

Cheerful Meandering: On the Virtues of a Sinuous Life

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Translated by Jessica Siegel

What is characteristic of modern life? What particular features and historical currents shape it? The efforts of philosophy and sociology to find answers to these questions about how our epoch understands itself have been intense. Here, “form of life” (*Lebensform*) has become a fundamental concept, when it comes to grasping the character of modern societies. Ever since Ludwig Wittgenstein accorded “*forms of life*” a central role in his philosophical work, the term has come to describe the totality of social practices and patterns of behavior. Forms of life provide the very foundation from which we come to understand, shape, and humanize our shared world. For they furnish a pre-given, acknowledged order. Forms of life render our individual behaviors and needs meaningful and reasonable. One might say they quite literally give form to our lives. They *inform* them and thus give them their orientation.

Hence, I don’t think it is wrong to read forms of life as a kind of cultural grammar, out of which meaningful and intersubjectively intelligible life can first emerge. Since the Renaissance, this cultural grammar in the Western world has been profoundly shaped by linearity. The linear form of life is characterized by distinctive features in that it first apprehends space. The

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modern age is generally characterized by the fact that a linear framework furnishes reality with a calculable order extending from private space to the ideal city. Let us simply look around where we are standing right now: bathroom tiles, windows, walls, high-rise buildings, city squares. Or consider the landscape with its linear arrangement of cultivated fields and forests, the grid-like order that prevails within it. The straight line is that formative idea, that ideal construction, which determines lived spaces of inner and outer architecture no less than it organizes the state-space designed in engineering drawings: motorways, canals, railway lines, pipelines, or straightened rivers. This readily graspable clarity finds its reflection in the countless urban plans and landscape reorganizations of modernity, all of which constitute rationalist overwritings of space. Le Corbusier formulated it in a way that proved prophetic for the future: "A modern city lives practically by the straight line. (...) The straight line belongs to the whole history of humanity, to human purpose, to human action."

In one of the twentieth century's most influential architectural visionaries, we can already perceive the emergence of what continues into the present as a linear form of life. Not only space, but time itself comes under the dominion of the line. It fell to the Enlightenment to coin the epoch-defining concept whose consequences would prove so far-reaching: progress. From Blaise Pascal's *continuel progrès* to Karl Marx's notion of a "progress of history", a notion that continues to inspire political parties to this day, social development traces a line into the future, moving from the worse toward the ever better, made tangible in rising consumer-based prosperity and steadily increasing life expectancy. As a result, the laser beam that the present projects straight into the future in fantastical acts of anticipation, armed with more or less sophisticated socio-utopian or technoscientific schemes, appears as the embodiment of historical reason. Stirred by visions, the historical gaze of the Western world turns toward the future, unaware of the illusion upon which it rests. This remarkable way of relating to time, in which the geometry of linear sequence finds its reflection, continues to demonstrate its formative power even today in something as banal as the "timeline," the life-schema of the digital Facebook subject replicated millions of times.

The linear rhetoric of space and time, which formalizes landscapes, cities, and history, extends equally to mentality and character. The ideal of a successful life includes that it runs as straight a course as possible, borne by an unwavering, goal-directed subject that speaks straight out, neither bending nor twisting, and that remains steadfast, never deviating from the

once set course. This applies above all to the professional life-line of a career. Alongside moral guidelines, political and corporate leadership is expected to set a general line, with fidelity to the line being rewarded. Within the schema of this form of life, a firm character is ascribed to those who embody the traits of unswerving forward striving.

The conclusion seems to suggest itself: the grammar of modern Western world culture shows itself to be inspired by an overwhelming need to disentangle life, with its bewildering nature and entangled movements. Everything seems to demand a clarity that overlays space with productive landscapes and governable cities, and draws time into stringent planning sequences of use, yield, and speed, grounded in a belief in straightness, unhesitating goal-directedness, and linear progress. An essential secret of modernity's triumph lies in the fact that linear logic succeeds in establishing a continuous progressive calculability, sustained by notions of efficiency, enhancement, and functionality, which ultimately aim to extract everything extractable from nature and civilization, whether landscape or metropolis, human capital or livestock.

If linearity long appeared to be a principle of reason by which reality could be organized in an increasingly rational and productive way, the irrational and destructive consequences of this form of life are now becoming ever more evident. By now, it can hardly be denied that the closely linked conception of life, economy, and history, with its unwavering imperative of escalation, is steering straight toward a situation whose civilizational-historical destructive force assumes unprecedented global dimensions. The future, and the beautiful straight road leading to it, have unmistakably lost their former splendor and plausibility.

It may even be that the losses of this linear dynamic will, in the not-too-distant future, outweigh the interim gains of which we have been beneficiaries for a brief historical moment. However, there is a mechanism built into modernity that prevents societies from truly perceiving this dilemma and responding to it appropriately. The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz calls this "the invisibilization of loss," by which he means that the form of life of the "progress society" structurally obscures its destructive and loss-inducing effects, because otherwise they would act "like a detonator."¹

¹ Andreas Reckwitz, *Verlust. Ein Grundproblem der Moderne* [*Loss: A Fundamental Problem of Modernity*], Berlin 2024, S. 23, 154.

The crisis that has now befallen the linear conception of history, “from which the future has slipped away”², thus provides us with good grounds for seeking out other dynamic figures of reason. There is a long tradition, reaching back to ancient Greece, of opposing the straight line to the sinuous line, pliant opportunism to undeviating straightness. In cultural history, this antagonism finds its reflection in the image of the serpent. Not only Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer, but also John Milton, brand the serpent as dangerous, deceitful, and toxic, since, as it is written in the Book of Revelation, it “deceives the whole world.” In fact, moralism remains steadfastly committed to a rhetoric hostile to meandering, warning against “crooked dealings” or against bending oneself out of shape. In politics as well, turnarounds and zigzag courses are frowned upon. To open up the possibility of dissolving—and perhaps overcoming—this deeply entrenched opposition between the straight line and the serpentine line, a new perspective was required: the cool gaze of the natural sciences.

While the analysis of the line belonged to mathematics, that of the meander belonged to physics. Far more complex, it took two thousand years longer to arrive at its formal scientific description. The eponymous Meander River, already known in antiquity for its thousand bends, flows into the Aegean after three hundred and eighty kilometers through western Asia Minor. At the same time, it is a symbol, for all rivers in the world meander. They wind their way through landscapes, shaping them over centuries and sustaining their fertility.

On 7 January 1926, Albert Einstein, still preoccupied with the knotty elaboration of the general theory of relativity, delivers a lecture at the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The subject must have left most of those present somewhat astonished, whether or not they had been able to attend Einstein’s lecture “Cosmological Considerations on the General Theory of Relativity” (*Kosmologische Betrachtungen zur Allgemeinen Relativitätstheorie*) at the same venue nine years earlier. The topic chosen by Einstein was: “On the Cause of the Meander Phenomenon in River Courses” (*Über die Ursache des Mäander-Phänomens bei Flussläufen*).

What, then, happens in a meander? First, following Einstein, we have to bear in mind that even in the most uniform river currents, occasional disturbances are inevitable. They occur with particular certainty, however, at points where the current comes into contact with its surroundings, that is, at the riverbed or along the banks. When this occurs, the balance between

² Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* [*Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*], Frankfurt am Main 1986, S. 17.

two forces is shifted, in short: the outward-directed centrifugal force and the inward-directed, opposing pressure-gradient force. As a result, the fluid begins to perform an acrobatic movement. While continuing to flow forward as before, it simultaneously begins to move crosswise to the direction of flow, from the outer bank toward the inner bank. The river, one might say, leaps through the very rings of flow it has itself created, rings that cut across the direction of the current and carry sand and stones at every bend toward the inner side, the slip-off slope. A physical circus that generates meander curves.

As compelling as Einstein's explanation was, he was by no means the first to be fascinated by this long-enigmatic phenomenon. In fact, meandering had already begun to preoccupy classical physics intensively by the middle of the nineteenth century. Whether in Paris, St. Petersburg, London, or Vienna, almost no European academy of sciences failed to engage in a research debate on the matter. And it was not long before it became clear that the same interplay of forces could also be observed in other forms of fluid dynamics, such as the atmospheric motion of air currents. Yet the greater the scientific understanding became, the more complex the actual conditions turned out to be, pushing every physical calculation to the limits of its capacity. To this day, non-computable turbulence in the "meander phenomenon," and, with them, questions of physical chaos, remain a scientifically non-trivial problem.

And yet: since the earliest fluid-dynamical explanations of sinuous currents, the research work of physics has confirmed the insight that wherever contact occurs within a flow, where frictionless motion encounters something resistant, something of different substance and density, a world of straight-line progression gives way to a multitude of curvatures, turns, turbulences, and transverse circulations. There emerge dynamic, self-organizing, and complex forms, the result of which becomes visible in the meander. For the formation and unfolding of flow systems, as are, in fact, nearly all processes of life and nature, one way or another always ends up in crooked stories.

It is therefore hardly surprising that serpent-reviling Luther asks somewhat resignedly: "Who knows why our affairs go so crooked?" (*Wer weiß warum unser sachen so krumm geben?*) The answer that still remains hidden from him is this: every time a flowing system is touched by its surroundings and thereby disturbed, a river by a rocky shore, an economic enterprise by a changed political environment, its former flow is deflected and begins to curve in another direction. A life flowing along familiar paths suddenly takes an unexpected turn upon contact with another person, be it

a superior or a beloved. The general principle behind these processes is what I wish to call dialogical plasticity (*dialogische Plastik*). Its distinctive feature lies in the enduring relational dynamic between two sides, in that one side emerges from the other. The river arises from the bank, and the bank from the river. Landscape arises through human beings, and the human being through landscape. The child arises through the mother, and the mother through the child. Every instance of dialogical plasticity bears within it the form of the meander. And every meandering event is indelibly marked by relationality and a reciprocal play of forces.

Open exchanges, such as those between rivers and their banks, are particularly effective in living, communicative systems. The form of contact inherent in communication reveals its open character in language as a form of life in every one of our conversations. Franz Rosenzweig draws attention precisely to this when he says that conversation “does not know in advance where it will end up; it takes its cues from the other.”³ That is: my sentence takes shape in response to the sentence of the other person, as an answer, justification, ironic retort, or small anecdote. Experience shows that the language-game of reciprocal speech flow rarely proceeds without friction; at any moment it can encounter resistance and veer off in another direction. Conversations meander, oscillate, and wind their way forward, thereby excluding any linear progression, unless communication is subjected to a maximum degree of control and standardization, as is the case, for example, in hierarchical commands or the mere transmission of information.

Not surprisingly, then, within the movement of free, equal exchange, the flow of conversation and interaction, like all rivers, meanders. With the precision so characteristic of concepts, we call this flowing movement of dialogue “conversation” —literally: a turning-together, back and forth, like a river in the space of social reality.

If every meander, whether natural, social, or communicative, constitutes a relational formation, expressing as it does the dynamics of a reciprocal relation, then one must recognize, in fluid processes of exchange, that one form of existence arises through another distinct form of existence. What configuration of curves and turns will emerge remains unforeseeable and beyond control. This points to an important property of the meander: its latency, the open reality of hidden directions. Only in the process of speaking do conversations come into being. Like other dynamically reciprocal forms of life, they are not pre-given. They can neither be carried

³ Franz Rosenzweig, *Das neue Denken. Eine nachträgliche Bemerkung zum „Stern der Erlösung“*. [The New Thinking: A Retrospective Remark on *The Star of Redemption*] In: *Der Morgen: Monatschrift der Juden in Deutschland*. 1925, H. 4, S. 426–451.

out nor planned like technical procedures. Wherever this is attempted, every genuine conversation withers away, and with it its inner force of unexpected turns and new perspectives. Only the reality of hidden directions opens our relationality, our encounters with others, to flowing movement, drifting, and intellectual wandering. All of this is fostered by an inner lightness and cheerfulness, by curiosity and by not being fixed in advance.

The discipline of linear logic must not prevent us from recognizing that much of what structures the small dramas of communication also reappears in the larger stories of life. Whether novels or biographical narratives, they all share a long-standing awareness that the stories they tell are full of turns, detours, and digressions. What in music is called *divertimento* is, in practical life, the insight that one can at any moment deviate, redirect things, and simply turn aside when our contact with the surrounding world prompts us to do so. Even if one proceeds “straight” ahead, driven by goal-oriented striving, even if one pursues a career along a straight line, one never actually reaches this ideal line of the modern biography. Upon closer inspection, these are in fact without exception stories of astonishing turns: sudden reversals, human catastrophe, political revolt, religious conversion, or professional reorientation. And suddenly, the successful investment banker becomes a shepherd in Provence. Behind this biographical meander lies the recognition of the importance of room for maneuver, of self-determined changes of direction and vital deviation, an insight that submits less to rigid principles than it insists upon our uncontrollable inner dynamism.

No less interesting here is the view of society. Political observers such as Ulrich Beck have long noted a “liquefaction of politics into political process.”⁴ And in the “liquid modernity” of which Zygmunt Bauman speaks, social currents become increasingly fluid. The more liberalized and self-organizing lifestyles permeate society, the more its internal processes become non-linear and sinuous. The paradox here is that although this is precisely what society desires, it is simultaneously lamented. And although one ought to welcome the thoughtful lightness of meandering systems, politics is often criticized for resembling a roller-coaster ride. One telling example among many is the debate over Germany’s energy transition: a gradual nuclear phase-out decided in 2002, a reversal in 2010 through the extension of reactor lifetimes, a return to phase-out after Fukushima in 2011, and a renewed debate today about re-entering nuclear energy.

⁴ Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* [*Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*], Frankfurt am Main 1986, S. 323.

One cannot emphasize enough that the more democratic a society becomes, the more sinuous and self-generated its forms of meandering become. For social and political currents encounter resistance everywhere that cannot simply be broken through authoritatively, but must instead be laboriously bypassed or overcome in a plastic dialogue. Where, in modernity, everything is set into motion, traditional certainties of belief, social role models, or homogeneous, stationary societies, the movements of meandering thus become historically decisive. Society continually accumulates vibrational energy, even if meandering appears inefficient, wasteful, and cumbersome. A second factor also comes into play, historical events. For genuine events are phenomena of curvature. Events, wars, stock market crashes, or the election of an American president, act as points of disruption, after which socio-political currents take a different turn. As long as history is also a history of events, the hope for its rational linear arrangement remains an illusion. History meanders, and at times it even seems, like river loops, to flow back in the opposite direction, toward the past. Augustine of Hippo called moments of historical turning or counter-movement *epistrophē*, epochal turning point.

Every dynamic, flowing, and self-forming system, whether rivers, living beings, or societies, follows the law of continuous contact with its environment, through which its distinctive sinuous form emerges. The meander is a formation of relation, of constant contact. The character of the environment becomes a formative part of the shape of the meandering river. Conversely, every flowing system shapes the natural, social, or political landscape. The meander is therefore the result of an interplay. While the straight line is a prescription within conflict, the meander is the transcription of an encounter. It does not draw the outline of a dictat, but unfolds in dialogue with what surrounds it. In doing so, it expresses another form of time, a slow, environmentally attuned, winding temporality. In this way, it brings forth the reciprocity of self and other, of the familiar and the foreign, of turning away and turning toward. A non-hierarchical relation of reciprocity.

Contrary to linear ideologies, it must now be acknowledged that in serpentine lines a manifold reciprocity and mutual influence between bank and river, system and environment, individual and society becomes manifest. The river is the bank, and the bank is the river. Together they form a dialogical plasticity. Where what is at stake is continuous correlation rather than relations of power, river and bank become, in the meander, a mutually constitutive relation, each contained within the other. This also implies that the meander can be deflected; it takes detours. In this sense, it

is also circuitous. Yet circuitousness arises whenever there is a shared ground that makes it difficult simply to override the Other, whether thing or living being, possibly even with authoritarian force.

One may wish for a world of crystalline clarity and linearity, but this does not prevent the reality of our lives, with their environmentally sensitive, irritation-prone, in short, open relations of exchange—from invariably leading to meandering, often entangled trajectories, whether in nature, in interpersonal relations, or in social developments. This reciprocity transforms both sides, river and bank, me and you. It then becomes meaningless to fix the river to a river-identity and the bank to a bank-identity. In their form of life, the child implies the mother and the mother the child. Their form is continually emerging and transforming through the other. This principle applies to all open social relations and allows the identity debates of recent years to appear, in many respects, as deviation-resistant, hegemonic rigidifications.

These fundamental insights now also shed light on something central to modernity, our conception of freedom in the sense of sovereign agency. For relational flows, sovereignty means not being unrestricted, not being able to override other beings or things. Rather, it means acting within an interplay of contact and interaction with one's environment. Accordingly, sovereignty does not arise, as orthodox moral theory long claimed, from the free and independent decision of the individual. Rather, it emerges from the reciprocity of different sides, from the interplay of forces within a field. What appears morally scandalous about the meander, the perceived "serpentine evil" of a sinuous life, lies, for modern subject, in the fact that our relational embeddedness distributes freedom or volition across different points within the social field. Sovereignty thus presents itself as an outcome of a shared situation. The ethics of the meander ethics stands in opposition to the idiocy of individualism.

No one lives for themselves alone. Every single miracle of life is carried by the vital reciprocity and dialogical plasticity of multilateral interaction. All action depends on co-activity, all dwelling on earth on cohabitation, every dream of the future on collaboration. Natural-social formations are meanders, free dances of movement in the interplay of vital agents and myriad influences. And if it is right to say that freedom is the freedom of the other, then not because this merely separates one from another in their egocentric claims, but because it expresses, in a deeper sense, the call to coordinated action, in the execution of which all sides arrive at a form of freedom that none could ever have achieved alone.

In this precise sense, the meander presents us with a planetary model of a multifaceted, dialogical plasticity, thereby inviting a conception of freedom that is as consequential as it is unconventional. Sovereignty is sovereignty within relational constellations that include both human and non-human beings alike. Dialogical sovereignty emerges from a dynamic process of interacting life forms that, in this way, bring themselves into a condition of freedom that allows them to live their lives with greater intensity, efficacy, and fulfilment, without dominating, harming, or destroying other forms of life.

In 1913, Marcel Duchamp, during an artistic experiment he would later describe as “the main source of my future,” stretches between his hands a white thread, previously cut to the metric standard of one meter. He then releases the taut line from exactly one meter above onto a canvas lying on the floor, “turning as it pleases.” He repeats this procedure twice more. He observes that all three threads have settled into serpentine lines. When he finally fixes the threads with varnish onto the Prussian-blue painted canvas, it is clear to him that he is preserving a particular form of freedom whose resemblance to a river is hard to miss.

The meandering thread suddenly brings the relaxed line into relief. Duchamp’s three falling threads thus present, if one may say so, a brilliant example of an aesthetically articulated, comprehensive politics of relaxation in modernity. The fall from tension into release brings forth the form of something entering flow. Alongside this emerges a turning away from a goal-oriented, instrumentally rational, and efficiency-driven overstrained epoch, with its unilateral planning structures and production lines. In this striking moment of the things’ refusal to be held in place, the growing indistinctness between letting go and freedom becomes a cultivable space open to imagination. Within the endless variation of the meander, an intellectual and social adventure flashes up.

It is as if, a century ago, Duchamp anticipated something upon which, after two world wars and an era overshadowed by arsenals of atomic weapons, the hope of the world would come to rest, and today once again in a particularly urgent way: relaxation. Between states, but now also in the relation between humans and nature. One can hardly avoid the conclusion that Duchamp’s small action has the potential to become a global gesture, a civilizational project. Its concrete metaphor is the meander. Its form is nonlinear, sinuous narratives of history and nature. In the face of a planetary life in crisis, it seems necessary to replace a driven, hurried, goal-directed time with an epic time whose knowledge lies not in data, formulas,

and applications, but in a deviant, “crooked” wisdom and in the “secret of the longest path.”

“The secret of the longest path.” I think Elias Canetti found in this phrase the most beautiful formulation for describing the meandering essayism of our lives. It opens our gaze to an experimental field in which an overstretched, efficiency-driven economy of life, with its calculus of “hopelessly straight forms,” as Canetti puts it, can be transformed into a conversion program that fundamentally alters the prevailing social grammar. The meander offers insights into another cultural and political ecology, into forms of life in which subjects and objects are not hierarchically ordered, and action and sovereignty are not unilaterally and one-dimensionally fixed. In its incalculable scope, this re-volt, with its interplay governed not by diktat but by dialogue between self and other, the familiar and the foreign, culture and nature, would amount to a genuine turning point in time. Within the horizon of our present antagonistic, strained world emerges a meandering cheerfulness, full of contact and shared deviation, which is nothing other than the search for the secret of the path that is right for all, while preserving terrestrial forms of life.



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