

Squirrel In Hell

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Shell, Shield, Staff

第一

There is a certain high-level pattern of progress seen in almost every human activity, which I like to call "growth triplets". A growth triplet follows an archetypal sequence of three stages: naive, clever, and wise, with the exact meanings of these terms varying depending on the situation. The defining feature of the pattern is that the third stage has some unexpected similarities to the first one. Because of this, most people have to actually go through the second stage before they can appreciate the third.

You can find several examples in [this Scott Alexander post](#), and recently I hinted at many others:

life/performance/improv

thesis/antithesis/synthesis

tribalism/rationality/post-rationality

brains/computers/neural nets

intuitive-cooperate/defect/TDT-cooperate

overplay/honte/sabaki (in Go)

In this post I'll be [circumambulating](#) an interesting growth triplet which I'm tentatively calling "dead/yang/yin" or "shell/shield/staff". The concepts of [aliveness](#) and yin/yang are already very overloaded, but I think that in this case it's a feature, not a bug. A matching interpretation is a progression from a style of being which I would metaphorically describe as living in a Shell, to something that resembles a using structure as armor or a Shield, finally moving on to having a structure shaped like a cane or a Staff. Let me explain.

Optimization is the opposite of possibility. Exposing a composed, compact, optimized surface to the world means that you resist the wind of reality, protecting yourself from it, and at the same time preventing it from changing you. There is a sense in which hearing the song of the [Sword of Good](#) is just an alternative definition of suffering. It is about letting your nervous system expand into the world, and be tarnished by the wind of reality, which can indeed sometimes feel more like a hurricane.

第二

The first, and at the same time the last, stage of optimization is a **Shell**. A Shell has been optimized to the point where there is nothing to add or subtract from it without breaking the whole. It is at the same time the ultimate protection, and the ultimate vulnerability. While hiding in the Shell the main questions you ask of your life are "am I okay?" or "am I preserved?". Your goals reference the self as the central concept, and cannot exist without it.

People don't like when their friends are Shells. Come out they say, we want to know you better. Give us the tools that will let us interact with you deeply. Do not hide in your Shell! However at the same time, those are the exact same tools that can be used to hurt me, the person inside the Shell knows. That's why the Shell is there in the first place. In this situation, whenever the nervous system becomes exposed, it is very weak. The nerves crawl low on the floor like vines, and are easy to step on. Everyone around is understood as a potential source of pain. The kind of pain that makes you

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grow, sure, but it doesn't mean the pain isn't there. The other people will happily tread on the nerves in the most malicious way imaginable, while at the same time smiling and congratulating themselves that they are helping.

In this sense a Shell is a containment device. Its function can be viewed as not so much protecting one from the environment, as preventing the loose strands of the web of one's nervous system from spreading out into the world. The ultimate Shell is held together by optimization. And weak Shell is built from holding very hard onto individual parts, and counteracting any individual attempt of the environment to disrupt the configuration. A strong Shell has been optimized to the point where external influences bounce off without disrupting anything, automatically. The environment is inherently a weaker pressure than the forces holding a strong Shell together. This kind of Shell can even give an impression of superiority when viewed from the inside. That logic here is: if you think you are allowed past my Shell, intruder, you are welcome to break it! But I know that you can't, because you are too weak. Bwahaha!

This dynamic illustrates one of the central insights which I'm trying to circumambulate here: that what locally looks strong and therefore alive, might in the bigger picture be dead and therefore weak. Optimization is the new death.

第三

The next stage is being a **Shield**. In this setting, the rigidity is turned to one side only. There is a degree of control over what one is hiding from, and which parts of reality are fully engaged with. However, the Shield is big enough to obscure a big part of the view. Once a Shield is up, there is no longer a choice, or in fact any information, about that part of reality. You go fast, because you have chosen to put blinders on your face.

From the inside, this logic feels like making trade-offs. You optimize something and give up on something else, because that is the only way to function in this world! It's impossible to do everything and care about everything. Everything is about trade-offs. So just shut up and do the thing. When you tell yin to close its eyes and hit hard, it becomes yang.

That nervous system is allowed to expand out into the world, but only in the places where it's resilient enough. The back is not protected, but that's because the back is antifrangible. It is not tough, but it is resilient. You can afford to have a few daggers in it. The nerves are above the floor level, so they do not get stepped on so much, and when they do, it is usually for a good reason. There are giants who will step on them, bringing their huge feet crashing down from impossible heights. But then you have the comfort of telling yourself that these are valuable learning experiences. You accept them and even welcome them. You congratulate yourself on your open and brave attitude. But the truth is, giants are rare in this world, and it is so much easier to deal with them when you are not covered with fresh wounds inflicted on you by the rest of humanity.

The equivalent of a Shield in moral philosophy is the position that only people who are currently alive have moral weight. A full, stereotypical Shell would have probably pushed for strict hedonism and egoism, but this is not a very defensible position. A Shield is much harder to win discussions with. What you call blindness, they can call a responsible trade-off, and get away with it. Although their ability to get away with these arguments depends largely on the social consensus and would disappear if said consensus upgraded itself to take into account full considerations of coherence. Similarly to some tendencies of Shells, Shields use the reference to self as a central part of their goals and arguments. From a broader view, this is not so much morally bad as simply an illusion, ill defined and impossible to coherently pursue.

第四

A **Staff** is the last stage of evolution of structure. Beyond this point, there is only discarding everything and letting oneself be spread over like a formless fluid, adapting to whatever surface it rests on. But while this extreme could naively seem like a good way to continue the trend, becoming completely formless undermines the ability to do anything at all. The trick is to have structure only to the degree that it allows one to spread out more, but without getting any artificial protection. The idea of the Staff is

that while leaning on it makes it easier to stand tall, it does not shelter from the wind of reality. Not even a little bit. Quite the opposite: by standing straight you are exposing a larger surface! If your nervous system interacting with reality is imagined as a loose web, simply throwing that web out will make it crumpled and useless, while spreading it on a minimal, thin structure will maximize the surface covered. It will also maximize impact. And of course, it will maximize pain.

The aliveness of yin is not in how strong the web is. It is rather in how fast it can regenerate. Or even more upstream, the limit is in how much pain the yin is able to absorb. The process of keeping a web around some topic is not static, but is in fact composed of repeatedly letting it be torn apart, molested, brutally and unfairly taken advantage of. Each time it will grow back a little bit stronger, and this is the kind of strength that is adapted to the shape of reality. Because the process of destruction and growth happens organically, with each small increase in tightness being paid for in blood and sweat and tears, the resulting network of bi-directional influence matches reality like a well worn glove.

If you discard a Shell or a Shield, you feel more vulnerable. If, on the other hand, you discard a Staff, you instead feel *less* vulnerable. The pressure would be off if you just flopped down on the ground and stopped moving. But you don't. You keep going. You show to the world the jagged rags that you call clothes, the bare feet bleeding on the sharp rocks, the hunched back fighting against the hurricane, the face burned from staring into the scorching sun. You let yourself be judged, and you don't care. You are ugly, and you are beautiful.

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