradigm of life’s origin, is a set of reactions whose product is the catalyst of its own production—a loop whose output is the cause of its output. In both, what endures is

precisely what makes more of its own enduring; the structures that aim at no terminal state, but only at their own continuation, are the ones the universe keeps. The autotelic is not an oddity of human striving but a feature of what persists at all.

In the dialectic of desire, as psychoanalysis describes it, the same structure governs the subject. Desire does not aim at a final satisfaction that would extinguish it; were it ever fully satisfied, it would cease, and the subject of desire would dissolve. Beneath every particular object—this person, this attainment, this possession—desire aims at its own continuation, which is why the object attained is, with a regularity that is structural and not accidental, found wanting, and desire moves on. This is not the failure of desire but its success: desire is organized to defer the satisfaction that would end it, to keep itself going by never quite arriving. Lacan's distinction of desire from demand and need turns on just this: need has an object that satisfies and stops it, but desire, beneath demand, aims past every object at the perpetuation of desiring itself. The subject lives by a wanting whose true end is to go on wanting.

In the structure of dialectic itself—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—the autotelic form appears as the engine of the movement. The synthesis that resolves a contradiction is not a resting place but the thesis of a further movement; the *Aufhebung* that lifts a tension into a higher unity does not end the dialectic but generates its next turn. A dialectic that reached a final synthesis and stopped would not be a dialectic but a death; the living dialectic is the one whose every resolution opens the next contradiction, whose end is not a final synthesis but the continuation of synthesizing. Here, in the most abstract register, is the same structure the rose and the cell display: a process whose product is the occasion of its own continuation.

And in Eglash's generative justice, this conjecture finds the political-economic and ethical articulation on which the paper will lean throughout. Eglash's insight is that value, in an unalienated economy, does not flow outward to be extracted and accumulated at a distant centre, but *circulates back to those who generate it*, to be reinvested in the conditions of further generation (Eglash 2016). The recursive, self-similar structure on which this regeneration leans is the through-line of Eglash's earlier study of indigenous fractal design (Eglash 1999). Where the dominant economies—he argues that both the capitalist and the state-socialist are, in this, alike—are organized around the *extraction* of value from its

producers to a centre, the generative alternative keeps value circulating at the grassroots, among and back to those whose labour, care, and creativity produce it. Generativity, here, perpetuates itself by recursion: the value it produces returns to nourish the producers, who produce again, in a loop that is its own end. **This is the spatial criterion of generative justice: that value, unalienated, return to its creators.** And the recursive structure of regeneration is, in Eglash's analysis, all but universal—generativity, to perpetuate itself at all, must lean on a recursive structure that returns its product to the conditions of its own renewal.

Drawing the four together:

The metaphysical ground, as point of departure. Generativity takes its own continuation as its end—an autotelic, self-referential structure that recurs across the dynamics of the cosmos (the self-reproducing dissipative structure), the dialectic of desire (the wanting whose end is to go on wanting), the structure of dialectic itself (the synthesis that is the next thesis), and the political economy of generative justice (the recursive return of value to its creators). The constancy of the recurrence warrants treating it as something like a metaphysical ground. This is the paper's *thesis*, its point of departure.

But it must be stressed that the thesis is offered as ground and not as conclusion, for the temptation here is real and the whole argument of the paper turns on refusing it. To establish that generativity is self-perpetuating, and that justice consists in the recursive return of value to its creators, can seem already to have delivered an ethics: let value circulate back to those who make it, refuse the extraction that carries it off to a centre, and all is well. The labour of this paper is to show that this is not enough—that the recursive return of value is necessary to the good circle but does not suffice for it, because the bare fact of self-continuation, even self-continuation *with* return, cannot by itself tell the good circle from the vicious one. For the most rapacious cycles are self-continuing too, and some of them return value to a circle of creators while exhausting everything outside it. To that insufficiency—the moral indifference of mere self-continuation—the

antithesis now turns.

9.3. Antithesis: Self-Continuation Is Morally Indifferent

The thesis stands; and against it the antithesis raises a single, stubborn law. **Self-continuation, in itself, is morally indifferent.** That a cycle perpetuates itself tells us nothing of its goodness, for the most rapacious cycles perpetuate themselves no less than the most generous—and some of them perpetuate themselves precisely *by* their rapacity. The autotelic structure that the thesis identified as a metaphysical ground is, taken alone, no mark of the good at all; it is, if anything, the formal signature of the very thing the paper means to criticize. This is the hard turn the argument must take before it can build: the ground it has just laid does not yet bear any ethical weight, and to pretend otherwise would be to mistake a structure for a value.

Consider the cases, set deliberately side by side, for their likeness is the whole of the point.

Capital is the purest case, and the one in which the autotelic structure is most exactly visible. Marx's formula for capital is not C–M–C—commodity exchanged, by way of money, for another commodity, to satisfy a need that ends the movement—but M–C–M': money advanced to become more money, a movement whose end is not any commodity, not the satisfaction of any need, but its own continuation at an enlarged scale (Marx 1976). Capital, in Marx's striking phrase, is value in process, value that has become the "automatic subject" of its own movement, and its aim is nothing but its own valorization—accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of more production. This is self-continuation in its most exact and most relentless form: production pointing at production, the cycle whose only end is the cycle. And it is precisely the thing the paper means to criticize. Here is the first and sharpest blow to any easy reading of the thesis: the autotelic form, far from being the mark of the good, is the formal signature of what the paper will come to call the vicious circle. M–C–M' satisfies the thesis to the letter, and it is the model of extraction.

The rose is the case carried over from the prelude, and it shows that the indifference of self-continuation is not peculiar to the economic. The rose's blooming is self-continuation

of a kind—the plant’s drive to flower, to set seed, to flower again, a generativity oriented toward its own perpetuation through the generations. And yet, at the scale of the single flower, it is exhaustive: the resplendence is bought by a total expenditure that holds nothing in reserve, and the bloom that spends everything is, for that reason, the bloom that cannot last. The rose perpetuates the species by spending the flower; and whether this spending is good or ill—whether it is the generous fall that feeds the root or the anxious blaze that exhausts it—the bare fact of perpetuation cannot say. Self-continuation here wears neither a virtuous nor a vicious face; it is, in itself, indifferent between them.

The parasitic bond is the case nearest the paper’s true subject, and the one that should most disturb. A relation in which one party’s self-continuation is purchased by the steady consumption of the other—the bond that endures, sometimes for decades, precisely by extracting from one partner the resource that sustains the other—perpetuates itself as surely as any love, and often more stably, for the extracted party’s depletion can be made to look like devotion and the arrangement thereby stabilized. It is a cycle; it does not stop; by the thesis’s criterion it is a fully successful generativity. And it is vicious. That a bond lasts, that it reproduces itself across years, that value circulates within it—none of this distinguishes it from love, and the failure to see this is the failure the antithesis exists to correct.

The three are formally alike: each is a self-continuing cycle, each satisfies the thesis, and the likeness is exactly what exposes the insufficiency of the thesis—and, with it, the insufficiency of Eglash’s spatial criterion taken alone.

The insufficiency of the spatial criterion. The recursive return of value—Eglash’s spatial criterion—is necessary to the good circle but does not suffice for it. For it cannot, by itself, exclude two failures. It cannot exclude the *fair stasis*: a cycle in which value duly returns to its creators, and which is in this sense just, yet which merely repeats, generating no surplus, climbing nowhere—the bond grown fair and lifeless, conserved but not sublimating, a circle and not a spiral. And it cannot exclude the *counterfeit closure*: a cycle that appears to return value to its creators while in fact sustaining itself by extraction from an outside it has hidden from view. Self-continuation, even

self-continuation *with* return, is not yet the good.

The two failures deserve to be drawn out, for the rest of the paper is, in large part, the apparatus for detecting them.

The fair stasis is the gentler failure, and the one the spatial criterion is least equipped to see, since by the spatial criterion it is not a failure at all. Imagine a bond in which value genuinely returns to both parties, neither extracts from the other, the distribution is scrupulously just—and nothing grows. The cycle turns and returns to exactly where it began; each round reproduces the last without remainder; the relation is fair, and dead. This is the circle of zero holonomy that the synthesis will name: a return that returns to the same, accruing nothing, climbing nowhere. The spatial criterion pronounces it just and falls silent, for it has no temporal dimension with which to register that a just cycle may yet be a stagnant one. That a relation can be fair and lifeless at once is the first thing the spatial criterion cannot say—and the first reason a temporal criterion is needed.

The counterfeit closure is the graver failure, and it deserves the closer look, for it is the structural heart of the antithesis and the thing the whole paper must learn to detect. Here is the puzzle it poses: if the vicious cycle is truly unsustainable, how does it endure—often for a very long time, capital for centuries, the parasitic bond for decades? A theory of sustainability that could not answer this would be mere moral consolation, predicting a collapse that stubbornly fails to come. The answer is that **the vicious cycle is an open system masquerading as a closed loop**. It sustains itself not by internally regenerating its conditions but by *dumping its entropy on an outside*—a colony, a nature, a future generation, a silenced party—and it defers its own collapse by an ever-widening extraction. Its “closure” is space bought with time: so long as there remains a fresh outside to draw upon, the breach in the loop stays hidden, and the system can present itself as self-sustaining while in truth it is being fed from a source it does not acknowledge. This is why capital must perpetually expand—to new markets, to the financialization of nature, to the colonization of the future; expansion is not capital’s ambition but its necessity, the continual search for a new outside to consume now that the last is exhausted. And it is why the parasitic bond so often goes hand in hand with

the isolation of its victim, the quiet severing of the partner's external supports—so that there is nowhere for the extracted to flee, and no witness to the extraction. **The vicious cycle's endurance is the postponement, and the displacement onto another, of its own collapse.**

Here, then, is the question the antithesis hands to the synthesis. If the cycle is, as the thesis and Eglash alike suggest, all but universal—if generativity must lean on recursion to perpetuate itself at all—and if self-continuation cannot tell good from ill, and if even the return of value cannot exclude the fair stasis or the counterfeit closure, then **wherein lies the difference between the good circle and the vicious one?** The thesis gave us the universality of the cycle; the antithesis has given us its moral indifference, and named the two failures—the stagnant and the counterfeit—that any adequate criterion must exclude. The synthesis must now give us the criterion that the cycle, by itself, withholds: a difference not in the bare fact of self-continuation, which good and vicious share, but in the manner of the return.

9.4. Synthesis: The Axiom of Sustainability and the Criterion of Geometric Phase

The synthesis must supply what the cycle, by itself, withholds: a criterion that distinguishes the good circle from the vicious one without appeal to the bare fact of self-continuation, which both share. I shall argue that the criterion is *geometric*—that the difference between the good and the vicious cycle is, with surprising exactness, the difference between a **circle** and a **spiral**, between a return that accrues nothing and a return that comes home bearing an irreducible remainder. And I shall argue that this is not a metaphor but a structural isomorphism, for which the physics and geometry of *anholonomy*—of the geometric, or Berry–Pancharatnam, phase—supplies the precise form.

9.4.1 Return to the root, and the difference between the circle and the spiral

Begin with the Daoist intuition the prelude already sounded. The 反 of 反者道之动 is not mere oscillation, a swinging back and forth between poles; it is 返—a *returning*,

a coming-home to the root. “The myriad things in their teeming each return to their root” (夫物芸芸，各复归其根, *Daodejing* ch. 16; Laozi 1963). This returning must be sharply distinguished from a second figure with which it is easily confused: the monotone linear accumulation that Hegel named the *bad infinite* (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*)—the mere “and then, and then,” the endless additive extrapolation that never comes home but only extends (Hegel 2010). Capital’s $M-C-M'$ is bad-infinite in just this sense: it does not return to its root; it extends without rest toward a more that is never enough.

So we already have two figures that must not be conflated: the *returning* of the Dao (return-to-source) and the *accumulating* of the bad infinite (linear extension). But this is not yet the distinction we need, for the antithesis showed that a returning cycle, too, can be vicious (the fair stasis that returns value yet merely repeats). We need a third figure, and it is here that geometry supplies what the two intuitions cannot.

9.4.2 The geometric phase: return without return-to-the-same

The decisive phenomenon is this. Consider a system carried around a *closed loop* in some space of parameters or situations—carried, that is, so that at the end it returns to the very point from which it set out. One might expect that, having come back to the same point, the system is in the same state. For an important class of systems this expectation is false. When the dynamical (the trivially accumulated) phase is subtracted, the system does *not* return to its initial state: it has accrued a residual—a **geometric phase**—determined purely by the geometry of the path, by the “area” the loop encloses, which is to say by the integral of a curvature over the surface the loop bounds. This residual is the phenomenon of *anholonomy*: **the loop closes in the base space, and yet does not close in the fibre.**¹

This is, with a precision that startled the author when it first appeared, the exact form of “return to the root, yet not to the origin.” The dialectical movement—thesis, antithesis,

¹The canonical physical instance is Berry’s: a quantum system carried adiabatically around a closed loop in parameter space returns with a phase factor that is not dynamical but geometric—an observable, gauge-invariant quantity equal to the flux of a curvature through the enclosed surface (Berry 1984). The classical optical antecedent is Pancharatnam’s (Pancharatnam 1956), for the phase of polarized light carried around a circuit on the Poincaré sphere. What matters for us is the structure, not the particular physics: a closed circuit in the base, an open one in the fibre, the gap between them fixed by an enclosed curvature.

synthesis—goes once around and comes back to its word; “the Buddha speaks of a world, which is then no world, and is thus named a world” (如来说世界，则非世界，是名为世界, the *Diamond Sutra*): the third term returns to “world,” to the very word of the first, and yet, having passed through the negation of the negation, it is no longer the naive “world” of the outset—it carries a remainder, a sublimation, a geometric phase. **The return happens in the base space (one comes home, to the same person, the same daily round); the sublimation happens in the fibre (one brings home what was not there at setting out).**

We can now state the criterion the synthesis was charged to supply.

The geometric criterion of the good and vicious cycle. Let the state of a relation, or of a value-process, evolve on a fibre bundle: the *base* the space of relational content or situation, the *fibre* the phase of value, of recognition, of jouissance. A cycle of reproduction is *vicious* when its holonomy is zero or negative—when, going once around, it either returns to exactly the point of origin (the stalled oscillation; Hegel’s bad infinite is this zero-creating monotone) or suffers a net loss of phase (a net extraction each turn, the rose exhausted). A cycle is *good* when its holonomy is positive—when, in the base, it returns to its root, while in the fibre it has accrued a positive geometric phase. **The circle is the vicious cycle (zero-phase repetition); the spiral is the good cycle (positive holonomy).**

Note what this criterion accomplishes that the bare notion of self-continuation could not. It frees “self-as-end” from the work of distinguishing good and ill. Both capital’s $M-C-M'$ and the good relational cycle “take their own continuation as their end”; the difference is not in the autotelic form but in the *mechanism of the phase*. Capital’s increment is counterfeited by extraction from an outside (an open system masquerading as a closed loop, in the language of §9.3); the good cycle’s positive phase is *endogenous*—produced by the curvature of the path itself, by the internal tension-structure of the relation, with no outside drawn upon. This is the geometric form of the distinction

between the *stolen* and the *internal* phase that will govern the rest of the paper.

9.4.3 The axiom of sustainability: the advance upon generative justice

With the criterion in hand, the paper's central constructive claim—its advance upon Eglash—can be stated.

The axiom of sustainability. Generative justice requires not only that value return to its creators (Eglash's spatial criterion) but that this return suffice, each turn, to reproduce the conditions of generation themselves—and, more strongly, that the cycle accrue a positive geometric phase, a sublimation, with each turn. A cycle that returns value to its creators and yet exhausts the very basis of its own reproduction is just in its distribution and unsustainable in its time. **The axiom of sustainability is the temporal dimension that the spatial criterion lacks: the good circle must return to its root and sublimates—it must be a spiral.** This is the paper's contribution to generative justice: not an application of it, but the addition to it of a criterion of time.

The axiom illuminates, too, why *wu wei*—non-action—will turn out (in §9.6) to be the fitting practical disposition. If the geometric structure of a system, the curvature of its bundle, is already such that its holonomy is positive, then **the sublimation happens of itself**, and requires no external forcing. *Wu wei* is not inaction but the refusal to extract, to force-close, to impose an external linear end upon a cycle that would, left to its own curvature, sublimates of itself. Forced action—the contrivance of capital, of instrumental reason—is precisely the disease that, in straining to control the phase and wring out an increment, destroys the very curvature by which the system would naturally have produced its sublimation. **Let the cycle be the spiral it would of itself become, and it will sublimates.** This is the geometric–Daoist statement of “let the circulation of value become a good, natural circle, and it will perpetuate itself of itself.”

9.4.4 Two honest caveats

Two debts must be acknowledged at once, for the geometric language is powerful enough to seduce, and the paper had rather name its limits than be caught out at them.

First caveat: the phase requires a real bearer. A geometric phase is physics, and not metaphor, only because the quantity carried around the loop is real—a phase with the structure of a circle (an S^1 , or a more general group), additive, gauge-invariant, in principle observable. If we speak of “the phase of value,” we are obliged to answer: the phase of *what*? What is it that has a periodic, additive, gauge-invariant structure, such that a holonomy can be spoken of at all? Absent a real bearer, the geometric phase is borrowed eloquence and no more. The paper does not discharge this debt here; it incurs it openly, and pays it only in §9.9, where the bearer is fixed as the sublimation of *real value*—the jouissance generated and refluxing in the interpretive cycle. Until then the geometric language is to be read as a structural analogy with a forward promise, not a completed formalism. The technical formalization, with its honest treatment of the bearer and the dimensionality, is deferred to the appendix and to the separate Value-Foam study it points to.

Second caveat: “sublimation = positive phase” must be argued, not stipulated. It is not permitted to *define* sublimation as positive holonomy and then announce an isomorphism; that would be to prove by naming. One must characterize, independently, a quantity of “sublimation” or “surplus”—for instance, a margin of sustainability: the net reproduction, each cycle, of the conditions of generation, in excess of what is consumed—and then *show* that, under a suitable bundle formulation, it corresponds to the sign of the holonomy. To weld the two by definition is circular (a vicious circle, in the most literal sense). This paper states the requirement and meets it only in part, in §9.9;

it flags, here, that the correspondence is a claim to be earned and not a convenience to be assumed. The reader will find, in §9.8, the paper calling itself to account on exactly this point.

These caveats are not weaknesses to be hidden but the very form of intellectual honesty the paper's epistemology (§9.5) will make thematic: that the geometric framework offers a structural *characterization* of what the good circle *is*, and not an operational *procedure* for measuring it from without. To mistake the “what it is” for the “how to measure” is the positivist's temptation, and the next section is, in part, a guard against it.

9.5. Epistemology: The Diagnosis of Curvature and the Reversal of the Burden of Proof

The synthesis gave a criterion: the good circle is the one of positive holonomy, the spiral that returns to its root while accruing a remainder. But a criterion of what a thing *is* is not yet a procedure for telling, from outside, *that* it is—and the gap between the two is the whole matter of this section. How, and how far, can the sign of the curvature be read? The section's answer constrains everything that follows, for it arrives at a conclusion that is, at first, disappointing and, on reflection, the very hinge of the paper's practical doctrine: that there is no shortcut to the diagnosis, no external metric that would relieve us of a sustained and fallible attention—and that this absence is not a defect of the theory but a demand of it.

9.5.1 The trending-toward-the-good of natural dynamics

Begin with an observation that, rightly understood, reverses a burden of proof we scarcely knew we carried. The Daoist tradition offers two homely images, and their homeliness is part of their force, for they record something everyone has seen. A wound left alone will, very often, heal of itself; it is the picking at it, the over-cleaning, the repeated anxious probing, that prevents a self-organizing process wiser than our intervention from doing its work. A body fallen into water will, if it ceases to thrash, float of itself; it is the

struggling—the forced action—that defeats the buoyancy by which one would otherwise have risen. 沉痾能自疗, 沉溺者不挣则浮: the deep affliction can heal itself; the one who is drowning, if he does not struggle, floats.

What these images teach is not a vague quietism but something precise about the curvature of certain systems. The wound, the body in water, the convalescing relation: each has a *ground state* that is already a positive curvature, a default tendency toward recovery and self-continuation that operates unless it is interfered with. The body does not need to be taught to float; it floats by its nature, and needs only to stop doing the thing that prevents it. The wound does not need to be made to heal; it heals by its nature, and needs only to be left unpicked. **The default tendency of a natural dynamics is often already toward the good—toward positive holonomy—and such a system goes vicious not for want of intervention but because it has been deformed by intervention.**

This gives *wu wei* a far stronger ground than mere prudence, and the strength of the ground is worth making explicit, for it is easily underestimated. The counsel to “let be” is usually heard as a counsel of caution—do less, lest you make things worse—a kind of epistemic humility about our limited foresight. But the claim here is not merely that we are too ignorant to intervene well; it is that the system’s own dynamics are, in the relevant cases, already oriented toward the good, so that intervention is not a risky improvement upon a neutral baseline but, characteristically, a deformation of a baseline that was already positive. This reverses a burden of proof:

The reversal of the burden of proof. If the default tendency of natural dynamics is toward the good—if self-continuation and recovery toward positive holonomy are the ground state—then the burden of proof is reversed. It is not *letting be* that requires justification, but *intervening*. The default presumption is that the system will, of itself, tend toward the good; what stands in need of defence is every action upon it. Each instance of forced action must answer a question it is not accustomed to being asked: am I repairing a system genuinely deformed into negative curvature, or am I picking at a wound that would have healed? The modern conviction that a relation “must be worked

at,” that maintenance is the default and letting-go the deviation, has the burden exactly backwards.

This is, in fact, the deepest charge the paper lays against the logic of capital and of instrumental reason, and it is worth stating as such. That logic cannot believe that any system will come right of itself; it is constitutionally unable to grant the ground state its positive curvature. And so, by ceaseless management, optimization, and control, it bends every cycle that might have healed into one that now genuinely requires its perpetual management—manufacturing the very dependency it then presents itself as remedying. The relation that “must be worked at” becomes, under enough working-at, a relation that can no longer hold itself without the work; the managed system forgets how to float. The reversal of the burden of proof is thus not only an epistemic correction but a diagnosis of how the anxious, managing disposition produces the helplessness it claims to address—the same structure, at the scale of a whole rationality, as the anxious hand that rots the rose’s root.

9.5.2 Why there is no metric: the honest limit

But the reversal must not become a licence, and here the section turns sharply upon itself, to forestall an over-strong claim that an earlier formulation of this very argument committed and that must now be retracted. It is tempting to convert the foregoing into a diagnostic rule: that the *amount of forced action a cycle requires to sustain itself* is a reliable marker of its curvature—the good cycle (incentive-compatible, positive-curvature) tending toward self-maintenance with little forcing, the vicious cycle (incentive-incompatible, negative-curvature) demanding ceaseless forcing to prop up its counterfeit closure. There is something to this, and the commercial instance of §9.6 will draw on it; but as a general rule it overreaches, and the overreach must be retracted before it does damage.

The trouble is that one and the same external phenomenon—a high cost of maintenance—answers to at least three quite different internal states, and the external observation cannot, of itself, distinguish them.

The maintenance cost is a fallible marker, never a criterion. The forced action a cycle requires to sustain itself is, at most, an external *marker* of the sign of its curvature, and never a *criterion* of it. One and the same high maintenance cost may answer to three quite different internal states. It may be the building of positive curvature in a founding period—a newly planted rose does need tending, and a young bond does need work, without this impugning its sustainability. It may be the repair of a positive-curvature system under external shock—a sound bond struck by illness or crisis needs upholding, and the upholding is no mark of viciousness. Or it may be the masking of an endogenous negative curvature—the vicious cycle forcing ceaselessly to hide its breach. The external phenomenon *underdetermines* the internal property; the causal inference from marker to property is not deductively valid, and is, in the human case, scarcely susceptible of proof. The maintenance cost is therefore an invitation to diagnose, never the diagnosis itself.

This limit, properly understood, is not a flaw in the framework but a corollary of its deepest commitment—and the section now makes the corollary thematic, for it governs the whole of the practical doctrine to come. The geometric framework offers a structural *characterization* of what the good circle *is* (a positive holonomy, an endogenous spiral); it does not, and cannot, offer an operational *protocol* for measuring that property from outside.

The unobservability of curvature is a demand of the praxis, not a defect of the theory. If the good and the vicious circle could be told apart by a single external indicator, then “diagnostic attention”—the sustained, fallible, first-personal labour of reading the curvature—would be superfluous; one could simply consult the metric. But it is precisely the irreplaceability of this attention that will constitute the core of the practice of sustainability. A criterion outsourceable to “check the maintenance cost” would itself violate the paper’s central claim, for it would settle, by an external sign,

what can only be read along a lived path—it would be, at the level of method, a settling failure. The unobservability of the curvature is therefore not an embarrassment the theory must apologize for but a consequence the theory requires: there is no shortcut of judgement, and the sign of the curvature can be read only in a sustained, fallible, first-personal attention, exercised again and again. To mistake the structural “what it is” for an operational “how to measure” is the positivist’s temptation, and the framework’s refusal of a metric is its refusal of that temptation.

So the epistemology arrives, by its own route, at a result that binds the practice to follow, and it is worth drawing the binding explicitly, for it dissolves the usual order of theory and practice. Knowing the curvature is not a measurement but an attention; and because it is an attention—sustained, fallible, first-personal, unoutsourcable—it is not a preliminary to the practice but already the practice itself. **The epistemology is not the prelude to the practice; it is the content of the practice.** To sustain a relation is, in the end, to keep reading its curvature—which is to say, to attend; and the later sections on perception (§9.12) and on the disposition of *wu wei* (§9.6) will be, in large part, the unfolding of what this attending concretely involves. The attention that the epistemology here identifies as the only access to the curvature is the same attention that the semiotics will recognize as the witness the poem demands, and that the series’ earlier papers described as joint attention. There is, in this convergence, a first intimation of the paper’s recurring discovery: that to know a relation rightly and to sustain it rightly are not two acts but one, and that both are forms of an attention that declines to possess what it attends to.

9.6. Praxis: The Strategy of No-Strategy

The epistemology ended on a result that dictates the form of the practice: that sustaining a relation is a sustained, fallible, first-personal attention, not the application of a metric. This section draws out what such a practice can and cannot be. Its conclusion is, at first, disquieting—that there is, strictly, no *strategy* for sustainability—but the disquiet is the doorway to the answer, and the answer is the one the whole paper has been circling: a

strategy of no-strategy, which is *wu wei* given its precise and non-mystical content.

9.6.1 Why sublimation cannot be aimed at

Lay the foregoing in a line and an uncomfortable necessity appears. The mark of the good circle is positive holonomy—sublimation; and holonomy is accrued along a path walked in the real, not cashed out by a sign (§9.7 will make this the heart of the semiotics). But any intervention that takes “producing sublimation” as its direct aim is attempting to produce, directly, the very thing that can only arise as the by-product of a walked path—which is the definition of settling failure. **Any strategy that takes the production of sublimation as its direct end will, precisely thereby, destroy it.** The more one schemes to “manage the relation into sustainability,” the more one flattens the spiral with the instrumental reason—the control, the extraction, the direct wringing-out of phase—that the geometric criterion identifies as vicious. A strategic love is not love; it is settling. To aim at the holonomy is, in the geometry, a category error: one cannot “walk toward” a holonomy, one can only walk the path, and the phase accrues of itself.

The strategy of no-strategy. Sustainability has no strategy, only a disposition. The good circle cannot be produced, only not-obstructed. Every “technique for making a relation sustainable” is, structurally, a forced action, an extraction, and destroys what it would preserve by cashing out a sublimation never walked. The only self-consistent practice is a negative, custodial one: not to do something so as to produce sublimation, but to refrain from doing what destroys the curvature under which sublimation arises of itself—not to extract, not to hasten, not to settle, not to counterfeit real presence with a cheap sign. ***Wu wei* is not the absence of practice but the redirection of practice from “producing sublimation” to “guarding the curvature under which sublimation occurs.”**

9.6.2 Three domains, three insights

The disposition shows itself, with a different lesson, in three domains; their parallel is part of the evidence that the structure is genuinely universal and not forced from a single case.

The Daoist domain contributes the ground: that the natural dynamics trends toward the good (§9.5.1), so that letting-be is not a passive default but a trust grounded in the system's own positive curvature. The wound heals; the body floats; the relation recovers.

The commercial domain contributes a sharpening, and a caution. The highest selling is, very often, not to sell. To press a sale is to emit a self-undermining signal: the very act of pressing betrays that “my interest and yours diverge, and so I must persuade you”—and the harder one presses, the more loudly one announces that the exchange may not, in truth, serve the buyer. The credibility of a relation of exchange cannot, in the end, rest on the polish of the pitch (which is cheap, outsourceable, machine-generable); it rests on the unforgeable fact that the thing is genuinely good, the relation genuinely mutual—so that the customer *comes of themselves*, and a mutually beneficial circulation arises that needs no forcing. Incentive-compatibility produces an endogenous positive curvature: when the parties' interests align in the cycle, the cycle perpetuates itself with little forcing, and *wu wei*—not interfering with a mutually beneficial cycle that would continue of itself—is the fitting disposition. (The maintenance cost reappears here as a marker of curvature; but it is held, as §9.5.2 demanded, to the status of a fallible marker, never a criterion.)

The domain of the rose contributes the sharpest lesson of all, and lifts the doctrine from “forced action is superfluous” to “forced action is harmful.” One who, dreading that the rose will wilt, waters it without cease, changes its water, tends it with an anxious love—that one cannot alter the fact that the flower must fall, and worse: he rots the root, and brings about the withering he feared. Here forced action does not merely fail to help; it *manufactures the very outcome it dreads*. The fear of an end, made into action, produces the end. This is 为者败之, 执者失之—“the one who acts upon it ruins it, the one who grasps it loses it” (*Daodejing* ch. 64)—and it cuts at once through capital (whose dread of the end of growth drives the extraction that exhausts its base), through the intimate bond (whose dread of loss drives the control that rots the relation), and through the Dao

itself. **The deepest unsustainability is born of the fear of unsustainability.**

9.6.3 Wu wei is not negligence: the diagnostic anchor

But *wu wei* must be sharply distinguished from negligence, or the doctrine becomes a high-toned alibi for abandonment—and the Daoist tradition has, historically, been put to just this use, sanctifying a ruler’s inaction as cosmic wisdom. The paper must therefore furnish a criterion that divides the two; and the criterion is, exactly, the sign of the curvature.

Wu wei versus negligence. *Wu wei* is non-intervention in a positive-curvature system; negligence is non-intervention in a negative-curvature one. The same “doing nothing” guards a sublimation arising of itself in the first case, and tolerates an extraction underway in the second. Whether one ought, at this moment, to let be or to act is not settled by the feel of one’s own disposition but by the diagnosis of the curvature: is this cycle, now, sublimating (returning to its root while the fibre accrues a positive phase), or is it being exhausted (a net extraction, one party giving without cease and nothing returning)? The legitimacy of *wu wei* is local, and stands in need of ceaseless re-diagnosis; it is not a posture adopted once for all. The root of the rose may be left to its own regeneration; the partner being drained dry may not be left to “wu wei” her way to depletion—there, what is called for is a repairing action.

9.6.4 Repair is subtraction

What, then, is the repairing action that a negative-curvature system calls for? Not a new forced action laid on top of the old, but the *removal* of the forced action that is doing the harm. This is the reconciliation of repair with *wu wei*, and it is the section’s final claim.

All true repair is subtraction. Repair is not the addition of a new intervention but the subtraction of the one that sickens. The drowning body does not need to be taught a more elaborate stroke; it needs to be brought to cease its thrashing. The wound does not need a fiercer medicine; it needs the picking hand withdrawn. The intervention a negative-curvature system requires is, at bottom, the withdrawal of the anxious, extracting, force-closing hand—so that the system’s own positive curvature may resume its work. **The highest repair is itself a kind of *wu wei*: not to do more, but to take away the hand that has all along been picking at the wound.** So 扶—to “steady” the drowning—does not mean to seize and haul him up (that is forced action, complicit in the thrashing); it means to hold him so that he ceases to struggle, and the water bears him up of itself. To steady is the least action that makes way for self-healing.

The two dispositions are thus unified. *Wu wei*, in a positive-curvature system, guards the sublimation arising of itself; repair, in a negative-curvature one, withdraws the hand that has bent the curvature negative—and thereby restores the conditions under which *wu wei* is once more legitimate. Repair completes itself by giving way again to non-action. The practice of sustainability is, in sum, neither management nor abandonment but a vigilant, custodial attention: to keep reading the curvature, to stand back where it sublimates of itself, to withdraw the harming hand where it is being drained, and never to try to cash out, with a sign, the sublimation that can only be walked. It is neither a strategy nor a laissez-faire, but a poetic custody—like the reading of a poem that is never read out.

9.7. What the Sign Can and Cannot Do: The Poem as Paradigm of the Good Circle

The preceding sections erected a criterion. The good circle is a spiral and not a circle: it returns to its root while accruing an irreducible remainder, a surplus we have named, in the language of geometric phase, a positive holonomy. The sections on epistemology and praxis then asked what finite agents can do in the face of such a criterion, and answered with a disposition rather than a technique—not to *produce* sublimation but to refrain from destroying the curvature under which sublimation arises of itself. Yet that answer

left a promissory note unredeemed. For whether we speak of guarding or of repairing, we must *do* something; and everything we can do must pass through a single interface—the *sign*.

This section takes up that interface. It must answer three questions, and the order is dictated by a principle that has governed the series throughout: epistemology before praxis. *Why* can a sign alter the trajectory of a cycle at all (§9.7.2)? *When and how* must a sign intervene if it is to bend the cycle toward the good (a question that begins here and is completed only in §9.9)? And *when and how* does a sign fail (§9.7.3)? The section’s summit (§9.7.4) will then advance what may be among the strongest claims of the paper: that among all signs, the *poem* occupies a singular place—that it is the pure form of the good circle’s sign, the Archimedean point of the entire semiotics.

9.7.1 The paradox of the sign: the sole operable thing, and the gateway to alienation

We must begin from a tension, and resist the temptation to dissolve it prematurely; the tension is itself the engine of the section.

On the one hand, **the sign is the only thing we can formally operate, know, and transmit**. The real of love—that connection between two beings which is unsayable, immeasurable, exhausted by no concept—is not, in itself, operable. We cannot “adjust” it directly, cannot hold it in the hand and add to or subtract from it. What we can lay hands on is only the sign: a declaration, a gift, a rite, a line set down on paper. All practice must pass through this narrow gate. In this sense the sign is not the ornament of a relation but the sole stratum at which a relation can be deliberately entered. To deny the sign its office is to deny the very possibility of practice.

On the other hand—and this is no less true—**the real of love does not reside in signs**. If a relation subsists on signs alone, it has already stepped into alienation: the signifier slides, multiplies, and is exchanged, yet anchors no real. This has been a constant concern of the series, and it acquires today an unprecedented edge. Technology, and above all the advent of large language models, is driving **the marginal cost of the signifier toward zero**. A machine can generate an inexhaustible supply of endearments, of bespoke declarations, of impeccably calibrated phrasings for a gift. When signs can

be produced this cheaply and at this scale, the sign's function as a *credible signal of investment and commitment* collapses. This is not a distant worry but an inflation of the sign already underway.

Set the two faces side by side and the genuine problem of a semiotics comes into view; and it hangs, precisely, upon the geometric framework erected above.

The paradox of the sign. The sign is the sole operable interface upon the dynamics of a relation, yet the sign itself *carries no* geometric phase—phase is accrued along a path, and a path is a process walked through in the real, incompressible. The sign can *initiate, redirect, mark* a cycle; it cannot *substitute* for the cycle's own unfolding. *Alienation* is precisely the error of taking the throwing of a sign for the walking of a path—the attempt to cash out, directly, by means of the sign, a sublimation that ought to have arisen as the by-product of a path actually traversed. And artificial generation has industrialized this very illusion: by rendering “the throwing of a perfect sign” all but free, it tempts us, as never before, to counterfeit the real path with the sign.

This is why “the sign growing ever cheaper” is a threat at the core of sustainability—not because the sign has ceased to matter but, on the contrary, because the cheap sign lets the vicious cycle (the cycle of zero area, of immediacy, of the skipped process) masquerade as the good one. A love-letter ghost-written by a machine, flawless in its diction, and a clumsy sentence spoken aloud to one's face, freighted with real hesitation—on the “quality” of the sign the former far surpasses the latter; but on the real path each anchors, the latter may carry the whole of the phase while the former tends toward zero. The entire unfolding of this section is a reverberation of this paradox.

9.7.2 How a sign alters dynamics: two mechanisms

To answer “when should a sign intervene” one must first answer “by what power can it intervene at all.” This is the order of epistemology before praxis: only by grasping the

mechanism does practice escape blind trial. I claim that the sign alters the trajectory of a cycle by two *independent* mechanisms, belonging respectively to psychoanalysis and to political economy. They alter the dynamics differently, and must be set out separately before their synthesis can be seen.

The psychoanalytic mechanism: the sign anchors the topology of the loop

The first mechanism is structural. In the Lacanian register the sliding of the signifier is in principle endless—meaning defers without rest along the chain, with no natural mooring. A signifying act—an “I love you,” a naming, a rite—functions as a **quilting point** (*point de capiton*): retroactively it pins down the meaning that until then floated free, producing a stable signified.²

Restated in the language of dynamics: the sign does not inject energy into the system; it *alters the system’s topology*. It manufactures, in the phase space of the relation, a new fixed point or attractor, or—and this is the decisive one for us—it **closes an otherwise open, dissipative trajectory into a loop**. A declaration can bend the course of a relation not, as a rule, because it conveys new information (both parties most often already know), but because it anchors the real diffused between them, as yet unformed, into a structure that can be *repeated, and therefore reproduced*.

This matters for the whole paper, because **without a loop there is no holonomy to speak of**. The geometric phase is a path-integral around a closed loop; and for there to be a closed loop, something must first suture the open trajectory. The sign is that suture. Hence the first epistemic office of the sign:

The topological office of the sign. The sign structures the unformalizable real into a fibre bundle capable of bearing a geometric phase. The sign does not produce sublimation, but it delineates the *loop* within which sublimation can occur. This is the first ground of

²Lacan’s figure is the upholsterer’s button that fastens the stuffing: it is the discrete anchors that lend structure to an otherwise loosely sliding fabric. The crux is that the anchoring is *retroactive*—the meaning does not wait, in advance of the sign, to be designated; it is constituted retroactively at the moment the sign falls (Lacan 2006).

what the sign *can* do, and the reason it cannot be dispensed with: absent the anchoring of the sign, the real of a relation is merely a dissipative flow, with no remainder to accrue.

The political-economic mechanism: the sign coordinates the good equilibrium

The second mechanism is selective, and a different vocabulary is needed for it. The sustainability of a relation—of any cooperative system—is often a problem of **multiple equilibria**. There exists in the system a “good” equilibrium in which the two parties mutually invest and value circulates back to each, and a “bad” equilibrium in which they mutually defend and each extracts. Which the system falls into is determined not by who is more virtuous but by *the parties’ shared belief about one another’s intentions*—common knowledge, in the game-theoretic sense.

The sign—and above all the costly, public, irreversible sign—here functions as a **coordinating device**. A weighty gift, a public rite, a covenant written down and witnessed: their office is to manufacture common knowledge—“we both know, and each knows the other knows, that the game we are playing is the good one.” It is this layer of shared belief that pushes the system out of the basin of the bad equilibrium and into the basin of the good. This explains a fact long obscured by romantic talk: why the gift must be *costly*, the declaration *public*, the covenant *written and witnessed*—cost and publicity are not ornament but the credibility of the signal, and credibility produces shared belief, and shared belief flips the equilibrium.³

The synthesis of the two mechanisms

The two mechanisms can now be joined, and the synthesis is itself a new claim. The psychoanalytic mechanism says: the sign *constructs the topology of the loop*, making sublimation structurally possible. The political-economic mechanism says: the sign *selects*

³This is the logic of costly signalling (Spence 1973; Zahavi 1975) and of coordination by focal points (Schelling 1960). But placed within the framework of generative justice it acquires a new sense: the political-economic office of the sign lies not in “conveying information” but in serving as the focal point that makes the good equilibrium common knowledge.

the basin of the loop, making the good circle the one jointly chosen. One is topology; the other is selection.

The double office of the sign upon dynamics. The sign alters the dynamics of a relation at two levels: it *delineates* the structure of the phase space (psychoanalysis: anchoring the loop), and it *coordinates*, among multiple stable states, the good branch (political economy: selecting the basin). The sign-inflation of the age of artificial generation attacks both at once—it devalues the anchor (signifiers proliferate and can no longer pin a real), and it strips the signal of its cost (no longer credible, it can coordinate no common knowledge). The crisis of the sign is therefore a *double* crisis.

Note that the two mechanisms do not reduce to one another. The topological anchoring can take place within a single mind in solitude (a vow one speaks to oneself anchors one's own real), whereas the coordination of an equilibrium is essentially multi-agent. They are two incommensurable faces of the sign's power, and they prefigure the polyphony the paper's final section will avow: one and the same phenomenon shows itself, at different epistemic stations, as different and mutually irreducible truths.

9.7.3 How a sign fails: three pathologies

Having grasped what the sign *can* do, we can characterize precisely what it cannot. The failure of the sign is not single but takes three structurally distinct modes. To distinguish them is essential, for each answers to a different pathology and demands a different response.

Inflationary failure: the surfeit of the sign

The first failure is the *surfeit* of the sign. The signifier multiplies without bound while the real investment of the signified does not grow with it. The contemporary performance of relation—the staged tenderness of social media, the algorithmically suggested phrasing

of an anniversary, the machine-generable endearment—is its type. Here both offices of the sign fail at once: anchoring fails (too many signifiers, none can pin a real), and signalling loses faith (cost at zero, no common knowledge can be coordinated). The cycle seems busier, more “full of content,” than ever, and yet it idles—its geometric phase tends to zero. This is the dominant pathology of the present, and the direct issue of the sign’s inflation.

Settling failure: the usurpation by the sign

The second failure is more hidden and more profound—and it is precisely the pivot of this section toward the poem. Here the sign is used to *substitute* for, rather than *invite*, a path: to settle with a sentence a wound that needed time to heal, to discharge with a gift a debt that needed presence to be borne, to “complete” with a perfect phrase a process that ought to have been walked. The sign here is no longer the quilting button that anchors the loop; it **declares the loop already closed**—though in fact it is not.

Settling failure. Settling failure is the use of a sign to *cash out* a sublimation never walked through. It counterfeits, as a balance the sign can draw on at once, a phase that ought to have arisen as the by-product of a path. Its essence is fraud—against the other, and against oneself. For phase depends on the path and not on the endpoints: two relations may arrive at “the same situation,” yet, having walked different paths, accrue different sublimations. Sublimation cannot be acquired instantaneously; it can only be walked. Every sign that proclaims “we have arrived” while in truth it never set out is a settling failure.

It is this failure that forces an unintuitive insight: **depth admits no shortcut**. In the language of geometric phase, the accrued phase equals the area enclosed by the path—the integral of the curvature around the loop. Hence the phase depends on the path and not on the endpoints. Carried over to relation: what we call “depth” just *is* the area the path encloses. One cannot leap over the process and possess a deep relation directly

—depth *is* that incompressible area. So “instant intimacy,” “express devotion,” must be, structurally, vicious cycles: they shrink the area of the loop to the minimum (shortest path, zero waiting), and the geometric phase tends to zero, and no sublimation occurs. The “immediacy,” “acceleration,” “efficiency” extolled by capital’s logic are precisely the systematic annihilation of geometric phase—the flattening of a spiral that might have climbed into an oscillation in place. **Slowness, therefore, is a formal necessary condition of the good circle, and not an aesthetic preference.**

Ossifying failure: the petrification of the sign

The third failure is **petrification**. A sign that once anchored a good circle hardens into an empty rite that no longer connects to any real—the perfunctory “I love you,” the commemoration become mere husk, the gift become duty. The loop is still there, but it is now the pure repetition of zero curvature (what the earlier sections called the “zombie cycle that refuses to wilt”). The sign here is not at fault; the fault is that it is no longer re-walked in the real; it has decayed from anchor into inertia.

The remedy for ossifying failure echoes, exactly, the “let it wilt and then regenerate” of the sense of *wu wei*: to let the old sign die, and let a new anchoring grow back out of the real. To try to rescue a petrified sign by more frequent, more forceful repetition only hastens its rigor mortis—which is the structure recurring throughout (and in the earlier praxis section): the action born of fear manufactures the very outcome it fears.

9.7.4 The poem as paradigm of the good circle’s sign: the Archimedean point of the semiotics

With the three failures before us, a naive conclusion seems to suggest itself: since the sign is so dangerous, let us use fewer signs, return to some presemiotic innocence. This conclusion is false, and instructively so. For **the contrary of settling failure is not “fewer signs” but a special kind of sign—one that refuses to settle itself**. And among all signs, the one that brings this “refusal to settle” to purity is the **poem**.

This is the core claim I wish to make: the poem is not one example within the semiotics but its *Archimedean point*—a fulcrum from which the whole understanding of “what a good sign is” may be levered. Let me unfold, in three layers, the poem’s title to being

the paradigm of the good circle's sign.

First layer: the poem structurally refuses closure, and is therefore immune to settling

A contract, a sentence reading “the matter is resolved,” a machine-generated standard endearment—their semiotic function is *termination*: to declare the loop closed, the meaning delivered, the file ready for archiving. The poem cannot do this, and *refuses to*. Every time a poem is read, its meaning unfolds anew; it is never “read out.”⁴ Precisely because the poem cannot be settled, it cannot be used as the instrument of “cashing out an unwalked sublimation.” In other words, **the poem is, in its very form, immune to settling failure**. This is its first title to being a paradigm: it is a self-defending sign, a sign that structurally refuses to be put to usurping use.

Second layer: the poem moves the site of sublimation from the text to the path of interpretation

This is the most important layer, and the interface that joins the poem to the geometric framework. The meaning of a poem does not lie in the arrangement of its signifiers—this is why we say “the formal content of the poem matters less”; the meaning of a poem lies in **its unfolding within the dynamics of the interpreter**.

In the language of geometric phase: the text of the poem is only a loop (or a point of departure) in the base space of situations; meaning, sublimation, is *the holonomy the interpreter accrues by traversing that loop once around*.

The meaning of a poem is the holonomy of the interpretive path. The meaning of a poem = the area the interpreter encloses along its loop. The same poem, for different interpreters—and for the same interpreter at different moments—walks different paths, encloses different areas, accrues different phases. This is why a poem is “inexhaustible”:

⁴Here “poem” does not designate the literary genre of lineated text but a manner in which a sign operates—which may equally take place in a passage of prose, a rite, a held gaze, and may fail to take place at all in a formal “poem” (see the false poem of §9.7.5).

its loop permits an area arbitrarily large, and unrepeating, to be enclosed. Each rereading is a spiral and not a circle—it carries home a remainder the last did not.

From this follows a surprisingly operable measure of “poeticity”: **the poeticity of a sign equals the supremum of the non-trivial holonomy it can bear.** A slogan, an advertising jingle—its loop is too small, too closed; on a second recitation the phase is already zero; it has been “read out”; its poeticity tends to zero. A great poem withstands a lifetime of rereading precisely because its loop permits the accrual of an almost unbounded, unrepeating phase. Poeticity is not a vague term of praise but a structural magnitude—a magnitude concerning the capacity of a sign to bear sublimation.

Third layer: the poem exhibits the epistemic structure of witness

The third layer fills the gap left by the first mechanism (anchoring). The poem does not transmit to the interpreter a ready-made signified; it **invites the interpreter to walk a real once over in person, and to become, in the walking, a witness.** This is the pure form of that act by which a sign “anchors the loop without substituting for the path”—the poem, with the fewest signifiers, sets in motion the largest unfolding of the real within the interpreter’s own dynamics.

And every sign-intervention done rightly—a declaration, a gift, a covenant—does the very same thing: it does not “inform” the other of love; it *invites* the other to walk love once over, in person, within their own dynamics, and there to become a witness. The poem, then, is not one example within the semiotics but **the limit form of all legitimate sign-intervention**—the “invitation of the path” brought to purity, the “settling” reduced to zero.

The poem as the apex of the good sign. Every good sign-intervention, at the limit, approaches the structure of the poem: it *anchors* the loop while refusing to *close* it, it *initiates* sublimation while refusing to *cash it out*, it *invites* the interpreter to walk the

real in person and there to witness generativity itself. Settling failure is precisely the moment a sign betrays its own poeticity and usurps the office of a contract. The crisis of the sign in the age of artificial generation is, in essence, *the poeticity of the sign being devoured by its settleability*—the infinitely generable signifier tempting us to treat every sign as a settleable deliverable, and thereby annihilating holonomy. Hence the practice of resisting alienation just is the *restoration of the sign's poeticity*: to let the sign be, once more, an invitation to a real path, and not the cashing-out of a sublimation.

This claim carries, besides, a retroactive dividend. The eighth paper of this series treated the lyric's address to the big Other—the poem presents generativity itself, rather than any ready-made structure. There that thesis concerned the lyric; here it is re-sited: the structure of the lyric just *is* the semiotic paradigm of the sustainable good circle. The series, then, is not eight papers and then one more, but a ninth that *retroactively re-anchors* the meaning of the eighth—which is itself a *point de capiton*, a spiral return. **The series enacts, in its form, the content it asserts**: no single paper settles the meaning, which goes on generating new remainders along the path of the papers' mutual rereading.

9.7.5 The vicious twin of poeticity: the false poem

But we must at once set a guard upon this too-beautiful picture, lest it collapse into a romanticization of “poetic vagueness.” That the poem refuses to settle is its strength; yet **“never settling” may slide into another pathology**—an infinite deferral, a game of the signifier that never redeems itself: the pure sliding of signifiers, the cynic's irony, the posture that pleads “staying open” as an alibi for never investing. This is in truth a higher form of inflationary failure, wearing the mask of the poem.

Poeticity, then, has its vicious twin. I call it the **false poem**. The difference between the true and the false poem returns, in the end, to geometric phase:

The criterion of true and false poem. The *true* poem's non-closure is in order that sublimation *be lived*—the interpreter walks the path in person and accrues a positive holonomy. The *false* poem's non-closure is in order to *evade* the cost of sublimation—its holonomy is zero, it proclaims “openness” in place while no one has truly set out. *Openness* is not, in itself, the good; only the openness that bears a positive phase is. A true poem invites a real path to be walked; a false poem pleads “openness” as an alibi for never investing.

This distinction is crucial, for without it the section would be justly charged with aestheticizing vagueness, with dressing “nothing is certain” as profundity. The false poem's refusal of closure is an idling refusal—it never demands of the interpreter the cost of walking a real in person, and so it breeds countless postures and zero sublimation. The true poem's refusal of closure is a generous refusal—it hands the whole weight of sublimation back to the path the interpreter lives. On the surface both “give no ready answer”; in holonomy they are opposites.

And here the question of the *bearer* of the phase can no longer be deferred: that “generativity” the poem presents, that “existence” the interpreter witnesses—of what is it the phase? We have twice now arrived at the threshold of one and the same answer—once following the logic of the sign's anchoring, once following the logic of the poem's unfolding—and both independent threads point to a single bearer: **the sublimation of *jouissance*** (Lacan 1998). The poem is the pure artistic form of this sublimation.⁵ But to fix this bearer securely, and to say what divides the “good” poem from the “vicious” one, we must first pass a threshold—the next section shows that poeticity, in itself, *does not guarantee* the good.

⁵In the Seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1992) Lacan expounds sublimation precisely by way of the relation between the poem and *das Ding*: sublimation is not the satisfaction of desire but the “raising of an ordinary object to the dignity of the Thing”—encircling that impossible, empty real without filling it. This structure will become, in §9.9, the heart of the definition of the appropriate poem.

9.8. Poeticity Does Not Guarantee the Good

The preceding section raised the poem to a great height—the paradigm of the good sign, the Archimedean point of the semiotics. Such praise, if it is not at once and severely qualified, would bring the whole paper down here. For an objection waits at the door, and it is sharp enough to be fatal: **poeticity guarantees only the self-continuation of generativity, not the good.**

The objection is fatal because it turns the paper’s own blade against the paper. The *antithesis* of this paper (§9.3) laid down an iron law: **self-continuation, in itself, is morally indifferent.** Capital’s accumulation continues itself; the rose’s blooming continues itself; the parasitic bond continues itself—“ceaseless circulation,” alone, never constitutes the good. We must now concede: *the poem is no exception.* A generator of $\lambda > 1$, bearing a phase, unfurling without end—by what right is what it generates the good circle? By what right does the poetic spiral necessarily climb, rather than descend?

To speak honestly: there is no such guarantee. And the counter-examples lie ready to hand, and must be faced.

9.8.1 The vicious poem exists

Poeticity does not entail the good. There exist genuinely poetic, yet vicious, generators of generativity. Fascist aesthetics is poetic—it is by no means a dead grammar; it installs in its followers a grammar of meaning able to go on self-generating, self-“sublimating,” impassioned, unending, demanding personal witness, refusing to be settled. Cultic speech is poetic. The addict’s inner monologue is poetic—it ceaselessly generates new rationalizations, new cravings, self-reproducing, never closing. All satisfy the criterion of poeticity given in the preceding section: $\lambda > 1$, the interpreter personally drawn in, refusal of settling, spiral and not mere repetition. They are *genuine* generators of generativity, and yet vicious. Therefore “poeticity $\Rightarrow$ good” is a false proposition.

We must pause and see exactly where the preceding section erred—for the error is the very one the paper had earlier warned itself to guard against. In §9.4 we set down a candid caveat: the correspondence “sublimation = positive phase” requires an argument independent of definition, on pain of circularity. And §9.7, in praising the poem, did precisely this—it quietly stitched “poeticity” to “the good” by the sign of the holonomy, without ever arguing, independently, *why the poetic phase must be positive*. This section comes to discharge that debt.

The manner of discharge is to concede a stratification:

Poeticity is necessary but not sufficient for the good. Poeticity guarantees the *form* of the cycle—that it is a living spiral, not a dead circle (ossification) nor a settled closure (the contract). Poeticity guarantees that the cycle *can* endure, *can* sublimate. But it does *not* determine the *direction* of that sublimation. Poeticity gives the cycle the capacity for endurance, but not the direction of endurance. The good must be guaranteed by something else.

9.8.2 Two orthogonal criteria: poeticity and justice

What is that “something else”? To pursue it is to drive the paper’s two languages to the point at which they must separate, and then be rejoined. I claim:

The orthogonality of poeticity and justice. *Poeticity* is a *dynamical / formal* criterion: it asks—can this cycle endure? is it a spiral or has it gone rigid? *Goodness* is a *justice* criterion: it asks—is the phase of this cycle drawn from an internal reflux, or extracted from an outside? whose conditions of generation does it reproduce, and whom does it reduce to expendable fuel? The two criteria are *orthogonal*: a cycle may be poetic and vicious (fascist aesthetics), or just and rigid (a bond fair but long since lifeless). The

formal “aliveness” and the just “goodness” are two independent dimensions.

With this orthogonal decomposition, fascist aesthetics can be diagnosed precisely, and no longer merely reviled as “bad.” It *is* poetic—it meets every formal condition; it is *not* just—its spiral can go on sublimating only because it takes “the enemy,” “the alien,” “the other” as expendable fuel. Its inner “sublimation” is **stolen**: the phase is produced not by the tension among the participants internal to the cycle but extracted from an outside excluded and consumed, and then disguised as an internal sublimation.

This drives an earlier insight to its terminus. In §9.3 we said that the vicious cycle is “an open system masquerading as a closed loop”—it dumps its entropy on an outside, deferring its own collapse by an ever-widening extraction. We now see that this structure has, at the level of poeticity, its exact twin:

The vicious poem is the stolen phase. *Fascist aesthetics is to the poem as capital is to generativity*—formal twins, ethical opposites. Capital “self-augments,” formally resembling generativity, but its increment is an extracted, counterfeit increment; the vicious poem “self-sublimates,” formally resembling the true poem, but its phase is a stolen, counterfeit phase. Both counterfeit a remainder that ought to have been internal, by excluding certain beings as pure fuel. A cycle’s poeticity answers “can it survive”; its justice answers “*should* it survive, and *on whose blood* does it survive.”

9.8.3 An interrogable criterion: who is the pure fuel?

The orthogonal decomposition gives us a concrete, reiterable diagnostic question—one that will become the point of departure for the next section’s constructive work. How to tell the internal sublimation from the stolen one? Look whether the cycle has, within it, an outside systematically reduced to **pure fuel**—a being that only contributes and never

benefits: a silenced partner, a colonized other, a group consumed as an enemy, a future overdrawn, a nature exhausted.

The pure-fuel criterion. Whether a spiral's sublimation is good or vicious may be interrogated by this question: *is there, within this cycle, some one person or thing that exists only as cost—excluded from benefiting in the very sublimation it feeds?* If there is, this is a vampiric poeticity—its phase is stolen. In the good poetic cycle there is no “pure outside”: every being drawn in is both producer and beneficiary of the phase; the sublimation refluxes to every one who generates it.

This criterion is the ethical redemption of the “open system masquerading as a closed loop” of §9.3, and it carries the core principle of generative justice—that value, unalienated, should return to those who create it—over from the domain of matter and labour into the domain of sublimation and witness. It will be locked, in the next section, into the substantive content of the “appropriate” poem.

It must finally be stressed where this section stands in the logic of the whole. To concede that “poeticity does not guarantee the good” does not weaken the preceding section; it is the very precondition of that section's standing. For it hands “the good” back to an independent, just criterion, and thereby forbids the poem—and the geometric form behind it—to usurp the role of a meta-framework that subsumes all the rest. The poetic framework can adjudicate “sustainability / endurance”; but to adjudicate “the good” it must hand the microphone to the framework of justice. **The poem answers whether the cycle can live; justice answers whether it should, and on whose blood.** These two questions are orthogonal, and therefore require two mutually unsubsuming frameworks—the polyphonic structure the paper's final section will avow, here for the first time appearing in a form impossible to evade: that even the most beautiful of things cannot, alone, vouch for the good.

9.9. The Appropriate Poem: The Non-Possessive Interpretive Cycle That Generates Real Value

Up to here the greater part of the paper has been spent diagnosing the vicious—failure, extraction, the stolen phase, the outside reduced to fuel. This was a necessary detour, but the time has come to put the question affirmatively: since poeticity does not guarantee the good, **what is the appropriate, the just, the self-perpetuating poeticity?**

This section is the keystone of the paper. Its particularity is this: the answer is not derived along a single line, but is the meeting, at one and the same point, of *two independent inquiries, each walked to its end*. One asks “what is the appropriate poeticity,” setting out from form and ethics; the other asks “how is value generated in an intimate relation,” setting out from a theory of value. They converge on a single thesis. And this convergence itself—two different frameworks illuminating one another, climbing in a spiral, carrying home a remainder neither foresaw alone—is a live occurrence of the very good circle the paper asserts. The form of this section, once again, enacts its content.

9.9.1 The first approach: the appropriate poem is the non-possessive poem

We cannot define “the good poeticity” as “poeticity + the good” and declare ourselves finished—that is tautology. The genuinely interesting question is: does the vicious poetic cycle, *within* its poetic structure, leave a recognizable formal scar? That is—does “stealing the phase by extraction” leave a mark upon the manner in which the poem operates, such that we might smell the vampire from *within* poeticity, rather than by appending a criterion of justice from without?

I claim: it does. For “to reduce some other to pure fuel” is a *closing* operation upon interpretation, and it necessarily leaves three scars upon the interpretive structure of the poem. And the obverse of these three scars sketches, exactly, the contour of the “appropriate poem.” More remarkable still—they fall in three distinct frameworks, mutually irreducible, and yet converge upon a single word.

The hermeneutic dimension: can it be freely betrayed

Return to the poem's root act: the poem's generativity unfolds in the interpreter, who participates in person in the generation of meaning. The true poem installs a living grammar the interpreter may *freely derive from*—the sentences you generate with it are *yours*, bearing your path, your situation, your symmetry-breaking this once. The poem does not prescribe where you must arrive.

The poeticity of the demagogue—fascist aesthetics, cultic speech—installs, by contrast, a grammar with **but one legitimate derivation**. On the surface its $\lambda > 1$ (it ceaselessly generates new content, new passion), yet all derivations converge, covertly, upon one predetermined endpoint: the leader, the enemy, salvation. What it demands is not witness but *submission*. The interpreter believes himself to be generating freely, while in fact executing a conclusion long preinstalled.

The first scar: possessing the reading. This is the disguised version of settling failure: it does not publicly declare the loop closed (that would expose it), but lets you believe the loop open while covertly steering every path to one closing point. Hence the first criterion of the appropriate poem is hermeneutic: *its grammar permits genuinely branching derivation, handing to the interpreter the generativity together with the freedom to go elsewhere, even to oppose it—it can be freely betrayed.*⁶ A true poem permits, even invites, a reading that betrays it; a vicious poetic grammar permits no betrayal—to betray is to apostatize, to become the enemy. Whether it can be freely opposed is the watershed between the poem and the demagogue.

⁶This is the hermeneutic insight that understanding is never the passive reception of a fixed meaning but a productive event in which interpreter and text co-determine sense (Gadamer 2004); the genuine work outruns any single reading, a *surplus of meaning* that no interpretation exhausts (Ricoeur 1976).

The psychoanalytic dimension: encircling the void, or the idol

The second scar continues from the bearer fixed in the preceding section—the sublimation of jouissance. The structure of sublimation is this (Lacan 1992): desire *encircles* an essentially empty, impossible real (*das Ding*) and does not fill it; and just because it does not fill it, desire can go on generating, enduring, sublimating. **The true poem keeps the void as void**—it points toward the unsayable without pretending to say it. This is the source of its inexhaustibility: that central emptiness guarantees that no single interpretation can fill it, settle it.

The vicious poem does the contrary: it **fills the void of *das Ding* with a positive object**—the leader, the race, purity, the enemy. This lends it a vast and immediate energy (a diffuse anxiety quieted by one concrete answer), but at a fatal cost: once the void is filled, that filler becomes an idol to be defended and fed without end, and *every other who threatens the filler is reduced to fuel to be cleared away*.

The second scar: possessing the void. This is the psychoanalytic mechanism of the “stolen phase”: the vicious poem fills with a sacrifice the void that ought to stay open, and confirms the filler over and over by clearing away others. *The one who encircles an idol needs an enemy* (the idol is forever threatened); *the one who encircles a void needs no sacrifice* (the void cannot be threatened). Hence the second criterion of the appropriate poem is psychoanalytic: it encircles a void kept open rather than filling it, and so its sublimation is *objectless* (encircling the void, self-sufficient, extracting no outside). This is the precise form, in the psychoanalytic framework, of the difference between “phase internal” and “phase stolen.”

The political-economic dimension: phase refluxing, or siphoned

The third scar is political-economic. The true poem is a **decentred** generativity—each interpreter generates, along his own path, a sublimation that is his own, and the phase

stays in the hands of the one who generates it. The poem does not possess its readings, nor do readers contend over a scarce “correct reading.” It is positive-sum: your reading does not diminish mine but may illuminate it.

The vicious poem is a **siphoning** generativity—the whole of the meaning, passion, and loyalty the interpreters generate is drawn back to a centre (the leader, the organization, the brand). The follower witnesses in person, sublimates in person, but the *proceeds of the sublimation are alienated*—they flow to the centre and do not remain in the follower’s own hands. The follower is the producer of the phase and yet the one dispossessed of it.

The third scar: possessing the proceeds of sublimation. This is the *alienated* poem: the interpreter contributes the whole labour of witness, yet does not own the fruit of his witnessing. The cult, the fascism, the fanatic brand—each has a centre that draws all in; the true poem has none—an old poem does not take your reading into the author’s keeping. Hence the third criterion of the appropriate poem is political-economic: it is decentred, the phase refluxing to every witness, with no centre siphoning the whole of the sublimation. This is the form, in the political-economic framework, of “no one reduced to pure fuel”—for in the siphoning structure the follower is himself the consumed fuel, though he take himself for a beneficiary.

The four frameworks converge on “non-possession”

Joining the three scars, the contour of the appropriate poeticity grows clear, and it falls beautifully across three mutually irreducible frameworks—which is no coincidence but a further endogenous corroboration of the paper’s polyphonic structure. The three scars are, in truth, one and the same thing showing itself in three frameworks: the vicious poem **possesses** the interpreter’s path (permits no betrayal), **possesses** the void (fills it with an idol), **possesses** the proceeds of sublimation (siphons them to a centre).

And *possession* is just another name for *extraction*. Therefore:

The appropriate poem is the non-possessive poem. A poeticity is appropriate (good, sustainable, just) if and only if it *does not possess*: hermeneutically, its living grammar permits genuinely branching derivation and can be freely betrayed; psychoanalytically, it encircles an open void rather than filling it, and so needs no sacrifice; politically-economically, it is decentred, the phase refluxing to every witness rather than siphoned to a centre. These three “non-possession” are three mutually irreducible faces of a single disposition.

These three non-possession receive, in the fourth framework—the Daoist—their unifying name. “To generate and foster them; to generate without possessing, to act without presuming, to foster without ruling: this is called the dark virtue” (生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰，是谓玄德). To generate without possessing what one generates, to act without leaning on what one does, to foster without lording over—this is, almost word for word, the definition of the appropriate poeticity. The vicious poem is, conversely, the poeticity of “possessing, presuming, ruling”: it possesses the reading, presumes upon the passion, rules over the sublimation.

So the four frameworks all converge, on this question, upon a single point—“non-possession”—and yet each speaks in its own tongue, none subsumed by another: hermeneutics says “permits betrayal,” psychoanalysis says “encircles the void and not the idol,” political economy says “the phase refluxes and is not siphoned,” Daoism says “generates without possessing.” They are four mutually irreducible faces of one “non-possession.” **And this, in itself, is a live demonstration of a good poetic cycle:** four voices encircle one void (“the appropriate poem,” a centre fillable by no single framework), each sublimating, the phase refluxing to every framework, none reduced to a footnote of another.

9.9.2 The second approach: how value is generated in an intimate relation

Now enter by a wholly different road. Throughout we have spoken of “phase,” “sublimation,” “holonomy,” yet have all along treated *value* as an unanalyzed primitive—we

said “the phase internal or stolen,” “the sublimation refluxing to every witness,” but the sublimation of *what?* the reflux of *what?* Without opening this black box of “value,” every criterion above hangs in the air. This subsection opens it.⁷

I claim that value in an intimate relation falls into three strata, answering exactly to the three Lacanian registers, and answering, too, exactly to the structure of good and vicious poeticity we have already drawn out.

Imaginary value comes from the imaginary: idealizing the other into a complete image, imagining the relation as two made one, each filling the other’s lack. It is the fuel of passionate love, the thing the rose is at its most resplendent. But it is, structurally, that operation of “filling the void of *das Ding* with a positive object”—it takes the other as the object that could fill my lack (mistaking the *objet petit a* for a possessable positive thing) (Lacan 2006). Thus imaginary value tends, by nature, toward the possessive, idol-encircling poeticity: the phase it manufactures is intense yet stolen—idealization is necessarily attended by the erasure of the real other (you love the other of your imagining, while the real other is reduced to fuel for that image). **The rose blooms but a week precisely because imaginary value is exhaustive:** the intensity of idealization cannot be sustained, and the phantasm is, in the end, pierced by the real other. Imaginary value is the psychoanalytic name of “resplendence born of unsustainability.”

Symbolic value comes from the symbolic: status, money, the recognized identity, the displayable sign of relation. It is countable, commensurable, accumulable—and therefore *stealable, siphonable, inflatable, cheaply machine-generable*. It exists, undeniably (to deny the office of the sign is naive); but its danger is just the danger of the sign. When a relation’s value-cycle runs in the symbolic stratum alone, it falls into settling or inflationary failure. Symbolic value is the bearer in which the phase is *most easily stolen*, for it is commensurable and extractable—it is the stratum on which the vicious cycle most readily lodges.

Real value comes from the real: the stratum bound up with trauma, with jouissance,

⁷The scope must first be declared: the task of this subsection is single and precise—to identify, for the “phase / value” left hanging above, a stratified bearer, so that the criteria acquire a concrete referent. It does *not* undertake to build here a complete theory of value; that is the work of a separate study (which the series intends to take up in a sequel). Here we use it and pass on, lest the theory of value usurp the stage and drown the true theme of sustainability.

with the unsymbolizable. It cannot be settled (it commensurates into no sign), cannot be idealized (it is gathered into no complete image of the imaginary). It is precisely that void of *das Ding* itself—the abyss between two persons that can never be wholly mutually understood, never made one, that keeps an irreducible alterity.

The three strata of value and the good/vicious poem. *Imaginary value* = the idol-encircling poem = the possessive sublimation = the stolen phase (idealization erasing the real other) = the resplendence and the swift death of the rose. *Symbolic value* = the settleable, siphonable poem = the most easily extracted bearer = the hotbed of inflationary and settling failure. *Real value* = the void-encircling poem = the non-possessive sublimation = the internal phase = the true bearer of the good's sustainable circle.

The bond of real value to trauma must be drawn with care, lest one fall into a “cult of trauma”—as though the more traumatic, the more unsayable, the more valuable. This is false. In a real relation, real value includes also the calm, non-traumatic unsayable: the shared silence, the bodily presence, the daily mutual witness. So it should be said: **real value has trauma as its sharpest, least evadable manifestation, but is not confined to trauma**—it is every relational kernel unsettleable by sign and unpossessable by the imaginary, of which trauma is merely the most compelling form. In an intimate relation the truly deep connection is built, more often than not, upon *witnessing the other's irreducible void without trying to fill it / repair it / possess it*—you accompany the other's unfillable void (trauma, finitude, the fact of eventual parting) rather than cover it with the idealization of the imaginary or settle it with a solution of the symbolic. This, precisely, is the relational form of “encircling the void, not the idol.”

Why value must be generated by hermeneutic engagement

From this a key question can be answered: why *must* real value be generated by hermeneutic engagement? Because real value cannot be given directly (it is unsymbolizable); it

can only be approached *encirclingly*, along the path of interpretation and witness. You cannot “possess” the other’s real kernel; you can only interpret it, witness it, accompany it, time and again—and this just *is* the poetic interpretive cycle.

The generative mechanism of real value is the poetic interpretive mechanism. Real value is not a conserved quantity transmitted; it is a phase *generated* in the process of two persons interpreting and witnessing, again and again, that unfillable void. It does not pre-exist, awaiting discovery; it is generated in the process of being encircled, of being witnessed. Hermeneutic engagement is necessary precisely because the good’s value (real value) is, ontologically, interpretively generated—without the path of interpretation there is no such value. Thus **the generative mechanism of real value just is the poetic interpretive mechanism.**

9.9.3 The convergence of the two approaches

Now the two roads meet. The first asked “what is the appropriate poeticity,” and answered: the interpretive cycle unfolded *non-possessively* (encircling the void, permitting betrayal, the phase refluxing). The second asked “how is the good value of an intimate relation generated,” and answered: real value—that value alone unpossessable, unsiphonable, approachable only by encircling witness—is generated through the poetic interpretive cycle. The two answers are one:

The keystone thesis. *The appropriate poem = the non-possessive interpretive cycle that generates real value.* It is, in form, poetic (a living grammar, enduring, resistant to settling); in justice, good (non-possessive = non-extractive = phase internal = no sacrifice = decentred and refluxing). It neither settles (unlike the contract), nor siphons (unlike the demagogue), nor idles (unlike the false poem). It generates without possessing what it generates—and therefore it can perpetuate itself, precisely *because* it does not try

to possess its own perpetuation. This is the final form of “let the circulation of value become a good, natural circle, and it will perpetuate itself of itself”: **the non-possessive generativity perpetuates itself.**

Note how this thesis returns upon the paper’s point of departure. The metaphysical ground laid in §9.2 was “generativity takes its own continuation as its end”; now the terminus (non-possession) returns upon the origin (self-continuation)—*it is precisely because it does not possess that self-continuation becomes possible*. To possess is to want to clutch the cycle’s product, to clutch the balance of the sublimation, to clutch the continuation itself—and the clutching is precisely what severs the cycle (this is another saying of §9.6’s “the one who acts upon it ruins it, the one who grasps it loses it”). Non-possession is not the price of perpetuation but its condition. The distance between terminus and origin is itself a spiral return—a return to “self-continuation,” carrying home the remainder “non-possession” that was not there at the outset. **The paper has, in its form, completed the good circle it asserts.**

Here, at last, the bearer of the phase can be finally fixed: it is **the sublimation of real value**—the jouissance generated, encirclingly, in each witness through the poetic interpretive cycle, and refluxing to each witness. This at once discharges the two debts left by §9.4 and §9.7: the phase has a real bearer (no longer hanging in the air), and “sublimation is positive phase” has a content independent of definition (it is the remainder internal to the non-possessive cycle, as against the counterfeit phase stolen by the possessive cycle).

9.9.4 The coupled system as touchstone: returning value to every co-creator

Finally, all of this must be pushed from the purely dyadic relation into its real social embedding. An intimate relation is never an isolated two-person system; it is *coupled* into a larger system—family, kin, society. And the criterion of the good circle is tested most severely precisely within this coupled system.⁸

⁸This subsection unfolds throughout in generalized language (“coupled system,” “participant,” “co-creator”); the criteria it states apply to any intimate system embedded in a larger relational network, and

Here the hardest principle of generative justice steps forward: **value should return to the creator of the value himself**. Carried into the intimate coupled system, it at once illuminates a fact long obscured by romantic talk—that an intimate relation is a system of the *co-production* of value, and that this system is exceedingly prone to alienation. Who creates the value? Not the loving two alone, but the family members drawn in: they contribute care, labour, affection, symbolic recognition, even material support. All these are the creation of value. Hence the criterion of the good demands:

The good circle of the coupled system. An intimate coupled system has a good value-cycle if and only if: (1) value *can circulate*—guaranteed by the poetic language: value is not settled, not siphoned, but continually reproduced in the loop of interpretation and witness; and (2) value *returns to every one who creates it*—this is the criterion of generative justice: whoever takes part in the creation of value ought to benefit from the value the relation generates, and in the system there exists *no “pure fuel,” no one who only creates and never benefits*. The first condition is dynamical (does the cycle live, is it a spiral); the second is just (on whose blood does the cycle run, to whom does it return).

This is the confluence, here, of the orthogonal structure “poeticity × justice” laid down in §9.8: the good circle must satisfy *both* at once. And the two are not two parallel checklists—they need one another. This is the original kernel of this subsection:

Poeticity is the mechanism that makes return possible; return is the content of poeticity’s goodness. The poetic language is the guarantor of the good circle precisely because it is the only form of cycle that lets value “return to the creator himself” without alienation: in the poetic cycle, value (the sublimation of real value) is generated along each witness’s own path and stays in his own hands. By contrast the purely symbolic

depend on no particular cultural form or case.

value-cycle tends, by nature, to siphon—someone is always serving as fuel for another’s symbolic capital. Therefore only when the value-cycle is led by *real value* and runs in the poetic manner does “the creator is the beneficiary” become structurally possible; for real value cannot be possessed, cannot be siphoned into another’s name. Poeticity and return are two faces of one thing: poeticity is the mechanism that makes return possible, return is the content of poeticity’s being good.

From which it appears that this section makes a double advance upon generative justice. The first is the **temporal dimension** (the axiom of sustainability of §9.4): the return must not only occur but suffice to reproduce the conditions of generation themselves. The second is the **problem of the bearer of return**: heretofore generative justice has mostly spoken of return in material, labour, ecological value, but in the intimate domain the least alienable value is real value, and it *can* return only through the poetic interpretive cycle. Generative justice in the intimate domain is therefore necessarily *poetic*—in a structural and not a metaphorical sense: only the non-possessive, non-settling, phase-refluxing cycle can return that unsymbolizable value to every one who creates it. **The intimate relation is thus the limit case that tests whether generative justice can handle “the incommensurable, unpossessable value,”** and the poetic cycle is its realization in that limit case.

At the scale of the family, alienation has a typical form—the alienation of social reproduction. The labour of care, of affect, of the household creates the value that sustains the relation, yet because it is invisible, because it is idealized as “the natural outflowing of love,” it is not returned: one party goes on creating value yet does not benefit from the value she creates, reduced to pure fuel within this system of tenderness.⁹ This is just what “the idol-encircling poem” looks like within the family: with idealized signs—“virtue,” “sacrifice,” “devotion”—it whitewashes one who is extracted from into one

⁹This is the structure disclosed by social-reproduction theory (Federici 2004; Bhattacharya 2017): the reproductive labour that sustains life and labour-power creates value, yet is placed, by the twin narratives of capital and patriarchy, in the position of the invisible and the uncounted. Fraser names the resulting instability a *crisis of care*—capital depends on reproductive labour it refuses to value, and so erodes the very condition of its own continuation (Fraser 2017), which is, in the vocabulary of §9.3, the counterfeit closure seen at the scale of the household.

who gives of her own accord; *imaginary value here performs the cover for extraction.*

The coupled system, by reason of its internal power differentials, its external pressures, its conflict of multiple value-systems (the family is often the executor of symbolic value), makes “no one is pure fuel” pass from an abstract proposition into a real demand to be vigilantly, ceaselessly diagnosed. So the practice of the good takes, within the coupled system, a concrete form: to let the rite *anchor without settling* real value (the rite as an invitation to the path, not the discharge of a debt), and to interrogate, without end, the question of the pure-fuel criterion (§9.8.3)—**is there, in this enlarged cycle, anyone who creates value yet does not benefit?**

And this returns us to a beautiful gathering. The essence of the good circle is **co-authorship**—which is precisely the unfolding, in the multi-agent system, of the hermeneutic dimension of §9.9.1: “permitting free betrayal, handing the generativity truly to the interpreter.” In the good coupled system every participant is a *co-author* of the relation’s meaning, not the executor of a written role: none is assigned a script of “virtue” to perform, none is the passive object receiving a settled arrangement; each can possess, in the generation of the relation’s meaning, his own branching derivation, his own path, his own phase. **To co-create value is to co-author a poem possessed by no one.**

9.10. Legislation as a Flow: Contract, Morality, and the Generative Shaping of the Manifold

The keystone of §9.9 named the appropriate poem the non-possessive interpretive cycle that generates real value. But a reader who has followed the semiotics will feel an objection gathering, and it must be met head-on, for unmet it would make the whole distinction between the poem and the contract look too clean, too easily won. **The contract appears to be the purest form of the settling sign.** Its very office is to settle: to fix the terms, to pin the obligations, to declare that the parties are, in this respect, *done*. The marriage registration is a contract; the covenant (盟书) is, in a sense, a contract. If contract is settling and settling is pathology (§9.7.3), then the paper must either reject all contract—which is absurd—or concede that its clean opposition of the poem to the settling sign has missed an entire dimension.

This section confronts the objection by way of a distinction that the author owes to a single corrective insight: that **the contract, too, is a language system—but a language system whose office is to *delimit* generativity rather than to generate content.** The poem is the language system that generates; the contract is the language system that bounds. And just because it bounds, the contract can both stifle generativity and foster it. The section’s task is to say which, and why—and, in doing so, to keep the contract *within* the generative framework rather than letting it stand outside as a foundation.

9.10.1 The poem and the contract: flow on a manifold, and the shaping of the manifold

Return to the geometric language of §9.4. There, everything—the geometric phase, the holonomy, the path—was a *flow on a manifold*. But one question was never put: whence the manifold? Who sets its boundary, its topology, the regions it makes reachable? The answer is the contract.

The poem is flow on the manifold; the contract shapes the manifold. The poem is the language system of generativity: it unfolds a free flow upon the manifold, the phase accruing along the path. The contract is the language system that delimits generativity: it generates no flow of content but shapes the *manifold itself*, constraining the unconstrained free flow into a *structured flow on a manifold* (SFM). The poem answers “how does the flow unfold upon the manifold”; the contract answers “what is the shape of the manifold, where lie its boundaries, where its impassable singularities.”

Let the free generativity be a flow on a manifold M . Unconstrained, the flow may reach any region of M , including those regions that lead to exhaustion, to extraction, to annihilation—the path on which the rose burns the whole of its resource in a single flowering is also a licit flow on the manifold. The contract is a *structuring* of the manifold: it may excise certain regions (setting impassable singularities—the absolutely forbidden harms), or alter the boundary (setting exit conditions—the reachable edge of the manifold), or

reshape the metric and the connectivity (governing toward whom value may flow—who is a licit participant in the cycle of value). Through this structuring the free flow is constrained into a *structured* flow: it remains free within the reshaped manifold M' , but can no longer flow into the regions the contract has excised or sealed.¹⁰

This at once gives precise sense to “the contract’s path does not matter.” A good contract does not prescribe which path the flow takes (that would annihilate the holonomy, pressing the poem flat into a contract—the settling failure of §9.7.3). It shapes only the manifold: it sets the boundary (where the cliff of the exit condition lies), the impassable singularities (which harms are absolutely forbidden), the topology (who is connected to whom, toward whom value may flow). **Within the manifold so shaped, the flow is free, poetic, unprescribed.** The contract and the poem are therefore not opposed: the contract shapes the manifold, and the poem flows upon it freely. The bad contract is the one that prescribes even the steps (the settling failure); the good contract is the one that marks only the manifold’s boundary and lets the flow run free within it.

9.10.2 The justice of the contract lies in the structure, not the path

From this follows the section’s sharpest claim, and it relocates the question of justice. We judged the good and vicious cycle, until now, by the character of the *flow*—whether each turn extracted or refluxed, whom it reduced to fuel (§9.8.3). The contract directs attention beneath the flow, to the *manifold* on which the flow runs.

The justice of the contract is the geometry of the manifold it generates. The justice of a contract lies in the structure of the manifold it generates, and not in any particular path. A manifold may be unjust in its very geometry—its curvature so distributed that the flow in certain regions must converge toward a centre (structural siphoning), or some position so placed that a being there, however it moves, can only be fuel (the struc-

¹⁰The geometry can be made precise—the contract as a restriction of the reachable set, the structured flow as a constrained flow on a manifold-with-boundary, the impassable harms as excised singularities—but the rigorous differential-geometric treatment is deferred to the appendix and the Value-Foam study it points to. What matters here is the structural analogy: the contract does not draw the path; it shapes the space within which paths are drawn.

tural pure-fuel position). This is not the viciousness of any single flow but the viciousness of the stage itself: a stage so built that some role, however it plays, is doomed to be extracted from. On an unjust manifold, even the most well-meaning dancer cannot dance a just dance—for the curvature has already bent each of his paths toward exploitation.

This answers a worry left open in §9.9. If the good circle requires that no one be reduced to fuel, but the *structure itself* has placed someone in the position of fuel—a position structurally fixed, regardless of any participant’s good will—then the good will of the two (the justice of the flow) cannot save her; the manifold itself must be reshaped (the justice of the structure). This is why the merely moral and the merely poetic do not suffice, and why contract and institution are indispensable: morality and the poem optimize the flow, but only contract and institution can reshape the manifold. It is the reason the appropriate disposition is not always *wu wei*: where the manifold is unjust, to let the flow run free upon it is to consent to the exploitation its geometry dictates. There, the structuring—the legislative—intervention is called for.

9.10.3 But the shaping of the manifold is *itself* a flow

Here the section must guard against a temptation that an earlier formulation of the argument fell into—the temptation to set “structure” against “flow” as a separate, deeper stratum, a foundation laid once and standing outside the generativity it grounds. This is false, and the falsity matters, for it is the very thing the paper has criticized throughout: the sanctification of a founding act that stands outside the cycle and declares the loop closed (the settling failure at the level of the ground).

The shaping of the manifold is itself a generative flow. The shaping of the manifold—legislation, covenanting, the laying-down of terms—is not an activity outside the flow but *itself a generative flow*. It unfolds in time; it is generative; it can be poetic or settling, good or vicious, no less than the flow of content upon the manifold. Generativity has two functions: to generate value upon a given structure (the poetic function

—flow on the manifold), and to generate or reshape the structure itself (the contractual function—flow *of* the manifold). But the latter is no less a flow. The contract is not a stage standing outside the flow; the contract is *the flow that generates the stage*. It differs only in that its object is the generated structure rather than the content upon the structure—which is why it is more decisive in the generation of structure, as legislation is to adjudication in a society.

The analogy to legislation and adjudication makes the structure exact, and it is worth drawing out, for it gives the section its spine. *Adjudication* treats a particular case under a given law (a flow upon the manifold)—this is the poetic function: within a given structure, generativity unfolds freely, accruing its phase. *Legislation* generates or amends the law itself (a flow of the manifold)—this is the contractual function: it shapes the structure within which adjudication will unfold. And both are flows; both are generative processes; both unfold in time; both can be good or vicious. Legislation is not a founding myth outside adjudication; it is a sustained, fallible, generative process, exactly as adjudication is. **A society that takes its law for a thing founded once and for all, and a society that takes its law for a living process to be continually re-legislated, differ precisely as the dead contract differs from the living one, as ossification differs from the poem.**

This is the corrective that keeps the contract within the generative framework rather than above it. There is no legislative god standing outside generativity to lay down, once and for all, the manifold upon which all subsequent flow must run. The shaping of the manifold has not escaped the generative criteria; it is subject to them, at its own scale. **Even the making of the stage is a kind of dance.** And this is, once more, a polyphony and a self-reference: even “the shaping of structure” has not escaped the criteria of generativity, has found no meta-stratum outside the flow—which is the formal imperative of §9.16 enacted yet again, at the level of the ground itself.

9.10.4 Contract and morality: the hard boundary and the intrinsic curvature

Within the contractual flow, a distinction must be drawn that the SFM language renders precise—the distinction between the contract proper (external, enforceable, third-party-compelled) and morality (internalized, self-compelled).

The external contract shapes the hard boundary; internalized morality shapes the intrinsic curvature. The external contract shapes the manifold *externally*: its boundary is maintained by an outside force (the law, the lineage, the sanction of society)—a *hard boundary*, against which the flow that runs is met with external penalty. Internalized morality shapes the manifold *intrinsically*: the boundary has become a part of the subject’s own dynamics, needing no external maintenance—an *intrinsic curvature*, by which the subject simply does not flow toward the forbidden region. A relation sustained by pure contract is one whose incentive-compatibility is propped by external penalty—structurally, the temperate version of the counterfeit closure of §9.3, sustained by an external injection. A relation whose morality is internalized is one whose curvature is, of itself, positive.

Hence morality is, in a sense, superior to contract—because it is an endogenous positive curvature rather than an externally imposed boundary-correction. But—and this is the necessary balance—where morality is not yet internalized, or where power is gravely asymmetric, the contract is the indispensable floor. The ideal trajectory is therefore one in which the contract serves as a scaffold (the external hard boundary), morality is gradually internalized (the endogenous curvature generated), and the contract at last *retires* into the background—as, in §9.6.4, repair gives way again to *wu wei*. **The best contract is the one that makes itself ever less needful of being invoked; the highest achievement of a contract is that it never has to be enforced.**

9.10.5 Self-legislation: who may shape the manifold

The deepest stratum of the cycle's justice is now reached, and it gathers the whole section. We said that the justice of the structure lies in the geometry of the manifold; but *who shapes the manifold*? If the strong alone shape it, and the weak merely flow upon a manifold given to them, then the very building of the stage is unjust—however symmetric the stage may appear. This carries forward the relational self-legislation of **Paper III**: that the norms of an intimate bond are not imposed from without but are the parties' joint self-legislation—a relational transposition of the Kantian thought that moral law binds because it is autonomously self-imposed (Kant 1998).

Just self-legislation: no one excluded from the shaping of the manifold. A just manifold must be *co-shaped*: every participant who generates value upon the manifold ought to be a co-legislator of the manifold, and not merely a given point upon it. This drives the “no one is pure fuel” of §9.9.4 to its deepest level: not only must no one be reduced to fuel *in the flow*, but no one must be excluded from the shaping *of the manifold*. Self-legislation is the relational co-shaping of the very stage upon which all will generate value. The vicious counterpart is the manifold shaped by the strong alone, presented to the weak as a given—the structural analogue of the demagogue's grammar with but one legitimate derivation (§9.9.1): a stage that looks like a shared agreement while in truth being the strong party's settling, hidden within the illusion of “our covenant.”

And self-legislation is, in turn, *itself poetic*—which closes the section back upon the semi-otics. The manifold is not shaped once and fixed forever; good self-legislation continually *reshapes* the manifold, as the relation changes, as power shifts, as new participants enter and the manifold must be renegotiated. The dead contract is the manifold ossified after a single shaping (the ossifying failure of §9.7.3, where “this is what we agreed at the outset” becomes a weapon of oppression); the living self-legislation is the manifold continually, jointly re-shaped—*re-legislated like a poem that is never read out*. **So the highest norm, too, is poetic: the limit of the good contract approaches the poem—a living**

manifold forever open to being jointly re-interpreted and re-legislated. The justice of a cycle is therefore not two strata, an upper structure over a lower flow, but one generative justice carried through at two scales: in the flow upon the manifold (no one reduced to fuel), and in the flow that shapes the manifold (no one excluded from its joint generation). To co-author the poem is, at this scale, to co-legislate the manifold; and the stage, like the dance, is never finished, and belongs to no one.

9.11. Toward a Eudaimonics of Relation: The Field and the Unfolding of One's Own Dynamics

The keystone thesis tells us *what* the good circle is—the non-possessive interpretive cycle that generates real value. It does not yet tell us how such a cycle is brought into being and lived. This is the threshold from the theoretical to the practical, and it opens onto a cluster of questions the paper has not so far confronted: How is the poetic language created and practised, such that the cycle becomes possible at all? How is the value of a system—of the two, of the family—to be perceived? How is value co-created? And how is the cycle made good, so that value returns to its creators? These are practical questions, and each merits its own sustained treatment; the present section does not pretend to answer them.¹¹ What it does is lay the ground for them, and offer one organizing intuition that the author believes to be the right frame in which all of them should be posed. That intuition is a **field**; and the doctrine it opens is, in the end, a *eudaimonics*—a theory of flourishing.

9.11.1 From the presentation of a structure to the cultivation of a field

Begin from a distinction that the whole of the foregoing has been pressing toward without naming. There are two radically different ways to conceive what it is one “builds” when one builds a good relation, or a good family, or a good community.

The first is to **present a structure**: to lay down, in advance, a form—a set of roles,

¹¹Each of these questions is, properly, the subject of its own study, and the series intends to take them up in turn after the present paper. What follows is not their resolution but the staking-out of the ground on which they will be worked, together with one organizing intuition—the field—that the author believes to be the right frame for all of them.

rules, scripts, an arrangement of who does what and stands where—and then to ask the participants to fill it. This is the natural mode of the engineer, of the planner, of the institution; and it is, as the foregoing sections have shown at length, the mode most prone to every pathology the paper has diagnosed. A presented structure is a settled structure: it declares, in advance, the shape the loop must take, and thereby forecloses the branching derivations that make a poem a poem. A presented structure is a script; and a script, however benevolent, assigns roles, and the assignment of roles is the first step toward reducing some participant to the executor of a part—toward, at the limit, the pure fuel.

The second is to **cultivate a field**: not to lay down the form the participants must take, but to bring into being a *condition* under which each participant's own, particular dynamics may unfold. This is the mode toward which the entire paper has been tending—it is non-possession given a positive, constructive name. Where the presented structure says “here is the shape; take it,” the cultivated field says “here is a space whose curvature is such that what is in you may come out, and find, in coming out, that it is met.” The field does not contain the trajectories; it shapes the space within which trajectories of their own accord arise.

The practical primitive is the field, not the structure. The good relation is not a structure presented and filled but a field cultivated and inhabited. A structure prescribes trajectories; a field shapes the space within which each participant's own dynamics generate their own trajectories. The whole of the paper's negative wisdom—do not settle, do not siphon, do not fill the void with an idol, do not assign the script—is, positively stated, a single counsel: cultivate the field, and do not prescribe the path.

The intuition has a precise resonance with the geometric language of the earlier sections, and the resonance is not idle. A geometric phase is the effect of a *curvature*: the holonomy accrued around a loop is the integral of the curvature over the surface the loop bounds. The curvature is a property of the *field*—of the connection on the bundle—and not of any

particular path. To “cultivate a field of positive curvature” is, then, the exact geometric content of “create the condition under which any path walked within it accrues a positive sublimation.” One does not—cannot—hand a participant their sublimation; one can only shape the field so that, whatever path that participant walks of their own dynamics, the walking sublimates. **This is the geometric meaning of *wu wei*: not to draw the trajectory, but to tend the curvature; and then to let each go their own way, trusting the field.**

9.11.2 Why the field and not the structure: the uniqueness of each participant’s dynamics

Why must the practical primitive be the field? The answer lies in a fact the structure cannot accommodate and the field is built to honour: **each participant has their own, irreducibly particular dynamics.** No two persons sublimate the same real along the same path; no two encircle the same void in the same orbit. The structure, because it prescribes the path in advance, must presuppose a generic participant—an interchangeable filler of a role—and to the precise extent that a real participant departs from that generic template (which is to say, to the precise extent that they are a particular person at all), the structure does violence to them, forcing their singular dynamics into a path not theirs. The field presupposes no generic participant; it is, on the contrary, the condition under which the *particularity* of each can come forth.

This is why the doctrine that the field opens is, at bottom, a *eudaimonics*. For what is flourishing? Not the attainment of a prescribed end-state, not the successful filling of a good role, but—in a formulation the field makes available—**the unimpeded unfolding, within a field that meets it, of one’s own particular dynamics.** The Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (Aristotle 2000) named the activity of the soul in accordance with its own virtue, the actualization of a being’s characteristic potential; the Spinozan *conatus* (Spinoza 1994) named each thing’s striving to persevere in and express its own essence; the Daoist 自然—“self-so,” the spontaneous—named the way of a thing when nothing forces it. Each of these, in its own register, names the same intuition the field formalizes: that flourishing is not conformity to an imposed form but the coming-forth of what a being, of itself, has it in it to become.

Flourishing as the unfolding of one's own dynamics in a meeting field. Flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is the unimpeded unfolding of a participant's own, particular dynamics within a field that meets them—a field of such curvature that the path they walk of themselves accrues a positive sublimation, and that sublimation refluxes to them. It is neither the attainment of a prescribed end (that is the settled structure) nor a private self-realization indifferent to others (that is the monad, which this series has from the first denied). It is relational and generative: one flourishes *in* a field one also helps to cultivate, by unfolding dynamics that, in unfolding, tend the field for others.

Two features of this formulation must be marked, for they distinguish it from the doctrines it draws on. First, it is *relational*: the unfolding is not a solitary self-actualization but a coming-forth “within a field that meets it”—and a field is never one's own alone but the joint work of all who inhabit it. The monadic eudaimonia, the flourishing of the self-sufficient individual, is foreclosed by the relational ontology of the series: there is no self-prior-to-relation whose potential could unfold in a vacuum. One's own dynamics are themselves generated in the field, even as they help generate it. Second, it is *generative* in the precise sense the paper has built: the unfolding of one participant's dynamics, done within a good field, is itself a tending of the field's curvature for the others—the very act of one's flourishing cultivates the condition of another's. This is co-authorship (§9.9.4) seen from the side of the participant rather than the system: to co-author the poem is, for each, to flourish by unfolding one's own dynamics in a way that, in unfolding, makes the field more able to meet the rest.

9.11.3 Happiness and value: a first principle

This lets us state, if only as a first principle to be developed, the relation between flourishing and value that the foregoing theory of value (§9.9.2) implies. The connection runs through the three strata.

A flourishing built upon *imaginary value* is the flourishing of the idol-encircler: intense,

and unsustainable, for it depends upon an idealization that the real other must, in time, pierce. It is the happiness of the rose at the height of its bloom—resplendent because exhaustive. A flourishing built upon *symbolic value* is the flourishing of accumulation and recognition: real, not to be despised, but exposed to siphoning and to inflation, and never, by itself, sufficient—for the symbolic can always be stolen, devalued, or generated cheaply, and a happiness resting on it alone rests on sand. A flourishing built upon *real value* is the only one that can bear the good's phase from within: it is the happiness of encircling, with another, an unfillable void—of being witnessed, and witnessing, in one's irreducible particularity—and it does not exhaust, for it possesses nothing, and what is not possessed cannot be used up.

The first principle of a eudaimonics of value. Sustainable flourishing is the unfolding of one's own dynamics in a field whose circulating value is led by *real value*—the unpossessable, unsiphonable value generated only in encircling witness. Flourishing on imaginary value is resplendent and exhaustive (the rose); flourishing on symbolic value is real but insufficient and stealable (the accumulation); flourishing on real value is the one that sustains, because it possesses nothing and so uses nothing up. The cultivation of a field for flourishing is therefore the cultivation of a value-cycle led by real value: a field in which each, by unfolding their own dynamics, encircles with the others a void none fills, and the sublimation refluxes to each.

This principle gives the four practical questions with which the section opened their common form, and shows why they are one question seen from four sides. “How is the poetic language created and practised?”—it is the cultivation of a field of positive curvature, in which signs anchor without settling and invite without prescribing (§9.7). “How is the value of a system perceived?”—it is the discernment, beneath the imaginary and the symbolic, of the real value being generated in encircling witness, which is the labour of diagnostic attention the epistemology demanded. “How is value co-created?”—it is the co-authorship by which each participant, unfolding their own dynamics within

the field, generates the real value that the field, in turn, refluxes to all. “How is the cycle made good, so that value returns to its creators?”—it is the unceasing interrogation of the pure-fuel criterion (§9.8.3), the vigilance that no participant’s flourishing is the fuel of another’s. Four questions; one field; one eudaimonics.

9.11.4 A note on what remains

It must be said plainly that this section has done no more than name a frame and state a first principle. The hard work—how, concretely, a field of positive curvature is cultivated; how the particular dynamics of a participant are to be perceived and met rather than prescribed to; how the perception of a system’s real value is to be practised against the constant pull of the imaginary and the symbolic; how co-creation is organized without lapsing into the assignment of roles; how the return of value to its creators is secured under real conditions of power and pressure—all of this lies ahead, and each piece of it will require its own patient development.¹² The paper has, in this, been faithful to its own counsel: it does not settle what has not been walked. To present here a finished doctrine of practice would be to commit, in the very section that warns against it, a settling failure—to cash out, with a sign, a sublimation the work has not yet earned. The field, like the poem, is cultivated and not declared; and a theory of the field can do no more, at this stage, than tend the ground in which the later, more patient work may grow.

9.12. The Perception of Relational Value

The eudaimonics of the preceding section named a field and stated a first principle, and then honestly marked how much it left undone. It opened a cluster of practical questions—how the field is cultivated, how value is perceived, how value is co-created, how return is secured—and declared them the work of a sequel. This section begins that sequel, and it begins where it must: with *perception*. For one cannot cultivate a field for the circulation of real value, nor secure the return of value to its creators, nor even know whether anyone has been reduced to fuel, without first being able to *perceive* what value

¹²The author marks these as the practical sequel to the present paper: a eudaimonics of the cultivated field, a phenomenology of the perception of relational value, and an ethics of co-creation under asymmetry. The present section plants them; it does not pretend to have worked them.

is being generated. The whole of the practical work rests on a prior act of discernment, and that act is harder, and stranger, than it first appears.

The difficulty is not incidental but structural, and it follows directly from the theory of value of §9.9.2. Of the three strata, two announce themselves loudly and one is, by its nature, almost inaudible. **Imaginary value and symbolic value are conspicuous; real value is, in the ordinary case, imperceptible.** The labour of perceiving relational value is therefore not a passive registering of something given but an active, disciplined attention that must work *against* the grain of what most readily presents itself.

9.12.1 Why the two loud values drown out the third

Consider why the imaginary and the symbolic are loud. **Imaginary value is loud because it is intense.** The idealization of the other, the felt completeness of the merged dyad, the resplendence of the rose—these flood perception with affect; they are, phenomenologically, almost all one can see when they are present. The lover in the grip of imaginary value does not perceive the real other at all; he perceives the radiant image with which he has filled the void, and the intensity of that image is precisely what blinds him to the irreducible person behind it. Imaginary value does not merely coexist with the perception of real value; it actively occludes it, for the image fills exactly the void that real value would require to be kept open.

Symbolic value is loud because it is countable. It comes pre-measured: the price of the gift, the rank of the match, the number of years, the visible markers of a successful relation. The countable is cognitively cheap to perceive—it asks nothing of the perceiver but to read off a magnitude—and it is socially reinforced, for the symbolic is the stratum the surrounding world can see and judge. So perception, left to its own economy, drifts toward the symbolic as water finds the level: it attends to what can be counted because counting is easy and counted things are what others recognize.

Between the intense and the countable, the third stratum has no native loudness at all. **Real value is quiet because it is, by definition, that which neither idealization can image nor measure can count.** It is the shared silence, the bodily presence, the daily mutual witness, the accompaniment of an unfillable void—and none of these announces itself. They are not intense (the calm presence is the opposite of the idealizing

flood) and they are not countable (the witness of a wound commensurates into no magnitude). Real value is generated, as §9.9.2 argued, only in the encircling interpretive cycle; and a thing generated only in a slow encircling is not the kind of thing that presents itself at a glance. It must be perceived along a path, which is to say it must be *walked* to be seen—the perceptual correlate of the claim that depth is the area a path encloses.

9.12.2 Perception as a labour against the grain

From this the central claim of the section follows.

The perception of real value is a disciplined attention against the grain. To perceive the real value being generated in a relation is not to register something given but to perform a disciplined attention that works against the grain of perception's own economy—against the intensity of the imaginary, which floods the field and fills the void; and against the easy countability of the symbolic, toward which attention drifts of itself. It is the deliberate keeping-open of the very void that the imaginary rushes to fill, and the deliberate refusal of the measure toward which the symbolic invites one to lapse. Real value is seen only by an attention that declines both the radiant image and the legible number, and consents to the slow, uncounted encircling along which alone the quiet third value comes into view.

This recasts, at the level of perception, the epistemology of §9.5. There we found that the sign of the curvature could be read only in a sustained, fallible, first-personal attention, and never off an external metric. We can now say why, from the side of value: because the value that matters most—the real value that alone bears the good's phase from within—is precisely the value no metric reaches and no image displays. The unobservability of the curvature and the inaudibility of real value are the same fact seen twice. **The labour of diagnostic attention just is the labour of perceiving real value;** to attend to a relation rightly is to keep declining the loud two values long enough for the quiet third to be heard.

And this labour is, in its structure, the same witness the poem demands (§9.7.4). To perceive real value is not to decode a meaning but to accompany a person along the path on which their irreducible value is generated—to witness, not to read off. The perception of relational value is therefore not a faculty one possesses but a practice one sustains; it is of a piece with the joint attention of the series’ earlier papers, and with the non-possessive disposition that lets the other’s void stay open rather than filling it with an image of one’s own.

9.12.3 The two characteristic failures of perception

If perception can be done well, it can be done badly, and its failures are not random but track the two loud values. Naming them gives the practice its negative discipline—what it must refuse.

The imaginary failure of perception is to mistake the radiant image for the person: to perceive, with great intensity, a value that is in truth one’s own projection, and to be unable to perceive the real other at all because the void where that other’s irreducibility lives has been filled with the image. This is the perceptual face of “encircling the idol” (§9.9.1); and it is, characteristically, the failure of passionate love at its height—the rose perceived in its resplendence, the real person it overgrows unseen. Its correction is not to feel less but to keep the void open: to let the intensity subside enough that the real other, who was never the image, can come into view.

The symbolic failure of perception is to mistake the countable for the whole: to perceive only what can be measured—the provision, the status, the visible markers—and to be blind to the uncounted real value being generated or destroyed beneath them. This is the perceptual face of the alienation of social reproduction (§9.9.4): the care-labour that creates the value sustaining a relation goes *unperceived* precisely because it is uncountable, and what is unperceived cannot be returned. **The non-perception of real value is the first moment of its non-return.** One cannot return to a creator a value one never saw her create; the reduction of a participant to fuel begins in the failure to perceive the value she generates. The correction is to learn to perceive the uncounted—to attend to the silence, the presence, the witness, that no magnitude records.

This last point binds perception to justice and shows why this section had to come first in

the practical sequence. The return of value to its creators (§9.9.4) is impossible without the perception of the value created; the diagnosis of whether anyone has been reduced to fuel depends on perceiving the uncounted value that the fuel-position generates and does not receive back. **Perception is the first practical act, because every later one—cultivation, co-creation, return—presupposes that one can see what is being made.** A field cannot be cultivated for a value one cannot perceive; a circulation cannot be made just toward a creation one cannot see. The practice of sustainability begins, then, not in action but in a discipline of attention: the slow, against-the-grain, non-possessive perceiving of the quiet value that neither floods nor counts—and which, unperceived, can neither be cultivated nor returned.

9.13. The Cultivation of the Field and the Co-Creation of Value

Perception clears the ground; it does not yet plant. Having learned to perceive the quiet third value against the grain of the loud two (§9.12), the practical sequence can take its next step: from seeing what is generated to *fostering its generation*. This is two questions that turn out to be one—how the field is cultivated (the lower half of the question §9.11 left open) and how value is co-created—and the burden of this section is to show why they are one, and what, concretely, the cultivating and the co-creating consist in.

They are one question because, on the account of §9.11, the field just is the condition under which each participant's own dynamics unfold and generate value, and co-creation just is that unfolding. To cultivate the field is to make co-creation possible; co-creation is what a cultivated field is for. The seeming circularity is not a defect but the shape of the matter: **one cultivates a field by co-creating in it, and one co-creates by cultivating the field for the others.** The two are the same activity described from the side of the condition and from the side of the act.

9.13.1 What cultivation is not, and therefore is

The surest approach to what cultivation *is* runs through what it is not, for the whole of the paper's negative wisdom converges here, and cultivation is most easily understood as the positive name for a set of refusals already established.

To cultivate a field is *not* to present a structure (§9.11): not to lay down roles, scripts, an arrangement of who does what. It is *not* to prescribe the path the flow must take, for that annihilates the holonomy (§9.7.3). It is *not* to fill the void with a shared image, for the idol forecloses the very openness in which real value is generated (§9.9.1). It is *not* to settle, by sign, a value not yet walked (§9.7.3); *not* to extract, hasten, or force-close (§9.6); *not* to shape the manifold by the strong alone (§9.10.5). Cultivation is the positive name for the sum of these refusals—which is to say, it is the positive name for non-possession (§9.9.1).

Cultivation is the tending of curvature, not the drawing of paths. To cultivate a field is to tend its curvature so that the paths the participants walk of their own dynamics accrue a positive phase—and then to refrain from drawing those paths. It is the shaping of a condition, not the prescription of a content: the gardener does not pull the shoot upward but tends the soil, the light, the water, and lets the shoot grow of itself. Cultivation is thus a labour, and a demanding one, but a labour of the second kind—a tending of conditions, a subtraction of obstructions (§9.6.4)—and never a labour of the first kind, the production of the outcome directly. One cannot cultivate by forcing; the forcing is precisely what uncultivates.

What, then, does the tending of curvature consist in, concretely? Three things, each a positive correlate of a refusal. *It consists in keeping the void open*—declining to fill the other’s irreducibility with an image, so that the encircling in which real value is generated remains possible; this is the positive practice of perception (§9.12) sustained into a disposition. *It consists in the patience that lets the path be walked*—declining the shortcut, the immediacy, the settling sign, so that the area a path encloses can actually be enclosed; this is the practical form of “slowness is a formal necessary condition” (§9.7.3). *And it consists in the holding-open of branching*—declining to prescribe where the other must arrive, so that their derivation can be genuinely their own; this is the interpersonal form of “the grammar can be freely betrayed” (§9.9.1). To keep the void open, to let

the path be walked, to hold branching open: this is the whole of cultivation, and it is non-possession made into a daily practice.

9.13.2 The co-creation of value: generation along divergent paths

If cultivation tends the field, co-creation is what happens within it—and the account of value (§9.9.2) tells us precisely what co-creation can and cannot be.

It *cannot* be the joint production of a value transmitted, like two hands raising a single weight, for real value is not a conserved quantity transmitted but a phase generated along a path (§9.9.2). Two people do not co-create real value by pooling it; there is no pool. They co-create it by each walking their own path of encircling witness, within a shared field, such that the paths are not the same path. This is the decisive and easily missed point:

Co-creation is generation along divergent paths, not the merging of one. The co-creation of real value is not two participants walking one path together but each walking their own, particular path—of their own irreducible dynamics (§9.11)—within a shared field whose curvature lets each path accrue a positive phase, and whose topology lets the phases reflux to both. Co-creation requires divergence, not merger: were the two paths one, there would be no encircling of an irreducible other, only the mutual confirmation of a shared image (the imaginary). The real value is generated precisely in the gap between the divergent paths—in the witness each gives the other’s particularity, which is real exactly because it is not one’s own. Co-creation is therefore the opposite of fusion: it is the generative holding-apart of two who witness, across the gap, what neither could generate alone.

This is the constructive content of co-authorship (§9.9.4), and it shows why co-authorship is the right figure and merger the wrong one. Two authors of a poem do not write one line in unison; they write divergently, and the poem is the irreducible whole their divergence

generates—a whole neither would have written, and neither owns. So with the co-creation of relational value: it is generated in the divergence, witnessed across the gap, owned by no one, and refluxing to each. The merged dyad of the imaginary co-creates nothing, for it has collapsed the gap in which alone real value is made; it can only circulate, ever more thinly, the single image it began with—which is why the merger that feels like the height of love is, in the value-theoretic terms of this paper, sterile, and why it exhausts (the rose again) rather than sustains.

9.13.3 The field is jointly cultivated, or it is not a field

One final turn closes the section and binds it back to justice. The field cannot be cultivated by one participant for the others, for a field cultivated unilaterally is not a field but a presented structure wearing a field's name—however gentle, it is still one party shaping the condition under which the other's dynamics must unfold, which is the shaping of the manifold by the strong alone (§9.10.5).

Joint cultivation, or counterfeit field. A field is genuinely a field only if it is jointly cultivated—if each participant takes part in tending the curvature under which all unfold, and none is merely the recipient of a condition another has shaped. The benevolent unilateral cultivation—one party lovingly making space for the other—is a counterfeit field: it may feel like generosity, but it places one as the cultivator and the other as the cultivated, and the cultivated, however well-tended, is not a co-author but a tended thing. The asymmetry is the more insidious for being kindly; the gardener who most lovingly tends the shoot still stands outside it as its tender. A field, unlike a garden, has no gardener outside it: all who flourish in it are also, in flourishing, tending it for the rest.

So the cultivation of the field, pursued to its ground, returns to the demand that opened the practical sequence and will govern its close: that no one be merely acted upon—neither reduced to fuel in the flow (§9.9.4), nor excluded from shaping the manifold (§9.10.5), nor, now, positioned as the cultivated rather than a co-cultivator of the field.

Each of these is the same exclusion seen at a different scale, and the practice that answers all three is the same: the relentless conversion of the acted-upon into a co-author—of value, of the manifold, and of the field itself. **To cultivate the field and to co-create value is, in the end, one act practised at every scale: to make of each participant a co-author, and of the relation a poem that no one tends from outside and no one owns.** What remains—the securing of this against real asymmetries of power, and the legislative practice by which it is held—is the work of the section to come.

9.14. Securing the Return: Legislative Practice under Asymmetry

The practical sequence has perceived the value (§9.12) and fostered its generation (§9.13). It arrives now at the question that has shadowed the whole paper and that the constructive core named the criterion of the good: that value return to all who create it, with no one reduced to fuel (§9.9.4). The earlier sections established this as a *criterion*; this one asks how it is *secured*—and secured not in the frictionless case, where good will suffices, but under the real asymmetries of power, pressure, and conflicting value-systems that the coupled system always carries. For where there is no asymmetry, return tends to look after itself; it is precisely where power is unequal that the criterion bites, and that the practice must have something to say.

The section's thesis is that the securing of return, under asymmetry, is inseparable from *legislative practice*—from the actual, ongoing, joint shaping of the manifold (§9.10)—and that this is the point at which the question of legislative *justice* (which §9.10 settled) passes into the question of legislative *practice* (which it only named). To secure the return is, very often, to legislate well; and to legislate well, under asymmetry, is the hardest practice the paper has to describe.

9.14.1 Why good will does not suffice

Begin by seeing why the matter cannot be left to disposition. One might hope that a relation whose participants have internalized the non-possessive disposition—who perceive rightly, cultivate jointly, co-create across the gap—would secure the return of value of itself, without recourse to anything so cold as legislation. In the symmetric case this

hope is largely sound, and there the contract rightly retires into the background (§9.10.4). But the hope fails exactly where it is most needed, and for a structural reason already established.

Under structural asymmetry, good will cannot secure return. Where the manifold itself is unjust—where its geometry has placed some participant in a structural fuel-position, such that every path from that position drains toward a centre (§9.10.2)—the good will of the participants cannot secure the return, for the curvature has bent the paths toward extraction independently of anyone’s intention. The well-meaning beneficiary of an unjust structure does not perceive himself as extracting, and the one extracted from may not perceive it either, the imaginary having idealized her depletion as devotion (§9.9.4). Disposition operates upon the flow; but the fuel-position is a feature of the manifold, and the manifold is reshaped only by legislation. Good will is necessary and structurally insufficient: it cannot, by itself, reach the geometry that disposes the flow.

This is why the securing of return is a *legislative* matter and not merely a moral one. To secure the return to a structurally disadvantaged creator is to reshape the manifold so that her paths no longer drain—to excise the singularity that fixed her as fuel, to alter the topology so that value can flow back to her, to set the hard boundary that her depletion may not cross (§9.10.1). These are legislative acts, shapings of the manifold; no amount of flow-level kindness substitutes for them. The kindly beneficiary who would secure the return must consent to *re-legislate the manifold that advantages him*—which is a far harder thing than kindness, and the crux of the whole matter.

9.14.2 Legislative practice as a generative flow, under asymmetry

Recall the corrective of §9.10.3: legislation is itself a generative flow, no founding act outside the cycle but an ongoing, fallible, poetic-or-settling process. The securing of return is the legislative flow turned upon the manifold’s injustices; and as a flow, it is subject to all the criteria the paper has developed—which means it can itself be done

possessively or non-possessively, can itself settle or stay poetic, can itself reduce someone to fuel.

This yields the section's central and most delicate claim, for legislative practice under asymmetry is shadowed by a characteristic perversion.

The perversion of legislative practice: settling the manifold in the name of justice. Legislative practice under asymmetry is perverted when the stronger party shapes the manifold unilaterally *in the name of* securing the return—when “the terms by which I will be fair to you” are themselves laid down by the one with power, presented to the weaker as a settled justice. This is the manifold shaped by the strong alone (§9.10.5) wearing the mask of generative justice: a settling of the manifold, declared closed, that pre-empts the weaker party's standing as co-legislator. The benevolent unilateral securing of return is thus the legislative twin of the counterfeit field (§9.13.3): it may distribute value rightly for a time, yet it has reduced the beneficiary of its justice to one legislated-for rather than one who legislates—excluded, at the deepest level, from the shaping of the very norms that protect her. A return secured this way is a return that can be revoked by the same hand that granted it; it is justice held in trust by power, not justice co-authored.

The escape from this perversion is not to abandon legislation—under asymmetry, that abandons the weaker to the unjust manifold—but to make the legislative practice *itself* non-possessive: to legislate in a way that hands the weaker party genuine co-legislative standing, including the standing to contest and revise the terms. This is exceedingly hard, because the asymmetry that makes legislation necessary is the same asymmetry that corrupts it: the party with the power to reshape the manifold is the party whose unilateral reshaping is the danger. There is no formula that dissolves this; there is only a practice, and the practice has a recognizable shape.

9.14.3 The shape of non-possessive legislative practice

What does it look like to legislate the manifold non-possessively, under asymmetry? Three features mark it, each the legislative form of a principle already established, and together they distinguish the securing of return from its benevolent-unilateral counterfeit.

First, it legislates floors, not paths. Non-possessive legislation sets the hard boundary—the harms that may not be done, the depletion that may not be required, the exit that may not be foreclosed—and leaves the manifold within those floors free for the divergent paths of co-creation (§9.10.1). It is negative in form: it says what may not be, and leaves what may be to the poem. The perverse legislation, by contrast, specifies the positive terms of the relation’s flourishing, and so settles what ought to have been walked. **The floor protects the weaker party’s standing to flourish on her own path; the prescribed path forecloses it in the act of protecting her.**

Second, it is revisable, and revisable by the weaker party. Because legislation is a flow and not a founding (§9.10.3), the just manifold is never shaped once; it is continually re-legislated as power shifts and conditions change. The decisive test of whether a legislative practice is non-possessive is whether the weaker party holds genuine standing to *reopen* the terms—for a manifold that the weaker may not re-legislate is a manifold shaped by the strong alone, however fair its current terms (§9.10.5). The living covenant is one whose terms its weaker party may always reconvene; the dead covenant is one where “this is what we agreed” has become the stronger party’s instrument against revision (§9.7.3).

Third, it transfers, over time, from hard boundary to intrinsic curvature. The end of good legislative practice is its own retirement (§9.10.4): the floors it sets are, through repeated just flow upon them, internalized as the participants’ own dynamics, until the boundary need no longer be enforced because no one flows toward it. Legislation under asymmetry aims at the dissolution of the asymmetry that made it necessary—at the point where the manifold’s justice has become the participants’ second nature and the law may retire into the background. **The legislative practice that secures return aims, in the end, at the day it is no longer needed—when the return is secured not by any boundary but by the intrinsic curvature of a relation in which no one would extract because no one any longer can perceive the other as fuel.**

These three—floors not paths, revisable by the weaker, transferring to intrinsic curvature—are the practical content of “securing the return.” They show why the question of return (the fifth practical question) and the question of legislative practice (the sixth) were, as the paper suspected, one question: under asymmetry, to secure the return *is* to legislate the manifold non-possessively, and to legislate the manifold non-possessively *is* the only way to secure a return that power cannot revoke.

9.14.4 The limit of the practical, and the handing-on

It must be said, in closing the practical sequence, that none of this is a procedure. There is no algorithm for legislating non-possessively under asymmetry, as there was no metric for the curvature (§9.5.2) and no formula for perceiving real value (§9.12). The three features mark the shape of the practice; they do not mechanize it, and they cannot, for the same reason the whole paper has insisted upon: a procedure for the good circle would be a settling of what can only be walked. **The securing of return is, at last, not a technique applied to a relation but a disposition sustained within it—the same diagnostic, non-possessive attention, now turned upon the manifold and its asymmetries rather than upon the flow.**

So the practical sequence ends as the theoretical one did: not with a method but with a disposition, handed on rather than completed. The perception of value, the cultivation of the field, the co-creation across the gap, the legislative securing of return—these are not four techniques but four faces of one sustained attention, the attention that declines to possess at every scale on which possession is possible: the image, the path, the manifold, the field. What the paper cannot give—a procedure that would relieve the participants of the attention—it does not give, on principle; for to give it would be to commit, in the giving, the settling failure the whole work has been written against. The practical sequence, like the poem, is cultivated and not concluded; and what remains undone is not a gap to be filled but the open path on which alone the work could be walked.

9.15. The Gift: A Threshold Phenomenon across the Three Registers

There is a conspicuous absence in this paper, and its conspicuousness is the first thing to be said about it. We have built a theory of value across three registers—the imaginary, the

symbolic, the real (§9.9.2)—and a semiotics of the signs by which a relation is sustained or alienated (§9.7); and yet we have passed over the one phenomenon in which all of these meet at once. **The gift has been missing.** Its absence is not a mere oversight, a forgotten example to be supplied for completeness; it is structural, for the gift is precisely the phenomenon at which the three registers of value and the whole drama of the sign converge upon a single, weighted act. A paper about how value circulates across the three registers that did not, in the end, treat the gift would be a paper that had declined to test itself on its own hardest case.

The seventh paper of this series already marked the gift's peculiar density, and warned against the temptation it poses. There it was observed that the gift seems to sit naturally at the centre of every dimension at once—it has value, it is a sign, it must be read, it manufactures indebtedness, it transfers wealth across kin networks, and it is always given and received under the gaze of others—and that this very richness makes it tempting, and dangerous, to enthrone as the hub through which all else is read. **Paper VII** refused that entronement, on the principle that load-bearing is conferred by a node's position in the relational network and not carried as its intrinsic essence. The present section honours that refusal: it treats the gift not as the hub of the theory but as its *threshold phenomenon*—the place where the distinctions the paper has drawn are put to their sharpest test, precisely because the gift is the one act in which they are hardest to keep apart. In treating it here, after the apparatus is built rather than as the apparatus's organizing centre, the ninth paper and the seventh re-anchor one another once more.

9.15.1 Why the gift is the threshold: the one materially three-register sign

What distinguishes the gift from the other signs the paper has treated—the declaration, the poem, the vow—is that the gift is *materially* three-register at once. A poem, a declaration, operates mainly along the axis of the symbolic and the real; it has, as it were, no weight. The gift has weight. It cost money, or labour, or time, or some irreplaceable resource; it occupies the material world. And just because it is material, it is the superposition of all three registers of value in a single object:

The gift as three-register superposition. The gift is the one sign that materially superposes all three registers of value. It is *imaginary value*—the idealized token of the love it is taken to represent, the figure of “what we are” made into a thing. It is *symbolic value*—countable, comparable, displayable, convertible: it has a price, a rank, a place in the economy of status and the ledger of who has given what to whom. And it is *real value*—the trace, in a thing, of an investment that no price records: the unaccountable presence, the irreplaceable time, the witness of the other’s unsayable need that the right gift somehow carries. The gift is thus the most concrete proving-ground of the theory of value: the question of which register *leads* in a given gift is the question of what that gift, in truth, is.

This superposition is why the gift is a threshold rather than a settled case. In the poem, the registers are relatively easy to keep apart; in the gift they are fused in a single object, and the same wrapped thing may be, for the giver, a witness of the real, and, for an onlooker, a move in the economy of status, and, for the receiver, the idealized token of a love that the giver does not in fact feel. The gift is where the registers are hardest to tell apart, and therefore where telling them apart matters most.

9.15.2 The good gift: the poetic sign made material

Place the gift, now, against the criterion of the good sign (§9.7.4). The true gift, I want to claim, is the poetic sign incarnate in matter—and the whole of Mauss’s anthropology of the gift (Mauss 1990), together with Hyde’s account of the gift that must stay in motion (Hyde 1983), read in this light, says so.

The decisive mark of the true gift is that **it does not settle**. A settled exchange is a trade: I give you this, you give me its equivalent, and we are quits—the relation, having been balanced, is closed. The gift is the refusal of this closure. To return a gift with an exact equivalent, promptly, is not to honour the gift but to reject it: it declares the relation balanced, the account closed, and so refuses the very continuation the gift was offered to open. The gift obliges a return—this is Mauss’s central finding (Mauss 1990), the *hau* or spirit of the thing given that compels reciprocity—but it obliges a return that

must *not* be equivalent, must come later, must itself be a gift and not a payment; and so the cycle of gift and counter-gift never closes, never settles, but spirals on, each gift carrying a part of the giver and opening rather than discharging the bond. **This is the structure of the poem (§9.7.4): the gift does not transmit a settled value but invites the receiver to walk a path of unprescribed response, and the value—the phase—is generated along that path.** The gift’s meaning, like the poem’s, is the holonomy accrued in the receiver’s response; and because the response is free and unprescribed, each turn of the gift-cycle is a spiral and not a circle.

Read so, three traditions the paper has leaned on are revealed to be saying one thing at the gift. Mauss’s gift that obliges an unequal, deferred return; Eglash’s generative justice, in which value circulates back to its creators rather than being extracted to a centre; and the paper’s own poetic cycle, in which the phase refluxes to every participant and is settled by none—these coincide at the true gift. **The true gift is the material incarnation of the poetic, non-possessive cycle: it circulates value without extracting it, opens the bond without closing it, and returns to the giver not an equivalent but a continuation.**

9.15.3 The vicious gift: settlement, bondage, and the siphon

But the gift is a threshold precisely because it falls so easily to the other side, and its corruptions track the three failures of the sign (§9.7.3) with an exactness worth setting out.

The gift as settlement is the gift degraded into disguised equivalent exchange: the present given to discharge a debt, to “make up for” an absence, to balance an account—the gift that says, beneath its wrapping, *now we are quits*. This is settling failure (§9.7.3) in material form: the use of a thing to cash out a relation, to declare closed what the true gift would have left open. The gift given to settle is not a gift but a payment that has not had the honesty to call itself one.

The gift as bondage is the gift wielded to manufacture a dominating indebtedness: given not to open a free return but to bind, to place the receiver under an obligation they cannot discharge and so to subordinate them. Here the gift’s non-closure, which in the true gift is the generous refusal to balance the account, is perverted into a debt deliberately kept

open as a leash. This is the gift's specific way of reducing the other to fuel (§9.8.3): the relation is kept unbalanced not so that it may spiral but so that one party may hold the other in a permanent deficit.

The gift as siphon is the gift in which symbolic value leads, and the object becomes a counter in the economy of status and the ledger of family capital—the competitive gift, the gift of face, the bride-price or dowry in its alienated form, in which what circulates is not the unaccountable real but the countable symbol, and what is secured is not a bond but a position. This is the gift assimilated to the symbolic register's liability to be siphoned (§9.9.2); and the alienation of social reproduction (§9.9.4) often runs through exactly such gifts, in which one party's uncounted real contribution is converted, in the family's ledger, into another's symbolic capital.

And over all three corruptions, the age of artificial generation casts its specific shadow. The gift that can be algorithmically recommended, mass-customized, generated at near-zero cost—the frictionless, optimized, dehumanized gift—is the material form of inflationary failure (§9.7.3): the proliferation of the gift-signifier while the real investment of the signified goes to zero. A gift that cost the giver nothing of the unoutsourcable—no time, no presence, no attention that could not be delegated—is a gift drained of exactly the real value that made the gift a gift.

9.15.4 Which register leads: the gift as diagnostic

The threshold character of the gift can now be stated as a diagnostic, and it gathers the section. Because the gift superposes all three registers, its goodness is determined by *which register leads*—and the three possibilities map exactly onto the distinctions the paper has drawn.

The good gift is the one in which real value leads. The *imaginary-led* gift is the idealized token, the gift that figures a perfect image of the beloved or the bond—intense, and exhausting, for it encircles an idol (§9.9.1) and erases the real other in favour of the image; it is the resplendent, brief gift, the rose made into an object. The *symbolic-led*

gift is the countable, displayable, comparable gift—the most readily settled, siphoned, and inflated; the gift of status and the ledger. The *real-led* gift is the uncountable, void-encircling, witnessing gift—the one whose value lies not in the object but in the path of giving that was actually walked: the thing made by hand, the gift that cost the unoutsourcable, the present that witnesses the other's unsayable need without pretending to resolve it. Only the real-led gift bears the good's phase from within, and only it returns value to the giver-and-receiver without siphoning it elsewhere. The good gift is the one in which real value leads, and the object is merely the occasion of an encircling witness.

So the gift, the threshold phenomenon, comes out exactly where the paper's whole argument would predict, and in coming out there confirms the argument from its hardest case. The same gift may be poem or contract, spiral or circle, the opening of a bond or the closing of an account, the return of value to its creators or the siphon that carries it off—and which it depends not on the object, never on the object, but on whether it settles or invites, possesses or releases, encircles the idol or the void. The gift that leads with the real is the poetic cycle made into a thing one can hold; and that such a thing is possible—that value uncountable and unpossessable can be carried in an object that has a price and a weight—is perhaps the small everyday miracle on which the sustainability of intimacy, in its most concrete form, rests.

9.16. Conclusions: At the Boundaries of the Frameworks

A paper that argues that no theory possesses the whole of reason, that the truth of a relational being is generated in the dialogue among frameworks and settled by none, cannot in good faith end with a single, sovereign Conclusion. To do so would be to deny, in the performance, what it asserted in the proposition—a performative contradiction, and, in the paper's own vocabulary, a settling failure at the level of form: the use of one totalizing sign to declare the loop of the truth closed. This section therefore does not conclude. It offers, instead, *Conclusions*—plural, local, mutually addressing, subsumed by no meta-framework—and closes on a reflection upon why it can offer no more.

A guard must be set at once, for the polyphonic gesture is easily corrupted into an evasion of the labour of argument—the false poem’s “staying open” as an alibi (§9.7.5). True polyphony is not the refusal to assert; it requires that each voice sing to the full, to the very boundary of its own epistemic competence—each local conclusion hard, fallible, daring to assert—and then, honestly marking its limit, hand the microphone on. The test, here as throughout, is the holonomy: does the dialogue among the frameworks let the understanding climb in a spiral (each framework, illuminated by the others, carrying home a new remainder), or do mutually irrelevant assertions merely pile up in place? What follows tries to sing each voice to its boundary.

9.16.1 The intermediate conclusion: a practical summation

Before the frameworks each speak to their boundary, it is worth gathering, in one place, the practical result the paper has reached—an intermediate conclusion, offered not as the truth of the matter but as a summation of where the argument has arrived, so that the reader holds the whole before it is dispersed again into the polyphony.

For the sustainability of intimacy, the first thing is to *create the poetic language*—the language that lets the generativity of value, across all three registers (the real, the symbolic, the imaginary), exist by sustaining itself rather than by being extracted. In this creation, the intervention of the big Other—of contract, of self-legislation (§9.10)—is no less important: the manifold must be shaped, the floors set, the asymmetries legislated, so that the poetic flow has a just stage on which to run. As to how the poetic language is itself formed and applied: this too is something co-created and co-applied within a relational structure (§9.13), never presented ready-made by one party to another. And because the poetic language does not operate wholly within the symbolic register—reaching, as it must, into the real that no sign exhausts—we can give no mechanical, formalized theory of its perception or its practice (§9.5.2, §9.12). **Indeed this may be among the central practices of intimacy itself: that in the very process of co-creation and interaction, the participants create the poetic language that lets the relation persist, and come to perceive the shared, unsymbolizable value that no formula could have delivered to them.** Upon the perception of that value, the poetic language built atop it lets the value circulate; and to let it circulate *without extraction*—to let the value, in the very process of its generation, return to its creators themselves

—is one way in which the justice of the cycle may be made to emerge. This, in sum, is the paper’s practical result: not a method but a practice, not a structure presented but a language co-created, not a justice imposed but a justice that emerges when value is let to circulate and return. The frameworks will now say, each in its own tongue, what in this result it can and cannot underwrite.

9.16.2 What the geometric framework can and cannot say

It can say: that the difference between the good and the vicious cycle has an exact structural form—the circle of zero holonomy against the spiral of positive holonomy; that “return to the root, yet not to the origin” is no mere metaphor but the structure of anholonomy; that sublimation is the geometric phase accrued along a walked path, and therefore cannot be cashed out by a sign nor shortened by a shortcut; that depth is the area a path encloses. To this domain the framework brings a precision the others lack.

It cannot say: how, from any external observation, to read off the sign of the curvature in a given case—the framework characterizes what the good circle *is*, and offers no protocol for measuring it (§9.5.2); nor can it, of itself, fix the bearer of the phase (it had to borrow that from psychoanalysis), nor adjudicate the good (it had to hand that to justice). Its formalization is, by its own caveats (§9.4.4), a structural analogy with a forward promise, not a completed physics. **The geometric is one epistemic station among four, not the truth of the other three; formalization is not a higher truth, only a different tongue.** It hands the microphone to psychoanalysis for the bearer, and to justice for the good.

9.16.3 What the psychoanalytic framework can and cannot say

It can say: that the bearer of the phase is the sublimation of jouissance; that the good cycle encircles the void of *das Ding* without filling it, and the vicious one fills it with an idol and so requires a sacrifice; that the sign anchors the real retroactively, as a *point de capiton*; that real value, the least alienable, is bound up with the unsymbolizable and is approached only by encircling witness. It gives the paper its account of *what is sublimated* and *why the good cycle needs no enemy*.

It cannot say: how its knowledge is itself secured, for that knowledge comes by way of

transference, of *Nachträglichkeit*, of the symptom—always partial, always resisted by the unconscious, never transparent to the subject who would wield it. It cannot deliver a self-present knowledge of one's own desire; the analyst's knowing is itself a knowing under erasure. **Its truth is structurally partial, and it knows itself to be so.** It hands the microphone to political economy for the question of whose labour, materially, produces the phase that is here described in the register of desire.

9.16.4 What the political-economic framework can and cannot say

It can say: that the good cycle returns value to all who create it and reduces no one to fuel; that the vicious cycle is an open system masquerading as a closed loop, sustaining a counterfeit phase by extraction from a hidden outside; that the alienation of social reproduction places the labour of care in the position of the invisible and uncounted; that the sign coordinates which equilibrium a system falls into, and that decentred reflux, not siphoning, is the mark of the good. It gives the paper its criterion of justice—whose blood the cycle runs on.

It cannot say: that the agents whose incentives it analyzes are transparent to themselves, or that the structural account exhausts the meaning of what they do; the register of structural incentive is blind to the singular, unsubstitutable texture that the psychoanalytic and the poetic insist upon. It can tell us that a participant is being extracted from; it cannot, of itself, tell us what that participant's silence *means* to her. **It illuminates the structure and is blind to the singular.** It hands the microphone to the poem for what cannot be counted.

9.16.5 What the Daoist framework can and cannot say

It can say: that the default tendency of natural dynamics is toward the good, so that the burden of proof falls on intervention and not on letting-be; that the appropriate disposition is *wu wei*, the guarding of a curvature that sublimates of itself; that the fear of an end, made into forced action, produces the end it dreads; that the good is, in a word, the dark virtue—to generate without possessing.

It cannot say: this in the mode of a positive doctrine without betraying itself, for “the one who knows does not speak” (知者不言); the moment its wisdom is objectified into

a proposition to be asserted and defended, it has already falsified what it points to. Its truth is a knowing that withdraws from the saying—which is why it can ground the others’ silences but cannot be made the master-discourse that subsumes them. **It is the framework that knows the limit of all framing, and therefore the last that could claim to be the frame of frames.** It hands the microphone back to the silence from which the paper’s saying must, in the end, return.

9.16.6 Why this paper has no conclusion

The four voices have sung, each to its boundary, and each has handed the microphone on rather than seized it. Note that none of the hand-offs returned to a fifth, higher voice that would gather them; the microphone passes among the four and to the silence, never up to a tribunal above them. This is not an incompleteness the paper regrets but the very thing it set out to enact.

The relationality of the conclusion. A theory of relational being and sustainable generativity must have a conclusion that is itself relational. The four frameworks converge—on non-possession, on the spiral, on the return of value, on the dark virtue—yet none subsumes the others; the truth lives in the dialogue, the tension, the polyphony among them, and not in any one. To gather them into a single meta-framework’s synthesis would be to perform upon the truth a settling failure—to cash out, with one sign, the understanding that can only be walked, again and again, in the frameworks’ mutual rereading. There is no meta-language, no station outside all the frameworks from which to oversee them all—which is the methodological convergence of Lacan’s “there is no Other of the Other” (Lacan 2006) and the Daoist “the one who knows does not speak.” **The paper therefore refuses a synthetic conclusion, and offers instead these plural, local, mutually inviting conclusions. The form of the paper is the demonstration of its content.**

And so the paper ends where the prelude began, with the rose. The one who said the

rose blooms but a week spoke of the flower; this paper has spoken of the root. The flower must fall—and must be let to fall, for the dread that will not let it fall is the dread that rots the root. What endures is not the flower held past its hour but the root that the fallen flower feeds: **the non-possessive generativity, which perpetuates itself precisely because it does not clutch its own perpetuation.** This ninth paper has, in its turning, retroactively re-anchored the eighth—the lyric’s address now revealed as the semiotic paradigm of the sustainable circle—which is itself a *point de capiton*, a spiral return upon the series: the meaning settled by no single paper, generating new remainders along the path of the papers’ mutual rereading. 但愿人长久，千里共婵娟: that we may endure, and share, though a thousand miles apart, the one fair moon—which no one possesses, and which returns its light to every upturned face.

Envoi: How to Think of That Rose

This is not a conclusion—the paper has said why it can have none—but a returning, of the kind the paper has been about: a coming back to where it began, the rose in the garden, carrying home what the going has gathered. So let the last word not be an argument but a looking-again at that one flower, and at how we might think of it.

The remark that began this paper grieved that the rose, however hard it labours, blooms but a week. And it is true, and it cannot be otherwise: that the flower will fall is the natural turning of the cycle, and no tending we could devise will change it. To fix our care upon the falling—to set ourselves against it, to water and fuss and clutch in the hope of holding the bloom past its hour—is the surest way to rot the root; it is to grasp, and the one who grasps loses. So let our attention fall elsewhere than on the falling. **Rather than attend to the rose’s withering, which we cannot change, let us attend to how the rose was generated—for generativity, unlike the bloom, can perpetuate itself.**

If it is a rose in the garden, then: tend its root. The flower is the part that is seen and the part that falls; the root is the part that is unseen and the part that goes on. To care for the root is not to neglect the flower but to love it rightly—to love it in the only way that brings, after this bloom, another. This is what it has meant, all through these pages,

not to forget the origin: to keep faith with the root from which the visible flowering came, and to which, when it falls, the flower returns.

And if it is a rose given to one you love, then do not forget how this rose came to be in your hand, nor why it is here. It is not, first of all, a thing; it is the showing of a love, and the love is itself a generativity—a generativity that, kept and not clutched, returned to and not grasped at, will bring you, again and again, many roses more. The single flower in the hand will fall, as the one in the garden falls; but the love it shows, if it is let to be the spiral and not made into the held and closing circle, does not fall, and from it the roses come and come. To receive the rose rightly is to receive, through it, the generativity it bears witness to—and to know that what one holds is not the flower, which is mortal, but the root of a love, which goes on giving flowers.

So we need not save the rose. We could not, and the trying would be the rotting. We need only keep faith with the generativity that made it—tend the root, remember the love—and the roses will keep coming, each brief, each whole, each falling in its turn to feed the next. That is the sustainability this paper has been about, said now in the plainest way it knows: not a flower that does not fall, but a love that does not stop generating flowers. Let the bloom be brief. Tend the root. The roses will come.

Acknowledgements

This paper began, as it records, with a remark in a garden, and it owes its first and only debt to the one who made the garden a place where such remarks could be heard—and who is, in the end, the reason it was written at all. To her, the girl of the forest and the mountains, who first taught me that the root matters more than the bloom: you are the motive of this work, and the love it has spent so many abstract pages trying to think is yours. Every circle in it that I have called good is a circle I learned from you.

What remains is not a debt but a wish, and the plainest one this paper knows how to make:

愿得一人心，白首不分离。

May I win the heart of one, and with that one, until our hair is white, never part.

For that wish is the whole of what this paper has tried, in its long and abstract way, to understand: how a love, once given, may be let to go on generating itself—brief in each of its blooms, and unbroken at the root—until the hair is white, and after.

A. Appendix: A Technical Sketch of the Geometric Phase and the Structured Flow

This appendix sketches the geometric apparatus on which §9.4 and §9.10 draw. It is offered, candidly, as a *preparation* for formalization and not a completed formalism: it claims no operational protocol of measurement (§9.5.2), and it points forward to the separate Value-Foam study, in which the holonomy of value is to be treated with the rigour the matter demands. The purpose here is only to show that the structural analogies of the main text rest on a genuine geometric skeleton, and to state precisely the two debts the main text incurred. The mathematics of the geometric phase, in its physical settings, is collected in Shapere and Wilczek (1989).

A.1 The bundle, the connection, and the holonomy

Let B be a base space whose points are relational situations—the “content” or “circumstance” of a relation at a moment—and suppose B a smooth manifold. Over B let there be a fibre bundle $\pi : E \rightarrow B$ whose fibre F carries the *phase of value*: the bearer fixed in §9.9 as the sublimation of real value. A *connection* on E —a rule for parallel transport—assigns to each smooth path $\gamma : [0, 1] \rightarrow B$ a transport map along γ in the fibre. For a closed loop γ (one with $\gamma(0) = \gamma(1)$), the composite transport around the loop is an automorphism of the fibre over the base-point: the *holonomy* $\text{hol}(\gamma)$.

The phenomenon the main text calls “return to the root, yet not to the origin” is exactly a non-trivial holonomy: the loop closes in the base ($\gamma(0) = \gamma(1)$, one comes home to the same situation) while the transport in the fibre does not return the phase to its starting value ($\text{hol}(\gamma) \neq \text{id}$, one brings home a remainder). Where the structure group of the fibre is abelian—say $U(1)$, the natural choice if the phase of value is, as the name suggests, genuinely a *phase*—the holonomy is a single angle, and by Stokes’ theorem it equals the flux of the connection’s curvature Ω through any surface Σ bounded by γ (Berry 1984;

Aharonov and Anandan 1987):

$$\text{hol}(\gamma) = \exp \oint_{\gamma} A = \exp \iint_{\Sigma} \Omega,$$

with A the connection one-form and $\Omega = dA$ its curvature. This is the precise content of two claims of the main text. First, that *depth is the area a path encloses* (§9.7.3): the accrued phase is the integral of the curvature over the enclosed surface, so a loop that encloses no area accrues no phase, and the “shortcut” that shrinks the loop toward a point drives the holonomy to zero. Second, that the good circle’s phase is *endogenous* (§9.4.2): the holonomy is fixed by the curvature *internal* to the region the relation traverses, not by anything injected from outside—which is the geometric form of the distinction between the internal and the stolen phase. The sign of the holonomy—the spiral’s positive accrual against the circle’s zero and the vicious cycle’s net loss—is the sign of the integrated curvature.

A.2 The structured flow on a manifold (SFM)

The contractual apparatus of §9.10 admits a complementary formalization. Where the geometric phase concerns the *flow* on a given manifold, the contract concerns the *shaping of the manifold* on which the flow runs. Model the free generativity as a flow on a manifold M ; unconstrained, the flow’s reachable set is all of M , including regions that lead to exhaustion or extraction. A contract is then a structuring of M into M' by three kinds of operation, corresponding to the three the main text names. It may *excise* a closed region (the impassable singularities—the absolutely forbidden harms—removed from the reachable set, $M' = M \setminus U$). It may *alter the boundary* (the exit conditions: M' a manifold-with-boundary whose edge marks where the flow may licitly leave). And it may *reshape the metric or the connectivity* (governing toward whom value may flow: a change in the topology or the metric structure that redistributes the geodesics). The constrained flow on M' is the *structured flow on a manifold* (SFM): free within M' , but no longer able to reach the excised or sealed regions.

The justice of the contract is then, as §9.10.2 claims, a property of the *geometry* of M' and not of any path upon it: one asks whether the curvature and topology of M' are such that every participant has a reachable region of positive holonomy, or whether some

position in M' is a structural sink—a region all of whose outgoing geodesics drain toward a single locus (structural siphoning), or a point from which no positive-holonomy loop is reachable (the structural fuel-position). And the corrective of §9.10.3—that the shaping of the manifold is itself a flow—is the observation that the map $M \mapsto M'$ is not given once but is itself a time-dependent, generative process: M is re-shaped continually, and this re-shaping (legislation) is a flow subject to the same criteria as the flow upon M' (adjudication). There is no fixed terminal manifold; there is only the ongoing, generative re-legislation of M_t .

A.3 The branching-process interface

The recursive regeneration of §9.2 connects the geometric picture to a stochastic one, by way of the spectral radius of a multitype branching process—the formal machinery developed in concert with the Value-Foam programme. Model the cycle of interpretation as a branching process whose “individuals” are interpretive acts, each begetting further interpretive acts. Let λ be the spectral radius (the Perron root) of the process’s mean matrix. Then poeticity, in the sense of §9.7.4, requires *both* super-criticality *and* a non-trivial phase increment per generation:

- $\lambda > 1$ with a non-trivial per-generation phase: the true poem—interpretations beget interpretations (the cycle endures), and each is a variation accruing fresh holonomy (the spiral);
- $\lambda > 1$ with zero phase increment: the slogan, the meme, the jingle—reproduction without sublimation, a super-critical process each of whose generations merely copies the last (the circle that nonetheless propagates);
- $\lambda < 1$: the dead poem—the interpretive process is sub-critical and dies out, no one interprets again;
- the false poem (§9.7.5): a process that advertises endurance while accruing zero phase—formally a degenerate case in which apparent branching carries no holonomy.

The conjugation of the two criteria—the spectral radius λ governing *whether* the cycle

endures, the geometric phase governing *whether* its endurance is a spiral or a circle—is the technical heart of the sequel, and is named here only to mark the road.

A.4 The two debts, restated formally

The main text incurred two debts (§9.4.4); they are restated here in their formal shape, as open problems rather than settled results.

The first debt is the demand that the fibre F carry a genuine periodic, additive, gauge-invariant structure—an S^1 , or a more general group—failing which hol is metaphor and not mathematics. The honest identification of this structure for “the phase of value” is the central task of the Value-Foam study: one must exhibit the bearer’s circle-structure (in what sense is the sublimation of real value a *phase*, with a well-defined notion of return and increment?), establish its additivity (do phases accrued along concatenated paths add?), and verify gauge-invariance (is the holonomy independent of the arbitrary choice of fibre-coordinate, as a genuine observable must be?). None of this is discharged here; it is incurred openly.

The second debt is the demand that “sublimation = positive phase” be argued and not stipulated. One must characterize, independently of the geometry, a quantity of sustainability—a *margin of reproduction*: the net regeneration, per cycle, of the conditions of generation, in excess of what is consumed—and then *prove* that, under the bundle formulation above, the sign of this margin corresponds to the sign of hol. To weld the two by definition would be circular (a vicious circle in the most literal sense). The correspondence is, at present, a conjecture with strong motivation and no proof; the main text flags it as such (§9.8), and the sequel must either establish it or revise the identification.

These two debts are not blemishes to be concealed but the precise form of the honesty the paper’s epistemology requires (§9.5.2): the geometric framework offers a structural *characterization* of what the good circle is, and the formalization of that characterization is a programme in progress, not a finished edifice. To present it as finished would be to commit, in the appendix, the settling failure the whole paper is written against.

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