

What Withdraws When It Is Held

On Geel / Mythic in the Geometry of Paths of Change

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I.

Something in the world does not stay still when it is looked at directly. Not because it hides — it has no interior to hide in — but because looking, if it is a certain kind of looking, is itself the act that makes it disappear. Several traditions, unconnected to one another by any known line of transmission, and one modern physical theory, independently arrived at the same shape. This is not a claim that needs proving. It is a pattern that has already been seen, repeatedly, by people who could not have known about each other. What follows is not an argument. It is a placing side by side.

II. Seven recognitions

Time, said Heraclitus, is a child playing a board game. The kingdom belongs to the child. Nobody has ever settled what game is being played, or by what rule — and this is usually treated as a problem of translation. It may not be. A child at play is not applying a rule that could be written down and handed to someone else. The rule, if there is one, exists only in the playing of it, and vanishes the moment someone tries to extract it and state it separately.

In the Vedanta reading of the Brahmasutra, creation is lila — play — and the commentary insists on a strict point: the Supreme Being creates the way a person breathes, without an ulterior motive, not because it lacks something and creation fills the lack, but because it lacks nothing at all. The moment a motive is supplied — even a benevolent one, even “for the good of creation” — lila stops being lila and becomes work. The theologians who tried hardest to defend this idea also warned against taking it too literally, because as soon as you explain it, you have already lost it.

At the end of the seventh chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Hundun — the featureless ruler of the Center, a being with no front or back, no up or down, no eyes, no mouth — is visited by two neighboring emperors named Sudden and Quick. Grateful for his hospitality, they resolve to give him what every other being has: the seven openings for seeing, hearing, breathing, eating. One a day. On the seventh day, Hundun dies. It is worth noticing that the emperors act out of gratitude. The undoing of the undifferentiated is not caused by hostility. It is caused by the wish to complete a gift.

A few chapters earlier, *Zhuangzi* dreams he is a butterfly, flitting and content, unaware of being *Zhuangzi* at all. He wakes, and cannot say whether he is a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming he is a man. The story is often read as a puzzle to be resolved in one direction or the other. It resolves nothing, and that is the point being made: the moment either side is declared the real one, the story is over and something has been lost that was there only while the question stood open.

Hundun does not stand alone in its chapter. A few pages earlier in the same seventh chapter, a shaman named Jixian — a *shenwu*, “spirit-shaman,” of the kind that served the Chu court from which the *Zhuangzi* itself emerged — boasts that he can read a man’s fate from his face with the certainty of a god. He is brought to meet the sage Huzi four times. Each time Huzi lets his face take on a different, ungraspable configuration — the appearance of pure Earth, then of Heaven-and-Earth in balance, then of a bottomless whirlpool — until on the fourth meeting Jixian cannot find a face to read at all, and flees. The chapter that ends with a face being drilled into something that had none opens with a face refusing to hold still for someone trying to read it as a fixed sign. Both stories are the same failure seen from opposite directions: one shows what happens when the reader insists, the other what happens when the read thing is dissolved by force. Neither the sage nor the emperors intend harm — which is what makes the pattern instructive

rather than merely tragic: competence and kindness are exactly the tools that fail here, because the failure is not a failure of skill.

The tradition also preserves the reverse movement. Elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, Confucius's disciple Yan Hui describes a practice he calls *zuowang*, "sitting and forgetting": first he lets go of the moral categories he was raised on, then the rites and the music, then — over seven days of fasting the heart-mind — his limbs and body-form, his intellect, all outward form, until nothing is left that could be called a self, or a world for that self to stand apart from. The commentary tradition names what this practice returns to: *Hundun* itself, the undifferentiated root that is one with the *Dao*. In one part of the text a being is un-made by having form added to it out of kindness; in another, a person un-makes himself by taking form away, on purpose, one layer at a time. The second is not a technique for causing the first to happen — it cannot be, since wanting a result is itself a layer that has to be forgotten before the rest can go. Every step in *zuowang* is subtraction, never construction; there is no moment at which something is achieved, only a sequence of things ceasing to be held onto. That may be the nearest thing the tradition offers to a resolution of the paradox already visible in *Hundun*'s death: not a method that reaches spontaneity by trying differently, but a discipline that removes, one at a time, everything that trying was made of.

Wu-wei sharpens this into an explicit paradox, one that a modern study of early Chinese thought states almost as a formal problem: a tradition that prizes spontaneity above all else has to explain how anyone could deliberately cultivate it, since the deliberate cultivation of spontaneity is a contradiction in its own terms — trying not to try. Every strategy proposed to resolve this (technique, ritual, apprenticeship, un-learning) ends up smuggling intention back in through the very method used to get rid of intention. The paradox is not a flaw in the theory. It is the theory, restated as a difficulty, and no version of Daoism has ever fully dissolved it — only lived inside it more or less gracefully.

The same difficulty appears, unannounced, in Kant's account of the judgment of beauty. The free play of imagination and understanding, in Kant's phrase, is purposive in its form, yet answers to no determinate concept, no rule, no end — Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck, purposiveness without a purpose. A judgment of taste cannot be derived from a principle and handed to someone else as proof; it can only be exercised, again, each time, as if universally shareable, without ever being demonstrable. Gadamer pushes this further, past Kant's residual subject who does the judging: the true subject of a game, he insists, is not the player but the game itself, which plays itself through whoever happens to be standing inside it. The player does not master the game from outside; the player is taken up into a movement that already has its own back-and-forth built into it, prior to and independent of anyone's intentions for it.

Twentieth-century physics found a version of the same shape without looking for it. In spontaneous symmetry breaking, the governing law — the Lagrangian — is completely symmetric: it has no preference, no privileged direction, no rule that says which of many equally possible ground states will occur. Yet a ground state does occur, and it is asymmetric, and it is one particular state among a continuum of equally valid others, and nothing in the symmetric law can tell you in advance which one it will be. The law is structureless with respect to the outcome. The outcome is unique. Nothing chose it. Physicists describe this by saying the theory has the symmetry, but no single solution of the theory does — the symmetry is visible only in the space of all possible worlds, never in the one that actually occurs.

Heidegger, writing on the origin of the work of art, gave this pattern its most direct philosophical name: earth. Every work sets up a world — a structure of meaning, use, reference — and every world rests on an earth that the work brings forward precisely by never fully exposing it. The earth, he writes, is cleared and open only when it is grasped as what is essentially undisclosable, what shrinks from every disclosure and holds itself constantly closed. Aletheia, truth as unconcealment, is not the

removal of concealment but a wresting of one thing free of it while concealment itself remains, intact, as what makes the wresting possible at all. A world that succeeded in fully illuminating its own ground — leaving nothing closed, nothing withheld — would not have achieved total truth; it would have lost the earth altogether, and with it the very thing that let anything stand out as true.

III. The shared gesture

None of these seven are the same claim. They come from Ionia, from the Ganges plain, from the Chu kingdom of the Yangtze, from eighteenth-century Königsberg, from twentieth-century field theory, from twentieth-century Freiburg. They share no ancestor. What they share is a gesture: something withdraws from the very act of being fixed, and the withdrawal is not a side effect of clumsy fixing — it is what fixing does, every time, without exception. You cannot get a better grip and hold it after all. The getting of the grip is the losing.

This is not disorder. Disorder is just failed order, the same kind of thing as order, on the losing side of the same scale. What withdraws here was never on that scale to begin with. It has no rule not because a rule is missing and could in principle be supplied, but because supplying one is the specific act that ends it. It has no purpose, not the absence of a purpose someone forgot to state, but activity that was never a means to anything, all the way through. And each occurrence is genuinely singular — not because no one has yet found the general law it exemplifies, but because there is no second instance for a law to range over. The child's game, played again tomorrow, would be a different game. The ground state, could it un-choose itself and choose again, would break a different symmetry.

IV. Where this sits in Paths of Change

In McWhinney's four worldviews — Blue/Unity, Red/Sensory, Green/Social, Yellow/Mythic — Yellow is usually placed as a fourth quadrant

alongside the other three: rule, action, relationship, meaning. That placement may itself already be an act of the kind described above — a fourth opening bored into something that had no face to begin with.

Put differently: Blue needs a rule that holds the same way twice. Red needs an outcome that can be brought about. Green needs a meaning that two people can share. Each of these is a way of making something repeatable, checkable, transferable. Yellow, on the evidence above, is what these three worldviews look like from the far side of the moment before any of them has closed around their object. It is not a peer standing next to Blue, Red, and Green. It is the condition each of them interrupts in order to exist at all — the game before the rule is extracted from it, the breath before it becomes a motive, the face before the first opening is drilled.

V. The geometry this started from

This inquiry began with a single image: four geometries, Rang/Volgorde against Spel/SamenSpel, a Heart at the shared center. The generative source behind that image is Alan Fiske's Relational Models Theory, which identifies four elementary forms of human relation — Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching, Market Pricing — and which Fiske himself already correlated with four mathematical structures, echoing Stevens' scales of measurement: Communal Sharing with an equivalence relation (undifferentiated sameness, no metric), Authority Ranking with an ordinal scale (a total order, rank), Equality Matching with an interval scale (additive balance, one-for-one), Market Pricing with a ratio scale (proportion, a fixed origin).

Rang/Volgorde, in the original diagram, is Authority Ranking: an ordinal geometry, a line with a direction on it. Spel/SamenSpel, its stated inverse, sits where Communal Sharing sits: an equivalence relation, a geometry of pure sameness with no metric imposed on it at all — every point interchangeable with every other, nothing to rank, nothing to add or multiply. That is already, independently of everything gathered above,

a formal way of saying “structureless”: an equivalence relation is the mathematical object that results when every distinction that could turn a set into an order, an interval, or a ratio has been withheld.

But Communal Sharing, in Fiske’s own account, still describes a relation between people — an “us,” a shared identity, something that in principle two people could recognize together. What the six recognitions above point to sits one step further back than that: not the geometry of sameness between two things, but what precedes even the drawing of the two things that could then be declared the same or different. Hundun has no second party to be undifferentiated with. The dreaming Zhuangzi has no butterfly standing apart from him to share an equivalence relation with — the distinction itself has not yet been drawn. In the quaternion formalization of Paths of Change ($q = w + xi + yj + zk$), where Yellow occupies one vector component alongside Red, Green, and Blue, this suggests the formalism reaches its own limit here: a quaternion has four fixed, orthogonal components by construction, and orthogonality is already a relation, already a form. Whatever in Yellow withdraws from form cannot, without contradiction, be one of four components inside a structure built entirely out of formal relations between components. The quaternion can represent Yellow’s effects — the imaginative, generative pole visible from Blue, Red, and Green’s side of the interruption — but not the interruption itself, for the same reason a photograph can show what a door looked like open, never the opening.

VI. A closing that does not close

This text, in saying all of this, has also reached for a hand. It has taken six ungraspable things and arranged them in a row, given them a common name, placed that name inside a diagram with three other names. That is a hole bored with good intentions, like Sudden and Quick’s, and it will have done to its subject something like what their gift did to Hundun’s face.

There is no way to write about this that avoids the gesture entirely — writing is itself a kind of grip. What can be done is to leave the diagram open rather than closed: not “Yellow equals X,” but Yellow as the name for the place where the naming itself is seen to happen, and seen to cost something every time.

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