

# The recurring seam: why cultures recurrently distinguish the manifest from the possible

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## Abstract

For at least twenty-five centuries, distant traditions have produced structurally comparable figures: a reality divided between a manifest region and a not-yet-manifest region, an operational passage between the two, and the recognition that what is most fundamental in the second region cannot be fully captured by the instruments of the first. This essay does not interpret the recurrence as direct transmission, mere coincidence, or perennial truth. It proposes instead that meaning-producing systems, when reflecting upon their own structure, tend to rediscover the seam between actuality and possibility. From this standpoint, futures studies is not only a methodology for dealing with uncertainty. Its refusal of the singular future is the contemporary disciplinary form of an older recognition: the not-yet-actualized is not nothing. Scenario work, anticipation, and plural futures thus appear as modern protocols for keeping the possible articulate without collapsing it into prediction.

**Keywords:** Futures studies; plural futures; anticipation; scenario work; possibility and actuality; semantic fields; ontology of the not-yet-actualized.

## A question disguised as a fact

For at least twenty-five centuries, in traditions often separated by vast distances, different languages, and historically discontinuous channels of exchange, the same family of conceptual moves keeps reappearing. Reality is split into two regions: one manifest, one not yet manifest but not therefore unreal. Between the two there is a passage that is operational rather than miraculous. And what is most fundamental in the second region cannot be fully captured by the instruments of the first. The claim is not that these traditions say the same thing, nor that their metaphysical commitments are interchangeable. The claim is more limited: across very different vocabularies one can identify a recurring structural figure.

The figure surfaces in Plato's distinction between intelligible and sensible, in Aristotle's *dynamis* and *energeia*, in Plotinus' graded emanation from the One, in the Christian apophatic tradition, in Avicenna's distinc-

tion between essence and existence, in Lurianic Kabbalah's contraction and emanation, in Renaissance Hermeticism, in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, in Bergson's ontology of the past, in Whitehead's eternal objects and actual occasions, in Heisenberg's rehabilitation of Aristotelian *potentia*, in Deleuze's virtual, in Simondon's preindividual, and in the Yogācāra doctrine of ālayavijñāna, which belongs to a very different soteriological and philosophical context yet displays a structurally comparable concern with latent, efficacious formations (Aristotle, 1984; Avicenna, 2005; Bergson, 1991; Deleuze, 1994; Heisenberg, 1958; Plato, 1997; Plotinus, 2018; Schmithausen, 1987; Simondon, 2020; Whitehead, 1978).

Elements of this recurrence have often been studied within specific lineages – Platonism, apophatic theology, Islamic metaphysics, Kabbalah, *Naturphilosophie*, process philosophy, Buddhist philosophy – but less often as a single transversal figure. The usual explanations each capture part of the phenomenon and miss what makes it strange. Direct transmission explains much of the European lineage from Plato to Plotinus, from Augustine to the medievals and beyond, but it cannot, by itself, explain why structurally comparable figures emerge in traditions whose development cannot be reduced to the European stream. Structural coincidence is a non-explanation: it registers a fact without accounting for it. Perennial philosophy, finally, supposes a single underlying truth imperfectly perceived by different traditions, but this typically requires precisely the access to the underlying that the traditions themselves often describe as structurally unavailable.

What follows is an attempt to take the phenomenon seriously without leaning on any of these reflexes. The convergence becomes less mysterious if one treats it as the recurrent output of a certain kind of meaning-producing system.

For futures studies, the question is not merely historical. The field has long insisted that “the future” should not be treated as a singular destination waiting to be predicted, but as a plurality of possible, probable, preferable, and contestable futures (Bell, 1997; Dator, 2009; Slaughter, 2004). This pluralization is often presented as a methodological achievement: a way of resisting deterministic extrapolation and opening decision-making to alternative scenarios. The argument of this essay is that something deeper is at stake. The pluralization of futures is the contemporary methodological expression of an older semantic structure: the refusal to identify reality with what has already become manifest.

In this sense, futures studies does not simply study what may happen

later. It works on the threshold between the actualized and the not-yet-actualized. Its object is not the future as a remote region of chronological time, but the structured field of possibilities that surrounds, exceeds, and pressures the present. To clarify the genealogy of this threshold is therefore to clarify something about the discipline itself: why it pluralizes its object, why prediction alone is insufficient, and why scenario work is less a technique for forecasting than a disciplined practice of articulating the possible.

### **Eight waves**

The recurrence is not a steady drone. It comes in waves, each shaped by the technological, linguistic, and institutional conditions of its period. The following survey is typological rather than exhaustive. It does not reconstruct a continuous genealogy; it isolates recurrent configurations that become visible across different historical settings.

The first wave is Greek-Mediterranean, between roughly the fifth century BCE and the fifth century CE. Its idiom is hierarchical and ontological. Plato establishes the distinction between two planes of reality; Aristotle internalizes the relation within individual substances through the *dynamis/energeia* pair; Plotinus radicalizes it into a gradient of emanation from the One (Aristotle, 1984; Plato, 1997; Plotinus, 2018). The wave leaves behind a vocabulary – *potential*, actual, intelligible, sensible – that will be reused for two thousand years.

The second wave is Christian and apophatic. The Greek bipartition is reread within a creationist framework. Pseudo-Dionysius shifts the emphasis from hierarchy to unknowability: the highest is not reachable by positive predication. Cusanus later turns unknowability into method through *docta ignorantia* and *coincidentia oppositorum* (Cusanus, 1981; Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987). Around the same broad tradition, Bernard of Cluny condenses a related intuition into the hexameter that Umberto Eco will place at the close of *The Name of the Rose*: *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus* – of the original rose stands only the name, we hold bare names (Eco, 1983). Access to what once was, or to what is hidden, runs through names whose referents are no longer or never were directly available.

The third wave is Arabic and Islamic, from the eighth to the twelfth

century. Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence introduces a bipartition immanent to each being rather than simply dividing two planes; Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle then return to Europe through translation and reshape Latin scholasticism (Avicenna, 2005). Whoever speaks of necessary and contingent in a recognizably modern philosophical sense is using a vocabulary that passed through Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba before reaching the Latin universities.

The fourth wave is Renaissance and Hermetic, between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Ficino translates the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Plotinus; Pico della Mirandola Christianizes the Kabbalah; Bruno radicalizes Cusanus into an infinite universe filled with living forms; Lurianic Kabbalah articulates contraction and emanation as a drama of hiddenness and manifestation (Copenhaver, 1992; Scholem, 1995). This wave installs in the cultivated imagination the idea that the hidden region of reality has structure – correspondences, signs, laws – and that the relation between hidden and manifest is, in principle, operative. It also contributes to a disposition later compatible with aspects of the scientific revolution: the conviction that what is not directly visible can nevertheless be investigated through disciplined techniques.

The fifth wave is Romantic and natural-philosophical, between roughly 1780 and 1850. Schelling and Goethe react against Cartesian-Newtonian mechanism by reasserting that nature is living, structured by polarities, and not exhaustively describable by analytic decomposition (Schelling, 1988). One of the wave's scientific residues is the emergence of field-like thinking. Ørsted's discovery of electromagnetism has often been read in connection with *Naturphilosophie*, while Faraday's lines of force helped make thinkable a structured spatial medium irreducible to particles in empty space (Stauffer, 1957). This did not simply produce later physics, but it contributed to the conceptual environment in which Maxwellian field theory could become intelligible.

The sixth wave is the deep twentieth century, between roughly 1890 and 1950. Psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and quantum mechanics emerge in partially overlapping European intellectual contexts, and each rearticulates, in its own vocabulary, the same family of moves. Freud postulates an unconscious that is not a metaphor for what we do not remember but a real region of psychic life with its own laws and boundary with consciousness (Freud, 1957). Husserl analyzes the structures of intentional life; Heidegger introduces the ontic/ontological distinction and

the *Lichtung*, the clearing in which beings manifest themselves (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1982). Heisenberg, struggling with the interpretation of quantum formalism, reaches back to Aristotle and proposes that the wave function be understood as *potentia*, an ontological mode between possibility and actuality (Heisenberg, 1958). These articulations are not reducible to one program, but their structural kinship is clear.

The seventh wave is countercultural and orientalist, between roughly 1960 and 1990. The post-war West encounters Asian traditions – Vedānta, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism – and simultaneously popularizes quantum mechanics through works that range from serious to confused. The wave produces genuine dialogue and considerable intellectual noise, but it leaves a residue that matters: the idea, diffused beyond academic philosophy, that the ordinary manifest world is one level and that other levels may be real, accessible, and significant. Alongside this, Buddhist traditions such as Madhyamaka and Yogācāra become increasingly available to Western philosophical comparison, though they must not be reduced to anticipations of Western categories (Garfield, 1995; Schmithausen, 1987; Waldron, 2003).

The eighth wave is digital, complex, and computational, from roughly 1990 to the present. The notion of the virtual enters ordinary speech with unprecedented force; complexity theory makes phase transitions, attractors, and emergence serious objects of inquiry; generative artificial intelligence makes navigable the space of possible texts, images, and arguments in a way no previous technology had done. This wave does not merely expand the imagination of multiplicity. It places the structured field of the possible under new operational pressure. Digital environments can keep plural futures open, but they can also engineer incompatible realities, accelerate echo chambers, and transform possibility into confusion. I have elsewhere described one form of this process as transreality: the production of public conditions in which mutually incompatible versions of reality coexist and compete for ontological authority (Bonisoli, 2020). A related pressure comes from the concentration of data, computational infrastructure, and advanced models in a small number of actors. In both cases, the problem is not simply technological; it is the narrowing or distortion of the field from which futures can be articulated.

Eight waves, each different in idiom, each producing a residue the next inherits, each making, within its own conditions of possibility, a recognizable variation on the same conceptual figure.

### **The transversal family**

If we abstract from the vocabularies and look at the form, what recurs is a family of six features. These features are not a checklist that every tradition satisfies in the same way. They describe a family resemblance: some traditions emphasize ontological partition, others operational passage, others unknowability, others fertility.

First, reality is partitioned into a manifest region and another region, neither of which is reducible to the other. Second, the other region has its own dignity: it is not merely illusion, epiphenomenon, or language. Third, the other region is structured: it has relations, gradations, configurations. Fourth, there is an operation of passage between the two regions. Sometimes it is ritual, symbolic, contemplative, experimental, or formal; sometimes it is natural, as in the birth of an idea or the actualization of an event; sometimes it is hidden, as in the analytic uncovering of the unconscious. In every case it is operational: a structured transition, not a miracle. Fifth, from the standpoint of the manifest region, the other region is structurally rather than contingently unknowable in some essential respect. Sixth, the relation between the two regions is fertile: the other region is not a museum or a residue, but a source from which the manifest is continuously fed.

Taken together, these features characterize the recurring move with enough precision to be useful. Platonic participation, hermetic correspondence, Schellingian polarity, Freudian repression, quantum collapse, Deleuzian actualization – none of these is the family, but each instantiates it. The vocabularies and metaphysical commitments differ enormously; the structural figure remains comparable.

### **Three unconvincing explanations**

Why does the figure recur? The standard explanations have each been tried, and each has limits worth naming.

The culturalist explanation traces an underground stream of transmission. Platonic vocabulary survives in Plotinus; Plotinus reaches Arabic philosophy through late antique channels; Arabic Aristotelianism returns to Europe through Latin translation; the Hermetic and Kabbalistic traditions enter Renaissance thought; Romanticism inherits part of that residue;

twentieth-century philosophy inherits the Romantics. This story is true as far as it goes. It accounts for much of the European thread. But it fails as a complete explanation because structurally comparable developments also appear in traditions whose formative trajectories cannot be reduced to documented transmission from Europe: the Yogācāra doctrine of ālayavijñāna, the Madhyamaka logic of Nāgārjuna, Taoist and neo-Confucian articulations in China (Garfield, 1995; Schmithausen, 1987; Waldron, 2003). It also leaves unexplained why the same inherited vocabulary is used to do such different work in different periods.

The cognitive explanation proposes that the human mind, for structural reasons, tends to think reality in bipartite-with-passage form. Perhaps this is because basic experiences – sleep and waking, memory and present, possibility and decision – are themselves structured this way; perhaps language, with its type/token distinction, has this form built in. There is something to this. But the cognitive explanation alone treats the recurrence as a fact about us. It does not yet engage the possibility that the fact about us tracks something about the kind of reality, or the kind of semantic activity, of which we are part.

The ontological explanation, in its strong form, says that reality really is partitioned in this way and that any sufficiently serious inquiry will eventually run into the partition. This is the move classical perennial philosophy makes. It has the advantage of simplicity and the disadvantage of being unfalsifiable as stated. It requires a kind of access to what is partitioned that the traditions themselves often describe as unavailable.

Each explanation has its truth, and none is sufficient alone. The better move is to descend one level beneath all three and ask what kind of system produces the recurrence as a structural output rather than as a mystery.

### **A frame, briefly**

To pose the question this way one needs a working frame. I will sketch the one that seems to do the job, without elaborating it in full. The point is not to advocate a school, but to make the argument legible.

Suppose that mind, in the most general structural sense, is not a thing that processes meaning but is itself constituted as meaning. What we ordinarily call a mind is a semantic field: a structured region in which significance is the basic mode of being, and in which perception, memory, rea-

soning, decision, and feeling are local operations on the field's structure. Suppose further that this field has a grammar: rules of composition, admissibility, proximity, and permitted transformation. Finally, suppose that the field has something like a polarizing filter: not a censor that blocks content, but an orientation-selecting structure that lets certain aspects of what is encountered count as encounterable, while others are attenuated or rendered invisible.

A semantic field of this kind cannot exhaust itself in the actual. At any moment, much more is possible-for-the-field than is actual-in-the-field. The possible is not nothing; it is the field's own articulated capacity for further operation. The actual is the subset of those moves that have crossed the field's operational threshold and become events in it. The line between the two is not an inaccessible noumenal region. It is the field's threshold of actualization, where its grammar is exercised under the constraint of its polarizing filter to produce one event rather than another.

This is the working frame. The argument can be followed without taking a position on its full metaphysical status. What matters here is what it lets us see.

### **The recurrence as structural output**

Once one has the frame, the recurrence stops being a mystery. Any system that is a semantic field contains within itself the bipartite-with-passage structure. The structure is not something the system merely encounters in the world; it is a feature of how the system is. A semantic field that articulates what is possible for it is, by that very articulation, distinguishing possibility from actuality, attributing some kind of reality to both, and operating a threshold between them. The six features of the transversal family are not six independent discoveries. They are six aspects of one structural fact about what kind of system a semantic field is.

A semantic field that turns its attention upon itself will discover these features, not because they are objects waiting to be found, and not because the field projects them onto a world that lacks them, but because they are the field's own articulation made visible to itself. The discovery has the form of recognition rather than investigation.

This is why the recurrence can appear in cultures whose contacts are indirect, discontinuous, or insufficient to account for the similarity by

transmission alone. Plato's Athens and Vasubandhu's Gandhara were not simply communicating variants of the same doctrine. They were doing something structurally comparable: a semantic field, in each case, turned upon its own structure, articulated what it found, and produced a vocabulary to describe it. The vocabularies differ because they are anchored in different languages, cosmologies, and practical concerns. The structural figure recurs because the operation is comparable.

This also explains why the recurrence does not dissipate with cultural transformation. Across two and a half millennia, conditions of life, institutions of knowledge, and languages change profoundly. Yet the figure recurs because it is not parasitic on any one of them. It is the form taken by a semantic field's self-recognition, and cultures that produce sufficiently developed semantic activity may recurrently articulate it.

There is no need to choose between cultural transmission and parallel discovery, because what is transmitted and what is discovered are aspects of the same process. Each generation, in its own conditions, articulates what its semantic activity makes visible to itself. The articulation has a recognizable family resemblance because the underlying operation has not disappeared.

At this point the relevance to futures studies becomes direct. If the recurring figure concerns the relation between actuality and a structured field of non-actualized possibility, then the work of futures studies belongs squarely within this lineage. Its central gesture – refusing the singular future and working instead with plural futures – is not merely an epistemic precaution in the face of uncertainty. It is an operational way of inhabiting the seam between what has become actual and what remains possible.

This does not mean that futures studies should be absorbed into metaphysics. On the contrary, the value of the field lies in its practical discipline: scenarios, anticipatory systems, causal layered analysis, horizon scanning, backcasting, and participatory foresight are ways of giving operational form to the not-yet-actualized without prematurely collapsing it into a single prediction (Inayatullah, 1998; Miller, 2018; Poli, 2017; Voros, 2003). They are techniques for keeping the possible articulate.

### **Futures studies and the ontology of the not-yet-actualized**

The argument now returns to the discipline from which the practical question began. Futures studies is often defined by a methodological refusal: the refusal to treat the future as singular, predetermined, or merely predictable. It works instead with plural futures, alternative scenarios, anticipatory capacities, and contested images of what may become actual. From the standpoint developed here, this methodological refusal has ontological depth. It is not only a useful precaution against bad prediction. It is the contemporary disciplinary form of a much older recognition: the not-yet-actualized is not nothing.

This does not mean that possible futures already exist as hidden objects waiting somewhere ahead of us. Nor does it mean that all futures are equally real or equally likely. The point is more precise: before any future becomes actual, it belongs to a structured field of possibility shaped by memory, institutions, technologies, desires, constraints, narratives, and decisions. Futures studies works on this field. Its task is not to see the future, but to articulate the field from which futures may be actualized.

First, plural futures are not merely heuristic. To speak of futures in the plural is useful because it prevents premature closure: it resists the tendency to mistake the most visible trend for destiny. But the argument developed here suggests that the plural is not only methodologically useful. It is structurally accurate. The present is surrounded by more possible actualizations than it can contain. Scenario work, at its best, does not invent arbitrary alternatives; it makes explicit a structured plurality already implicit in the present field.

This is why the discipline's refusal of a single future is not a stylistic choice. It is a form of fidelity to the structure of the not-yet-actualized. A forecast collapses the possible toward one expected outcome; a scenario set preserves plurality long enough for actors to recognize, contest, and redirect the field in which they are already operating.

Second, uncertainty is not simply a deficit of knowledge. In ordinary predictive reasoning, uncertainty appears as something to be reduced: the less uncertainty remains, the better the model. Futures studies require a different posture. Some uncertainty can indeed be reduced by data, modelling, and trend analysis. But the uncertainty that belongs to the not-yet-actualized cannot be eliminated without eliminating the openness that makes futures plural.

The possible does not ask to be measured in the same way as the actual. It asks to be articulated, interpreted, stress-tested, and inhabited. This is why methods such as causal layered analysis, participatory foresight, backcasting, and scenario planning are not inferior substitutes for prediction. They are appropriate protocols for a different kind of object: not an actual state of affairs, but a structured field of possible actualizations.

Third, the field from which futures emerge includes unactualized pasts. Futures studies often looks forward, but the structure of possibility is not oriented only toward what has not yet happened. Cultures, institutions, and individuals carry unrealized dispositions, interrupted trajectories, forgotten alternatives, and latent conflicts that continue to shape what can become actual. The past is therefore not only a record of what happened. It is also an archive of possibilities that were never fully actualized, or that were actualized once and then removed from dominant visibility.

This has practical consequences for scenario work. A good scenario is not only an extrapolation from present trends. It may also recover a latent possibility already present in the cultural or institutional field: a path not taken, a suppressed memory, an abandoned technology, a forgotten form of social organization, an unresolved trauma, a dormant aspiration. The future is generated not only by novelty, but by the reconfiguration of what the field has not yet finished actualizing.

These dynamics operate today under specific pressures. When narrative manipulation produces stratified incompatible realities within the same public sphere, the field's articulation becomes opaque to those who inhabit it: plurality becomes confusion rather than possibility. When the material infrastructure of cognitive production concentrates in a few hands, the field's openness narrows differently: not by confusion of layers, but by foreclosure of access. Both processes reduce the operational plurality of the future in the present. They are contemporary forms of the older problem of premature closure that the transversal tradition has, in its different idioms, kept naming.

### **A coda on the bare name**

It is worth returning, by way of conclusion, to the twelfth-century hexameter that has accompanied this essay in the background: *stat rosa pristina*

*nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*. Of the original rose stands only the name; we hold bare names.

The line has usually been read as elegy. What remains of what was, what remains of what is hidden, what remains of those we have lost – only the names. The reading is moving, but incomplete. A bare name, in the structural reading, is not the diminished residue of a richer original. It is the form that what was real takes when its other regions have not been actualized for us, or have been actualized once and no longer are. The name is not less than the rose. The name is what the rose is for a semantic field no longer in active contact with the actualization the rose once was.

This recognition bears on anyone who attends to what is not yet, or what is no longer, manifest. The bare name is not an obstacle to be removed by recovering the original rose, since the original rose, in the relevant sense, was never available as a fully captured object. The bare name is the form under which the field's structure is offered to us, here, now, in this state of partial actualization. The work is not to overcome the bareness by reaching behind the name. The work is to live with the name as the entrance point to a field whose articulation continues.

For futures studies, this means that the plural future is not simply a professional convention. It names the structural excess of the field over its current actualization. Every present contains more futures than it can actualize; every future, once actualized, leaves behind other possibilities that do not disappear but remain as residues, pressures, memories, or later reconfigurations. The work of futures studies is to keep this excess intelligible without pretending to master it completely.

This is why the discipline matters. It is not only a set of tools for organizations that need to plan under uncertainty. It is a cultural practice for resisting premature closure. It trains societies to remain in contact with the not-yet-actualized without confusing it with fantasy, prediction, or wishful thinking. In this respect, futures studies belongs to the long transversal tradition traced in this essay: it is one of the modern names for the discipline of the possible.

The eight waves we have traced have all, in their different idioms, said something like this. The argument of this essay is that these articulations, far from being a chain of independent insights or a single chain of transmission, are better understood as comparable operations performed by systems of the same kind under different historical conditions. The convergence is not a marvel. It is what such systems tend to do when they look at themselves.

We hold bare names. That is not less than what there is. That is the

form in which what there is presents itself to fields whose work is to recognize, articulate, and respond. The recognition is old. The articulation is always to be done again. The work continues.

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