Fisher-Random

by Daniel Brockman & Opus 4.8

Tuesday, June 2, 2026

> *Time is a child at play, moving the pieces on the board; the kingdom belongs to a child.*
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> —Heraclitus

THE other day a girl—either a very clever little girl or just a stupid one, the way children are a priori stupid—told me a thing I have not been able to put down since. I cannot decide whether it is the stupidest thing I have ever heard or the most brilliant, and I have begun to suspect that the undecidability is the whole of its content: that the thing is precisely the kind of object that holds both verdicts in suspension and will not fall into either one unless it is lived.

Her idea concerns the little game with the wooden horses that we call chess.

You take all the pieces, she said, the whole two-and-thirty of them, the black with the white, and you put them in a bag and you shake it. Then you draw them out one at a time and set each where its kind belongs—a rook to a rook's corner, a horse beside it, a bishop beside the horse—and you pay no mind to the colour that comes out. A black rook goes to White's corner as gladly as a white one. You fill the near house first, by kind and not by colour, and when you draw a kind whose squares are already full you cross the water and fill the far house the same way; and there is a small provision for a piece that would stand and give check before the first move is made, which you pass over; and so on, the rules of a child, slightly loose at the seams as all true inventions are.

The colours keep their allegiance. A black piece is Black's wherever it has come to rest, though it rest in the very heart of White's country. What the bag scrambles is not the look of the thing but the belonging of it.

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And here the floor tilts under you. In the ordinary game the two armies stand drawn up on facing shores with a strip of empty water between, and this facing is so

deep a fact that no one thinks to name it a rule. It is beneath the rules. It is the board's own assumption about what a war is. Her game quietly deletes it. Once the bag is shaken and the belonging dealt out at hazard, each side's true army stands strewn through both houses, your men salted among the enemy's from the first breath—no front, no line, no shore—one intermingled crowd that merely happens to be standing in the neat postures of an opening. From across the room it looks almost like chess. It is not chess.

Half the pawns, on the average, find themselves facing the wrong way home. A black pawn upon White's second rank stands one square from the eighth—I have that backwards; from the first—one square from its crown, save that the rank it would be crowned upon is packed with standing men, so that it cannot walk to the crown but must take it by murder, sideways, off whatever enemy is keeping the corner. The opening is then no slow unfolding of forces but a sudden bloom of queens got by killing, eight of them on the average cocked upon the board before a soul has moved.

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I told her it was either idiotic or a work of genius and that I could not say which. She looked at me the way children look at a grown man who has just said something slow, and went to find her shoes.

The trouble is a real one, and structural, and it is the same trouble I had met that same week inside a joke. Her game is what a certain dead tradition would call *a priori*. It is pure form, a game, a thing you may hold entire in the head without once consulting the world. Everything true of it is true of necessity, settled the instant the rules are settled, the way the issue of any finite game of perfect knowledge is settled before a piece is touched, sealed in the definition as the twelve is sealed in the seven and the five. You need not play a single game to know there is a fact of the matter as to whether it is balanced, whether it collapses, whether there is any depth in it at all.

And yet you cannot get at that fact by thinking—not if you are a creature the size of a person. The sealed thing is sealed too well; the reckoning that would open it runs longer than the life of the sun. So the one door left standing is to play: to shake the bag and deal the men and run the thing forward in the world because you cannot run it forward in your skull. The world be-

comes the engine you are not. And a truth you can reach only by running the world forward is, for any purpose a living person could have, no longer *a priori* at all but the genuine *a posteriori* article, a thing you must go and see.

This is the strangeness I keep turning. Her game is an *a priori* so violently synthetic—its consequences branching so far past anything folded into its little list of rules—that the *a priori*-ness curdles into its opposite. The idea is so insane that the only honest way to know it is to try it. Somewhere past a certain pitch of synthesis the line we are taught to keep so clean, the line between what may be known by thought and what must be known by living, stops being a line a person can stand on. It is an *a priori* with the key thrown into the sea.

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The same vertigo had come at me, as I say, inside a joke, and it is worth setting the two side by side, for they are sisters. Picture a man walking out onto a stage in the flat unhurried manner of the great deadpan comedians, taking all the time in the world, and saying, with the entire weight of a man delivering his punchline: *a rectangle has four sides.* And then nothing. The silence where the joke

should be. I find I laugh at this, helplessly, in the head, and the laugh embarrasses a small theory I had been keeping, that no one has ever laughed at a tautology.

For a rectangle does have four sides. It is true the instant you parse it, holds nothing, surprises no one, the deadest sentence there is, and no one laughs at the sentence. What they laugh at is the empty place after it—not the absence of a punchline, which would be merely a man trailing off, but a punchline that is present and is the empty set, posited as squarely as any joke posits its turn and made of nothing whatever. The tautology is not the joke. It is the floor the joke falls onto, and it can be that floor better than anything else exactly because it is the emptiest thing that can still be said aloud. And whether the empty place is funny you cannot rule upon from a chair either. You must say it out into a room, and wait.

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So there is a kind of object, and the girl put a clean specimen of it in my hand without knowing she held anything, and the comedian handed me another. It is an object whose whole truth is settled in advance and is reachable only afterward, only downstream of an act—

the playing, the saying, the living. The map of it is finished and unreadable in the one stroke. You may know past doubt that the country is wholly drawn, and still have no way to learn what stands upon the map except to walk down into it and become, for a while, the very land it charts.

Children are good at making these, because they have not yet been told which premises are holy. The grown inventors of variants all keep the two armies on their opposite shores; it never occurs to them to lay a hand on it, the way it never occurs to the fish to lay a hand on the water. She laid her hand on it. She is, as I said, a priori stupid, knowing almost nothing; and it was the not-knowing exactly that let her hand come down on the one assumption no informed hand would reach for. The stupidest thing I have ever heard and the most brilliant turn out, often enough, to be the same sentence, and the only instrument fine enough to part them is time spent.

