PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

The History of the Lost Difference

A Relational Reading of Ancient Philosophy

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Part I – The Greek Debate

On Myth, Movement, Boundary, Number, and the Transformation of a Relationship into an Object

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Preliminary Note: How This History Is to Be Read

The history of philosophy is often told as a succession of great thinkers, each of whom is said to have developed his own conception of the world. Yet for our investigation, this would already amount to a decision that we should first examine. We are less interested in which Greek thinker was right in his explanation of the world than in the question of how anything emerges as something determinate at all. What constitutes a difference? Under what conditions can we name it, count it, draw it, or make it the object of a thought? And what happens to such a determination when it is detached from the context of its emergence and read centuries later as a statement about an already constituted thing?

Heraclitus, Parmenides, the Pythagoreans, Leucippus and Democritus, Plato and Aristotle are therefore not to appear before us as a collection of mutually independent inventors. We consider them within a historical debate. Their views contradict one another, and often they are not even asking the same question. Nevertheless, their reflections touch on a shared field of problems: movement and constancy, being and non-being, boundary and division, number and measure. The question of difference emerges in this field from different perspectives—sometimes precisely where the answers are mutually exclusive.

Our approach is guided by Volume 0 of “Tractatus Principio”. A transmitted statement is not regarded as a sealed container of its meaning. Rather, we first distinguish its visible trace, the context of its emergence and transmission, and the relationships under which it becomes legible in its original text. Only then do we proceed to our own further consideration. Where the works themselves are lost, we must draw on later witnesses and make their distance in time explicit. The analogy with the Tractatus therefore comes at the end of the examination of sources, not at its beginning.

Volume I is also authoritative for the perspective internal to the work: the distinction “|” is not an already constituted element among other elements, but the condition of their determinability. In this approach, number and geometry are not mutually independent foundations. Number is a reading of articulated relation; geometry is the same question in the form of boundary, figure, direction, and construction. Volume I explicitly calls geometry “relation in an image” (Chapter VII). We will question the Greek testimonies from this perspective without retrospectively attributing the terminology of the Tractatus to them.

The significance of this caution becomes particularly clear in atomism. Anyone speaking of a “body” among the Greeks must not simply imagine the now familiar picture of a tiny sphere of matter. Corporeality there concerns shape and extension as well as boundary and divisibility. It thus touches on geometry and—through unity, multiplicity, and measure—on mathematical

determination as well. Certainly, ancient authors distinguished mathematical domains of objects and procedures. But a distinction between their methods does not yet imply that number, figure, and body must be understood as mutually unrelated worlds. What interests us is precisely the transitions at which these determinations interlock.

Our thesis is therefore not that the Greeks were all essentially saying the same thing. Rather, the sources reveal a many-voiced debate about how differences emerge, are represented, bounded, and finally retained as something determinate. The possible history of a misunderstanding begins where a later reading takes this retained result on its own and loses sight of the relationships through which it became determinable at all.

1. From Myth to the Question of Emergence

The surviving Greek texts do not begin with a philosophical textbook. One of the oldest surviving accounts of the world's emergence is found in Hesiod's “Theogonie”, usually dated to the late 8th or early 7th century BCE. In line 116, the sequence begins with Chaos: “First Chaos came into being.” The poem then names Gaia, Tartarus, and Eros. From Chaos emerge Erebus and Night; further connections bring forth new forms and orders.

We should not too hastily confuse the Greek “Chaos” with our present-day notion of disorder. The word can denote a gaping, an opening, or a chasm. Yet it would be equally mistaken to immediately suspect a modern philosophical principle behind it. Hesiod tells of named powers whose significance unfolds through their emergences and genealogical relationships. We learn what becomes of them and how they stand in relation to one another. It is precisely here that the order of his narrative lies.

It is striking that Eros has a place in this early sequence. Connection does not appear only at the end of a world that has already been fully established. Even though Hesiod is not thereby formulating a general theory of difference, something presses itself upon our question: the world is not explained by an isolated enumeration of already constituted objects. Determinations are brought into language through the account of their emergences and connections.

With the Ionian thinkers, the form of the question changes. Anaximander of Miletus, in the 6th century BCE, is later associated with the “Apeiron”, the unlimited. A famous fragment is preserved through Simplicius, an author of the 6th century CE. This distance in time is part of the evidence; we possess no page written directly by Anaximander. The transmitted passage says, in paraphrase, that things return to those contexts from which they arose, and render compensation to one another according to the order of time.

The phrase “one another” is noteworthy. Coming into being and passing away are not simply presented as independent states of individual things. Their order contains a reciprocal reference. Yet the fragment is too slight, and its transmission too mediated, to attribute a fully formulated relational ontology to Anaximander. It opens a question, not a licence to equate the Apeiron with “|” or with Delta.

Thus, even here we encounter two different ways of describing the world's emergence. Myth recounts it through figures and lineages; the philosophical tradition attempts to grasp the order of coming into being and passing away conceptually. Neither is significant for our investigation because it secretly contains the same doctrine as the other. In different ways, they show how the determination of an appearance is connected with its emergence.

2. Heraclitus: The River Cannot Be Separated from Its Flowing

With Heraclitus of Ephesus, around 500 BCE, the activity of distinguishing itself comes more clearly into view. His work has not survived in full. We possess sentences that other authors quoted, arranged, and commented on. We must therefore separate the transmitted fragments from later summaries.

This begins with the most famous saying attributed to Heraclitus: “Everything flows.” It is extremely effective as a concise formula, but is not identical with a securely attested verbatim fragment of Heraclitus. Plato gives such an interpretation of flowing in “Kratylos” 402a. The river fragment B12, often regarded by scholars as the most reliable, says more precisely that ever different waters flow towards those who step into the same rivers.

Why does this shift matter?

“Everything flows” can easily be understood as though all constancy dissolved into ceaseless change. Yet it is precisely Heraclitus's river image that holds both together: the same rivers and different water. The river remains recognisable as a river while the water continually changes. Its determinacy thus does not exist independently of the movement that constitutes it. It is not first an immobile thing to which flowing subsequently happens. Rather, the recognisable shape becomes legible precisely in the continuing change.

Here lies the strength of the relational reading: identity is not necessarily the opposite of movement. It can become determinable in an ongoing difference. The image does not assert that everything changes arbitrarily. It makes a particular connection between remaining and becoming different visible.

Fragment B51 sharpens this insight. It says, in paraphrase, that people do not understand how what diverges comes together with itself. Bow and lyre serve as images. The bow is not first an already constituted bow to which tension is then externally added. Its efficacy depends on the distinguishable directions holding together in a tensioned context. Likewise, the lyre becomes capable of sounding only through its particular relationships of tension.

The statement that opposites are somehow “one” would be a rather meagre summary of this. The bow and the lyre allow us to follow much more precisely what Heraclitus is getting at: the sides' striving apart belongs to the context in which the shape acquires its determination and efficacy. Tension does not stand alongside the bow; it helps sustain its determinate function.

Another transmitted sentence is illuminating. In B1, Heraclitus describes his own discourse as distinguishing and setting out things according to their respective nature. Here philosophical speech does not merely show results. It names an activity through which something is made discernible and legible.

From here, we can investigate the later formula “Everything flows” as a possible abbreviation. Not every summary is already a misunderstanding. Yet if Heraclitus's interconnected remaining and becoming are reduced to the assertion of unqualified change, the internal relationship of his image shifts. The difference that sustains the river's determinacy disappears behind the mere word “change”.

3. Parmenides and the Eleatic Challenge: What Can Be Thought at All?

Parmenides of Elea, in the early 5th century BCE, often appears as Heraclitus's great antagonist: movement on one side, unchanging being on the other. This textbook opposition initially helps us find our bearings, but can abbreviate the original context.

Parmenides wrote a didactic poem. In fragment B2, the speaking goddess distinguishes paths of inquiry. One path concerns that it is; the other, that it is not. The latter is rejected as a path on which what is not could neither be known nor spoken.

This contains more than the later slogan that everything is immobile. What is initially posed is the question of the conditions of a tenable statement. Can what is not be treated as an object about which something determinate could be said? May linguistic negation already count as the positive determination of a second being?

This question touches on a decisive point in Volume I of the Tractatus: from A follows a distinguishable non-A side, but not yet an independently determined B. Negation does not simply carry positive content out of itself. This analogy does not make Parmenides the author of the Tractatus. It merely helps us recognise that the boundary between statement and non-statement itself requires philosophical work.

In the Eleatic tradition, Zeno's paradoxes pose further questions about division, extension, and movement. If a line segment is divided ever further, what, then, is a subsegment? What does it mean to reach a boundary if differences can again be posited between beginning and end? Zeno's individual arguments differ; as a shared perspective of inquiry, we take away the point that divisibility is not merely a manual action performed on things. It concerns the status of magnitude, boundary, and movement themselves.

The connection between geometry and knowledge already shows itself here. Anyone speaking of a body as an extended something is at the same time speaking of possibilities of cutting, bounding, and determining. The question of the “smallest” is therefore by no means already a modern microscopic question. Initially, it is also a question of what a further geometrical or conceptual cut would mean at all.

4. Number, Figure, and Measure: The Mathematical Form of Distinction

Even before we turn to atomism, we must consider a connection easily lost in retrospective engagement with antiquity. There, the question of a smallest body that cannot be divided further cannot simply be separated from line, surface, shape, magnitude, and measure. If we

already presupposed the modern opposition between a material microphysics and an abstract geometry, we might overlook the conceptual relationships the Greek thinkers themselves investigated.

The Pythagoreans provide an important example, albeit one that is difficult in terms of source criticism. We possess no writings by Pythagoras himself that would attest to a coherent original doctrine. Aristotle reports in “Metaphysik” I, 5 that the so-called Pythagoreans recognised principles of the world in the ratios of numbers and musical intervals. This account is a valuable ancient source, but at the same time a later interpretation of the Pythagorean tradition.

Its subject is noteworthy for us: number here is not merely a label attached to individual objects. Numerical ratios make orders of tones and other relationships describable. Ratio, magnitude, arrangement, and shape belong to the attempt to read a world as mathematically determined.

One must not conclude from this that Greek mathematics as a whole never distinguished between number and geometrical magnitude. Euclid's “Elemente” treat geometrical constructions and number-theoretical objects in distinguishable books. Yet separating procedures is not the same as separating their underlying problem of origin. Number and geometrical figure can be different forms of presentation and proof of the same question concerning articulation, boundary, ratio, and measure.

This is precisely what is decisive for the reading internal to the work. In the Tractatus, number is not first an abstract entity that subsequently acquires a figure. The figure is one possible visibility of articulated relation; number is another reading of its context. We must not equate these readings as though they always had the same function. But we must relate them back to the enactment of distinction effective in both.

The relationship becomes especially clear later in Euclid. Book VII of the “Elemente” determines the unit as that through which something is called one, and number as a multiplicity composed of units. Book I begins with point, line, and surface, and with the actions of drawing, extending, and describing circles. That number is treated in a different part of the work from geometrical construction emphatically does not mean that, among the Greeks, we would have to choose between a material body and a number unrelated to it.

For Euclid, the point is that which has no part. The line has length without breadth; the ends of a line are points, the boundaries of a surface are lines. We find a chain of reciprocal determinations through division, boundary, and extension. In geometrical proof, a figure is determined not solely by its drawn appearance, but by the construction and the relationships of its parts.

For what follows, let us keep in mind: when a Greek thinker speaks of indivisibility, we must ask within what order something is divided, what is preserved in a division, and through what that which is called indivisible is to remain legible as shape or unit. Geometry and number are not mere illustrations here. They belong to the matter itself.

5. Leucippus and Democritus: The Atom as Boundary and as a Geometrically Determined Body

The Greek “atomos” (ἄτομος) means uncut or indivisible. A familiar word, then, behind which a certain danger lies. For as soon as we hear “atom”, we almost involuntarily picture a small particle of modern natural science. In this way, what Democritus meant seems already settled before we have even read the testimony about him.

Democritus's writings have not survived in full. A particularly important early testimony is Aristotle, “Metaphysik” I, 4, 985b4–20. Aristotle reports that Leucippus and Democritus assumed the full and the void as fundamental determinations. He also transmits three modes of differentiation: “rhysmos”, “diathigē”, and “tropē”, which he explains as shape, arrangement, and position. For illustration, he uses letters: A differs from N in shape; AN from NA in sequence; the orientation of a sign can change its position.

For our investigation, this report is valuable precisely in its twofold character. Aristotle does indeed present the atomists as proponents of indivisible, full bodies. Anyone claiming that Democritus spoke exclusively of a subjective boundary of knowledge and never of corporeal elements would fail to do justice to the transmitted ancient evidence.

But the statement “indivisible body” is by no means already the modern conception of a particle. Such a body is geometrically determined: through extension, shape, demarcation, location, and the relationship to the void that makes separation and movement possible. Its differences are not simply explained by a particular substance, but by shape, position, and arrangement. The examples of letters show that the same components can become legible differently through their relationship. AN and NA do not have different letters, but they have a different order.

The atomistic doctrine thus poses two questions at once. On the one hand, it posits bodies denied physical divisibility. On the other, it explains the diversity of appearances through geometrical and ordering relationships. It is precisely here that the history of difference must look more closely, instead of merely opposing the slogans “smallest matter” and “pure boundary of knowledge”.

What does it mean at all to declare something indivisible? Does it mean that no physical cut is possible? That no further distinction is envisaged within the assumed order? Or that even conceptual division into smaller extensions is excluded? These meanings are not simply identical. Modern scholarship therefore explicitly asks in what sense ancient atoms were conceived as physically or also mathematically indivisible.

For our relational reading, “atomos” is the limiting case of distinguishing: that which is not further decomposed within a particular reading perspective. This reading does not replace the transmitted doctrine of full bodies. It discloses what conceptual work is required for the “not-further-divisible” to become a something posited as indivisible.

The actual historical break thus comes into view. The later claim that Democritus predicted the atom of modern physics draws a line of identity of name from the ancient “atomos” to the early modern and modern “atom”. But the name does not guarantee the persistence of the

same distinctions, the same geometry, the same conditions of divisibility, or the same relationship between theory and observation. Moreover, modern atoms were themselves distinguished into further components. This alone does not refute the ancient doctrine; it shows how inadmissible it is to treat two differently determined concepts as the same object merely because they share a name.

For Democritus, the real difficulty thus does not lie solely in the question of whether he imagined a very small particle. More interesting is the transition from a geometrically and conceptually determined boundary of division to a permanently posited element. What is not to be divided further within a particular order acquires the role of a ground for further determinations. We have yet to investigate how the ancient atomistic doctrine justifies this step and how later traditions read it. In any case, sharing a name with the modern atom does not relieve us of this work.

6. Plato: When Division Does Not Yet Produce a Determination

Plato's dialogues show how explicitly the question of correct distinguishing was pursued. “Phaidros” 265d–266b concerns gathering together and dividing. The good speaker and thinker should not cut arbitrarily, but proceed according to the constitution of what he investigates: as it were, at the natural joints.

In “Politikos” 262d–263a, the Stranger shows why a cleanly executed cut does not yet yield a division that is tenable in terms of its subject matter. The opposition between “Greeks” and “barbarians” does linguistically separate two sides. But the name “barbarians” groups entirely different peoples under a single negative determination. The counterpart of the Greeks does not suddenly become a uniform kind through its being non-Greek.

Plato illustrates this with numbers. Anyone who separates ten thousand from all other numbers can name the remainder, but has not thereby determined a genuinely uniform genus of numbers. A boundary can be posited; its second side does not automatically acquire a positive structure of its own through this positing.

Here Volume I of the Tractatus connects directly. From A does not already follow a B determined in itself. Negation marks a difference, but mere negation does not yet establish a tenable second determination. Plato's example is therefore so important because it examines the context from within the enactment of dividing. The error does not lie only in a wrong name, but in a division that fails to do justice to its own domain of objects.

In “Sophistes” 255c–e, the relationship is expressed still more sharply. The Other is always other in relation to an Other. Otherness is not intelligible as an isolated property. Its determination requires a relation. Nor is non-being simply treated there as a second independent thing standing opposite being. Plato investigates the meaning of being different.

We should not read this as the claim that Plato formulated the entire relational basic architecture of the Tractatus. There is, however, a genuine historical source text here in which the question of the relationship of what is distinguished is explicitly posed. Such passages sustain our investigation more strongly than retrospective similarities between individual catchwords.

7. The Spherical Human: When Difference Is Told as Myth

In Plato, difference becomes a theme not only argumentatively but also mythically. The myth of the spherical humans occurs in Aristophanes' speech in the “Symposion”, approximately 189c–193d. We possess it as part of a dialogue by Plato, not as an independently attested original narrative from early Greece. This attribution matters if we take the earliest accessible source seriously.

Aristophanes tells of three original kinds of spherical double beings: male, female, and male-female. They are powerful until Zeus divides them. Henceforth, the separated beings seek their other half. The narrative makes separation and relationship into an event that can be felt. The cut brings forth not only individual sides, but at the same time new conditions of seeking, recognising, and desiring.

In the final chapter of Volume II, “Das mythische Denken”, the Tractatus reads this narrative as an image of distinction. Its formula is: unity – separation (|) – relationship. The three original kinds are read there in the light of the work's own order of difference. And the final sentence condenses the point internal to the work: “I am not the half. I am the stroke.”

For our new historical text, it is precisely the distinction between levels of reading that matters. Aristophanes initially tells of an original corporeal wholeness. The Tractatus reads in it a movement in which relationship, and not the restoration of an already constituted object, becomes the decisive context. This is an explicitly further-reaching analogy, not a literal doctrine of the historical Aristophanes.

And the Platonic dialogue itself compels us not to isolate the narrative. In the later speech of Socrates, who recounts Diotima's teaching, it is explicitly questioned whether love is simply the search for a half or a whole. In “Symposion” 205e–206a, desire is directed instead towards the good. A half can be desired if it is good; it is not already the goal merely because it is a half.

This is not a troublesome objection to the myth that one should prefer to set aside for the sake of our thesis. It is precisely here that the discursive character of the Greek tradition reveals itself. A dialogue lets several determinations contend with one another. Aristophanes' narrative makes the cut and its relationship visible; Diotima's speech asks whether the relatedness thus brought forth already explains the object of desire.

Perhaps this shows most beautifully what our method is meant to achieve. The image of the spherical human must not be replaced by a single isolated point. Its significance moves within the dialogue and in relation to later readings. The myth does not become less significant when we read these relationships along with it. Only through this does it become philosophically more precise.

8. Aristotle: Body, Boundary, and the Question of Independence

Aristotle is often presented as the thinker who transformed movement into categories and relationships into substances. Such a formula falls short. To demonstrate an actual shift, we must read Aristotle himself and examine what relationships his concepts still sustain.

In “Metaphysik” III, 1001b–1002b, Aristotle discusses whether numbers, bodies, surfaces, lines, and points can count as independent substances. The question of the boundary is particularly pressing: when bodies lie against one another, a shared boundary surface can be described; when they are separated, two boundaries appear. Have these boundaries thereby come into being like things? And when they coincide again, have they perished as things?

Aristotle presents this as a difficulty. Boundaries belong to the determination of the body, but treating them as independently existing objects leads to problems. Point, line, and surface cannot be understood without their roles in demarcation, contact, and division.

Here the complement to the atomistic discussion becomes particularly clear. The question of whether a body is indivisible presupposes a determination of boundary, division, and geometrical extension. Thus, what we encounter in Aristotle is not simply the fixed object whose properties would be independent. The conditions of mathematical determinability are explicitly examined.

In the “Kategorien”, Chapter 7, Aristotle also describes what is related to something, the “pros ti”. Greater means greater than something; double is the double of something. He also treats the One and number in the “Metaphysik” in the context of measure and multiplicity. The systematic distinction between conceptual roles does not automatically erase these references.

This does not mean that Aristotle and the Tractatus hold the same ontology. It means that our history of possible reification cannot begin with a simple attribution of blame to Aristotle. Only by comparing later translations, schools, and uses could we show when a relational determination is treated as though it were given independently of the relationship through which it receives its meaning.

9. What Becomes of Difference When It Becomes Number or Figure?

Euclid's “Elemente”, around 300 BCE, retain another form of this historical movement. Proof works with determinate figures and relationships, with names for points and lines, with operations of drawing, extending, cutting, and comparing. A figure can be present as a result, but its mathematical determinacy does not arise solely from its visible drawing. It becomes legible within the regulated context of construction and proof.

Alongside this, Book VII defines number from units and their multiplicity. The unit has a different conceptual role from the number whose determination it makes possible. Precisely here there is no isolated world of already constituted number fields, but a structure of unit, set, measure, and relationships of division.

The geometrical determinations of a body also depend on such relationships. A body can be described through boundaries, shape, and measure. Its numerical determinations and readings as figure occupy different roles in the same enactment of mathematical inquiry. Historically, we must therefore ask about the respective constructions, not about a blanket assertion of the identity of all Greek disciplines.

This leads us back to Democritus. If the ancient atomists explained differences through shape, position, and arrangement, the question of their elements cannot be read without the geometry of differences. And when geometrical shape becomes numerically determinable, what is at stake is not merely a juxtaposition of matter and abstract computational number. It concerns different ways of articulating a context and making it legible.

Here Greek history touches on the fundamental thesis of Volume I: number must not be introduced as an already constituted origin when it is precisely its emergence from distinction that is to be explained. Nor is it sufficient to presuppose a body as an element when its indivisibility is only determined from the conditions of division, boundary, and shape. Geometry in this investigation is not an ornament to an argument, but a concrete mode of appearance of what is distinguished.

10. Where Does the Misunderstanding Begin?

One could tell this history quite comfortably: once the Greeks possessed a unified knowledge of difference, until a later school transformed it into rigid objects. Yet precisely such a narrative would fail to meet our own standard. We would have made a many-voiced discourse into a single object that seemingly travels unchanged through the centuries. A history of possible reification must not itself begin with a reification.

It is historically more precise to trace particular shifts individually.

In Heraclitus, we can investigate the tension between the transmitted river images and the subsequently widespread formula of mere changeability. The question is whether the connection between the same rivers and different waters is preserved in the rendering.

In Democritus, we must distinguish between the original meaning of the word “atomos”, the ancient doctrine of indivisible bodies, the geometrical explanation of their differences, and later particle theories. The modern claim that Democritus simply anticipated today's atom skips over these differences. But it would be equally inadmissible to project our own epistemological reading back onto him, as though Democritus had explicitly asserted only a boundary of knowing and no bodies.

In Plato, the “Politikos” shows that a division does not already produce two genuine kinds. The “Sophistes” shows otherness as relationship. And the “Symposion” compels us not to separate the narrative of the spherical human from the rest of the dialogue. A later abbreviation occurs where one of these results is declared to be the sole content and the relationships of its determination are lost.

In Aristotle, we must examine whether later schools continue the questions he explicitly posed concerning boundary, division, measure, and relation, or whether his categories are henceforth read as lists of independent things. The possibility of this development is visible in the ancient texts; its actual course requires further work on transmission.

Here also lies the standard for our further investigation. The same word does not necessarily designate the same concept; a similar result tells us nothing yet about the relationships of its emergence. Nor is every divergent interpretation already a falsification. Only when it can be shown which relationship essential to a statement has been omitted, shifted, or replaced in a later reading can we speak of a misunderstanding. This may make the history somewhat less straightforward. In return, it becomes more precise.

11. The Greek Trace—and the Way East

What remains from this first passage?

Hesiod recounts the world's emergence in relationships of powers and figures. Anaximander transmits an order of reciprocal coming into being and passing away. Heraclitus shows in the river, the bow, and the lyre that movement and constancy need not be understood in isolation from one another. Parmenides centres the boundary of thinking and saying. Zeno sharpens the question of division and movement. The Pythagorean tradition connects number and ratio with the order of the world. Leucippus and Democritus take the question of the indivisible into a doctrine of corporeal, geometrically determined elements. Plato examines the quality of the cut and the relation of the Other; in the myth of the spherical human, separation is recounted as an experience of relatedness. Aristotle investigates boundaries, measures, and relations in the context of their conceptual determination. Euclid makes this work mathematically explicit in constructions of numbers and figures.

These thinkers are not parts of a single secret tradition. Yet their questions can be read as a debate about what a distinction shows, how it is enacted, and what emerges from it as a determinate result. Body, number, line, element, and name are not objects naturally separated from one another. Their respective meaning is bound to modes of determination that the text can carry along or suppress.

This brings forth the question that will accompany us through the history to come: when does thinking begin to take a determination for an independently given object and forget the context in which this determination first became possible?

In “Tractatus Principio”, the fundamental answer is not that we merely have to return to a lost original unity. Difference is not the accident through which something whole was damaged. It is the condition of relationship and its legibility. At the end of the myth of the spherical human, Volume II gives the thought these words: “I am not the half. I am the stroke.”

For history, this sentence remains an explicitly modern interpretation internal to the work, not the voice of the Greeks. As a guiding question, however, it is fruitful: what happens when we no longer take the visible sides as the ultimate foundation, but investigate the relationship that sustains their distinguishability?

With this question, we turn east in the next part. There, too, we will encounter emptiness, multiplicity, emergence, and naming. We must not identify either the Dao or non-being in advance with the Greek Apeiron or the stroke. We begin anew with the oldest accessible textual witnesses and read each statement from its own relationships. Only then do we examine the analogy.

Thus, it is not the similarity of concepts that becomes the starting point of our history, but the movement of their determination.

Sources and Reading Notes

A. Foundations Internal to the Work

Tractatus Principio, Volume 0, “Warum du über Dinge nachdenkst, die es nicht gibt”, especially Chapters 1, 5–12. Authoritative for the distinction between trace, transmission, relational reading, and further thesis, as well as for the Greek problem context.

Tractatus Principio, Volume I, “Buch der Mathematik”, especially Chapter II (“Vom offenen Unterschied zum geschlossenen Gegensatz”), Chapter III (“Die Erfindung des materiellen Denkens”), Chapter VI (“Die Natur der Zahl”), and Chapter VII (“Der Rhythmus der Zahl”). Authoritative for relating number and geometry back to distinction.

Tractatus Principio, Volume II, “Buch der Physik”, Chapter XX (“Das mythische Denken”), pp. 80–82. Authoritative for the modern relational reading of the myth of the spherical human; not used as a substitute for the Platonic primary source.

B. Greek Sources and Early Witnesses to Transmission

Hesiod, Theogonie, lines 116–125 (Chaos, Gaia, Eros, and the first emergences). Greek text: https://www.gottwein.de/Grie/hes/thggr.php

Anaximander, DK 12 B1; transmitted in Simplicius, Kommentar zu Aristoteles' Physik, 24,13 ff. Text and transmission: https://sergiubisceanu.github.io/presocratic-reader/read/anaximander/

Heraclitus, DK 22 B1, B12, B51; on Plato's rendering of the river: Plato, Kratylos 402a. State of the fragments and differing transmission: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/

Parmenides, fragments B2 and B8, especially B2 on the paths of thinking: https://lexundria.com/parm_frag/2/cf

Aristotle, Metaphysik I, 4 (985b4–20), on the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus; I, 5 (985b23 ff.), on the Pythagorean tradition. Greek and translation: https://aristotle.johnhboyer.com/Meta/book/1/

Plato, Phaidros 265d–266b (gathering together and dividing); Politikos 262d–263a (Greeks/barbarians and ten thousand); Sophistes 255c–e (the Other in relation); Symposion 189c–193d (Aristophanes' myth of the spherical human) and 205e–206a (Diotima's qualification of the search for halves). Texts: https://adfonteslibrary.org/work-plato-statesman ; https://adfonteslibrary.org/work-plato-sophist ; https://adfonteslibrary.org/work-plato-symposium

Aristotle, Metaphysik III, 5 (1001b–1002b), on body, line, point, boundary, and division; Kategorien, Chapter 7, on relation (pros ti). Greek/translation: https://aristotle.johnhboyer.com/Meta/book/3/

Euclid, Elemente, Book I, Definitions 1–6 and postulates; Book VII, Definitions 1–2. Text: https://www.euclids-elements.org/elements/books/bookI/definitions/ ; https://www.claymath.org/euclid_index/fundamentals-of-number-theory/

C. Research Orientation on Disputed Questions of Transmission

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Democritus” (2023): https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Ancient Atomism” (2022): https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atomism-ancient/

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Heraclitus”: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/

Note on work with sources: in the case of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaximander, Democritus, and the Pythagoreans, many texts survive only in fragments or through later authors. “Earliest accessible source” therefore means, in each case, the earliest surviving or reconstructible textual witness for the specific statement, not the unsupported assertion of an original wording that no longer survives today. The reading internal to the work remains explicitly distinguishable from such historical findings.

End of Part I.

Interlude – Ideas Have No Weight

On the Paths of Thought and the History of Zero

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IDEAS HAVE NO WEIGHT

Having considered the Greek reflections on difference, our path leads us eastward. Yet before we read the early Chinese texts, a historical question presses itself upon us: how far could thoughts travel at all when there was as yet no question of that continuous “Silk Road” which people today so readily draw across the map?

Perhaps the difficulty begins with the image of a single road. Long before continuous long-distance trade connections were described as such, there were regional trade routes, markets and places of encounter whose connections opened, grew denser or were lost again. Not every merchant had to travel from one end of Eurasia to the other. It could suffice for the routes of neighbouring regions to interlock, allowing a story, a technique or a sign to pass from one encounter to the next.

This holds for goods. For ideas it holds in a different way.

An amphora must be carried, as must a bale of silk or a sack of grain. A thought, by contrast, has no such weight. It cannot be loaded in the same way. It can arise in a conversation, continue to work within a story, enter into a rule of calculation or be remembered as an image, to reappear in different words at the next opportunity. Words make an idea communicable. But they are not already the idea itself. What is transmitted therefore need not arrive in the same linguistic form in which it once set out.

This does not mean that ideas spread without people, voices, gestures or signs. But their path cannot simply be reconstructed from the route of a single transported object. A merchant may use a method of calculation without knowing its history. A scribe may adopt a figure and explain it differently. A story can be translated without its words being preserved; conversely, a name may persist while the relationships of its use change.

Early Eurasian exchanges therefore allow us to ask about possible transmissions. They do not prove that Heraclitus, an Indian calculator and an author of the early Laozi shared the same transmitted idea. Temporal proximity is not yet evidence of transmission; structural similarity is not yet a common origin. The question must remain open as long as the intermediate stages cannot be identified.

There is something revealing precisely in this. The history of difference concerns not only the thoughts people conceive but also their transmission. How does a determination become transmissible? What can change without every relationship being lost? And how do we recognise whether a later appearance actually emerged from an earlier one?

NO GREEK ORIGIN: THE TURN AS ENACTMENT

The fact that we began our investigation with the Greeks by no means makes Greece the birthplace of distinction. We begin there because certain philosophical debates encounter us in written form. People had, of course, been making distinctions much earlier and in very different places. We possess evidence of this too, although it does not necessarily take the form of philosophical writings.

One particularly vivid piece of evidence stands in Ireland: the Neolithic monument of Newgrange in the Boyne valley was built around 3200 BC. Its passage and an opening above the entrance are aligned so that at the winter solstice the light of the rising sun can penetrate to the inner chamber. This does not simply depict an opposition between summer and winter. The structure relates to a determinable turning point in the course of the year: the days grow shorter until the winter solstice and longer again afterwards. What matters is not only that two seasons are distinguished but that one movement passes over into the other at its boundary.

Spirals and other geometric patterns are found on the stones of Newgrange. An archaeological interpretation published in 2025 reads certain counter-running or inward- and outward-directed spiral forms as representations of the sun's shortening and lengthening paths. This is an interesting interpretation, but not the only possible one. We know of no contemporary explanation of the signs. Nor can we reliably reconstruct whether and how people there celebrated the solstice from the alignment of the structure alone. Later Irish traditions and narrative traditions described as Celtic must not be attributed to the much earlier builders without evidence of the intervening transmission. The fact that sun discs and crescent-shaped gold ornaments also occur in the Irish Bronze Age points to further celestial images, but not to a proven, unified symbolic doctrine spanning millennia.

For our question, precisely this distinction is fruitful: the shortening and lengthening days are not merely two ready-made opposites. Their determination depends on the continued observation of a movement and on the point at which its direction reverses. Such a turning point can become legible in a building, an image or a recurring ritual without those involved having to write a philosophical treatise about it. The geometric spiral is no more already a finished explanation than the small circle later is, of itself, already the number zero. Their respective meanings emerge only from the interrelation of form, enactment and reading.

This cross-reference is therefore not intended to assert a direct line of descent from Newgrange through Greece to the Indian zero. It reminds us that ideas of boundary, return and reversal were worked through in images and practices in different periods and cultures, long before the surviving Greek texts made them the subject of philosophical arguments.

ZERO AS A SMALL, GREAT EXAMPLE

Hardly any sign is better suited than zero to making this question visible.

In Euclid's Greek arithmetic, the determination of number begins with the unit, the monas, and with multiplicity composed of units. A general number zero does not belong to these definitions. In Greek-language astronomy, however, we encounter something else: in the

Almagest, in the 2nd century AD, Ptolemy uses a small circular sign within sexagesimal calculations. It can mark a missing or zero-valued place, thus making the structure of a table legible.

It would be tempting to see in this small circle the origin of the Indian zero already. Two similar signs, two historical worlds of knowledge and possible contacts between them: a line of transmission seems already to have been found. Yet this is precisely the step our investigation must not take without examination. The visible similarity of a sign is not yet evidence of its origin.

From India too we know early signs for unoccupied places, including the dot in the Bakhshali manuscript. Its dating and compilation are debated in scholarship. Later, the circular sign also appears. Brahmagupta documents a different, clearly identifiable step in AD 628 in his Brāhmasphuṭasiddhānta: he treats śūnya, zero, in rules of calculation. Zero is thus not merely a written sign that keeps a place open; it is determinable and usable within a calculation. The individual rules do not, however, invariably correspond to today's conventions.

Between such pieces of evidence lie time, different numeral systems, different mathematical practices and demonstrable contacts between Greek-language and Indian worlds of knowledge. The history of astronomical procedures makes such contacts particularly clear. But it does not yet follow that the Indian concept of zero as a whole emerged from the Greek circular sign. Nor does an Indian rule of calculation imply that it arose independently of every earlier place-value practice.

We must therefore keep three questions distinct. First: what visible form do we encounter? Next: what task does it perform within a particular system of writing or calculation? And finally: what concept of zero becomes possible or is explicitly developed in this use? Only the relationship between these questions allows us to speak of more than a similarity of signs.

A circle is a geometric figure. The same outline can mark an empty place within a table. And the digit 0 can represent a determinate value within a calculation. These readings may be related, but the similar outline does not make them identical. The meaning of each zero emerges only from the relationships in which it is used.

This is the methodological point of Volume 0: we must neither simply declare the Greeks the inventors of modern zero nor collapse the different functions into the word "zero". Volume I, by contrast, develops a reading internal to the work in which zero and circle are bound to the unfolding of distinction. This relational derivation can sharpen our questions to history. It does not, however, replace evidence of when and by what path a particular sign, procedure or explanation was actually transmitted.

Precisely when number and geometry are read together from the enactment of distinction, the history of zero becomes particularly interesting: not because circle, empty place and computational value are already the same, but because we can investigate how one and the same visible form is determined differently in different practices. The circle is not automatically zero; and zero is not an object-like nothing merely because it designates an unoccupied place.

A MOVEMENT THAT IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE

History may thus proceed far less linearly than the familiar narrative of a single invention and its subsequent spread suggests. Local developments can coexist with contacts between traditions of calculation. Individual signs may be adopted while their use changes; other functions may arise independently and only later come together in a shared notation. Sometimes a use can be documented earlier than the form we now associate with it. And not every surviving form retains its original task.

We must read people's paths in this way too. A network of partial routes does not become real only at the moment when a later historian gives it a single name. At the same time, the documented coexistence of regional contacts must not retrospectively be presented as an already continuous long-distance connection. There are differences between possibility, contact and documented transmission.

Zero shows us why this caution is necessary. What set out on a journey: a figure, a place within a numeral system, a rule of calculation or an idea of what it means for nothing to be set in a particular place? Perhaps some of these determinations travelled together, perhaps separately; perhaps some relationships arose anew. The surviving evidence does not decide every one of these questions.

A history of difference that follows its own method must therefore also read the history of ideas from their relationships. It does not seek an invisible package labelled "zero" or "Dao" that was carried unchanged from culture to culture. It asks which determination appears at which point, what it makes possible there and in what form it later becomes legible again.

Ideas possess no weight that we could record as freight. They nevertheless have a history. But this history does not lie in an unchanged thing carried from place to place; it lies in the relationships in which people think, communicate, use and change them.

With this perspective, we now turn to the oldest surviving Laozi texts. Not to rediscover a Greek doctrine there, but to begin once again with their own witnesses of transmission: with what is said, with the relationships of its determination and with the question of what emerges from the unnamed as soon as it receives a name.

SOURCE NOTES

Basis internal to the work: Tractatus Principio, Volume 0, especially Chapter 1 and Section 16.5.1 "Null: Leerstelle, Zahl und formales Objekt"; Volume I, Chapter VI "Die Natur der Zahl". Volume 0 expressly separates historical source findings and relational inference; Volume I develops the number-and-circles reading internal to the work.

Euclid, Elemente VII, Definitions 1–2: monas and number as a multiplicity of units.

Ptolemy, Almagest, on zero marking in sexagesimal astronomical tables: see the references in Volume 0, note [142], and MacTutor, "Zero": https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Zero/

Brahmagupta, Brāhmasphuṭasiddhānta XVIII.30–35 (AD 628); see Volume 0, note [143]. On Indian place-value notation and the Bakhshali manuscript: Bodleian Libraries/Oxford, https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/article/carbon-dating-finds-bakhshali-manuscript-contains-oldest-recorded-origins-symbol-zero ; the early dating of the manuscript is disputed.

On the insertion about Newgrange and seasonal turning points: National Museum of Ireland, “The Winter solstice at Newgrange”, https://source.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Irish-Antiquities-Division-Collections/Irish-Antiquities-Articles/The-Winter-solstice-at-Newgrange ; Heritage Ireland, “Newgrange Winter Solstice”, https://heritageireland.ie/visit/newgrange-winter-solstice/ ; University of Galway, “New research suggests passage tombs of Brú na Bóinne served as sophisticated solar observatories” (2025), https://www.universityofgalway.ie/about-us/news-and-events/news-archive/2025/april/new-research-suggests-passage-tombs-of-bru-na-boinne-served-as-sophisticated-solar-observatories-.html . The spiral interpretation is listed as a research hypothesis, not as a securely established historical key to the signs.

On early regional contacts before the later consolidation of the Silk Roads: “The Early Silk Road(s)”, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History, https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/61799/chapter-abstract/546303630 ; and “Polities and nomads: the emergence of the Silk Road exchange in the Tarim Basin region during late prehistory (2000–400 bce)”, Bulletin of SOAS, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bulletin-of-the-school-of-oriental-and-african-studies/article/polities-and-nomads-the-emergence-of-the-silk-road-exchange-in-the-tarim-basin-region-during-late-prehistory-2000400-bce/6311521432E4F0AFA783860A3C51C0BA

Note: the text does not claim an exhaustively documented transmission of the Greek zero sign to India or of particular Greek doctrines to China. It distinguishes historical possibilities of connection, documented practices and the relational reading of the Tractatus.

Part II – The Dao and the Open Interrelation

On Naming, Emergence, Emptiness and the Relationship of Opposites

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PRELIMINARY NOTE: DO NOT CONFUSE THE TRANSITION WITH AN EQUATION

The Greek part of our investigation has not yielded a unified doctrine of difference. Rather, we encountered different answers to questions that touch upon one another: how does something remain determinable amid change? What role does a boundary play? When does a division actually lead to a viable determination? And how does the indivisible relate to the form that we can describe geometrically? Even a name can persist although the relationships within which it designates something change.

With these questions we can approach early Chinese thought. We must not, however, simply take their Greek answers with us and apply them there as a standard. The Dao would thereby quickly be declared the Eastern counterpart of Heraclitus's river, or even another name for the difference "|" of the Tractatus Principio. Yet in doing so we would already have detached the designation from its own context and made it into a supposedly familiar object. We would thus have committed precisely the error against which Volume 0 warns us.

We therefore begin with the oldest surviving textual witnesses. Which passages have actually been transmitted? What relationships obtain between their statements? And where do later versions change their wording or arrangement? Only after considering these questions can we examine the analogies with Greek transmission and with the Tractatus. The source has its priority; so do the relationships between its statements.

A further question accompanies us: could ideas not only arise independently but also travel along the paths of people, goods, stories and written witnesses? Trade contacts between distant regions make transmissions possible; they do not, however, prove that a particular philosophical proposition was conveyed along these paths. We will treat the historical connection as a research question and not present it as a result before there is a reliable chain of transmission to support it.

1. BEFORE THE "DAO DE JING": THE OLDEST SURVIVING LAOZI TEXTS

Anyone opening the Dao De Jing today usually finds 81 chapters: a part on Dao and one on De, which is translated, among other things, as potency, virtue or efficacy. One might think that this gives us a text transmitted unchanged since its origin. Yet precisely the oldest textual witnesses reveal that the work's familiar form itself has a history.

The oldest Laozi materials surviving today come from a tomb near Guodian in what is now Hubei province. The tomb is dated to approximately 300 BC; the bamboo strips were excavated in 1993. They contain several groups of texts with passages corresponding to the later Laozi chapters. The surviving materials cover only part of the later work. They possess neither its complete arrangement nor its familiar division into two parts. Whether we have excerpts from a larger text, distinct collections or different stages of its compilation has not been conclusively settled. [Q1]

The next most important early textual witnesses are two silk manuscripts from Mawangdui. They come from a tomb sealed in 168 BC; the manuscripts themselves were written earlier. They contain most of the material of the later work but place the part on De before the part on Dao. Here too, the customary chapter sequence is not necessarily the earliest demonstrable form. [Q1]

Finally, there are later transmitted versions of the text, including those associated with Wang Bi's commentary from the 3rd century AD. Many editions in common use today owe their familiar formulations and chapter numbering to these versions. This transmitted version too is the result of a textual history; the surviving wording must not be confused with an unchanged original manuscript by Wang Bi. [Q1]

A methodological consequence already follows: when we quote a sentence from the "first chapter of the Dao De Jing", we must ask which textual witness contains it. The famous first chapter is not attested in the surviving Guodian materials. It does not follow that its thoughts were unknown at the time. It follows only that we cannot quote them verbatim from this oldest surviving find. [Q1, Q2]

Transmission itself is thus already a history of differences. Passages appear in different collections, formulations change, their sequence is rearranged. A title later shared makes a unity emerge that did not yet have the same form in the oldest witnesses. The question of what a text says therefore cannot be fully separated from the question of the transmitted form in which we encounter it.

We therefore begin not with the most famous formula but with an older surviving passage.

2. THE DAO IS NAMED – AND THE NAMING IS MARKED AS NAMING

The Guodian texts contain a passage corresponding to today's Chapter 25. It speaks of something joined together or undifferentiated that is said to have emerged before heaven and earth. It then says:

> 未知其名，字之曰道，吾強為之名曰大。

In sense: I do not know its name; I designate it as Dao and call it great only with reservation. [Q3]

These lines are particularly significant for our investigation. The text does not simply say “Dao” as if this designated a ready-made, unambiguously identified object. It makes the process of naming expressly visible. There is that of which one speaks, and there is the linguistic action by which a designation is introduced for it. A distance remains between the two.

In early Chinese, the word Dao can mean “way” or “course” and can also assume verbal functions of guiding or speaking. The German rendering “das Dao” should therefore not prematurely evoke the image of a self-contained, invisible substance. The precise meaning emerges from the respective relationships within the sentence and text, not from a dictionary equivalence chosen once and for all.

Still more interesting is a textual variant at the beginning of the same passage. The Guodian transcription gives “有狀混成”, where 狀 points to form or appearance. The later familiar version reads “有物混成”, with 物, “thing” or “something”. [Q3]

The difference is small enough to be overlooked in a cursory reading, and significant enough to concern us for precisely that reason. In one version the opening expression can be read more in terms of form and appearance; in the other, a “thing” or “something” emerges. It by no means follows that a later editor intentionally reified a relational conception. But we do possess a concrete passage where we can investigate whether and how the determination of what is meant shifts.

For the passage holds together a further movement. From the “great” it leads to going onward, from going onward to distance, and from distance to return. And it concludes with a sequence of references: the human being takes orientation from earth, earth from heaven, heaven from Dao, Dao from Ziran. “Ziran” here does not simply mean the modern idea of a “nature” lying outside the human being, but being-so-of-itself, comporting-itself-so. [Q3]

The name is thus introduced within an interrelation of emergence, movement, return and orientation. Whoever isolates only the word Dao loses precisely the relationships through which it acquires a role in the text.

We thus have a first firm point of reference. Already in the oldest surviving Laozi materials we encounter not merely the designation of a supreme magnitude. We find a text that makes the process of naming itself recognisable. The name emerges without its relationship to what it designates simply being assumed to have been settled.

3. THE OTHER IS NOT INDEPENDENT OF THAT FROM WHICH IT DIFFERS

The Guodian bamboo strips also preserve a passage corresponding to the later Chapter 2. It begins with human distinctions: where beauty is recognised as beauty, ugliness too emerges; where the good is determined as good, its other appears at the same time. Paired relationships follow:

> 有亡之相生也，難易之相成也，長短之相形也。

In a cautious reading of the sense: presence and absence bring one another forth; the difficult and the easy determine one another; the long and the short acquire their form in mutual comparison. The written form 亡 stands here in the early transmission where later texts usually write 無. [Q4]

The statement does not amount merely to listing two opposed words. Its grammatical form retains the reciprocal reference: “one another”, “mutually”. The examples that follow too – high and low, tone and sound, front and back – do not stand for two entirely independent objects.

An object is not absolutely long. It appears long in a relationship of comparison; the same extension can be called short under a different condition of comparison. Front and back are not two substances existing separately from one another. They receive their determinacy through orientation.

The context therefore cannot be reduced to a single metaphysical statement about being and nothingness either. The text begins with aesthetic and evaluative determinations, demonstrates the mutual bringing-forth of distinguished sides and then connects them with a way of acting that does not seek to order everything through coercive interventions.

This is decisive for the priority of relationships: the passage concerns not merely opposites but the handling of distinctions. Our determining beauty, goodness, length and precedence is connected with the question of how we act and evaluate through such determinations.

An analogy with the Greek discussion can be formulated precisely here. As in Heraclitus’s image of the drawn bow, the relationship of the sides is not added only afterwards. As in Plato’s reflection on otherness, one side becomes determinable through reference to the other. Yet the Chinese text follows its own path. It connects the reciprocal determinations with a practical stance. It would be wrong to treat this connection simply as a repetition of Greek propositions.

A comparable field of investigation opens up here for Volume I of the Tractatus: a difference cannot be explained by presupposing two already finished things and merely placing a sign of opposition between them. But the Chinese expression “bring one another forth” is not automatically the Tractatus notation “|(|)”. The analogy consists in the dependence of determinations on their reciprocal reference, not in the identity of their conceptual elaboration.

4. RETURN AND ABSENCE: A SMALL TEXTUAL DIFFERENCE WITH A LARGE CONSEQUENCE

The question of emergence leads us to the passage later numbered as Chapter 40. It too belongs to the sections preserved at Guodian.

Its beginning can be read in sense as follows: return is the movement of Dao; yielding or weakness belongs to its efficacy. The movement of Dao is thus not described merely as incessant forward progression. The concept of return is part of its determination. [Q5]

Still more important is the passage's conclusion, because the textual witnesses do not offer the same wording here.

Guodian A:

> 天下之物生於有，生於亡。

In an initially close reading: the things under heaven arise from presence, arise from absence.

The later widespread version, by contrast, reads:

> 天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

In sense: the ten thousand things arise from presence; presence arises from absence. [Q5]

At this point, sentence structure matters. The Guodian version places the emergence of things from presence and from absence side by side. The later widespread version orders the relationship differently: things emerge from presence, and this in turn from absence. What could previously be read as a twofold reference now explicitly receives a graduated direction. Precisely because only a few characters are involved, we can trace here how strongly a change in their relationship can operate.

This is not merely the substitution of a single word. It changes which relationship is asserted grammatically. Of course, the shorter early version too can be interpreted in different ways; and the original intention of an entire tradition cannot be read from a single manuscript. But this is now a concretely examinable passage in which the text itself allows different movements of determination.

For our investigation this is much more fruitful than the sweeping assertion that in the East "nothingness" had always been understood as the origin.

The early Chinese 無, or 亡 in these textual witnesses, is not automatically identical with an absolute metaphysical nothingness. Depending on the context, it designates lack, absence, not-having or a negative determination. Likewise, 有 does not in every context mean a fully self-subsistent "being" in the sense of later ontologies.

What matters, then, is not which of the two words we most quickly elevate to the rank of an origin of the world. First we must understand the relationship in which something is determined as present and something else as absent. Without this question, we would already have treated the two sides as ready-made opposites before considering the interrelation of their determination.

The Laozi material itself thus shows us a possible path from a relational to a more strongly hierarchical formulation. Whether this is already a misunderstanding would have to be examined through further textual witnesses, commentaries and the respective uses of 有 and 無. Naming the shift is a finding; already evaluating it conclusively would be an additional thesis.

5. “THE DAO THAT CAN BE SPOKEN”: THE FAMOUS FORMULA AND ITS SOURCE

Only now do we come to the famous opening passage that appears as the first chapter in editions familiar today.

In the Mawangdui transmission it begins with:

> 道可道也，非恆道也。名可名也，非恆名也。

One possible, deliberately cautious reading is: a way that can be specified or spoken as a way is not the constant way; a name that can be spoken as a name is not the constant name. [Q6]

The famous German phrase about the “true Dao that cannot be named” can indicate the direction of the statement, but it already fixes a particular interpretation. 恆 (heng) points to constancy or duration. Later familiar versions have 常 (chang) at this point. The question is therefore not merely whether a statement may be called “true”. It also concerns whether a linguistically determined way or name can claim the same constancy as that to which it refers. [Q6, Q7]

Moreover, the Chinese character 道 can be read as both noun and verb. Precisely for this reason, a rigid translation that installs a finished object, “the Dao”, at the very beginning is only one of several possible readings. The passage does not simply make speaking impossible. Rather, it distinguishes between naming and the constancy of what is named.

It continues with the distinction between namelessness and naming. The Mawangdui texts have “萬物”, the multiplicity of things, here, where the later widespread version names “天地”, heaven and earth, at the corresponding point. The statement’s domain of objects is thus also framed differently in the transmission. [Q6]

What is decisive, however, is the end of the thought. The two sides are presented as emerging together and being named differently. Naming produces different forms of legibility without the text simply dissolving their interrelation.

The relational reading of the Tractatus can begin here. If difference itself is the condition of a determination, it must not be treated like a further determinate object. Similarly, the opening passage of the Laozi warns against equating the spoken or named way with the constant interrelation. The thoughts have different contexts of emergence; their analogy lies at the boundary where a naming is confused with what is named.

This also explains why we did not place this famous passage at the beginning of our examination of the sources. It is not the earliest directly surviving wording. At Guodian we already find related difficulties of naming, especially in the passages of the later Chapters 25 and 32. Only Mawangdui directly attests the formula of the later first chapter. [Q1, Q3, Q6, Q8]

6. THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS: MULTIPLICITY IS NOT A SUM OF TEN THOUSAND OBJECTS

A second famous passage occurs in the later Chapter 42:

> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

In sense: Dao lets the One emerge, the One the Two, the Two the Three, the Three the ten thousand things. [Q9]

Two source notes are necessary here. The passage is not present in the surviving Guodian materials. In the Mawangdui B manuscript, the first members of the sequence survive, while the line after “Three brings forth” is damaged. The complete familiar formulation, including “ten thousand things”, is securely transmitted in the later textual tradition; where earlier manuscripts have gaps, an editorial supplementation must not pass unnoticed as a directly legible find. [Q9]

“Ten thousand things”, 萬物 (wanwu), is a conventional expression for the world’s incalculable multiplicity. It does not say that the world contains exactly ten thousand things. Nor does it establish an elaborated mathematical definition of infinity. It concerns the abundance of what has emerged.

Likewise, One, Two and Three must not prematurely be treated as independent numerical objects. The text itself does not state unambiguously which objects these numbers stand for. Later commentaries offer different interpretations. Anyone who inserts a ready-made cosmological table here without examination skips over the original movement of the text. [Q9, Q10]

Particularly important is the immediately following context of the later version: the many things carry Yin and embrace Yang; their harmony is described through Qi, an interrelation of breath or efficacy. The image is not one of ten thousand isolated individual pieces that meet only afterwards. Multiplicity appears as determined through opposites, interpenetration and connection.

But the text does not end in cosmology. It subsequently speaks about rulers’ self-designations and about how diminution can lead to gain and gain to diminution. The numerical sequence thereby becomes part of a broader reflection on efficacy, reversal and human action.

This continuation belongs to the statement. If we detached the sequence “Dao – One – Two – Three – ten thousand things” from its context and read it as a pure ladder of genesis, we would have cut off the text’s further practical thinking. The historical use of the numerical sequence does not become clear merely from an isolated enumeration of its members.

The comparison with Volume I nevertheless remains illuminating. There too, the question does not begin with an already finished collection of numbers. Number is developed as a reading of distinction and its continued relationship. In the Laozi passage, multiplicity likewise appears as something emerging. But it follows neither that Laozi formulated “|(|)” nor that the One,

Two and Three of the Chinese text already correspond to the orders of difference of the Tractatus. The shared question is, first of all, how multiplicity becomes legible without its determinations simply being presupposed as finished from the outset.

7. EMPTINESS IS NOT SIMPLY AN ADDITIONAL THING

One particularly vivid later Laozi passage is today's Chapter 11. It names a wheel, a vessel and a room: spokes and hub yield a usable connection only through the opening at their centre; a vessel is created through the form of the clay but made usable through its cavity; walls, doors and windows form a room whose usability depends on its openings and interior. [Q11]

We must again clearly identify the state of the sources: Chapter 11 is not attested in the surviving Guodian strips. It must therefore not be declared the wording of the earliest Guodian transmission.

It is precisely their vividness that makes these images so interesting to us. A wheel hub is formed, yet what remains open at its centre belongs to its usability. A vessel possesses walls, yet its cavity is not determinable as a vessel's cavity independently of the clay, its boundary and its use. Emptiness here is no mysterious second material added to the formed side. What is present and what is absent stand in a practical relationship; without it, precisely that determinate function of which the text speaks would be lost.

This is not a mere negation of fixed form. In use, the formed side and what remains open through it work together. One cannot understand the vessel by counting only the clay. But neither does an abstract "nothingness" explain a vessel's usability if the formed boundary is not read together with it.

Here the expression "Eastern empty space" acquires an examinable meaning. We need not assert emptiness as a mysterious object. We can show in the text how what is unfilled becomes effective within a determinate relationship.

For the Tractatus this is a suitable point of connection. Volume I does not introduce boundary and open distinction as finished things; geometric figure and number remain tied back to their enactment. The Laozi images too can be understood only if form, boundary, use and openness are read together. They are related questions, not the same theory.

8. THE EARLY TEXTS ALSO SPEAK OF ACTING AND GOVERNING

It would be a reduction to treat the Dao solely as the origin of the world or as an unnameable metaphysical principle. Numerous passages attested early speak about rule, moderation, non-coercion, withdrawing after accomplished work, the handling of names and the emergence of order.

In the Guodian transmission of the later Chapter 32, Dao is expressly connected with namelessness. At the same time, the question arises of what happens when ordered designations are introduced. The later Chapter 37 describes how things might change without being forcibly produced if rulers preserve the corresponding stance. [Q8, Q12]

These political references are not merely external applications of a cosmology separate from them. They belong to the historical form of the texts. Naming is not only a philosophical question of language; names also order the social world. What is present and absent do not stand only within a doctrine about the cosmos; they change how actions, interventions and their effects are understood.

For this reason, the expression Wuwei (無為) too must not simply be translated as “doing absolutely nothing”. The respective passages concern a manner of efficacy not determined by imposed interventions that seek to control everything. Its precise scope must be read in the individual text and its historical situation.

This makes a difference to our history: a thought originally situated in relationships of governing, acting, comparing and naming can become an exclusively cosmological proposition in later commentaries. Here too, a shift in meaning might take place. But we must demonstrate it in concrete commentaries and stages of transmission rather than declaring the later metaphysical reading an error from the outset.

9. ENCOUNTER OF TRADITIONS: RELATED QUESTIONS ARE NOT YET EVIDENCE OF TRANSMISSION

The dating of Guodian to around 300 BC makes a striking historical contemporaneity visible. In the Mediterranean world, Greek discussions about division, unity, movement and otherness had long been under way. In the Chinese world, texts were being recorded in writing that address relationship, emergence, namelessness and return.

This opens the question of paths of mediation. Trade and transport connections linked different regions in antiquity, often through numerous intermediate stages. The possibility that thoughts travelled with people, goods and stories therefore belongs to a serious historical investigation.

Temporal proximity nevertheless remains only temporal proximity. Just as a similarity of concepts does not prove a common origin, known trade routes do not yet allow us to infer the transmission of a particular philosophical statement. Anyone wishing to assert, for example, a mediation of Heraclitean thoughts to China or, conversely, an influence of the Laozi texts on Greek thinkers would have to be able to demonstrate a concrete direction of transmission: mediators, translations, terminological traces or recognisable textual contacts. Where such evidence is lacking, the possibility remains a research question and must not become a historical result.

We can say something more precise about the findings so far: different cultures developed questions about emergence and determination that can be compared from a relational reading perspective. Whether their commonalities go back to historical contacts, comparable practical experiences, independent philosophical insights or several of these conditions remains to be investigated.

The similarity of the images themselves is also an object of research here. The Greek bow, the geometrically determined boundary, the Chinese vessel, the way and return show relationships not only as an abstract formula. They make them vivid in experiential actions and forms. No direct line of descent follows from this, but a shared methodological challenge does: we must read images from the activities and orders in which they gain their meaning.

10. WHAT THE DAO SECTION YIELDS FOR THE HISTORY OF THE LOST DIFFERENCE

The oldest accessible Laozi witnesses show a remarkable movement of questioning.

At Guodian, something is named whose name expressly does not appear as self-evidently given. Dao appears within an interrelation of emergence, movement, return and orientation.

In a further early section, evaluations and opposites acquire their determination reciprocally. Beautiful and ugly, easy and difficult, long and short are not conceived as wholly independent magnitudes.

The early formulation about presence and absence differs from the later familiar version. The history of transmission thereby changes the concrete relationship that becomes grammatically legible.

The Mawangdui texts attest the famous warning that the nameable way is not simply identical with the constant way. Precisely this familiar formula thus itself stands within a textual history whose earliest surviving witnesses offer other passages for priority.

The later transmission unfolds a sequence from Dao through One, Two and Three to incalculable multiplicity. But the numbers do not stand at the beginning of the explanation as independently defined numerical objects. And through Yin, Yang and connecting efficacy the passage leads back into the context of action.

Finally, the images of vessel, wheel and room show that what remains open does not become intelligible by our declaring it a substance of its own. Its role emerges from the relationship to form, boundary and use.

These are not proofs that a Chinese author had already anticipated the Tractatus Principio. They show that a question central to our investigation can be traced within the Laozi transmission itself: what makes something determinable without our prematurely making what determines it into a finished object in turn?

And they show a second interrelation, historically just as important: the transmitted form of a text is not immaterial to the answers we can read from it. A character can be replaced, a sentence rearranged, a passage ordered differently, and a later interpretation can become the supposedly original doctrine.

The history of difference is thus more than a history of philosophical propositions. It is at the same time a history of names, copies, readings and those relationships that persist or change in the course of their transmission. What is transmitted itself cannot be understood either if we disregard the contexts of its emergence and use.

The Greek question of movement, boundary and division does not meet an identical answer here. It encounters a different historical discourse in which way, naming, absence, return and multiplicity are connected with one another.

The possible encounter of these traditions in other cultural regions will require an investigation of its own. Here, for now, our reading of the Dao ends. We retain the relationships before carrying them over into a further historical transmission.

SOURCES AND TEXTUAL BASIS

READING BASIS INTERNAL TO THE WORK

– Tractatus Principio, Volume 0, especially the methodological beginning (Chapter 1) and the Greek investigation (Chapters 5–11): distinguish source findings, transmission, relational inference and a more far-reaching thesis; read from relationships.

– Tractatus Principio, Volume I, especially Chapters I–II and VII: priority of distinction, open difference and closed opposition, geometry as a relational reading of images.

– Tractatus Principio, Volume II, Chapter XX: mythical thinking as a horizon of comparison, without retrospectively equating the Chinese text with Greek myth.

CHINESE PRIMARY WITNESSES AND TEXTUAL COMPARISONS

[Q1] “Laozi”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Sections 2–3, version revised on 22.10.2025: dating, Guodian, Mawangdui and later textual transmission.

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/

[Q2] Brook Ziporyn, “About Chapter One of the Daodejing”, University of Chicago, 2023: Chapter 1 is absent from the surviving Guodian materials; different structure and legibility of the Mawangdui version.

https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/about-chapter-one-of-the-daodejing/

[Q3] Guodian Laozi A, correspondence to Chapter 25, compared with Mawangdui A/B and Wang Bi: “有狀混成”, naming as Dao, sequence of distance and return, and “道法自然”. Digital transcriptions are editorial readings of the manuscripts.

https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/25

[Q4] Guodian Laozi A, correspondence to Chapter 2, compared with Mawangdui: “有亡之相生也”, long/short, easy/difficult and further pairings.

https://daodejing.ru/fr/chapters/02

[Q5] Guodian Laozi A, correspondence to Chapter 40; Mawangdui A/B and Wang Bi: return and variants concerning emergence from 有 and 無/亡.

https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/40

[Q6] Mawangdui A/B, correspondence to Chapter 1, compared with the Wang Bi text: “道可道也，非恆道也”, differences in sentence structure and in 萬物/天地.

https://daodejing.ru/en/chapters/01

[Q7] Scholarly investigation of variants and punctuation in Chapter 1, including 恆/常 and grammatical particles, in: Philologica (2017), with references to the silk manuscripts.

https://karolinum.cz/data/cascislo/6463/Philologica%204_2017.pdf

[Q8] Guodian Laozi A, correspondence to Chapter 32, on namelessness and the institution of names.

https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/32

[Q9] Mawangdui B (partially damaged) and Wang Bi transmission, correspondence to Chapter 42, with information on the textual gaps and the complete later wording.

https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/42

[Q10] Investigation of different historical interpretations of Chapter 42 and the open meaning of One, Two and Three: “Yan Zun and the Lines of Dao”, Religions 16 (2025), 1492.

https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/12/1492

[Q11] Transmitted Laozi text, Chapter 11, wheel, vessel and room; not in the surviving Guodian corpus.

https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing

[Q12] Guodian Laozi A, correspondence to Chapter 37: Dao, Wuwei and the political-practical context.

https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/37

ON SOURCE METHOD

The Chinese passages are reproduced according to published transcriptions of the early textual witnesses. Modern punctuation and divisions into sections are editorial; they are not simply an unchanged feature of the ancient bamboo or silk manuscripts. Missing characters have not been silently supplied. The German renderings are context-related working translations, not conclusive philological determinations. A concrete historical transmission between Greece and China has not been demonstrated. A relational analogy must not be equated with historical identity.

Part III – The Buddha and the Regress of Distinction

On Becoming, the Observer, Suffering, Non-Attachment, and the Return to Wu wei

November 2026

PRELIMINARY NOTE: NOT OVERWRITING ANOTHER TEXT WITH OUR OWN CONCEPTS

With early Buddhist teaching, we reach a point at which the history of difference takes a particular turn. For the issue is now no longer solely how something emerges, through what it becomes determinable, or in what form we can describe its order. We must also consider the one who distinguishes. How can human beings become entangled in their own distinctions? And how can such entanglement be recognized without immediately adding a new opposition to it?

The preceding parts have followed various traces. Among the Greeks, we encountered movement, non-being, the boundary, what can be determined geometrically, and the relation of what is separate. The early Laozi texts showed how naming, opposition, return, and emergence are connected without their originating context having to be made into yet another thing. At the same time, the history of numerical signs and zero made it apparent that a form of representation, its use, and the relation readable in it are not necessarily identical. Ideas have no weight that one carries around. They can continue to work through stories, conversations, and actions without being expressed in the same words in every transmission. That cultural regions were in contact with one another does not, however, already prove that they adopted a particular teaching from one another.

This calls for the same priority of sources and relations that we have already followed in the preceding parts and that Volume 0 of the Tractatus Principio develops methodologically. We will not begin with familiar images of karma, rebirth, meditation, or enlightenment only then to present them as original statements of the Buddha. We are initially interested in the relations in which these concepts stand in the early discourses. For here, too, a vivid image can lose its original meaning as soon as we detach it from its context and read it as an independent account of metaphysical facts.

The earliest Buddhist textual material is not a surviving autograph of the historical Buddha. Discourses were transmitted orally over an extended period, collected and edited in different communities, and only later committed to writing. The oldest surviving Buddhist manuscripts, particularly those from Gandhāra, date predominantly from the period between the 1st century BC and the first centuries AD. The Pali discourses examined here are therefore an early textual tradition, but not word-for-word verifiable records of conversations from the Buddha’s lifetime. Where parallel transmissions exist, comparing them is also part of the historical task. [Q1]

A second caution follows from this. Buddhism arose within the religious and philosophical debates of northern India, in which Brahmanical, ascetic, and other teaching traditions were already disputing with one another. This world worked with rituals, divine figures, stories, concepts of sacrifice, and images of becoming and passing away. But it was not simply a single "Hindu culture" from which a fully formed Buddhist counter-teaching later broke away. Nor can later demonstrable Greek–Indian encounters or similarities with the Dao already explain the emergence of early Buddhist teaching.

Our question therefore remains deliberately narrower: What relations do the oldest accessible Buddhist discourses describe? And where does their own line of thought touch on that self-reference of difference which Volumes I and IV of the Tractatus develop? Only once we have considered each side in its own right will the comparison become sound.

1. SUFFERING DOES NOT BEGIN ONLY AT THE END OF THE STORY

Buddhist teaching is occasionally reduced to a seemingly simple proposition: everything passes away, and human beings must therefore live with suffering. Such a summary does more than fall short. It also changes the context of what the early discourses investigate. For the question there is not directed merely at the unpleasant fate of impermanent things. It is directed at the conditions under which experiencing, craving, holding on, and resistance become suffering—and at how precisely these conditions can end.

In the discourse SN 56.11, traditionally regarded as an exposition of the four noble truths, dukkha is illustrated not only through old age, illness, and death. It also includes association with the unwanted, separation from the wanted, and not obtaining what one craves. The brief summary speaks of the five groups of experiencing insofar as they are objects of grasping. The cause of suffering is then connected with taṇhā, thirst or craving; the cessation of suffering with the extinguishing of this very craving. [Q2]

This sequence already calls for distinguishing two things: that something happens, and that human beings bind themselves in a particular way to what has happened. The experience is not identical with the additional demand that it must remain, disappear, or be different from what it is.

For the Tractatus, this connects with the transition from open difference to closed opposition (Volume I, Chapter II). Distinguishing makes determination possible. But as soon as a determination is held on to as an independently existing pole, thought can oppose to it an equally fixed opposite: this is how it ought to be, not like that; this must remain, that must disappear. Negation is then treated as though a positive object had already been found in it.

The Buddhist discourse does not literally say: "Suffering arises from the stroke." That would be a backward projection of our notation. What it does actually describe, however, is suffering through being bound to a particular experience and through craving for it to change. Our relational reading investigates whether this binding can be understood as the solidification of a result of distinction.

In doing so, the interpretation must not turn into the sweeping assertion that all pain is self-inflicted. Illness, injury, hunger, and loss are not mere imaginings or moral failings. Rather, the discourses ask how further conditions of suffering join the conditions of an experience—and how this additional nexus can be interrupted.

2. HOW ONE'S OWN THOUGHTS BESET THE THINKER

A particularly important source is the discourse MN 18, the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta. It initially contains a brief statement about how disputes, attachment, and entanglements of thought arise. Later, Mahākaccāna develops this nexus in conversation with the monks. This sequence of speakers is already significant for our method: not every explanatory sentence of the discourse is attributed to the Buddha as a word spoken directly by him.

The explanation describes the coming together of a sense organ, a perceptual domain, and the corresponding consciousness. From this arises contact; feeling follows contact. What is felt is perceived; what is perceived is thought; and what is thought can pass into a conceptual proliferation called papañca in Pali. Finally, human beings are beset by the conceptions emerging from this proliferation. [Q3]

What is remarkable here is the direction of the inquiry. It is not a ready-made hostile external world that first imposes all further thoughts on human beings. The text traces how increasingly further determinations arise from a perception through its conceptual processing. The question of entanglement thus leads back into the very activity through which human beings distinguish their experiences and give them meaning.

Initially, something is seen, heard, remembered, or expected. What is perceived is recognized as something. Then it is judged: good or bad, mine or foreign, wanted or threatening. Further demands and possible counter-reactions arise from the judgment. The original experience is surrounded by an ever denser network of subsequent fixations. Finally, the result of these fixations confronts us as though it had been an independently existing reality from the outset.

This is precisely where the thought of the regress of distinction begins. Thought attempts to solve a self-generated problem through a new determination. What appears as a lack is to be supplied. What appears as an opponent is to be eliminated. What appears as a solution is to be secured permanently. But this solution, too, can once again become an object of craving, fear, or resistance. Under unchanged conditions, the means against suffering thus gives rise to a new possibility of suffering.

The regress is by no means the inevitable consequence of every distinction. Otherwise, even ordinary perceiving or learning would necessarily have to become entanglement. What matters, rather, is that additional relation in which a determination is held on to and made the measure of further demands, resistance, or oppositions. It is not distinguishing as such that is being criticized, but a particular way of continuing it.

The relational point is therefore this: it is not difference that must be eliminated. What must be seen through is that additional solidification which turns an open determination into an opposition to which we bind ourselves.

3. THE “I” IS NOT AN UNCHANGING OBJECT

A more difficult question now arises: who is it, in the first place, that becomes entangled in this movement?

In SN 22.59, five interconnected domains are examined: bodily form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), formations or volitional impulses (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa). For none of these domains is the claim that this is my unchanging self to hold. The text grounds this not only in changeability, but also in the fact that human beings cannot bring the processes concerned fully under their own control. They cannot simply determine that the body, feeling, or consciousness should henceforth have precisely this constitution and no other. The discourse expressly includes past, present, and future phenomena. [Q4]

A cautious relational question can be connected with this. If none of these phenomena can be held on to as a ready-made, unchanging observer, how does experiencing an “I” become possible at all?

The Tractatus does not answer this question by looking for a second, invisible body behind the body. In Volume IV, distinction is read self-referentially: |(|), in the agreed notation internal to the work Δ := |(|). In this reading, the observer is not an independent authority outside difference. The observer appears at the interface at which difference relates to itself. The expression “Δ | Δ” proposed by the author designates a reading of self-relation here, not the existence of two separate delta-things.

This is also what is meant by the “always as you” intended in the conversation. It does not designate the same person as an unchanging object travelling through a succession of states. What is meant is the self-reference of enactment, from which a particular observer perspective emerges.

This connection is a statement of our Tractatus reading, not a translation of the Pali word anattā. The early discourse disputes the identification of the five domains with an unchanging self; it does not formulate the equation “observer = Δ”. But it excludes a reading that simply presupposes the observer as an unchanging part of what is observed.

It is precisely the careful separation of the statements that makes the comparison interesting. The Tractatus investigates the self-reference of distinguishing and the observer position that becomes readable in it. The Buddhist discourses, by contrast, examine which phenomena can be claimed as an unchanging self at all. These questions touch on one another; that they therefore formulate the same teaching would, however, first have to be justified, not already presupposed.

4. CONDITIONALLY ARISEN—NOT A HIDDEN WANDERER

MN 38 is a second key passage for this. The monk Sāti claims that it is one and the same consciousness that wanders through different existences and experiences the consequences of actions. The tradition expressly presents this statement as an error. Consciousness, the reply goes, arises only under conditions. The discourse illustrates this through different forms of consciousness: seeing depends on the eye and on what is visible, hearing on the ear and on

what is audible, and correspondingly for further forms of experiencing. Consciousness is named after the condition on the basis of which it appears. A fire, according to the comparison, is likewise determined according to the fuel on which its burning depends. [Q5]

The image of an unchanged core of consciousness being transported from state to state is precisely what cannot be derived from this passage. A widespread counter-claim must also be avoided here: rebirth and the continuing effects of actions already belong to the early Buddhist teaching tradition. They were not all added only by later interpreters. What is rejected here is the particular idea that one and the same unchanging consciousness wanders on as a ready-made bearer. How the early tradition describes continuity without such a bearer must be inferred from its teaching of conditions. [Q5, Q8]

But neither need we draw the reverse conclusion that only mutually independent momentary things exist and that all relations disappear at every transition. Rather, the discourse binds each phenomenon to its conditions.

In conversation, we used the analogy of “frozen frames” for this. The image can help to make a difference visible: what appears as having already happened stands before us as a determinate reading. The enactment through which it became determinable is not identical with this fixed image. But the analogy must not tip over into a block universe in physics, in which nothing but ready-made states exist as independent containers through which an observer subsequently wanders. We would then merely have exchanged the unchanging wanderer for unchanging images.

The statement “There is only the past” must also remain precise within this framework. As a reading aid internal to the work, it can mean: every established determination is already the trace of an enacted distinguishing. It must not simply be elevated into a quotation from the historical Buddha or into a cosmological teaching according to which the present and future do not exist at all.

The thought of retrocausality is similar. Volume I and the relationship map of the Tractatus state that a later closure reads an earlier edge along with it in its determination. In such a retrospective reading, how the earlier context is now understood changes. This is not necessarily a cause intervening in terms of physics from the future into the past. The Buddhist discourses on dependent arising do not expressly stipulate such backward causality.

We can, however, investigate how the self-relation of an enactment contributes to determining its own result without treating the particular observer as an independent bearer. The analogy thus remains directed at the question for which it was introduced: how can the constancy of a nexus be thought without presupposing a constant thing?

5. MUTUAL CONDITIONALITY INSTEAD OF SEPARATE FOUNDATIONS

SN 12.67 develops the question still more vividly. In the conversation between Sāriputta and Mahākoṭṭhita, the relationship between consciousness and name-and-form is explained through two bundles of reeds leaning against one another. Each stands in dependence on the other. If the support of one is removed, the other falls as well. [Q6]

This passage does not assert that two ready-made substances subsequently act on one another. It shows a constellation of mutual conditionality. What is described as one side of the nexus is not independent of the other side.

This is a closer analogy to our question about the observer than the assumption of an isolated I-core. In the Tractatus, the stroke does not designate an already finished pole. It is the condition and enactment of that through which poles become distinguishable at all. The poles do not operate as individual parts subsequently assembled whose relation could be removed from consideration.

In SN 12.20, the difference between the rule of dependent arising and the conditionally arisen phenomena is made explicit. Even if no Buddha appears in the world, the nexus of conditionality is not thereby annulled. [Q7]

Here our thought of what endures without an unchanging person can be taken further. What is described as reliable in the discourse is not an indestructible private core of a soul, but the conditionality of what happens. The relation does not become meaningless because one of its particular phenomena passes away.

This is a possible bridge to the constancy of self-relating difference in the Tractatus. But the wording does not permit the conditional nexus to be presented without further ado as “our unchanging core” in the sense of an enduring individual entity. The core of our analogy is precisely that no such thing has to be introduced in addition.

6. NEITHER THE SAME NOR ANOTHER

In SN 12.46, a Brahmin asks whether the one who acts and the one who later experiences the consequences are the same or two different ones. Both answers are rejected as extremes. In their place comes explanation through dependent arising. [Q8]

For our historical investigation, this passage is almost a touchstone. The attempt to exhaust identity through the alternative “the same or another” generates a dichotomy in which the nexus of becoming can no longer be read adequately.

If we claim that it is precisely the same unchanged bearer, then we must explain change even though we have immunized the bearer against change. If we claim that it is a completely different bearer, then we lose the nexus on the basis of which one can speak of consequences of an earlier action.

The discourse does not answer the question by declaring one of the two sides the winner. It changes the explanatory approach: what matters is the conditionality of the nexus.

Here our critique, in Volume I, of negation made independent becomes particularly fruitful. “Not the same” does not yet automatically mean “a completely different object”. Negation does not independently install a positive counter-pole. Only an additional decision would turn what is open into a closed opposition.

The Buddhist statement “not self” must therefore also be read from its particular textual relation. It is not necessarily equivalent to the assertion of a metaphysical nothingness. It is directed against particular forms of grasping and identification.

This explains why the early teaching can discuss an uninterrupted relation of what is conditioned without presupposing an unchanging consciousness as a wanderer.

7. THE REGRESS OF DISTINCTION

Here the movement so far can be brought together into a distinct thesis internal to the work.

A human being experiences a difference. Within their experience, they determine something as pleasant or unpleasant, as fulfilled or deficient, as to be preserved or eliminated. Initially, this determination is neither an error nor an illness. It belongs to the possibility of orientation.

At this point the regress begins. An experience is no longer determined merely as something experienced; it gives rise to a demand on reality as a whole. The person no longer merely says: “This is how I experience it.” They demand: “This is how it must remain” or “This is how it must not be.” Open difference thus becomes a fixed opposition between what is supposedly given and what is unconditionally demanded.

To overcome this opposition, the person attempts to posit a new distinction: to acquire another object, defeat an opponent, avoid an unpleasant experience, produce a more pleasant experience. Yet this new result is subject to the same condition of holding on. It can now itself be lost, appear insufficient, or be delimited against something else. It becomes the starting point of the next demand.

The person seeks an end to suffering with precisely the movement through which they reproduce the painful opposition over and over again.

The regress of distinction consequently does not mean the mere recurrence of Δ. Difference continues to operate in self-relation. The movement becomes a regress of suffering where its particular results are held on to as independently existing things and human beings bind themselves to them in the same way again and again. What is in question is not continued distinguishing as such, but this particular relation to its result.

Early Buddhist teaching has its own language for this, which is not identical with Tractatus notation. In SN 56.11, the arising of suffering is traced back to craving. In MN 18, conceptual proliferations are described that eventually beset human beings. In the discourses on dependent arising, craving, attachment, and becoming follow one another in a particular order of conditions. [Q2, Q3, Q7]

The explanatory contribution of our reading consists in not viewing these passages as isolated moral injunctions. They are read together in relation to the question of how a self-reinforcing nexus arises and why a further counter-movement within the same solidification does not necessarily lead to liberation.

8. NOT “EVERYTHING IS ALREADY OVER”, BUT: WHAT IS HELD FIXED IS A TRACE

The formula “Everything is impermanent” is often heard as though it were an announcement: what exists today will disappear at some point. In Dhammapada 277, a familiar formulation reads “sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā”—all conditionally arisen formations are impermanent. The Pali word anicca does not literally mean “already past”. [Q9]

Our reading developed from the Tractatus begins with a different question. When something is described as a determinate state, its determinability is already the result of an enactment. The description holds a trace fixed while the nexus continues to operate. Understood in this way, what is treated as fixed being is already a reading of a becoming, not an absolute starting point.

This allows impermanence to be considered not only as the future demise of an object, but as an indication of its non-independence from the enactment of its determination.

The proposition must not, however, be passed off as a covert translation of anicca. It is our interpretation internal to the work. The early discourses do not speak of our wandering through an archive of already fully existing images of the world. They speak of conditionality, changeability, grasping, and letting go.

It is precisely the careful separation of the statements that makes the comparison interesting. We do not first have to translate the Buddhist discourses into the idea of a modern block universe for their statements on becoming to be fruitful for our investigation. We can take their original question seriously and then examine what additional perspective the relational reading opens up.

9. MEDITATION: THE OBSERVER TURNS TOWARD THEIR OWN ENACTMENT

If human beings reinforce their entanglement through their own activities, the temptation is to simply put a different activity in their place. One might then claim that monastic life and prayer are primarily means of distracting oneself from trade, sociability, entertainment, and everyday disputes.

The early textual context is more demanding. In DN 2, the monk’s life is described, among other things, as a practice of self-restraint, mindfulness, and concentration. The monk remains attentive during ordinary actions such as walking, eating, speaking, and perceiving. The practice is not a mere transfer of attention to some substitute occupation. It changes how one deals with one’s own perceptions and reactions. [Q10]

For this, “meditation” is usually the more precise word than “prayer” in the early Buddhist context. It is not primarily a prayer to a deity who is to free human beings from their faults. It concerns a form of practice in which the arising of experiencing, craving, resistance, and holding on is observed and changed.

Within our reading, we can say: the observer directs attention back toward the enactment through which they themselves appear as an observer. A second witness independent of experiencing is not discovered within. Rather, one's own participation in the arising of those oppositions previously treated as merely external reality becomes visible.

Monastic life reduces certain occasions for acquisitiveness, competition, and distraction. But it follows neither that all social life is necessarily delusion nor that everyone must become a monk. Early discourses such as AN 8.54 expressly address people with households, work, possessions, and social relationships. [Q11]

The question, then, is not whether trade, conversation, music, or sociability already constitute a transgression in themselves. What matters is whether human beings bind themselves to them in a way that continues the regress. And the opposite—the compulsive prohibition of every joy—could equally become a new, self-generated opposition. The external form of an action alone does not decide this relation.

SN 56.11 rejects both indulgence in excessive sensual pleasure and self-torment as extremes. The middle way therefore does not require leaving the world in order to find any reality at all. It changes the position of human beings toward their own actions and their results. [Q2]

10. NOT DESTROYING THE SYSTEM, BUT RECOGNIZING ITS FEEDBACK

The entanglement described so far concerns not only individual human beings. The same structure can continue in the relations among many people.

A community distinguishes between order and disruption, property and theft, members and outsiders, just action and injustice. These distinctions are not necessarily wrong; without them, collective action would not be determinable. Yet a system can treat the results of its own organization as though they came exclusively from outside.

DN 26 tells a story about a ruler who does not adequately provide for the destitute. Poverty spreads, followed by theft and further conflicts. The ruler responds initially to individual thieves and finally with harsh punishment; violence increases. The narrated sequence expressly connects poverty, theft, weapons, and killing. [Q12]

This is not present-day social statistics, but a didactic narrative working with great symbolic lifespans. Yet precisely as a narrative, it makes the mutual relations visible. The problem cannot be adequately explained if one considers only the act of the individual thief and disregards the conditions under which it occurs more frequently. At the same time, the social response is not neutral: it changes the conditions of further actions.

Here the regress becomes vivid at the social level. A system determines something as a disruption and attempts to eliminate it. Through its own measure, however, it changes the relations within which the disruption arose. These changes can in turn appear as new disruptions and call for further interventions. In this way, the supposedly completed solution itself becomes part of the continuing problem.

DN 5 contains a complementary narrative. There, a ruler is advised to respond to unrest not only with repression, but by supporting farmers with seed and fodder, traders with capital, and employees with appropriate remuneration. The conditions of social activity are to be changed instead of combating only its unwanted consequences. [Q13]

The two texts do not formulate a finished modern systems model. But they make a precise observation possible: a social nexus cannot solve its own problems if it completely excludes the contribution of its own conditions to their arising.

For the reading internal to the Tractatus, this can be put as follows. Someone who makes a distinction does not step outside its nexus as an untouched authority. What their action determines in the world feeds back into the conditions under which they will act and observe in future. The observer is included in this reflexive relation.

A change to the system therefore need not be equated with its violent destruction. It can consist in the system recognizing its own feedback and acting differently under changed conditions. Here, too, not every asymmetry is declared an error: a distinction is not yet violence. What becomes problematic is the self-reinforcing positing of opposites that makes its own conditions unreadable.

11. ENMITY AS A SELF-REINFORCING OPPOSITION

A brief teaching in the Dhammapada, verse 5, speaks of enmity not being ended by enmity. This statement does not develop a detailed theory of the state. But it names an experience that fits the two narratives about rulers: the mere repetition of the same counter-movement does not annul its ground. [Q14]

An opponent is determined. One attacks in order to eliminate the opposition. The attack changes the opponent, one’s own position, and the relations of those around them. The new state can in turn produce further images of enemies. The original cut acquires additional edges; nevertheless, thought attempts to read the situation once again as a simple opposition between two fixed sides.

In our relational interpretation, this thinking fails to recognize the enactment that continues to operate. It treats the opponent as independent of the nexus that determines both sides as opponents. It therefore reproduces the conditions of its own enmity.

An interruption is therefore not already achieved by seeking a third opponent. Rather, that relation would have to change in which those involved repeatedly determine themselves and one another as opposites.

This consideration also leads to the limit of a naive equation with Daoist non-doing. Refraining from violence where one would oneself trigger violence can make sense. But that does not mean passively accepting all injustice. The early Buddhist narratives about kings call precisely for changing social living conditions. Not every good action is a violent counter-blow; and non-attachment is not indifference to the suffering of others.

12. NIBBĀNA AND THE END OF COMPULSIVE CONTINUATION

What, in this reading, would liberation be?

If the regress is continued by holding on to every new determination once again as a final solution or as a new lack, a mere further determination cannot reliably end the regress. But it does not follow that human beings would have to stop distinguishing, seeing, thinking, or acting responsibly.

The early discourse SN 56.11 describes the end of suffering as the extinguishing of craving, as letting go and not holding on. It connects this with the eightfold path, thus with insight and practice, with speech, action, livelihood, attention, and concentration. [Q2]

Within our relational reading, the self-reference of difference does not thereby end. Rather, what is interrupted is a particular way of treating its results as independently existing objects of possession, resistance, or final mastery. Letting go concerns this solidification, not the fundamental enactment of distinguishing.

The distinction between fundamental movement and solidified regress is crucial here. If we equate the two, liberation would be conceivable only through the abolition of all determination. That itself would once again be an impossible demand for a state beyond every relation.

The Tractatus allows a different explanation here. Δ does not designate a thing that could be switched off through a final operation. Self-relation remains the nexus in which readings appear. In our analogy, liberation from suffering does not describe a shutdown of reality, but a different reading position within the enactment that continues to operate.

In the Buddhist sources, Nibbāna is of course not simply a technical name for a Tractatus reading position. The text speaks of the cessation of craving and of liberation. Our analogy explains why the end of a self-reinforcing relationship can be possible without denying the arising of all relations.

13. THE RETURN TO THE DAO: WU WEI AS NON-REINFORCEMENT

The arc now comes full circle to the preceding Dao section.

The Guodian bamboo texts, that is, an early surviving Laozi tradition from around 300 BC, already contain a passage corresponding to the present-day Chapter 48. It contrasts daily adding in learning with daily diminishing on the way of the Dao. The diminishing is continued as far as wu wei, non-forcing or non-intervention. [Q15]

Here, too, it would be wrong to equate wu wei with simple inactivity. Such a misunderstanding would detach the concept from the movement of its text. It concerns a particular way of acting that does not continually impose its own intention on what happens as additional violence.

It is precisely for this reason that wu wei is suited to be the concluding figure of our Buddha chapter. In our reading, the regress of suffering arises through an attempt to overcome a problem generated by holding on with ever new counter-determinations. The “more” of the supposed solution prolongs the underlying entanglement. Daoist diminishing, by contrast, suggests the possibility of precisely not continuing the superfluous intervention.

Human beings do not have to declare every experience an opponent. They can let a determination take effect without immediately developing a final claim of possession from its appearance. This is not a standstill of difference, but a change in their own relationship to the enactment in which they participate.

Precisely where, according to the ordinary view, action would be imperative, the opposition emerges: an opponent issues a challenge, the situation threatens to escalate, and an immediate counter-movement seems the only resolute response. But why should the challenge already be allowed to decide how we react? Someone who refrains from the counter-blow need not be powerless. They can avoid reinforcing the opponent’s movement in the first place through their own counter-movement. Conscious non-intervention is then not an absence of action, but a different position toward what happens.

Sunzi’s “Art of War” offers a strategic counter-reading here. In Chapter III, it is not the person who wins as many battles as possible who is described as the most skillful, but the one who brings the opposing forces to surrender without a battle. The impatient attack on fortified cities is also described there as a costly error. Sunzi is thus not calling for general inactivity: planning, changing the conditions, and avoiding open confrontation are also ways of acting. Yet he shifts the criterion from visible combat action to the effective result. Precisely where attack appears the obvious course, refraining from it can be the superior decision. [Q16]

The image of the general who waits by the river until the corpses of his enemies float past is often attributed to Sunzi. In the transmitted text of the “Art of War”, however, this sentence cannot be substantiated; its precise origin remains unclear. As a later image, it nevertheless brings the contrast to the point: the impatient person relies on immediate intervention; the waiting person refuses the conflict the immediate response it demands. This does not mean that every instance of waiting is right or that refraining from necessary protection would be called for. What matters is examining whether the intervention clarifies the nexus or merely drives its tension further. In our relational reading, the strategic renunciation of a battle here meets Daoist wu wei as non-forcing and the Buddhist question of how the regress of suffering can be interrupted without once again fighting against its own results.

Nor are the Buddha and Laozi thereby to be retrospectively made authors of the same teaching. Early Buddhist thought describes suffering, attachment, practice, and liberation within its own conceptual world. The Laozi tradition speaks of Dao, return, diminishing, and wu wei. The Tractatus reading shows a possible common nexus: an enactment can be solidified through additional counter-movements; a different position toward enactment can interrupt the self-reinforcing regress.

Historical similarity does not prove a common textual source. The direct dissemination of these thoughts along early trade networks remains a separate question for investigation. For the argument developed here, it is already sufficient that we can describe comparable relations in different traditions without erasing the differences in their emergence.

14. WHAT THE BUDDHA SECTION YIELDS FOR THE HISTORY OF THE LOST DIFFERENCE

The path of this chapter can thus be summarized without reducing it to a simple equation between the Buddha and the Tractatus.

The early discourses describe a world of conditionally arisen phenomena. They reject the idea that body, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness are an unchanging self. They expressly dispute that the same consciousness travels between existences as an unchanging wanderer. At the same time, actions and their consequences remain connected within conditional nexuses; the question of whether the one who acts and the one who experiences are simply the same or another is not answered by choosing one of these poles.

The teaching of suffering investigates how feeling, craving, attachment, and conceptual proliferation become entanglement. The regress arises when human beings keep prolonging such an entanglement through the same kind of grasping. The practice of attention is therefore more than distraction. It makes visible one's own participation in processes that previously appeared merely as an external imposition. In the political teaching narratives, the same question can be extended to the feedback effects of social action.

Our reading internal to the work connects these findings with the self-referential difference of the Tractatus. The observer is not a ready-made authority outside the relation. The observer appears as the interface of its self-reference. In this reading, what is sought as unchanging is not a soul-body, not a wandering consciousness-thing, and not a collection of ready-made states. What is investigated is the fundamental nexus in which determinations form, feed back into one another, and become readable anew.

We thus claim neither that the Buddha expressly taught $\Delta := |(|)$ nor that early Buddhism was an ancient form of modern retrocausality. This is a relational elucidation that emerges from the Tractatus and is tested against the Buddhist textual relations. Where a text does not sustain this reading, the difference must remain.

The final step leads back to wu wei. It is not the movement of difference that must fall silent. What can be interrupted, rather, is the habit of turning every determination into a fixed counterpart and confronting it with a new counter-determination. Insight into the self-generated conditions of a problem changes the possibility of action—in the individual as well as in the community.

The history of difference thus becomes at the same time the history of suffering from its reified results—and the question of the possibility of freeing oneself from precisely this reification.

It is not the world that must stop distinguishing itself.

What can stop is the attempt to defeat once and for all every determination that has emerged from difference through a new opposition.

Sources and Reading Notes

A. Starting Point Internal to the Work

Tractatus Principio, Volume 0: foundation of relational historical reading, especially the introduction and chapters on trace, meaning, and transmission.

Tractatus Principio, Volume I: “Buch der Mathematik”, especially Chapter II, “Vom offenen Unterschied zum geschlossenen Gegensatz”.

Tractatus Principio, Volume IV: “Buch der Selbstbezüglichkeit”, orders of difference $|$, $A|B$, and $|(|)$, $\Delta := |(|)$.

Tractatus Principio – Die Bewegung des Unterschieds: on the reading of Δ, reflexive reference, trace, and later closure. The retroactive contribution to determining an earlier edge is not necessarily backward causality in physics.

Die Geschichte des verlorenen Unterschiedes, Part II: “Das Dao und der offene Zusammenhang” (November 2026).

B. Early Buddhist Teaching Tradition (Pali Reference Abbreviations; Accessible Translations)

[Q1] On transmission: Stefan Baums, “Canon and Commentary in the Earliest Buddhist Manuscripts” (Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, 2022), doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.588; University of Washington, Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project, https://asian.washington.edu/early-buddhist-manuscripts-project

[Q2] Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, four noble truths, middle way, craving and its end: https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi

[Q3] Majjhima Nikāya 18, Madhupiṇḍika Sutta, contact, feeling, perception, thinking, conceptual proliferation: https://suttacentral.net/mn18/en/sujato

[Q4] Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59, Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, five domains of experiencing and not-self: https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/en/bodhi

[Q5] Majjhima Nikāya 38, Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, rejection of an unchanging wandering consciousness and its conditionality: https://suttacentral.net/mn38/en/sujato

[Q6] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.67, Naḷakalāpī Sutta, image of the two bundles of reeds: https://suttacentral.net/sn12.67/en/sujato

[Q7] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.20, Paccaya Sutta, dependent arising and conditionally arisen phenomena: https://suttacentral.net/sn12.20/en/bodhi

[Q8] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.46, Aññatara-brāhmaṇa Sutta, the one who acts and the one who experiences: https://suttacentral.net/sn12.46/en/sujato

[Q9] Dhammapada 277, “sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā” (all conditionally arisen formations are impermanent); Pali Canon, Dhammapada, verse 277.

[Q10] Dīgha Nikāya 2, Sāmaññaphala Sutta, restraint of the senses, mindfulness, and monastic practice: https://suttacentral.net/dn2/en/sujato

[Q11] Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.54, Dīghajāṇu Sutta, teaching for people with households and gainful employment: https://suttacentral.net/an8.54/en/sujato

[Q12] Dīgha Nikāya 26, Cakkavatti Sutta, poverty, theft, punishment, and violence: https://suttacentral.net/dn26/en/sujato

[Q13] Dīgha Nikāya 5, Kūṭadanta Sutta, seed, capital, and provision as responses to social unrest: https://www.wordsofthebuddha.org/dn5

[Q14] Dhammapada 5, on interrupting enmity: https://suttacentral.net/dhp1-20/en/sujato

C. Daoist Counter-Reading

[Q15] Guodian Laozi B, passage corresponding to the later Chapter 48: 學者日益，為道者日損。損之或損，以至亡為也，亡為而亡不為。 Textual witnesses in comparison with Mawangdui and Wang Bi: https://daodejing.ru/de/chapters/48 ; cf. “Die Geschichte des verlorenen Unterschiedes”, Part II.

[Q16] Sunzi, “Die Kunst des Krieges”, Chapter III (“Strategischer Angriff”): 不戰而屈人之兵, subduing the opponent without combat; cf. the section on impatient siege. Chinese wording and translation: https://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/Suentzyy/Suentzyy03.html. The saying about the corpses in the river often attributed to Sunzi is not attested there; its original provenance is unclear.

Note on the sources: the numbers of the discourses are bibliographic points of orientation in collections transmitted later. They do not designate demonstrably autograph writings of the historical Buddha. The German renderings in the chapter are predominantly paraphrases conveying the sense, not verbatim translation quotations. The term “regress of distinction” and the delta reading are expressly the interpretation of this investigation, not terms of the transmitted original Buddhist texts.