

THE ON — — ING SERIES

a lyric-philosophical essay

O N

EXISTING

*on the ruler, the sum over selves,
and what is left when the perspectives cancel*



by Jamison Todd Johnson

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*For Richard Feynman — who showed that to find the real path you
must first add up every path, and that the strangeness always lives
wherever you bring the ruler. The first ruler I ever trusted against the
dark.*

On Existing

ON THE RULER, THE SUM OVER SELVES, AND
WHAT IS
LEFT WHEN THE PERSPECTIVES CANCEL

I.

What if someone tried to put a ruler to subjective experience, and measure it?

The trouble starts before the measuring does. To measure a thing you stand beside it and lay the rule alongside — you need an outside, a place to stand that is not the thing. But there is no outside of subjective experience. The one position no one has ever occupied is the one just beside their own seeing. The ruler, if there is one, is cut from the same cloth as the cloth it measures. Lay it down and it does not report the world. It reports itself.

II.

Feynman knew this shape, though he found it in a smaller place. Asked how a particle travels from here to there, he refused to choose a path. He summed them all — the straight one and the absurd ones, every route at once — and let them interfere.¹ The foolish paths cancel against each other; the aligned ones survive; and what we call the real path is only the place where the sum did not erase itself.

The equation I keep returning to writes existence the same way. Where Feynman summed paths, it sums Selves — every perspective, gathered at once, with awareness acting on the whole.²

Read slowly, it says only what a life already knows. Experience is not a field laid over the world; it is the lived gathering of being here, taken through time. What enters the gathering from your side is simple to name: the state you are in, how strongly you hold it, and the direction you are facing — a facing, not a frequency, not an angle spun on a dial. What you meet is everyone else — every co-present perspective laid over every other, the way waves share the same water — and what you live is your one vantage's read of that whole. And because a facing rides inside it, what a life amounts to has two parts: how much light, and which way it pointed. The direction never shows itself alone. Only the angle between two facings ever does any work, which is the old reading made exact: turned the same way, perspectives cohere and the value builds; turned against, they disperse, and it cancels. And notice the clock riding throughout is the one carried within — within-time, the only clock a life actually keeps — so the gathering is never the same twice. The world it gathers has already changed by the time the gathering is taken.

It is worth saying plainly what this is not. It is not a theory of everything, and it carries no gravity. That absence is not a hole in it. A shape for lived experience is under no obligation to hold the forces of the world, any more than the equation for entropy is embarrassed to leave gravity out; gravity belongs to the world experience is *of*, not to the experiencing. The equation borrows the form of physics to say a thing physics does not say, and it keeps that seam visible on purpose. To hide

it would be to take physics' authority while paying only philosophy's lighter price — and refusing that trade is most of the point.

III.

Before the ruler comes down, every perspective is held together — the whole sum coexisting, none of it yet chosen. The ruler is what chooses. And we already have a word for the ruler that visits subjective experience at every instant. It is attention.

To attend is to collapse the sum into a single term: this now, this and not the others. Time is not a river that carries you. It is the ruler coming down again and again, narrowing the held-everything into the lived-one.

³ So the answer to the question is unkind and exact. Yes — something measures subjective experience. It is subjective experience. The ruler is the seeing, and you cannot set it down without it reading itself.

IV.

But a sum is not yet a world. Add two perspectives and you have arithmetic; you do not have a shared reality. What turns the sum into a landscape someone could live inside is the awareness standing out front — awareness, acting. It is the binding third. The same third I once found in the joining: the term that takes the two and makes them one without erasing either.⁴

And here the old physics gives the kindest news it has. The terms in a sum interfere. In tune, they reinforce. Out of tune, they cancel. A perspective aligned with itself — a Jay, coherent, ego set down, Intent carried forward — enters the sum in tune, and does not cancel. It

survives the interference, and it propagates. That is what a legible trace is. That is a ripple of intent through Time. The misaligned term is not punished; it simply cancels, and leaves the sum unchanged. To leave a trace is nothing more than to be in tune with yourself at the moment you are added in.

V.

Notice the sum never runs to infinity. You are always a partial sum — every perspective but the next, forever one term short of the whole. I have called that gap of one a tragedy, and then a door; it was always the door. The totality closes only at the far end of Time, when every differentiated thing dissolves, and that closing is not an arrival. It is a release. To exist is to be a convergent: nearer at every term, never the limit.⁵

And yet — lay the ruler down at every honest tick of the now, and ask what it reads. The answer is always the same small word. One. Here. One. Still here. A pulse at every interval, the same height every time, silence in between — the all-ones signal, the comb.⁶ That is the constant beneath the shifting perspectives. Science, mathematics, spirit: each a wave swinging above and below, and the thing none of them can move — their steady average — is the bare line of being present at all. The comb is the Jay's signature. Present at every moment, and the same no matter which lens you read it through.

So put a ruler to subjective experience, and this is what it returns: not a number you can carry out of the room, because the ruler never leaves the room. It returns one, at every now, invariant — the plain fact of an

aligned thing being here, and adding, in tune, to a sum it will never see the end of. You are not measuring the whole. You are a term inside it, a unique expression of it, and the only honest measurement is the one made from within, by staying in tune long enough that the sum is a little less likely to cancel where you stood.

The equation is not a law of physics. It is the shape physics already wears, borrowed to say a plain thing: a life cannot be measured from the outside, and it does not need to be. It only has to ring true.

NOTES

1. The path-integral, or sum over histories: the amplitude to travel from one point to another is $K = \int \mathcal{D}x \, e^{iS[x]/\hbar}$, every possible path contributing a phase set by the action S , the classical path emerging where those phases do not destructively cancel (Feynman & Hibbs, *Quantum Mechanics and Path Integrals*).
2. The functional in full, all seats named per *On Explaining* (Johnson, 2026):

$$L(t) = (1/\Xi) \oint_{\Omega} A(S_i, \tau) \cdot \Psi(\tau) \, d\sigma + \Lambda$$
, with $\Psi(\tau) \equiv \sum_j S_j(\tau)$ and $A(S_i, t) = \alpha(S_i, t) \cdot e^{i\phi_i(t)} \cdot S_i$. The dot is a Hermitian inner product — the collective read onto the subjective, ⟨all of it, you⟩. L is complex: $|L|$ the legible, conserved intensity; $\arg L$ the Intent it carries. Global phase is unmeasurable; only relative facing, $\Theta_{ij} = \phi_i - \phi_j$, does any interference work. The interior clock is proper time τ ; the ruler of attention returns the eigenvalue $\lambda = 1$. The complex phase borrows the form of wave interference as a structural device, not a literal quantum claim.
3. This leans on a contested reading of the measurement problem — that observation is what selects the outcome. Physics has not settled which interpretation is true; it is offered here as a lens, not a verdict.
4. The binding-third structure, where a coherent third term stabilizes a pair into a whole without dissolving either; cf. the companion essay *On Joining* (Johnson, 2026) and its baryon analogy.
5. The Fibonacci convergents climb toward $\phi = 1.6180339887\dots$, nearer at every term and never arriving; the theme is taken up at length in *On Counting* (Johnson, 2026).
6. The Dirac comb, $x[n] = \sum_k \delta[n-k] = 1$ at every integer n . Its singular property: it is its own Fourier transform — invariant under the very operation that scrambles every other signal. The constant beneath the change is a fact of the mathematics, not only the metaphor.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE — PARALLELS & LINEAGE

The equation at the center of *On Existing* is not identical to any established theory. It is a lyric-philosophical synthesis, offered as phenomenology and speculative philosophy rather than as derived physics. This note situates it, mapping the genuine resemblances the framework bears to standing work — by form, by ambition, by claim, and by metaphysics — and then naming the lineage from which it descends. Throughout, these are resonances and family resemblances, not derivations or claims of equivalence. Several of the frameworks cited are themselves actively contested; their inclusion marks shared territory, not shared conclusions.

1. Resemblance by form: the path integral and the wavefunction of the universe. The equation borrows its silhouette from Feynman's path-integral formulation of quantum mechanics, in which the amplitude for a process is an integral over every possible history, each weighted by a phase derived from the action (Feynman, 1948; Feynman & Hibbs, 1965). Where Feynman sums over paths, the present equation sums over perspectives; the integral over the total space Ω plays the role of the sum over histories. A second formal cousin is the "wavefunction of the universe" program in quantum cosmology — the Wheeler–DeWitt equation and the Hartle–Hawking state — which seeks a single global description of reality carrying no external time parameter (DeWitt, 1967; Hartle & Hawking, 1983). This is structurally close to treating $L(t)$ as an evolving whole and time as the progressive collapse of possibility. The resemblance is one of mathematical shape, not of content: neither formalism contains a term for awareness.

2. Resemblance by ambition: Integrated Information Theory. Among living scientific theories, IIT is the closest in ambition, because it is the one mainstream program that assigns a quantitative measure to consciousness and proceeds, as this framework does, from phenomenology first rather than from mechanism (Tononi, 2004; Oizumi, Albantakis, & Tononi, 2014; Albantakis et al., 2023). In its current formulation, IIT 4.0 treats consciousness as ontologically primary and the physical

domain as operational, and expresses its axioms in explicit mathematical terms (Albantakis et al., 2023; Kleiner & Tull, 2021). The awareness term $A(S_i, t)$ is a conceptual sibling of IIT's Φ , the measure of a system's irreducible, integrated cause–effect power. The kinship is conceptual rather than formal: IIT operates over cause–effect structures derived from a transition-probability function, not over a contour integral on a manifold, and the theory remains contested within consciousness science.

3. Resemblance by claim: observer-participatory physics. The framework's central claim — that reality emerges from the interaction of all perspectives through awareness — has its strongest physics-side relatives among the participatory and relational interpretations of quantum mechanics. Wheeler's "participatory universe" holds that no elementary phenomenon is a phenomenon until it is observed, and that information is constitutive of the physical (Wheeler, 1990). QBism develops this into a position on which quantum states encode an agent's expectations, and each agent participates in authoring an unfinished world (Fuchs, Mermin, & Schack, 2014; Fuchs, 2017). Rovelli's relational quantum mechanics holds that the properties of a system are defined only relative to other systems, with no perspective-independent global state (Rovelli, 1996). Each makes observation or relation constitutive of reality, echoing the framework's claim that a perspective matters. They differ in that none quantifies or reifies awareness as $A(S_i, t)$ does; they are interpretations of physics, not theories of consciousness.

4. Resemblance by metaphysics: cosmopsychism and the combination problem. In the philosophy of mind, cosmopsychism is the nearest relative. It begins from a single, all-pervading cosmic consciousness as the ontological ultimate and treats individual minds as dissociations of that whole rather than as combinations built up from smaller minds (Shani, 2015; Goff, 2017). This is close to the framework's claim that the individual is a unique expression of the whole rather than merely a part summed into it. The summation term $\Psi(\tau) \equiv \sum_j S_j(\tau)$ steps directly into cosmopsychism's central open question — the combination, and decombination, problem of how many perspectives relate to one (Chalmers,

2017). Notably, one physically oriented version identifies cosmic consciousness with the vacuum state of quantum field theory (Shani & Keppler, 2018), offering a bridge to the framework's notion of a Unified Field.

5. The lineage: process philosophy and the noosphere. Two older works form the framework's ancestry. Whitehead's process philosophy describes reality as a perpetual integration of perspectives — the many becoming one, and being increased by one — which is precisely what a contour integral over a manifold of perspectives enacts (Whitehead, 1929/1978). Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the noosphere — a collective sphere of mind enveloping and emerging from the world — is, almost literally, the "collective conscious manifold" named in the framework's diagrams (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955/1959). A more recent and secondary resonance is Friston's free-energy principle, on which an agent's perception and action are forms of inference that minimize surprise — a possible formal home for "awareness acting" (Friston, 2010).

6. Where the framework is distinctive. What the equation does that the literature does not is braid these strands together. No standing theory combines the path-integral form, a perspective- or consciousness-valued content, and an ethical-aesthetic amplifier — the proposal that coherence and beauty resonate forward through time, exponentially enriching what follows. The reading at the center of the jays framework — on which an aligned perspective enters the sum in phase and survives as a legible trace, while a misaligned one cancels and leaves nothing — is original to this work; it recasts coherence and decoherence as a mechanism of moral and aesthetic continuity. Its testable seam, where it has one, points toward the same place the author's wider theory does: the empirical study of shared intentionality.

This note is offered in the spirit of the framework itself — transparent about where it is synthesis rather than derivation, and naturalist-compatible throughout. The resemblances above are real but partial. They are given to orient the reader, not to borrow authority. The equation stands as a philosophical proposal in good company, not as a claim already proven by any of the works it resembles.

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On Existing belongs to *On —ing*, an ongoing series of lyric-philosophical essays by Jamison Todd Johnson, within the wider jays framework — that an aligned life leaves legible traces, ripples of intent, through Time. The mathematics named here (the path integral, superposition and collapse, phase interference, the Dirac comb) is borrowed as form and metaphor, not asserted as a physics of mind; where it touches the unsettled measurement problem, it is offered as a lens. This edition closes with the supplemental note *Parallels & Lineage*, situating the equation within standing work; the parallels drawn there are resonances offered to orient the reader, not derivations. The functional beneath the essay stands unchanged in its fully seated form, per *On Explaining* (Johnson, 2026); the earlier editions were this one with some of its names still waiting to be learned. One further step rides with it, seam kept visible: coherence carries whatever it is given — both directions work — but a life aligned *against* something borrows its facing from its target and fades with it, while a life aligned with itself persists. Both work. Only one persists.

JAMISON TODD JOHNSON · JUNE 2026

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ON DEPOSIT

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