

"Ghost", chalcedony (Brazil: 10 x 9.5 cm), image from *Lai Lecture des Pierres (The Writing of Stones)* by Roger Calhoun.



# A Distance of Stones

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1. [spaceguardcentre.com](http://spaceguardcentre.com)

Pluto, the most distant planet in our solar system, and Charon, its largest moon, are subject to what is termed 'mutual tidal locking'. They always keep the same face toward one another as they orbit every 6,387 days. Whereas our own planet swivels and twists, presenting multiple versions of itself to a single-faced moon, Pluto and Charon are resigned to gaze fixedly at each other, sharing in a commonality, as though their eyes are fused.

Between Jupiter and Mars the asteroid belt contains the elements of a planet that could never form, such has been the gravitational pull of our largest gas giant. Instead, fragments rotate through vast distances, subject to occasional collisions. Some impacts cause these lumps of rock and metal to be driven off course, into deeper space or back towards us in the direction of the Sun.

In a 'dark sky' site on the border between Wales and England, data flickers across computer screens day and night. The self appointed task of the Spaceguard Centre – a voluntary and independent organisation not as yet recognised by the UK government – is to protect our planet from asteroids and comets driven out of the Main Belt and travelling towards us.<sup>1</sup> To this end the skies are watched twenty-four hours a day. Near Earth Objects are monitored by automated telescopes gathering data. For a threat to be perceived, a base image of the skies must be made then another produced at a different time for comparison. If a dot has moved in a field of static or predictable objects, an alert is automatically created and the astronomer's attention is drawn. This moment of discerning movement also coincides with this object coming into view.

Attraction is the impulse to move towards a desired object, literally, to have traction – to acquire closeness and to share in this closeness. From inertia into an attracted state, a subject, in becoming active, also becomes simultaneously transmitter and receiver. To be attracted, or attractive, is to pull and be pulled; one cannot exist without the other. Becoming attracted or attractive is also to enter into a field of visibility. Our subject now sees and is being seen.



In a sermon written in the late 1200s, German mystic Meister Eckhart identified three distinct modes for approaching attraction.<sup>2</sup> Within the powerful Catholic traditions of his era, and as a man of the cloth, attraction towards God, for him, was the unquestionable aim. As to how we might better understand this reaching towards a higher power in order to become more like God, Eckhart invokes examples of physical processes and objecthood: the behaviours of water and stone.

Medieval painting and literature of Eckhart's time often features a physical cord binding the earth-dwelling human to the celestial figure of God above. Usually it has a glittering appearance; it twinkles, as if made of precious matter, gold trails catching the light, brightening as they stretch nearer to heaven. In Eckhart's sermon on attraction, this cord is described as made from a mingling of what it brings together – literally fragments of heavenly and mortal bodies – materials described as the Word of God, his “works and limbs and nerves”.<sup>3</sup>

His first mode of attraction, the cord of affinity, alludes to this binding. Emphasis is placed on similarity; to be attached to God in such a way is to become more like him. Like is drawn to like, same species together, the pull of the herd, the banishing of difference. Key to this mode is mutual desire; both are attracted, both are attractive.

Plato had also recognised the power of drawing like to like when thinking through the educational needs of the future inhabitants of his idealised state in *The Republic*. A poet, for instance, in Plato's view, must not use the voice of another as a cipher or write of anything he had never experienced. Only an alignment of the speaker, the writer, the actor, and what they have experienced as true could serve against corrosive untruths.<sup>4</sup>

Eckhart continues his explorations into the power of combining like with like in a sermon titled ‘The Angel's Greeting’, containing the story of a woman who has lost an eye. Her husband asks why she is unhappy and she explains that she is troubled by the thought of losing his love, as she has lost her eye. In response, the man puts out one of his own eyes to become more like her, to prove that he loves her just the same as he is the same. He argues that the act of putting out his eye is not one that breaks with consistency, but instead is a continuity of the love he feels for his wife in the eyes of God.<sup>5</sup>

This is not, then, the male tiger attracted to the female mate or vice versa, but instead a male tiger attracted to another male with markings similar to his own. Each tiger is drawn to the other as he would a mirror. The more similar the tigers, the more intense their attraction. By extension, this mode of attraction operates as a potential queering device. To be drawn like to like, to collapse difference, encourages a greater degree of union. Ultimately eyes are shared. As for Pluto and its moon, the same eyes that look at one can also be used to see the other.<sup>6</sup>

Eckhart demarcates a second mode of attraction through describing a physiological process. We are to imagine a hollow pipe with one end placed in water. Suction draws the water through the pipe, up the stem, and into the mouth. Water entering the emptiness of the pipe follows itself; water following water.

2. Meister Eckhart, ‘The Attractive Power of God’, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. C. Field (London: H. R. Allenson Ltd., 1909), 3–5.

3. Eckhart, ‘The Attractive Power of God’, 4.

4. Plato, *The Republic*, book iii, part iii (London: Penguin Classics, 1955).

5. Meister Eckhart, ‘The Angel's Greeting’, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. C. Field (London: H. R. Allenson Ltd., 1909), 25–29.

6. In the sermon ‘True Hearing’, Eckhart wrote one of his most quoted lines, ‘The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me’ and ‘My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love.’ The aim is to enhance similarity to the point where two become one. Meister Eckhart, ‘True Hearing’, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. C. Field (London: H. R. Allenson Ltd., 1909), 10.

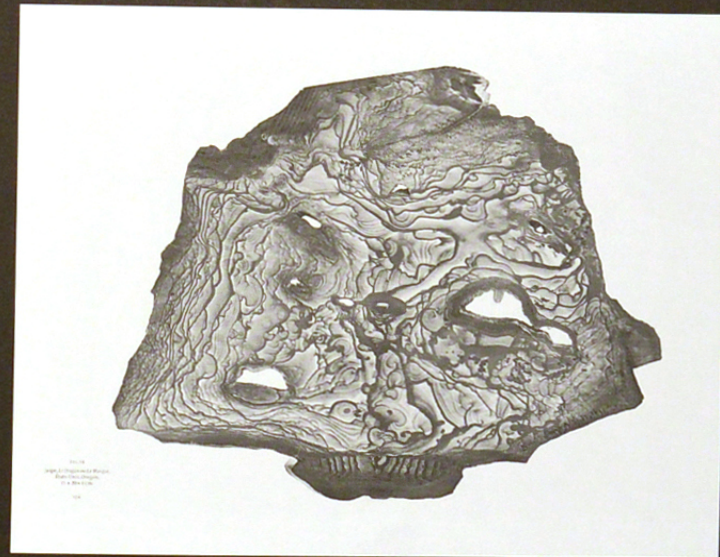


Image from the cover of *La Lecture des Pierres (The Writing of Stones)* by Roger Callois.



Jasper (Oregon, U.S.; 19.5 x 14.5 cm), image from *La Lecture des Pierres (The Writing of Stones)* by Roger Callois.



7. M. Serres, *Eyes*  
(London: Bloomsbury, 2015),  
135.

God here is emptiness; he has made himself void and water represents his flock of followers. Eckhart is not implying that the flock should be attracted to this void that is God. This is rather attraction in the absence of conscious intent; it has instead become a procedure as though at cellular level. Blood follows the blood before it through vessel and vein, causing, but not willing, the heart to beat.

In his book *Eyes*, Michel Serres writes of a celebrity's face among admirers becoming depersonalised, adopting a blankness, an unfocused stare directed at no one in particular, or as easily, inversely, at everyone at once.<sup>7</sup> As the celebrity withdraws, the admirers are drawn into the space vacated, not because they actively want to occupy the void, but because desire to adopt a likeness to the celebrity drives them forward into emptiness.

Eckhart's final mode of attraction is towards the suffering of others and could be envisaged as an extension of the second. As Christ's body leaks on the cross, his physical body bleeding out, the spectacle of his becoming void resonates with the physiological process just described. However, the direction of traction differs because of his suffering. To witness another in pain is first to be drawn powerfully towards them. This is not happening to you, and you are drawn towards that fact, that sight, to find out more. To feel safe in your separation from what you are seeing you must move in as close as you can to see what you are not.

If Eckhart's trinity of attractions were to be extended outside of religious spheres, it becomes possible to consider further modes which forgo the target of being drawn towards God.

In this spirit, a potential fourth mode of attraction could emerge, contingent on Eckhart's third, as there is evident suffering involved. This is the possibility of having your attraction rejected, or unrecognised, by the other. In the absence of God, the object of affection could be as unresponsive as stone. Beams of infatuation would bounce off the targeted object, some returning to the desirer, others flying past obliquely to strike other objects and materials at random, causing unintended effect. The few, unaltered, returned beams received by the desirer would feed in to confirm and perfect the original projected image of attraction. However, in this mode, they would barely be needed as there is no dialogue or meaningful reciprocation between the attracted party and what they are attracted to. This loss, literally, of touch, emphasises a mode of desire sustained by distance. It relies on retaining a capped knowledge of what is desired.

Finally, a fifth type is one that forgoes altogether direct access between the desirer and the object of desire. Instead, an envoy, delegate, messenger, philosopher is sent in the desirer's place. This representative must go and observe and then return to relay what they have seen, projected forward and then reeled back as though once again attached by a cord. As such this go-between is composed of the desirer, the desired and, of course, themselves. They operate as a further triangle of parts; as traveller, impersonator, translator. They must move back and forth, adopting the guise of the nodes they oscillate between. They must convert what they see with their eyes into the spoken word, conjuring as they do in their host a mind's eye view of the desired object. All of this must be repeated, to potentially



accumulate over time. The go-between is at one and the same time void in and of themselves while brimming with the charges and forces of the other.

Increasingly, as further modes of attraction are introduced, the attribute of distance features more strongly. Being drawn to the suffering of others, unrequited desire and using a messenger to engage with the object of attraction, all place the desirer at a remove. A gap begins to extend not only between the one who is attracted and what is desired, but also, potentially, to knowledge of what might be attractive.

Now we are drawn into the world. We are attracted and attractive, we see and are seen. We have come into existence. We have been sucked through voids. We have moved closer and find ourselves further away. In *The Writing of Stones* the Surrealist intellectual Roger Caillois positions ideas of distance and proximity within an experimental frame. He focuses on how we might perceive of the markings or 'images' that exist in agate stones if a slice were taken through them revealing their insides. These stones consumed him with fascination towards the end of his life. He was struck by the problem of how we might understand the information they contain when they were formed millennia before human beings came into existence. What do they say of what knowledge is, of what art is? And how might these stones speak of what ideas of distance offer to both?

Caillois refers to one of his samples of cut stones as "a shocking copy of an alien reality".<sup>8</sup> He is referring to arbitrary markings that have been made by no hand and for no intended purpose, which when revealed by slicing and then polishing a stone's surface, can be perceived as lifelike representations of scenes we might recognise in our current world. However, Caillois admits that his stones cannot truly be thought of as copies as there was never any original, as such, to base one on. Yet information has been recorded, and proposing the stone as a copy in this way serves to draw attention to the vast void crossed to now encounter this resemblance anew.

Image stones involve folding space down and condensing time. They are both a record and a recording: a literal compression of layers of unknowable life forms, capable of becoming a single still image, or one in a series, if a succession of cuts were made. Either way an image, or images, formed in stone cannot meet with existing knowledge already in our possession as distance to source is too vast.

Vilém Flusser invites us to encounter a comparable phenomenon to Caillois' stones in his book *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, sharing with him the intention of meditating on the copy, resemblance, and the human condition through use of the distant object as a signifier of pre-existence.<sup>9</sup> Flusser's semi-fictional creature, based on the extant vampire squid, is described as a creature that can be found only in the deepest parts of the ocean and at such depths, and therefore under such physical pressure from the weight of the waters above it, that we literally cannot bring it to the surface and into our world, much less have it in our hands, to examine closely. Flusser drives home our intrinsic segregation from the living squid with the notion that if an attempt was made to bring it to the surface in a pressurised tank this would inevitably result in the squid simply consuming itself in apparent distress.

8. R. Caillois, *The Writing of Stones* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1985), 6.  
9. V. Flusser and L. Beck, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique De Recherche Paranaturaliste* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

10. The cephalopod is any member of the molluscan class of exclusively marine animals including the vampire squid. Literally translated from the Greek, 'cephalopod' means foot attached to head.

It would suffocate in our air, just as we would be crushed to death instantly in its deep-sea environment. It is vital for Flusser's experiment to work that the divide between human and squid is finite and insurmountable.

For the most part, Flusser thereafter continues to emphasise divides rather than similarities between his partially invented cephalopod and human beings, describing the habitat of the former in a three-dimensional world while we are tied to the gravitational pull of ours, pointing out its solution to the pitch dark crevices of the ocean where it provides its own lighting displays and its means for courtship and reproduction far in advance of our own.<sup>10</sup> As did Caillois, Flusser utilises the demands of the human imagination, our essential fascinations and extreme fantasies, in an attempt to probe deeper into human ontologies via another 'natural' form. Crucially, however, he allows for what he terms "convergences" or evolutionary moments where similar, or near identical, attributes are created in unrelated species. One such convergence, he notes, is the eye, which has a beguilingly similar appearance in both vampire squids and humans. The introduction of this sudden instance of fusion, this coincidental accident of function and appearance, rather than returning the anthropomorphic debate, has the effect in Flusser's text of expanding possibility along unforeseen evolutionary lines. This sudden match of an eye, and so potentially a view shared between cephalopod and human, as Eckhart invited us to consider a shared eye between the faithful and God, also serves to emphasise the extraordinary qualities of such a moment of union across vast territories. Furthermore, evident in Flusser's descriptions of the elaborate behaviours of the squid, he also appears to share with Caillois a resistance to the reductionism of natural selection as explanation for all animal behaviour. Flusser's study of the squid, as for Caillois in his other writings on the octopus and the praying mantis, refutes the idea that the animal only does what is required of it to reproduce and survive. Flusser's squid is capable of making and reproducing art. Caillois' 'artworks', as recorded in the formation of stones, wait in their exuberance for their first contact with the human eye.

Flusser's squint gaze, via the vampire squid and its dwelling place far out of sight at the bottom of the ocean, was formed precisely to aid intimate reflections on the evolutionary decisions that have been made for us over time through a range of our own inevitable successes, excesses, and failures. Caillois, before him, ventured yet further into the distance, into the inanimate mineral world for a via point, his stones waiting at a depth, most not yet in our hands, markers of both our unmapped, yet extensive subconscious, and all that remains opaque to us.