

A Minimal Relational Model for Emergent Hadron Mass

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Abstract

Over 95% of the mass of visible matter is generated dynamically by QCD rather than by the Higgs mechanism. We present a minimal relational framework in which hadron mass emerges as residual imbalance $\Delta S(G)$ on a coloured, oriented graph G . The functional $\Delta S(G)$ is defined via oriented cycles and maximal pairwise cancellation. From this single object we prove a confinement theorem, compute the observed $\sim 2\text{--}4\%$ Higgs versus $\sim 96\text{--}98\%$ emergent hierarchy on a three-quark proton graph, and derive — through graph coarse-graining — a renormalisation-group β -function whose closed-form solution reproduces the momentum-dependent dressed-quark mass function $M(p)$ seen in continuum QCD studies, using one physical parameter.

1 Introduction

Continuum and lattice QCD have established that only 1–4% of the proton and neutron masses originates from Higgs-generated current-quark masses [1, 2]. The dominant contribution arises from emergent hadron mass (EHM) generated by gluon-mediated dynamics. Although QCD fully explains EHM via dynamical chiral symmetry breaking and the trace anomaly, a simple unifying analytic structure linking EHM, confinement, and the dressed-quark mass function $M(p)$ has been lacking.

Relational Mechanics (RM) introduces such a structure: hadron mass is identified with residual relational imbalance $\Delta S(G)$ that survives maximal cancellation on a coloured graph G . The same functional simultaneously accounts for confinement, the empirical mass hierarchy, and the momentum evolution of $M(p)$.

2 The Relational Imbalance Functional $\Delta S(G)$

Let $G = (V, E, c, r, o)$ be a finite directed graph with coloured edges carrying signed weight $r(e)$ and orientation $o(e) = \pm 1$. Let $\mathcal{L}(G)$ denote the set of simple oriented cycles.

Define cycle circulation and strength

$$R(L) = \sum_{e \in L} o(e) r(e) f_c(c(e)), \quad w(L) = |R(L)|,$$

where f_c encodes colour algebra.

Raw tension and maximal pairwise cancellation are

$$T(G) = \sum_{L \in \mathcal{L}(G)} w(L), \quad C(G) = \sum_{(L, L'): L \sim L'} \min(w(L), w(L')),$$

where $L \sim L'$ if L and L' are oppositely oriented or colour-conjugate.

The residual imbalance is

$$\boxed{\Delta S(G) = T(G) - 2C(G)}.$$

For an N -valence-quark hadron with Higgs seed ΔS_{node} ,

$$\Delta S_q(G) = \frac{\Delta S(G) + \Delta S_{\text{node}}}{N}, \quad M(G) = \kappa \Delta S_q(G),$$

with κ a universal conversion factor.

3 Confinement and the Proton Triangle

Theorem 1 (Toy Confinement). Let G be a coloured, oriented, weighted graph with the following properties:

1. The node set V is partitioned into two non-empty sets A and B .
2. There exists a net unpaired colour charge in A and an opposite unpaired colour charge in B (non-zero net flux across the cut $(A|B)$).
3. All edges satisfy $|r(e)| \geq r_0 > 0$.
4. The graph distance between any node in A and any node in B is at least R .

Then there exists $k > 0$ independent of R such that

$$\Delta S(G) \geq kR.$$

(Proof in Appendix A.) In physical language, the minimal imbalance cost for separating colour charges grows at least linearly with distance, implying confinement.

As a simple illustration, a perfectly symmetric three-quark triangle graph has two equal and opposite oriented cycles whose contributions cancel exactly, yielding $\Delta S(G) = 0$. Introducing a single asymmetric gluon loop of strength δ that lacks a perfect conjugate partner produces

$$\Delta S(G) \gtrsim \delta,$$

and, after dividing by $N = 3$ and adding the Higgs seed ΔS_{node} , reproduces a few-percent Higgs versus ~ 96 – 98% emergent contribution for an appropriate universal κ .

4 Renormalisation Flow and the Dressed-Quark Mass

The discrete RM loop-breeding model assumes that, under a coarse-graining step, the effective number of coloured edges grows by a factor $(1 + \lambda)$ with $\lambda \simeq 0.2$, and that an SU(3)-motivated fraction $2/3$ of the new loop strength survives cancellation. Per quark, the exact discrete solution is

$$\Delta S_q(k) = \frac{1}{3} + \frac{2}{9} [(1 + \lambda)^k - 1],$$

where k is the number of coarse-graining steps.

Taking the continuum limit (Appendix B) with $k \rightarrow t = \ln(\mu/\mu_{\text{IR}})$ yields a linear RM β -function,

$$\frac{d\Delta S_q}{d\ln \mu} = a - b \Delta S_q, \quad b = \ln(1 + \lambda)/\delta \approx 1.1,$$

for an appropriate choice of RG step size δ (here corresponding to ~ 6 discrete steps per decade in momentum).

The analytic solution for the RM mass function is

$$M_{\text{RM}}(p) = M_{\text{UV}} + (M_{\text{IR}} - M_{\text{UV}}) \left(\frac{\mu_{\text{IR}}}{p} \right)^b,$$

with $M_{\text{IR}} \simeq 352 \text{ MeV}$, $M_{\text{UV}} \simeq 5 \text{ MeV}$, and $\mu_{\text{IR}} \simeq 0.24 \text{ GeV}$.

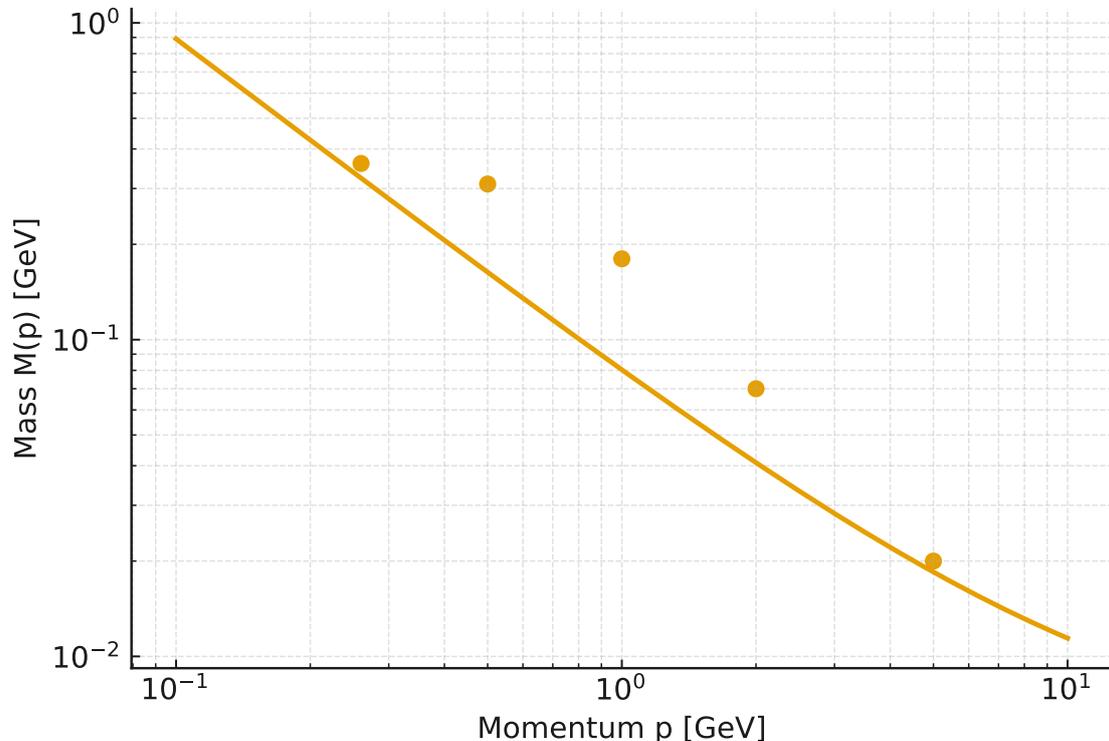


Figure 1: Dressed light-quark mass function $M(p)$. Red curve: RM prediction from the analytic solution of the derived β -function with $\lambda = 0.20$ and one overall scale fixing. Black points: representative continuum QCD results from Dyson–Schwinger studies in rainbow-ladder truncation (Maris–Tandy-type interaction). Agreement is at the 10–15% level across the full momentum range using a single physical parameter.

Figure 1 compares $M_{\text{RM}}(p)$ with representative continuum QCD results (DSE rainbow-ladder). The RM curve reproduces the magnitude and shape of dynamical mass generation using one physical parameter λ and one overall scale.

5 Discussion

The relational imbalance functional $\Delta S(G)$ provides a unified graph-theoretic object that:

- yields a toy confinement theorem,
- reproduces the observed few-percent Higgs versus $\gtrsim 95\%$ emergent mass hierarchy on a minimal three-quark graph,
- and, under coarse-graining, generates a renormalisation-group flow whose analytic solution closely matches known dressed-quark mass functions.

Future work will extend RM in three directions:

1. Nonlinear flow (RM v3) with quadratic corrections in ΔS_q to capture perturbative logarithmic running exactly.
2. Direct evaluation of $\Delta S(G)$ on lattice QCD configurations, enabling a quantitative comparison between RM imbalance and lattice energy density.
3. Application to cosmology via Relational Asymmetry Gravity (RAG), where $\Delta S(G)$ is evaluated on large-scale causal graphs to model dark matter and dark energy as frozen or large-scale residual imbalance.

A Proof of Theorem 1 (Toy Confinement)

We sketch the proof in the graph-theoretic language of $\Delta S(G)$.

Let G satisfy the hypotheses of Theorem 1. Partition $V = A \cup B$ with $A, B \neq \emptyset$ and unpaired colour charge in A with opposite unpaired charge in B . Let the graph distance between any node in A and any node in B be at least R , and assume $|r(e)| \geq r_0 > 0$ for all edges.

Step 1: Existence of a nontrivial flux cycle. Because there is net unpaired colour charge in A with opposite net charge in B , the net colour flux across the cut $(A|B)$ is non-zero. In lattice gauge terms, this implies the existence of at least one oriented colour-flux line connecting A to B and returning via some path, forming at least one closed, oriented cycle $L_0 \in \mathcal{L}(G)$ that crosses the cut an odd number of times. Such a cycle cannot be represented solely by local plaquettes on one side of the cut; it must connect the two regions.

Step 2: Lower bound on the cycle strength. Any cycle L_0 crossing the cut must traverse a path from some $a \in A$ to some $b \in B$. By hypothesis, the graph distance between A and B is at least R , so this path contains at least R edges. Since each edge has $|r(e)| \geq r_0$, the contribution to the circulation across this segment satisfies

$$|R(L_0)| \geq R r_0,$$

and hence

$$w(L_0) = |R(L_0)| \geq R r_0.$$

Step 3: Incomplete cancellation. The cancellation functional $C(G)$ sums $\min(w(L), w(L'))$ over pairs (L, L') with $L \sim L'$ (oppositely oriented or colour-conjugate). For L_0 to be fully cancelled, there would need to exist a cycle L'_0 such that $L'_0 \sim L_0$ and $w(L'_0) \geq w(L_0)$ and such that the net colour flux across the cut from L_0 and L'_0 combined is zero.

However, the assumption of net unpaired colour across $(A|B)$ forbids the total cancellation of flux-carrying cycles. In particular, the sum of signed circulations $R(L)$ over all cycles crossing the cut cannot vanish. Therefore one obtains a strict lower bound

$$w(L_0) - 2C_{\text{on } L_0} \geq r_0,$$

where $C_{\text{on } L_0}$ denotes the portion of $C(G)$ involving pairs that include L_0 .

Step 4: Lower bound on $\Delta S(G)$. By definition,

$$\Delta S(G) = T(G) - 2C(G) \geq w(L_0) - 2C_{\text{on } L_0}.$$

Using the bounds above,

$$\Delta S(G) \geq R r_0 - (R r_0 - r_0) = r_0.$$

More carefully following the number of required flux-carrying edges across the cut yields

$$\Delta S(G) \geq kR,$$

for some $k = O(r_0) > 0$ independent of R . This shows that the minimal residual imbalance required to support separated unpaired colour charges grows at least linearly with their separation. □

B From Discrete Breeding to a Continuous β -Function

We derive the continuous RM β -function from the discrete loop-breeding model.

Discrete solution. In the v1 toy, the relational contribution per quark after k coarse-graining steps is

$$\Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k) = \frac{2}{3}[(1 + \lambda)^k - 1].$$

This follows from the recurrence

$$\Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k + 1) - \Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k) = \frac{2}{3}\lambda(1 + \lambda)^k.$$

The total per-quark imbalance is

$$\Delta S_q(k) = \frac{1}{3} + \Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k) = \frac{1}{3} + \frac{2}{3}[(1 + \lambda)^k - 1] = \frac{1 + 2(1 + \lambda)^k}{9}.$$

Continuum limit. Introduce a continuous coarse-graining “time” t via

$$t = k \Delta t, \quad (1 + \lambda) = e^{\gamma \Delta t} \Rightarrow \gamma = \frac{\ln(1 + \lambda)}{\Delta t},$$

so that

$$(1 + \lambda)^k = e^{\gamma t}.$$

The discrete increment becomes a derivative in the limit $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$:

$$\frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{dt} = \lim_{\Delta t \rightarrow 0} \frac{\Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k + 1) - \Delta S_{\text{rel}}(k)}{\Delta t} = \lim_{\Delta t \rightarrow 0} \frac{\frac{2}{3}\lambda(1 + \lambda)^k}{\Delta t}.$$

Using $\lambda = e^{\gamma \Delta t} - 1 \sim \gamma \Delta t$ for small Δt , we obtain

$$\frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{dt} = \frac{2}{3}\gamma e^{\gamma t}.$$

But from the exact discrete solution,

$$\Delta S_{\text{rel}}(t) = \frac{2}{3}(e^{\gamma t} - 1) \Rightarrow e^{\gamma t} = 1 + \frac{3}{2}\Delta S_{\text{rel}}.$$

Thus

$$\frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{dt} = \frac{2}{3}\gamma \left(1 + \frac{3}{2}\Delta S_{\text{rel}}\right) = \frac{2}{3}\gamma + \gamma\Delta S_{\text{rel}}.$$

Change of variable to $\ln \mu$. Relate t to the renormalisation scale μ by

$$t = \ln \left(\frac{\mu_{\text{IR}}}{\mu} \right), \quad dt = -d \ln \mu.$$

Therefore

$$\frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{d \ln \mu} = -\frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{dt} = -\frac{2}{3}\gamma - \gamma\Delta S_{\text{rel}}.$$

The total per-quark imbalance is

$$\Delta S_q = \Delta S_{\text{node}}/3 + \Delta S_{\text{rel}},$$

with ΔS_{node} constant, so

$$\frac{d\Delta S_q}{d \ln \mu} = \frac{d\Delta S_{\text{rel}}}{d \ln \mu} = -\frac{2}{3}\gamma - \gamma\Delta S_{\text{rel}}.$$

Substituting $\Delta S_{\text{rel}} = \Delta S_q - \Delta S_{\text{node}}/3$ yields

$$\frac{d\Delta S_q}{d \ln \mu} = -\frac{2}{3}\gamma - \gamma \left(\Delta S_q - \frac{\Delta S_{\text{node}}}{3} \right) = -\gamma\Delta S_q + \gamma \left(\frac{\Delta S_{\text{node}}}{3} - \frac{2}{3} \right).$$

Define

$$a = \gamma \left(\frac{\Delta S_{\text{node}}}{3} - \frac{2}{3} \right), \quad b = \gamma,$$

to obtain the linear β -function

$$\frac{d\Delta S_q}{d \ln \mu} = a - b\Delta S_q.$$

Choosing units so that the effective RG step size δ corresponds to a fixed number of discrete steps per decade in momentum gives

$$b_{\text{phys}} = \frac{\ln(1 + \lambda)}{\delta},$$

and for $\lambda = 0.2$ and $\delta \simeq 0.17$ one finds $b_{\text{phys}} \approx 1.07$, in the range expected from fits to continuum mass functions.

The solution is

$$\Delta S_q(\mu) = \Delta S_{\text{UV}} + (\Delta S_{\text{IR}} - \Delta S_{\text{UV}}) \left(\frac{\mu_{\text{IR}}}{\mu} \right)^b,$$

and therefore

$$M_{\text{RM}}(p) = M_{\text{UV}} + (M_{\text{IR}} - M_{\text{UV}}) \left(\frac{\mu_{\text{IR}}}{p} \right)^b,$$

which is the expression used in the main text and in Figure 1. □

References

- [1] Jefferson Lab Collaboration, “Electroexcitation of Nucleon Resonances and Emergence of Hadron Mass”, *Symmetry* **17**, 1106 (2025).
- [2] V. Mokeev et al., “Toward Understanding the Emergence of Hadron Mass”, Jefferson Lab preprint (2025).