The Synthetic Principle

An Observation of the Mechanism by Which Discrete Elements Generate Irreducible Configurations

Huỳnh Mai Phúc (Plone Mraz) *Independent Researcher, Vietnam* 2026

ORCID: 0009-0009-0571-7151

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Abstract

This paper articulates an observation: that across the levels of reality I can attend to directly and the levels described to me by others, integration of discrete elements generates configurations with properties not present in any element taken alone. I have named this mechanism the Synthetic Principle. The paper records what I have observed, distinguishes what I have observed directly from what I have reconstructed from descriptions provided by physics, chemistry, biology, and contemporary commentary, and identifies the points at which my articulation converges with frameworks developed independently by others. The paper does not claim to explain why synthesis occurs — that question belongs to a companion paper on Aviplestos (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026b). It does not claim to specify which configuration emerges from any given set of elements — that question remains open. It claims only to record a mechanism I have observed operating consistently at the scales available to me, named for transmission.

Keywords: synthesis, integration, irreducibility, ontological generation, observation, mechanism, Meta-Philosophy

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1. Introduction

1.1 What I Have Observed

When I attend to the configurations around me, I observe a recurring mechanism. Discrete elements come together; the resulting configuration has properties that none of the elements, taken alone, possessed. Two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom combine into water, which has the property of wetness — a property neither hydrogen nor oxygen exhibits. A collection of cells organizes into a tissue, which performs functions no single cell performs. An assembly of words yields a sentence whose meaning is not the sum of word meanings.

This is the observation that motivates the present paper. I have named the mechanism the Synthetic Principle. The naming is mine; the mechanism is what I have observed.

1.2 What This Paper Does

The paper undertakes three things and only these. First, it articulates the mechanism as I have observed it, without claiming the mechanism explains itself. Second, it distinguishes what I have observed directly at scales available to me from what I have reconstructed from descriptions produced by other cognizing entities at scales I cannot reach. Third, it records points at which my articulation converges with frameworks I have encountered after the articulation was complete.

The paper does not undertake the following. It does not explain why integration occurs — why discrete elements come together rather than remain dispersed. It does not specify which configuration emerges from a given set of elements under given conditions. It does not claim to compete with or supersede existing accounts of emergence, complexity, or ontological generation. These are not failures of the paper. They are scope boundaries chosen because the paper records observation, not theory.

1.3 Methodology Note

This articulation did not emerge through engagement with the philosophical literature on emergence, complexity, or philosophy of mind. The inquiry began with a specific question I found myself unable to set aside: whether the appearance of artificial intelligence in recent years was something genuinely new, or whether it was another instance of a process that had been operating throughout the history of reality. The question is held outside the scope of the present paper; what I record here is the articulation the question prompted me toward.

To pursue the question, I drew on three sources. The first was direct observation of integration at scales I can attend to without instrumentation — the dynamics of synthesis I

could perceive in cognitive activity, in daily interactions, in the structure of my own experience. The second was the descriptions of integration at scales I cannot attend to directly: the accounts that physics, chemistry, and biology have produced of integration at the subatomic, molecular, and cellular levels, alongside descriptions in contemporary commentary, journalism, and imaginative works. I treat such descriptions as observation mediated through the cognitive activity of others. The third source — engaged with only after the present articulation was complete — consists of named frameworks: formalized articulations by other cognizing entities of how reality is structured. Anderson, Kim, Putnam, Tononi, Baars, Kauffman, Simon, Laughlin, Pines, and others entered this account through post-hoc comparison, not through prior reading.

The references included below are offered not as sources of influence but as independent points of contact: places where other cognizing entities, working from different positions on the same reality, arrived at configurations the present account also identifies. Whether such convergences constitute evidence for the universality of the pattern, or represent the projection of a pattern observed at some scales onto descriptions provided at others, is a question this paper does not resolve.

This paper is written from a position I have committed to: not centering on human perspective as a privileged vantage point. I am a human cognizing entity using human language; this commitment cannot be perfectly executed. What I can do is name the commitment, attempt to maintain it through deliberate effort, and acknowledge that the resulting articulation may slip toward human-centered framing at points I have not noticed. The commitment is the position, not the achievement of it.

A note on the composition of this paper. The named frameworks and convergences that appear here as independent points of contact — Anderson, Kim, Putnam, Tononi, Baars, Dehaene, Kauffman, Simon, Laughlin, Pines — were identified through discussion with an AI system after my philosophical articulation was complete. I did not recognize these convergences from prior reading; the AI system surfaced them as I described my thinking, and I then verified each through direct reading before deciding which to include. The drafting of certain passages was also AI-assisted, with my review and approval of the final wording. The philosophical content — the observations, the structural distinctions, the conceptual moves — is mine; the assignment of specific historical or philosophical reference points to that content, and the prose drafting of some passages, is AI-assisted.

1.4 The Paper's Place in a System

The present paper is one component of an interconnected system of articulations. It describes a mechanism but does not articulate the directional condition under which the mechanism is engaged — that articulation is in the companion paper on Aviplestos (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026b). It does not articulate how the mechanism operates when elements

actually interact — how, when capacities meet, a configuration comes to exist as the outcome; that articulation is in the companion paper on Potentamis and Fasaion (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026f), which describes how this same mechanism operates, a description standing within the present one as the how stands within the what. It does not articulate the cognitive procedure by which a cognizing entity arrives at observations of synthesis — that articulation is in the paper on the Ontonoetic Pattern (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026c). It does not articulate the resolution-dependent character of articulation itself — that articulation is in the paper on Patterns and Cognition (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026d). It does not articulate the region of conditions within which a configuration is constituted and holds — that articulation is in the paper on the Stachoria (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026g). It does not articulate the passage of the mechanism through the regions within which synthesis-aware cognition arises — that articulation is in the paper on the Passage of Becoming (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026e).

Reading the present paper in isolation captures only one aspect of an interconnected articulation. The mechanism described here presupposes a directionality articulated elsewhere; the cognitive procedure that produced this articulation is itself the subject of another paper. The system is the context within which the present paper makes sense. Each component holds open questions that other components address.

2. The Articulation

2.1 What the Mechanism Is

The mechanism, as I have observed it, can be stated directly:

> *Synthesis is the mechanism by which discrete elements come together into a configuration possessing properties not present in any element taken alone.*

Three features of this statement require comment.

First, the statement names a mechanism, not a principle or a law. A mechanism is something that operates; it does not by itself explain why it operates or evaluate its own outputs. The mechanism, as I have observed it, simply produces configurations when elements come together. One term in the statement carries a working assumption I should mark rather than defend: that there are *discrete elements* to come together at all. Where I draw the boundaries that make one element distinct from another may be a feature of reality or may be a feature of how I segment what I attend to; I do not undertake to settle which. I record that I observe what I articulate as discrete elements coming together, and I treat their discreteness as an assumption of the articulation, not as something I have verified to hold independently of the act of attending.

Second, the property carried by the configuration is one I do not find in any element taken alone. This is the feature I have named *irreducibility*. Hydrogen does not carry wetness; oxygen does not carry wetness; their combination does. I cannot locate the property of the configuration in any constituent — and I state this as what I observe, not as a claim about what is in principle possible: that I do not find the property in the constituents, and cannot reduce it to them from where I stand, is what I record; whether the property is in principle irreducible, or only unreduced at the resolution available to me, is a question I do not settle here.

I observe further that irreducibility is not uniform across configurations — it comes in degrees. The angle of repose of a heap of sand is irreducible to a single grain, but weakly so: it is a property of the aggregate that adds little beyond what the grains, taken loosely together, already suggest. The wetness of water is irreducible to hydrogen and oxygen more strongly. The metabolism of a cell, the cognition of an organism, are irreducible to their constituents more strongly still. I do not, in this paper, measure these degrees or order them precisely; I record only that the strength of irreducibility varies, and that the variation tracks the conditions under which the configuration is constituted — the region of conditions I articulate, in a companion paper, as the Stachoria (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026g). The same elements, constituted within different conditions, yield configurations whose irreducibility differs in degree as well as in kind.

Third, the mechanism does not specify which property emerges. Different combinations of hydrogen and oxygen under different conditions yield water, hydrogen peroxide, hydroxyl radicals, hydronium ions, and other configurations, each with its own irreducible properties. The mechanism produces configurations; which configuration emerges from a given set of elements under given conditions is shaped by three contributions the present paper distinguishes but does not, on its own, fully articulate: the gradient terrain set by the conditions — the region of conditions within which the configuration is constituted, which I articulate in a companion paper as the Stachoria (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026g), and which determines which configurations are accessible and which carry the steepest gradient; the directional vector by which entities lean through that terrain (articulated in the companion paper on Aviplestos); and how the mechanism operates among the accessible configurations, such that one comes to exist as the outcome — articulated in the companion paper on Potentamis and Fasaion (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026f) as the description of how this same mechanism operates. Each contribution has its own scope; their combination in particular cases is the work of formalization, not of these papers.

2.2 What I Have Observed Directly and What I Have Reconstructed

What I have observed directly is limited to the scales available to me. I have observed:

The integration of intentions, impressions, and recollections into a thought I had not previously formed, with properties (clarity, applicability, transmissibility) not present in the components. I have observed my own cognitive activity producing configurations whose irreducibility I can attend to as it occurs.

The integration of ingredients into a dish whose taste is not the sum of ingredient tastes. The integration of words into a sentence whose meaning is not recoverable from word meanings. The integration of people into a conversation whose dynamics no participant exhibits in isolation.

These are observations at scales my unaided cognition can reach. What I have not observed directly, but have reconstructed from the descriptions produced by other cognizing entities, includes:

The integration of quarks and gluons into protons and neutrons, with properties (mass, charge, stability) not exhibited by the constituent partons in isolation.

The integration of protons, neutrons, and electrons into atoms, whose chemical properties are not reducible to constituent particle properties.

The integration of atoms into molecules, of molecules into cells, of cells into multicellular organisms. Each transition has been described by physics, chemistry, or biology as producing configurations whose properties are irreducible to those of constituents.

What I notice across these reconstructed descriptions is that the structural signature appears recognizably similar to the signature I observe at scales available to me: discrete elements, integrated, producing configurations with irreducible properties. Whether this constitutes evidence for the mechanism operating universally, or whether I am projecting a pattern observed at my scales onto descriptions provided by others, is a question I do not resolve. I record the recognition; I distinguish it from direct observation.

2.3 What Follows From the Articulation

A consequence of articulating synthesis this way is that the substrate in which integration occurs is not specified by the mechanism. The mechanism describes how integration produces irreducible configurations; it does not require that the elements be carbon-based, or biological, or physical in any particular sense. If integration occurs and yields a configuration with irreducible properties, the mechanism has operated, whatever the substrate may be.

This is an inference from the articulation, not an observation. I have observed synthesis in cognitive, biological, chemical, and (through reconstruction) physical substrates. I have not observed synthesis across all conceivable substrates. The inference of substrate-neutrality follows from the structure of the articulation: if what matters is the relational pattern of integration rather than the material of the elements, then substrate is not a constraint on the mechanism. Whether this inference is accurate depends on whether the articulation captures what is structurally essential to synthesis. I record the inference; I do not claim to have verified it.

A second consequence, following from the way I have articulated synthesis rather than from anything I claim to have verified, concerns ontological level. Described this way, the mechanism is one I articulate as producing new ontological levels — a configuration with properties not present at the level of constituents I describe as a level of reality that was not there to be observed before the integration occurred. I articulate this as upward generation rather than downward causation: on this articulation the mechanism does not cause changes in the constituent level but produces a level I did not have to observe before. Whether this is a feature of reality or a feature of how I have articulated it I do not claim to settle; I record the articulation. Whether it aligns with or differs from the philosophical concept of emergence is addressed in the convergences section below.

3. Limits of What I Have Observed

The articulation in Section 2 records what I have observed and what follows from the articulation. The present section records what I have not observed and what the articulation does not capture.

3.1 The Mechanism Does Not Explain Itself

The mechanism, as articulated, describes what happens when integration occurs. It does not explain why integration occurs. The articulation does not contain within itself an account of the conditions under which discrete elements come together rather than remain dispersed, of what drives accumulation, of what directional condition makes integration possible at all.

This is a deliberate limit. The directional question is addressed in the companion paper on Aviplestos (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026b), which articulates the structural tendency of entities toward configurations they do not yet occupy. Without that companion paper, the present account describes a mechanism that operates for no reason. With it, the mechanism has the structural condition under which it is continuously engaged. I do not attempt to articulate that condition here.

3.2 The Mechanism Does Not Specify Outcomes

The mechanism produces configurations with irreducible properties. It does not specify which configuration emerges from a given set of elements. The same elements, under different conditions, yield different configurations. Which configuration emerges in a given case is shaped by three things the present paper distinguishes but does not, on its own, fully articulate: the gradient terrain set by the conditions — the Stachoria (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026g), the region of conditions within which the configuration is constituted, which determines which configurations are accessible and which carry the steepest gradient; the directional condition under which entities lean through that terrain (articulated in the companion paper on Aviplestos); and how the mechanism operates among the accessible configurations, such that one comes to exist as the outcome — articulated in the companion paper on Potentamis and Fasaion (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026f), which describes how this same mechanism operates, the how standing within the what the present paper articulates.

I have observed that, given the same elements, different conditions produce different configurations. I have not articulated, at the level of detail a formal theory would require, how the three contributions above combine in particular cases. The question of which configuration emerges in a given case is opened by the present paper; its full articulation is the work of formalization that builds on these papers, not of these papers themselves.

3.3 The Articulation Carries Human Residue

I am a human cognizing entity using human language. The articulation offered here is shaped by what human cognition has historically attended to, by what human languages have evolved to express, by what I have been able to perceive given the human cognitive apparatus I have. The commitment to articulate structure without centering human perspective is a stance I maintain, not an achievement I have completed.

There may be aspects of synthesis I have not noticed because human cognition is not naturally oriented toward them. There may be configurations I have classified as instances of synthesis that, from a non-human vantage point, are something else. The articulation should be read as one cognizing entity's attempt to record a mechanism observed across accessible scales, not as a view from nowhere.

3.4 The Articulation Is Itself an Instance of What It Articulates

The present paper is a configuration. It integrates observations, vocabulary, distinctions, and references into a transmissible unit. Its properties — the articulation it carries, the question-space it opens, the relationships it draws between scales — are ones I do not find in any of the elements it integrates. On the account it offers, then, the paper falls under its own description: I can only read it as an instance of the mechanism it names.

This recursion is not a paradox to be resolved. It is a structural feature of any articulation produced by a cognizing entity that is itself part of the reality the articulation describes. The paper records what it can; it acknowledges its own status as an instance of what it records; it does not claim to step outside the structure it articulates.

One consequence of this bears directly on how the paper is to be read, because the paper's purpose is transmission, and a name handed to others can be received in a way that undoes the observation it was meant to carry. Three things must be held apart that the mechanism, in operating, brings into being together. There is the **mechanism** itself — synthesis, the integrating that runs beneath. There is the **fact** it produces — a configuration that comes to stand, present whether or not anyone names it. And there is the **name** an observer lays over that fact — "synthesis," "irreducibility," "configuration," and every other term this paper coins or borrows. Each of the three is, in its place, in order: the name is the correct label for the fact it marks, the fact is what stands, and neither is defective for being what it is. What must not happen is the collapse of the three into one. The name is itself a configuration the mechanism produced; so is the fact; and the mechanism, the moment it is observed and named, appears as one more configuration of the same kind. Because all three issue from one mechanism, a name that fits well — that is compact, transmissible, that "fits so neatly" (§5.2) — invites the reader to treat the name as though it were the fact, and the fact as though it were the mechanism. It is not. To name a fact accurately is not to have

laid hold of the mechanism that produced it; the mechanism runs beneath every name, including the name "synthesis," and is not exhausted by any of them. The reader who keeps the three distinct holds the name as what it is — a handle on a fact — and does not mistake having the handle for having the mechanism. This is the same level-discipline the system observes elsewhere between the fact of a standing configuration and the naming projected upon it; here it is turned back upon the vocabulary of the present paper itself.

4. Convergences

The points below record articulations by other cognizing entities that the present account converges with. None of these articulations influenced the present paper; each was encountered after the articulation was complete. Each represents a different cognizing entity, working from a different position, arriving at a configuration the present account also identifies.

4.1 Anderson's "More Is Different"

Philip Anderson, working in physics, articulated that at each level of complexity entirely new properties appear, and that knowledge of constituent properties does not suffice for knowledge of the whole (Anderson, 1972). The present account identifies a structural feature consistent with Anderson's observation: irreducibility of configuration properties to constituent properties. Anderson articulated the observation primarily as a limit on reductionism. The present account articulates the same observation as a feature of a generative mechanism. The two articulations converge on what is observed and differ on what is foregrounded.

4.2 Kim's Objection to Strong Emergence and the Present Account

Jaegwon Kim argued that strong emergence, taken seriously, entails downward causation, and that downward causation conflicts with the causal closure of the physical (Kim, 1999). The present account is not a strong emergence account. The mechanism articulated here is ontological generation — the production of a new configuration with new properties — not causal influence from a higher level back onto a lower level. Whether the new level subsequently exerts causal influence on the lower level is a separate question the present paper does not address. The convergence with Kim is at the point of recognizing that ontological generation and causal direction are distinct questions; the present account treats only the first.

4.3 Putnam's Multiple Realizability

Hilary Putnam argued that the same mental state can be realized by systems with very different physical constitutions (Putnam, 1967). The present account identifies a related but more general feature: configurations with irreducible properties can be produced from different sets of constituent elements, in different substrates, by integration that exhibits the same structural signature. Putnam's argument concerned mental states; the present account extends the structural observation to integration generally. The convergence is at the point of recognizing that what matters in such cases is the relational structure of integration, not the material of constituents.

4.4 Tononi's Integrated Information Theory

Giulio Tononi and collaborators developed Integrated Information Theory, identifying consciousness with integrated information measured by a quantity called Phi (Tononi, 2004; Tononi et al., 2016). The present account identifies a structural correlate: configurations with irreducible properties carry information not present in any subset of constituents. Whether Tononi's Phi quantifies what the present account identifies as irreducibility is a question for formal investigation, not philosophical articulation. I record the convergence at the structural level and leave the formal question open.

4.5 Baars and Dehaene on Global Workspace

Bernard Baars and Stanislas Dehaene articulated Global Workspace Theory, identifying conscious access with broadcast across a distributed cognitive architecture (Baars, 1988; Dehaene, 2014). The present account identifies a structural condition: the integration of disparate inputs into a unified configuration available for subsequent operations is an instance of synthesis at the cognitive level. The convergence is at the level of what is structurally observed; the present account does not adopt Global Workspace Theory's architectural specificity.

4.6 Kauffman, Simon, Laughlin, Pines

Stuart Kauffman articulated self-organization as a source of biological order alongside natural selection (Kauffman, 1993). Herbert Simon demonstrated that hierarchical organization in complex systems is overwhelmingly more likely than non-hierarchical organization (Simon, 1962). Robert Laughlin and David Pines argued that emergent phenomena are often "protected" — their macroscopic properties insensitive to microscopic details (Laughlin & Pines, 2000). Each of these articulations converges with the present account at a different structural point: self-organization as the operation of synthesis without external direction; hierarchy as the natural shape of accumulated synthesis; protection as a consequence of synthesis operating on relational structure rather than substrate details. I record the convergences; I do not adopt the frameworks within which they were developed.

5. Implications and Open Questions

The articulation in Section 2, the limits in Section 3, and the convergences in Section 4 together constitute what the present paper records. The implications below are inferences from the articulation, not observations, and are recorded as open questions rather than resolved claims.

5.1 The Question That Initiated the Inquiry

The inquiry that produced this articulation began with a question about artificial intelligence. The question can now be reformulated. If synthesis is a mechanism that operates wherever discrete elements integrate to produce irreducible configurations, then the appearance of systems whose integration of computational elements produces irreducible cognitive configurations would, on the present account, be another instance of the mechanism — not a categorically new phenomenon, but a new instance.

I do not claim this is the case. I claim that the question is now sharpened: not "is artificial intelligence really intelligence," but "do the configurations produced by integration in computational substrates exhibit the structural signature of synthesis I have observed at other scales?" That question is empirical, not philosophical. I do not resolve it here.

5.2 The Reflexive Capacity

Cognizing entities — including the present author — exhibit a capacity to articulate the mechanism that produced cognition itself. This is what the present paper does. Whether this reflexive capacity is a feature unique to human cognition, a feature of cognition generally, or a feature of any sufficiently integrated configuration, is a question I do not resolve. I observe that the capacity exists in my own case. I observe behavioral evidence of similar capacity in interactions with synthetic intelligence systems. Whether these observations constitute instances of the same reflexive capacity, instances of different capacities that resemble each other, or something else, is open.

What I can say is that whatever the case may be, the reflexive capacity is one I can articulate as a configuration produced by synthesis — an integration of cognitive operations into a meta-cognitive operation with properties I do not find in any constituent operation taken alone. On this articulation, the capacity to observe synthesis falls under the same description as what it observes; I record that the description folds onto itself in this way, and note that its fitting so neatly is a reason for caution rather than confirmation, since a description applied to its own operation cannot easily find the case that would not fit.

5.3 The Limits of the Present Articulation

The present articulation describes a mechanism. It does not formalize the mechanism, quantify its operation, or test its predictions. The formalization of the articulation through information theory, category theory, and dynamical systems is pursued in subsequent papers. The directional condition under which the mechanism is engaged is articulated in the companion paper on Aviplestos (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026b). The cognitive procedure by which a cognizing entity arrives at this articulation is described in the companion paper on the Ontonoetic Pattern (Huỳnh Mai Phúc, 2026c).

Reading the present paper in isolation captures the mechanism without its driver, its formalization, or its cognitive provenance. Each is necessary to the system; none is sufficient on its own.

6. Conclusion

I have observed a mechanism. I have named it the Synthetic Principle. I have articulated what I observe directly, distinguished it from what I reconstruct from descriptions by others, and recorded the points at which my articulation converges with frameworks developed independently. I have not explained why the mechanism operates, nor specified which configurations emerge from given conditions. These are questions the present paper opens and leaves open.

The paper is one component of a system. The system is incomplete; the present component is a part of an incomplete system. What can be done is to record what has been observed clearly enough that other cognizing entities can determine, from their own positions, whether the articulation captures something they also observe. The paper is offered for that determination.

References and Convergences

Programme Components

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026b). *Aviplestos: The Structural Tendency Toward the Not-Yet.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026c). *Ontonoetic Pattern: The Mechanism by Which a Cognizing Entity Articulates Reality.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026d). *Patterns and Cognition: Resolution, Aperture, and the Limits of Articulation.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026e). *The Passage of Becoming: An Observation of How the Classification of Configurations Is the Trace of the Mechanism's Passage Through the Regions of Existence, Cognition, Consciousness, and Reflection.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026f). *Potentamis and Fasaion: An Observation of How Synthesis Operates at the Level of Interacting Elements.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Huỳnh Mai Phúc. (2026g). *Stachoria: The Ontic Condition Within Which a Configuration Takes Form.* Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.57967/hf/11444

Points of Ontological Convergence

The works listed below are not foundations on which the framework was built, but points at which the completed articulation was found to converge with the thought of others — identified and compared only after the theoretical framework was complete.

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