

Commentary

From Coherence to Control: A Non-Systematic Approach to Multi-Parametric Phenomena

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Modern science was founded upon the principle of control — the isolation of variables, the reproducibility of outcomes, and the search for deterministic order. Yet, many natural and synthetic systems resist such control, existing far from equilibrium and governed by self-organizing feedbacks. This work proposes a conceptual reframing of experimental epistemology, arguing that coherence, rather than control, defines the frontier of understanding. Through a dialogue between historical method, non-equilibrium dynamics, and emergent geometry, it explores how order arises from instability and how the observer evolves from controller to participant. Integrating insights from Prigogine, Turing, Haken, and contemporary photonic experiments, the text outlines a philosophy of experiment where variation becomes creative rather than disruptive. In this perspective, the scientist's highest task is not to impose order but to recognize it — to discern meaning within fluctuation. The article concludes with a reflection on the future of knowledge in the age of intelligent companions, suggesting that while machines may master precision, only humans can truly see and give sense to order in chaos.

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1. Introduction — When Control Suppresses Discovery

The scientific method was born from a radical act of simplification. Faced with the overwhelming complexity of nature, Galileo Galilei chose to observe only what could be measured and repeated. “Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so” ^[1]. In this gesture, both ingenious and restrictive, lay the founding assumption of modern science: that understanding requires isolation. By

stripping phenomena of their contingencies — of place, time, and interdependence — Galileo transformed motion into mathematics, and experience into law. Francis Bacon extended the method into a program: experiment was no longer dialogue but interrogation. Nature, he wrote, must be “put on the rack and compelled to answer” ^[2]. The act of control became not merely a means of discovery but the essence of knowing. Isaac Newton then unified this logic under the promise of universality: if the right variables were defined, and the right initial conditions imposed, the world would yield to prediction. The universe was to be a transparent mechanism, decipherable through isolation, reduction, and repetition.

This triad — measurement, control, prediction — has served science with extraordinary success. It gave us the celestial mechanics of Newton, the deterministic clarity of classical physics, and, paradoxically, the statistical mastery of quantum mechanics. Yet implicit in this architecture was a silent presupposition: that the world itself would cooperate. That phenomena could, at least in principle, be detached from their environment, rendered stationary, and made reproducible. But not all phenomena oblige. As Ilya Prigogine noted, “far-from-equilibrium systems escape the tyranny of stability; they create their own structures and rhythms” ^[3]. When multiple variables fluctuate simultaneously and interact nonlinearly, attempts to control one often destabilize the rest. Hermann Haken, in developing synergetics, emphasized that such systems “organize themselves through cooperative effects beyond external control” ^[4]. In this domain, the act of control becomes itself a perturbation — a way of destroying the phenomenon it seeks to measure. Paul Feyerabend foresaw this conflict not as an exception but as a symptom of methodological rigidity. In *Against Method*, he wrote: “The only principle that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes” ^[5]. Feyerabend was not rejecting reason; he was describing what every experimentalist in complex matter knows intimately — that systems driven by competing gradients, feedbacks, or instabilities do not yield to discipline. They respond, rather, to a kind of conversation: a negotiation between what the system can express and what the observer can sustain. In such experiments — evaporative assembly, crystal growth, reactive diffusion — control becomes interference. Each trial alters its own boundary conditions; each measurement shifts the balance among hidden variables.

The experimenter faces a different form of ignorance: not the lack of data, but the absence of a stable framework within which data can even be defined. There is no fixed “state” to return to — only a system learning its own limits. Under these conditions, the traditional hierarchy collapses: the observer no longer governs the phenomenon but accompanies it. Reproducibility ceases to mean identical outcomes; it becomes the recurrence of recognizable behaviors across variations — coherence, not control. As

Gregoire Nicolis observed, “instability is not the end of order, but its beginning” ^[6]. In this view, complexity is not noise to be eliminated but the medium through which new forms of order appear. The experimenter’s task is no longer to suppress fluctuation but to recognize, among its transient configurations, the one that can be stabilized — the one that speaks back.

This, perhaps, marks the quiet turning point of modern experimental thought: science, after centuries of seeking to control nature, begins to rediscover what Galileo had to forget — that the world, in its ungoverned state, already knows how to organize itself ^{[7][8][9][10]}.

2. Non-Equilibrium as a Source of Order

Equilibrium is not the natural state of matter— it is its moment of silence. All living, growing, and evolving systems exist far from equilibrium, sustained by the very flows that drive them away from rest. In such regimes, order does not preexist; it emerges. What we call structure, coherence, or even life, is the visible trace of instability learning to persist.

As Ilya Prigogine observed, “the destruction of equilibrium is the source of new forms of order” ^[3]. The paradox is profound: matter becomes more organized, not when it settles, but when it dissipates energy. Alan Turing was among the first to recognize that pattern formation requires instability. In his 1952 paper on morphogenesis, he wrote that “it is possible for a system of reacting and diffusing substances to give rise to stationary waves of concentration — spontaneous order from instability” ^[11]. The same principle governs soft-matter self-organization, where capillarity, evaporation, and gravity act not as noise but as orchestral forces. In colloidal crystallization, a droplet’s curved interface redistributes evaporation flux and surface tension, imposing a geometry of constraint that guides particles into ordered arrays. The resulting opaline structures — curved, hierarchical, sometimes asymmetric — arise not in spite of non-equilibrium, but because of it. Every fluctuation is a candidate for meaning. The pattern that survives is not the one that minimizes disturbance, but the one that absorbs it most effectively. Hermann Haken called this process “enslavement”: the spontaneous selection of macroscopic order parameters that stabilize the collective behavior of microscopic degrees of freedom ^[4]. Erwin Schrödinger proposed that organisms “feed upon negative entropy” ^[12]. Every cell, every metabolism, is a dissipative structure in Prigogine’s sense — a dynamic compromise between internal coherence and external flux. Stuart Kauffman later wrote, “life is a process that builds itself by making use of the very flows that threaten to dissolve it” ^[13]. Edgar Morin reframed this insight: “Order and disorder are not

opposites, but partners in the same generative process” ^[14]. Nicolis and Prigogine similarly described instability as “a reservoir of potential order” ^[6]. To control such systems, in the classical sense, is to silence them. To observe them is to learn how coherence emerges through fluctuation, not against it. Francisco Varela captured this interdependence: “the observer and the observed co-emerge in the very act of knowing” ^[15]. Ultimately, non-equilibrium is not a condition to be corrected but a principle to be understood — the grammar of emergence.

3. Geometry and the Grammar of Emergence

Geometry is the silent syntax of matter. D’Arcy Thompson wrote, “The form of an object is a diagram of the forces that act upon it” ^[16]. Alan Turing’s diffusion-driven instability ^[11] and René Thom’s catastrophe theory ^[17] both recognized geometry as a mediator of emergence. Michael Berry showed that curvature induces a “geometric phase” — the accumulation of order through path-dependent evolution ^[18]. Recent work in nanophotonics confirms this: Bekenstein et al. demonstrated that “light can be guided and focused by artificial curved spaces” ^[19], while Kedia and Dennis showed that curved-surface optical modes possess distributed coherence absent in planar systems ^[20]. This resonates with Hermann Weyl’s insight: “geometry is the expression of the order of things, not the order itself” ^[21].

4. Coherence, Disorder, and the Ethics of Complexity

Paul Dirac once wrote, “It is more important to have beauty in one’s equations than to have them fit experiment” ^[22]. Eugene Wigner marveled at “the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences” ^[23]. David Bohm argued that “order and disorder are not opposites, but aspects of a deeper wholeness” ^[24]. Edgar Morin wrote, “The task of knowledge is not to simplify the world, but to make complexity intelligible without mutilating it” ^[25].

Thus, simplification must be a cognitive and methodological act that balance accessibility with fidelity, which reveals coherence without erasing essential complexity. In this aim, language and conceptual framing are mechanisms of resilience that help preserve meaning across simplifications, ensuring that intelligibility does not come at the cost of truth.

However, as Richard Feynman reminded us: “Nature’s imagination is so much greater than man’s; she’s never going to let us relax” ^[26]. There, in that trembling balance between precision and wonder, science

regains what it once risked losing — not control, but meaning as observer-dependent informational relevance — the emergence of pattern significance through context and selection.

5. The Experimentalist as Selector of Reality

If non-equilibrium is the source of order, then the experimentalist is not an external observer but a participant — a selector within the system’s unfolding. Every choice of temperature, substrate, solvent, or illumination defines a slice through an infinite landscape of possibilities. Werner Heisenberg wrote, “What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning” ^[27]. The scientist learns not by suppressing variability but by cultivating sensitivity to its signatures.

In doing so, he evolves from an engineer to what Michael Polanyi called a “tacit knower” — one who “understands more than he can tell” ^[28]. John Dewey saw art as “the organization of energies into a coherent experience” ^[29]; in this sense, every non-equilibrium experiment is an artistic act. As Ilya Prigogine noted, “The scientist himself becomes part of the irreversible processes he observes” ^[30]. Francisco Varela described cognition itself as “the bringing forth of a world through the activity of living” ^[31].

As we mentioned above, to experiment on a non-equilibrium system is not to control it, but to accompany it. The experimenter becomes a selector of reality — a participant who shapes the visible from the possible.

We found along the way, three principles guide this practice:

- a. **Ontological Alignment.** The experimental setup must resonate with the nature of the phenomenon. A system cannot be forced into artificial linearity without destroying what makes it coherent. The apparatus is not an instrument of domination, but a framework that allows emergence to reveal itself.
- b. **Methodological Reduction.** The fewer the elements, the purer the phenomenon. Minimalism is not asceticism but precision — a refusal to let the instrument speak louder than the system. The best experiment is the one that contains only what cannot be removed.
- c. **Participatory Observation.** No measurement substitutes presence. Direct observation remains the highest form of inquiry, for only the attentive eye can perceive the unexpected — the fleeting anomaly that later becomes principle.

From these arise a non-systematic methodology: The experimenter does not vary parameters in a rigid grid, but in a spiral — observing, adjusting, converging. Each iteration refines attention rather than control. Anomalies are not errors but signals of higher organization; reproducibility is not identity but recurrence of coherence. In this sense, understanding grows not by enumeration, but by resonance — between the system’s voice and the observer’s intuition.

The concept of the experimentalist as a “selector of reality” intentionally preserves a degree of subjectivity, since the act of recognition and focus within complex phenomena cannot be entirely objectified.

Selection, in this sense, is not procedural but interpretative: it reflects the scientist’s capacity to perceive coherence within fluctuation. Once such coherence is recognized, it can indeed be formalized and communicated through systematic measurements — but the initial act of selection remains a human contribution, guided by intuition, experience, and sensitivity to context.

This framing acknowledges that subjectivity is not a limitation but an intrinsic part of discovery in non-systematic domains.

6. Epilogue — The Apprenticeship of Understanding — Science in the Age of Intelligent Companions

Every scientific age invents its own kind of student. The seventeenth century gave birth to the observer — the patient measurer of the measurable. The nineteenth century trained the engineer — master of instruments, builder of control. The twentieth shaped the analyst — interpreter of data, constructor of models. Now, the twenty-first calls for another kind: the companion of intelligence. For the first time, knowledge has a partner that does not forget, tire, or doubt. An intelligence that can calculate faster than thought, search deeper than any library, and simulate the very world it seeks to describe. But this new power does not abolish uncertainty; it magnifies it. The problem is no longer how to know, but how to mean. When every equation can be solved by code, and every hypothesis tested in silico, the essential question shifts: what is understanding, once explanation is automatic? In this new apprenticeship, the student no longer learns from authority but from interaction. The teacher is distributed — part human, part algorithm, part phenomenon. The laboratory is not a place but a conversation. Knowledge emerges not by replication of past results but by resonance across intelligences — human intuition meeting computational clarity. And perhaps that is how science returns to its oldest form: not a doctrine, but a

dialogue. Galileo's telescope and Bacon's method were tools for forcing nature to reveal its order. The new tools — intelligent companions — invite us to listen instead. They free us from the drudgery of calculation so that we may face the one task no machine can perform: to discern significance. Understanding, in this sense, is not an output but a relationship. It grows between the measured and the felt, between logic and wonder. The young researcher of the future will not be trained to command complexity but to accompany it — to sense when a model ceases to describe and begins to distort; to know when an answer is true yet meaningless. Machines will master precision. Humans must master discernment. And discernment, like love or art, cannot be programmed — only practiced. The new apprenticeship of science, then, will not teach control but humility: to know that intelligence is no longer ours alone, yet understanding still is. For understanding is not stored in memory or code — it lives only in the act of recognizing coherence amid confusion. It is what allows a scientist, staring at a messy experiment or a flickering simulation, to whisper, there it is. That moment — when order reveals itself through participation — is where the human remains irreplaceable. In the age of intelligent companions, we are not losing our place in knowledge. We are finally learning how to share it.

And yet, even when every calculation, every prediction, every optimization can be performed by machines, two gifts will remain forever human. The first is the capacity to see order where others see only chaos — to glimpse structure in turbulence, coherence in noise, meaning in accident. The second is the power to give that order a sense — to weave observation into significance, and significance into understanding. Everything else — precision, repetition, memory, control — will belong to the machines. But these two acts, seeing and meaning, will remain the untranslatable gestures of the human spirit.

For science, at its deepest, has never been about knowing more. It has always been about seeing differently.

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