

Centers and the Origins of Agency

Morphogenic Fields and the Animation of Matter

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Abstract

This paper proposes that *agency*—the apparent capacity of systems to act, adapt, and self-direct—is a natural consequence of the *centering process* found throughout the cosmos. Extending the Centerpath framework, it argues that wherever a center arises, coordinated, purposeful behavior follows. From atoms to organisms to societies, centers act as organizing attractors that bind parts into cohesive wholes, establish gradients, and create the conditions for directed action. Incorporating the notion of morphogenic fields, the paper further suggests that the formative memory of these centers is carried forward through field-like resonances that guide pattern formation across scales and generations. In uniting energy flow, centrality, and morphic resonance, this model portrays the universe not as a mechanistic assembly, but as a living continuum of self-structuring, self-directing centers.

1. Introduction – From Wholes to Agency

Science has long wrestled with the mystery of how parts become wholes—and why these wholes seem to *act*. Quantum theory revealed that even subatomic “parts” are composed of further constituents held together by forces of attraction. Gestalt psychology demonstrated that the mind perceives integrated wholes rather than disconnected details. Complexity theory, in turn, placed part-whole dynamics at the heart of its inquiry: “The behavior of macroscopic collections of many basic but interacting units that are endowed with the potential to evolve in time” (Coveney & Highfield, *Frontiers of Complexity*).

These insights point toward a deeper question: what compels parts to organize, persist, and move coherently as wholes? This paper proposes that the answer lies in *centers*—focal nodes of energy, information, or meaning—that bind systems together and imbue them with a measure of agency.

2. Defining the Whole Through Centers

Traditional holism describes wholes as systems whose properties cannot be reduced to their parts alone. Yet this remains an abstract claim unless we identify *what physically or informationally connects* the parts into a functioning unity.

The Centerpath framework offers such a mechanism: a whole is that which shares a common center, expressed symbolically as:

$$\text{Whole} = \Sigma(\text{Part1} + \text{Part2} + \text{Part3} + \text{PartN...} + \text{Part}_{\infty}) \leftrightarrow \text{Center}$$

The center acts simultaneously as attractor, regulator, and integrator—organizing surrounding elements into structured coherence. This relationship, seen across all levels of existence, provides the bridge between structure and function, pattern and purpose.

3. Centers as the Source of Agency

Agency emerges when a center not only unifies but also *directs* its parts. In atomic systems, electrons maintain orbits in response to a nucleus's pull; in living cells, organelles coordinate around the nucleus and metabolic hubs; in social systems, individuals align around shared symbols or leaders. In every case, the center establishes gradients—of charge, energy, or meaning—that generate patterned responses.

Agency, in this light, is the capacity of a center to influence the behavior of its parts toward the maintenance or amplification of the whole.

Moreover, the quality and character of the center inevitably defines the field and through it permeates, its parts and the larger whole. A radiant sun shapes its planetary system in its own matter filled image; the informational core of DNA dictates the composition and behavior of every cell it governs; a leader or cultural symbol molds the ethos of a society; and the quality of a person's inner center—their beliefs, values, and intentions—sets the tone of their outward life. In every case, the nature of the whole mirrors the nature of its center, for the field it radiates carries forward its character, quality, and information; coherence from source to circumference is thereby guaranteed.

This model dissolves the boundary between “animate” and “inanimate.” Both are systems organized and animated by their arrangement about centers. What differs is degree, not kind—the depth of the center's self-reference, the associated power and sensitivity of the field, and the complexity of feedback.

4. Fields as the Mechanism of Influence

Centers act through *fields*. When a point condenses from a uniform background—be it a gravitational well, a nucleus, or an idea—it creates a surrounding gradient that both shapes and stabilizes nearby matter or meaning. These wells of influence give rise to recognizable order: planetary systems, crystalline lattices, ecosystems, and social formations.

The center and its field thus form a twofold unity:

- The center defines the locus of coherence, the organizing center from which diverse elements unite and form meaningful wholes.
- The field defines the extent and quality of its influence.

Together they convert potential into pattern—turning stillness into motion and symmetry into structure.

5. Morphogenic Fields – The Memory of Centers

Here the framework intersects with Rupert Sheldrake's concept of *morphogenic fields*: formative fields that store the memory of patterns and influence future organizations by resonance.

In the Centerpath context, morphogenic fields represent the memory and reach of centers—the way a central form continues to propagate its ordering influence across space and time.

Every center imprints a subtle pattern in the surrounding medium, establishing:

1. Pattern Memory – The record of its structural or behavioral template.
2. Field Resonance – Communication among like forms through similarity of vibration.
3. Non-local Coordination – Influence extending beyond immediate boundaries, explaining parallel evolution, species archetypes, and collective behaviors.

Morphogenic fields thus provide the informational substrate by which centers *teach* the universe how to build itself again.

6. Hierarchies of Centered Agency

Across scales, agency intensifies as centers become more reflexive—able to model and regulate their own fields as summarized in the following table.

Level	Central Entity	Field Type	Expression of Agency
Atomic	Nucleus	Electromagnetic	Stable orbits, chemical affinities
Biological	DNA / Metabolic hub	Morphogenic	Growth, repair, instinct
Psychological	Self / Ego	Cognitive	Intention, planning, reflection
Communication	Meaning / Subject / Chapter Title / Book Title	Meaning	Word / Sentence / Chapter / Book
Societal	Cultural symbols, institutions	Memetic / Social	Collective behavior, adaptation
Cosmic	Gravitational attractor	Spacetime	Galactic evolution, cosmic order

Each step along this continuum represents the same underlying pattern: a center generating a field that organizes and directs its surroundings.

7. Conscious and Collective Agency

When a system's center gains the ability to *observe its own field*, agency becomes conscious. In humans, this manifests as a self-aware center—"I"—that integrates sensory data, memories, and goals. Consciousness is thus a reflexive morphogenic field: an attractor capable of modulating its own gradients of attention and intention.

At larger scales, societies demonstrate *distributed consciousness*. Shared centers—myths, ideologies, leaders—create synchronized behavior much like neuronal ensembles firing in unison. Through symbols, the social field becomes self-steering, its agency expressed as culture, governance, and evolution of meaning.

8. Morphogenic Continuity – The Universe Remembering Itself

If centers generate morphogenic fields that retain pattern memory, then the universe is continuously *learning itself into existence*.

Stars give rise to elements that seed life; biological forms evolve yet retain ancient geometries; civilizations re-enact archetypes of structure and purpose. Each is a re-expression of central patterns impressed upon the cosmic field.

Agency, in this ultimate sense, is the universe acting upon its own memory—each new formation echoing the forms that came before.

9. Conclusion – The Animated Cosmos

Agency is not a privilege of life but a property of centeredness itself.

Everywhere centers arise, fields form; where fields form, order emerges; where order persists, purpose blooms.

From atoms to awareness, from galaxies to gods, the same principle unfolds: the center gathers, the field remembers, and the whole acts.

In this view, the universe is not a machine but a *living geometry* of centers—each a pulse of meaning, each a node of agency, each a note in the great morphogenic symphony of creation.