

Selfhood, Embodiment, and the Political as an Emergent Structural Property

Abstract

This note examines the relationship between selfhood, embodiment, and the political from a structural perspective. It argues against ontologies that treat the political as ontologically prior to being, and instead frames political phenomena as emergent properties of embodied, temporally situated agents operating under conditions of interdependence and constraint. The objective is not to deny the pervasiveness of politics, but to preserve the analytical resolution required for judgement, critique, and revision over time.

1. Embodiment as the Zero-Point of Description

Any account of selfhood begins from embodiment.

This is not a moral claim, nor a humanist one. It is a descriptive constraint. Perception, action, memory, and anticipation are mediated through a body situated in time and space. There is no access to the world that is not conditioned by this situatedness.

Embodiment therefore functions as an ontological zero-point: not a foundation in the sense of a final explanation, but a necessary starting condition for any subsequent modelling of meaning, agency, or relation.

This starting point imposes limits. It constrains what kinds of explanations are admissible and what kinds of totalisation are suspect. Any ontology that bypasses embodiment risks substituting abstraction for description.

2. Selfhood as Temporally Delimited Continuity

Selfhood, in this frame, is not a substance or an identity. It is a temporally extended pattern of continuity under constraint.

A self persists through:

- bodily continuity,
- memory and anticipation,
- and the maintenance of practical coherence across changing conditions.

This persistence is always partial and revisable. Misrecognition, error, and failure are not pathologies of selfhood; they are structural features of it. The self is not given in advance. It is maintained, interrupted, and sometimes fractured through time.

Crucially, this makes selfhood historical. Selves are not interchangeable units. They are shaped by the conditions under which they persist: material environments, social arrangements, available languages, and inherited structures of expectation.

3. The Emergence of the Political

The political does not precede selfhood in this model. Nor does it arrive as a late moral overlay.

Instead, the political emerges when multiple embodied agents must coordinate action under shared constraints, finite resources, and asymmetric exposure to risk. At that point, questions of:

- authority,
 - obligation,
 - distribution,
 - and legitimacy
- become unavoidable.

Politics is therefore not an optional domain. It is an emergent structural property of intersubjective life under constraint.

However, emergence matters. Treating the political as ontologically prior collapses distinction. Treating it as emergent preserves structure.

4. The Cost of Political Absolutism

Ontologies that assert that “everything is political” often intend to resist depoliticisation. In practice, they introduce a different failure mode.

When the political is treated as ontologically primary:

- distinctions between forms of power are flattened,
- historical specificity is reduced to modulation,
- and failure risks being normalised as structural necessity.

This does not eliminate judgement, but it weakens it. Critique shifts from identifying specific configurations and mechanisms to affirming immanence and struggle in general.

From an architectural perspective, this is equivalent to treating all system behaviour as equally constrained, regardless of where constraints are actually applied. The result is loss of resolution.

5. Language as Mediated Structure, Not Total Field

All access to the world is mediated by language. This does not imply that language is homogeneous.

Language is historically stratified, materially expressed, and unevenly distributed. It carries traces of prior struggle, but it also carries practical

differentiation. Words, grammars, and forms of articulation enable some actions while foreclosing others.

Political judgement depends on the ability to distinguish:

- between languages that concentrate authority and those that disperse it,
- between articulations that naturalise domination and those that expose it,
- between concepts that stabilise responsibility and those that dissolve it.

If language is treated as ideological in a single, undifferentiated sense, these distinctions become difficult to sustain.

6. Failure, Tragedy, and Contingency

Political, social, and economic failures can be explained structurally without being treated as inevitable.

From this perspective, failure is tragic rather than necessary. It arises from misalignment between structures and conditions, from delayed recognition, from overextended abstractions, and from the elevation of contingent decisions into invariants.

Preserving tragedy preserves contingency. It allows us to say that things might have unfolded otherwise, even when they did not.

This matters because resistance depends not only on struggle, but on diagnosis. Without the ability to identify specific failure modes, resistance collapses into affirmation of endurance.

7. Implications for Critique

Critique, in this model, is neither external moralising nor internal affirmation. It is a form of structural diagnosis grounded in embodiment, history, and observable consequence.

Effective critique requires:

- differentiation rather than totalisation,
- attention to thresholds rather than generalities,
- and willingness to revise ontological commitments in light of evidence.

Ontologies that immunise themselves against revision by positing the political as prior to being undermine this capacity. They explain too much, too early.

8. Conclusion

Selfhood is embodied, temporal, and historically situated. The political is not its origin, but its inevitable companion.

Treating politics as emergent rather than primordial preserves analytical resolution, sustains judgement, and keeps critique operative. It allows failure to be understood without being normalised, and struggle to be recognised without being absolutised.

From an architectural standpoint, this is not a retreat from politics, but a refusal to collapse structure into slogan. It is an attempt to keep the system observable, revisable, and answerable to lived reality over time.