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The Platonic Boundaries of Soul and a Daoist Counterpoise

It goes without saying that any discourse on soul in conventional Western thought is almost invariably presented in entity-like terms.¹ Soul is commonly understood as an incorporeal substance housed within the body, largely indebted to Judeo-Christian interpretations of Plato's dialogues, in which soul travels toward an 'end' beyond embodied life, aligning with Abrahamic eschatologies. The aim, in short, is to preserve the immortality of personal identity, accountable for choices made and lives led in corporeality. From the early Church Fathers through the Scholastics, this outlook endures even in secular thought. Not merely theological, soul here also recalibrated how reason is conceived. So attending to this legacy clarifies how the very structure of thinking is organised around a relational centre, whether named 'soul' or 'subject,' functioning as the origin-point from which both reasoning and experience proceed.

In this picture, intentionality represents the privileged locus of intelligibility, a reflexive centre that becomes teleologically positioned for salvation and meaning alike. Consequently, knowledge and insight become authenticated by reference to what the centre can ground, warrant, or survey. Even where overt theology recedes, this architecture persists in secular guises; the subject displaces soul, but the inner workings of agency and intentionality remain. Through this inheritance, we can observe how reason and contemplation more generally continue to presuppose a non-predicable origin in the self, an origin that establishes its own boundary by ordering experience and projecting it toward ends.

Historically, this construal of soul as partially extricated from the phenomenal world developed in tandem with the notion of 'intentionality' (*intentio*). The term underwent a decisive reshaping in the passage from Arabic into Latin. For earlier thinkers such as al-Fārābī, the cognate *ma'nā*

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¹ We avoid the definite article 'the' when referring to 'soul' to prevent its nominalisation into a discrete entity; an anarthrous usage to keep soul's boundaries processual rather than thing-like. We adopt the same practice for 'form,' which we later treat meontologically, likewise to avoid objectification.

(to intend or to mean) denoted a non-objective operation of the intellect within the Neoplatonic system they inherited, one that presupposed an intelligible order transcending any relational centre.² Rather than a phenomenological program, al-Fārābī spoke of a ‘methodic experience’ that generates universals through the deliberate regulation of particulars by the senses.³ From the Latin reception onward, chiefly perhaps Albertus Magnus and Aquinas, *intentio* was retuned as a volitional ‘tending toward’ an end (*intentio finis*), shifting the centre of gravity from intellect to will (*voluntas*), even while the latter remained informed by the former. Aquinas explicitly located *intentio* in the will and articulated its relation to absolute willing (*volumus*) and to the directedness of intention toward its end (*intentio respicit finem*).⁴

It is this reframing that transformed intentionality from a feature of an intellectual order into a will-centred process, paving the way for subject-centred epistemologies later consolidated in Franz Brentano’s descriptive psychology and ultimately 20th-century phenomenology proper, where soul is re-secured by boundaries set within a self-posit-

² As Hacker notes, *intentio* entered Latin discussions as a rendering of al-Fārābī’s *ma‘qul* and Avicenna’s *ma’nā*, signifying what is before the mind in thought, which Aquinas reworks by treating *intentio* as the intellect’s non-pictorial formal likeness of the thing, such that the object of thought has *esse intentionale* in the intellect, whether or not it enjoys *esse naturale* in reality. The Thomistic shift, therefore, lies in construing intentionality less as a merely intelligible item and more as the mode of being proper to the object as known (Hacker 2013, 60-63). Lisska adds further complexity here, explaining that, for Aquinas, *esse intentionale* captures the cognitive content through which an object is known, not the object itself, and that such cognition depends on the real powers of the knower. The form known therefore exists in two modes, *esse naturale* in the thing and *esse intentionale* in the cognitive act, which secures Aquinas’s realism while avoiding both Cartesian dualism and crude representationalism (Lisska 2016, 32-43). For an early scholarly exploration of this connection in more explicit form, see Hammond (1947), who links al-Fārābī and Aquinas on universals, being, negative theology, intellect, causality, contingency, and essence – existence.

³ For a fuller discussion of al-Fārābī’s and Avicenna’s accounts of ‘methodic experience,’ where the emphasis is more on cognitive intentionality and causal cognition, see (Lammer 2018, 45-51). Essentially, both distinguish experience (*tajriba*) from simple induction (*istiqrāʾ*), but whereas al-Fārābī allows it to issue in a universal judgement extending beyond examined cases, Avicenna treats it more cautiously as repeated observation ordered into a causal syllogism, producing only conditionally universal knowledge under determinate circumstances, with absolute first principles deriving from a separate source of certainty.

⁴ See, for example, *ST I-II*, q.12, a.1, where Aquinas presents the will as the power ordered to an end and, through that end, to the means. Although reason orders and presents the means, it remains the will that tends towards and intends the good to be attained. An early exposition of this Thomistic account of the will may be found in (Alexander 1898, 127-142). For a modern scholarly discussion contrasting Aquinas with the Arabic tradition, especially the Alexandrian-Averroist tendency to externalise intellect and thereby attenuate the individuality of the human soul, see (Tropia 2022, 1433-34).

ing subject.⁵ By contrast, Oriental traditions for the most part did not posit an incorporeal entity that anchors a relational centre; the sharp Cartesian subject-object divide is, at the very least, not taken as basic. This orientation persists into 20th-century East Asian philosophy, i.e., Kyoto School and New Confucianism, whose principal critique of Western thought targets inquiries that begin from a subjective centre. Much of this is underwritten by the legacies of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, among other systems they inherit; what is called 'soul' is understood as a construct of desire and willing rather than a permanent, factual aspect of existence. Hence, Daoist cultivation aims at a release into things as they already are, toward a boundlessness that recognises no boundary as ever having existed, whether 'within' soul or 'without.'⁶

Accordingly, our discussion centres on boundaries, particularly those that contour contemplation and embodiment, guided chiefly by Platonist and Daoist accounts. For the Platonists, we see two factors at work. First, the contemplative, above all in mathematical figures, geometry, and abstraction, i.e., the movement of thought itself; second, the bodily faculties, whose indispensable operations provide the background for such thinking. Turning to the Daoists, we find a comparable programme of bodily regulation, though within a different contemplative vantage. Emphasis falls on discerning the world's patterns of movement, which at once guide bodily regulation and enable releasement. Despite a similar level of rigour, both subject thought to a rectificatory programme in tandem with bodily cultivation. In each case, a holism is evident. Boundaries prove neither purely inner nor purely outer; they function as the co-constitutive limit of thought and embodiment.

⁵ In Hacker, Brentano is the key nineteenth-century figure who brings the medieval notion of intentionality back into prominence and famously defines it as the mark of the mental. While Hacker traces the term's earlier background through Avicenna, al-Farabi, and Aquinas, it is Brentano's role to restate and redirect the problem in modern philosophy rather than mediate the original medieval transmission (Hacker 2013, 60-63).

⁶ As Pregadio explains in his *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, Daoist thought does not construe 'soul' as a single immaterial substance separable from the human being, but as part of an integrated psychosomatic whole in which body, spirit, vital forces, and inner deities are interwoven, in marked contrast to Western models that posit firmer boundaries between body and soul. In this view, the person (*shen*) includes both material and non-material dimensions, while *hun* and *po* designate complementary *Yang* and *Yin* soul-aspects that reside in the viscera and participate in the body's cosmological, spiritual, and administrative order (Pregadio 2008a, 75-80).

There is, in Platonism, a distinctive ‘logic of soul’ whereby mathematics maps and regulates the bounds of cognition, experience, and the broader cosmology. Here, the intellect, as primordial ground of metaphysics, functions in a primarily mathematical manner, but up to a point. Beyond that limit lie the Platonic forms or *ideas*. Hence, it is through mathematics and its self-imposed boundaries that the movement of thought enters metaphysics proper.⁷ This perspective renders any strict definition of ‘soul’ difficult and unsettles conventional talk of ‘boundaries.’ By soul, then, we are not positing a discrete entity, nor ascribing it an ontologically fixed status. In this connection, Schopenhauer’s observation is apt. The contrast between the two fundamental pillars of judgement, first adumbrated in Aristotle, receives its clearest articulation in Proclus; *epagōgē*, an inductive ascent from particular to universal, traces what is to be proved back to an acknowledged first principle, while *apagōgē*, a reductive or refutational reasoning, often by way of contradiction, derives consequences from such a principle.⁸

For Schopenhauer, Proclus’ Greek terms prefigure the modern distinction between inductive ‘analysis’ and deductive ‘synthesis,’ *epagōgē* and *apagōgē* respectively (*WWR II*, 130). Hence, Schopenhauer accepted Plato’s view of geometry as the intermediary between eternal *ideas* and particular things, with its mathematical precision serving as a penultimate bridge that prepares the intellect to apprehend the incorporeality of forms (*WWR II*, 140).⁹ In this sense, geometry and mathematics

⁷ See, for example, *Tim.* 27d-29d on the intelligible model, 34b-37c on the mathematically proportioned world-soul and cognition, and 47a – c on number and astronomy as pathways to understanding. As for where mathematics reaches a limit and yields to metaphysics proper, see the ‘Divided Line’ in *Rep.* 509d-511e, and 522c-531d, for where arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics prepare soul for dialectic.

⁸ In Proclus, the intelligible triad *ousia* – *zōē* – *nous* is based on the primary noetic structure of reality as Being, Life, and Intellect. Soul is not itself a member of this highest intelligible triad, but its lower participated image, receiving being, life, and intellection from the noetic order and mediating their unfolding within the psychic and sensible realms. Read through the late-antique dynamic of remaining, procession, and reversion, soul’s place is therefore intermediate and derivative. Oosthout’s recent work shows that, according to Proclus’ ‘rule,’ higher intelligible principles extend their causal power further into the sensible world than lower ones. Soul thus remains a genuine generative cause, but one whose reach is more limited than Intellect’s, which helps explain why even lowly sensibles may reflect higher intelligible causes more directly than soul alone. See (Turner 2014 53-59); (Oosthout 2025, 55-6, 64-70).

⁹ Despite Schopenhauer’s Platonism here, the filtration of that Platonic background through Indian thought is unmistakable. Soul in his philosophy is not a separate substance but an individual appearance of the one World-Will, a view that invites comparison with Advaita Vedānta’s non-dualism, even though Schopenhauer described the ultimate as blind striving rather than pure consciousness, see Pradhan (2017, 21-33, esp. 24). All of this is then reread through an aestheticised vision of beauty and the sublime, in which the Platonic Ideas explain their metaphysical function; yet soul, even here, remains

more generally function as a middle discipline; it begins from empirical ‘reminders,’ such as drawn figures and diagrams, only to proceed analytically by reducing the particular to the universal, tracing back to principles, hence the analytic route – *epagōgē*. More importantly, this ‘middle’ position is closely tied to soul’s inner workings, for the empirical ground of geometry, though methodically analytic in leading the mind from the sensibly given figure to the principle, is also preparatory for synthetic deduction. This shows that mathematical procedure remains a discursive motion, not the ‘motionless’ *noēsis* of the *ideas*, whereby the intellect’s ‘activity-at-rest’ is non-processual.

Furthermore, since these mathematical horizons are self-imposed and intrinsically provisional, meaning that they are prefigured by a given soul’s capacity for judgement, soul itself resists any entity-like definition. From here, we reach a central defining feature of soul: *nous* as a self-unfolding activity of thought that manifests corporeality and incorporeality within a single, continuous horizon. This activity, at once intellectual and demiurgic, creates and sets before itself both world and self-reflection in one particular field of view. We are, of course, adumbrating from the outset a thorough conflation of epistemology and ontology; precisely why soul’s metaphysics resists any phenomenological grounding. All judgment must operate, in principle, with universals and particulars, a mereological operation that is ‘intuitively given’ rather than experientially ascertained, indeed very much in line with what Schopenhauer calls the *principium individuationis*, albeit unrestricted even by the space-time continuum that the German posited. Put differently, this understanding of soul presupposes a universal, intuitive givenness in the intellect’s rudimentary operations.

For example, Euclid’s first postulate, that a straight line can be drawn through any two distinct points, is taken as self-evident and not peculiar to Euclidean geometry. This axiomatic proof displays how the intellect proceeds irrespective of phenomenological derivations, so that mathematics best discloses the horizon of thought. For Proclus, however, exactly this type of self-evidence simultaneously indicates how mathematics at once directs thought beyond itself toward the *ideas*. This orientation toward the ideal of forms through soul’s operations rests on the principled impossibility of absolute empirical demonstrations of geometrical and mathematical entities; a perfect straight line or circle remains forever

boundaryless, just as it does in the Indian perspective. The broader Indian dimensions of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, including his understanding of soul, continue to attract scholarly attention (Barua 2008; 2013), while his engagement with the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upanek’hat* further reinforced the idea that the true self lies beyond empirical individuality and bodily action (Cross 2013, 23-32).

imaginative rather than experientially given. Hence, every mathematical construction is a copy measured against its imaginative paradigm; indeed, all ‘mathematicals’ are imaginative derivations of forms, with the latter functioning as symbols of the intellect’s navigational orientation, whence their resistance to complete description.

This attests to Proclus’ point that if intellect is all things in the mode of intellect, soul is all things in the mode of soul; if *nous* is exemplar, soul is copy; if *nous* contains things in concentrated unity, soul contains them discursively (*Euc. Comm.* VI.16). Mathematics here acts as a hinge, its figures and limits articulate the conditions of knowing while at the same time disclosing the ascent beyond them. Accordingly, Plato fashions soul from mathematical forms, dividing it by numbers, binding it with proportions and harmonious ratios, including the first principles of figure, the straight line and the circle, and setting all in intelligible motion (*Tim.* 35a-36c). Therefore, all ‘mathematicals’ are present in soul from the beginning, before ordinary numbers, the self-moving numbers; before visible figures, the living figures; before harmonised parts, the ratios of harmony; before bodies revolving in space, the invisible circles already inscribed (*Euc. Comm.* VI.17).¹⁰

These points further attest to a characterisation of soul as a second world-order proceeding from its native principle. Animated by the intellect’s demiurgic power, though without body or extension, it manifests the sciences and the virtues by sustaining thought’s own motion. Number, as ‘in-souled,’ is neither reducible to a plurality nor to motion tied to corporeal extension; it proceeds from living forms, the intelligible archetypes of visible numbers, figures, ratios, and motions. Indeed, self-moving are these mathematical ideas that complete soul; as understanding discloses them, the plurality of the sciences is begotten. Accordingly, all discursive inquiry is, in principle, fundamentally mathematical, owing to the relevant concepts already inhering in soul as originating causes (*Euc. Comm.* VI.18).¹¹ We can hitherto make the case that mathematics

¹⁰ Modern scholarship has increasingly turned to Proclus’ *Euclid Commentary* as a key witness to his emphasis on foundational mathematics, showing that geometry mediates between discursive soul and intelligible unity. Netz, for instance, notes that Proclus privileges elementary mathematics because its proximity to first principles gives it greater philosophical weight than advanced technical work or observational astronomy (Netz 2022, 423-25).

¹¹ As Grieg adds, for Proclus, soul is ordered mathematically within the ontological series as a mediating and proportionate cause between Intellect and Nature. Since higher principles possess more universal and comprehensive powers, while lower principles receive and transmit these only partially, soul occupies an intermediate rank whose causality is real yet limited, extending intelligible order into the lower cosmos without comprehending the full universality of Intellect. Grieg’s exposition thus shows how Proclus arranges divine and ontological orders through relations of remaining, procession, and reversion,

is thought-in-motion, soul's highest-grade derivative of *nous*, which from the outset abides in perfection.

More precisely, soul, finite in its receptivity to intelligible paradigms, realises its distinctive activity principally through mathematical operation, whereas forms exceed mathematics altogether, serving as the *telos* that orients thought beyond calculative precision. For however precise they become, mathematical projections are posterior to and dependent on forms. As both formal and final causes, forms precede and exceed all; for although soul's noblest thinking-in-motion, mathematics only participates in and images what forms ultimately represent, namely, *nous*. We must also add that forms forever evade union with thinking, while mathematics proceeds as their discursive imprint, demonstrative of soul's reversion towards them through its inquiries. Forms are, at base, meontological; the mathematical are merely the measured derivatives of an endless seeking after that which resists all ontological determination.

By 'meontological,' we mean forms allow the imagination of stable measures (*metra*) and limits (*perata*), by which things are what they are. In this sense, they remain 'immobile,' a meontological blueprint that is traceless in any self-projection of their ideals; effects defined solely by the way beings measure up to them. Further, as exemplars (*paradeegmata*) in *nous*, they give shape through participation (*methexis*) not because they emerge or step out, but because beings perpetually look up to them. Indeed, as 'intelligible reasons,' they are the *logoi* that inform becoming; the *logos* of trianglehood does not change, while triangles only ever approximate it. Soul's repeated grasp of triangles in understanding is bounded by the limits that outline trianglehood's horizon; whenever thought presses beyond them, it shows that forms exert an unattainable causality beyond the formal and final.

For Proclus, this reaching is precisely the orientation beyond the mathematical that forms effectuate; they 'cause' by transcendence and priority, not by temporal propulsion. Hence, in Proclus' programme, forms remain in themselves while being aimed at by souls, an order of dependence rather than temporal-spatial motion, hereby positioning the intellect as the direct, self-sufficient vision and knowledge of forms. Perfect, unmoving, and not in need of inquiry, intellect is already filled with and converged upon truth itself. By contrast, soul's mathematical orientation

with intermediate terms binding one level to another. Soul fits as a mediating order whose causality is neither maximal nor minimal; it does not comprehend the full powers of Intellect, but surpasses Nature by retaining a more universal and self-reflexive causal activity. This is why soul can function as an ordering and vivifying principle without being identical with the highest intelligible causes. Its position is 'mathematical' in the Neoplatonic sense of ordered proportion, hierarchical derivation, and mediated continuity. See (Greig 2021, 197-202).

is discursive (*dianoia*) and step-by-step; from symbols in sense-experience it turns inward to *ideas*, moving between principles and conclusions, advancing through inquiry, correcting itself, and progressing from ignorance to knowledge (*Euc. Comm.* VII.18-20).

To put simply, intellect retains forms immediately and perfectly, without inquiry; mathematics approaches them by discursive reasoning. This very discursivity marks soul's boundary, as our Platonic sketch shows; soul is confined to thinking-in-motion, and further still, soul is the stepwise passage from premises to conclusions. By contrast, *nous* in act qua *noēsis* differs in kind as well as degree. The motion that implies change of place, coming-to-be, or any sequential traversal is a pattern that *noēsis* never exhibits. Unmoved and non-inferential, it therefore lies beyond soul's boundary even as it orients soul's mathematical activity toward forms. Since *nous* is complete activity-at-rest, knower and known coincide; *noēsis* and forms are one act beyond soul's boundary, intellect's ground is boundless.¹²

Schopenhauer offers a useful analogue to this Platonist insight in his account of aesthetic contemplation. In contrast to the status quo, where-in reason is perpetually caught in the *principium individuationis*, fixed in the total distinction between self and others and bent towards its own well-being, the aesthetic state involves a momentary silencing of all willing that "begins as soon as we give ourselves up to aesthetic contemplation as the pure, will-less subject of cognition – the correlate of the Idea," so that, with individuality dropping away, "nothing is left but the will-less cognition of the Idea" (*WWR I*, 390).

The status of intellect, and insofar as it is juxtaposed from within the vantage point of soul's boundaries, is ontologically consistent in both Schopenhauer and the Platonists; there can be no step-by-step search, for the intelligible field is present all at once. Hence, soul recognises eternity to be the all-together-at-once, while time is "an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity [...] number, of course, is what we now call 'time'" (*Tim.* 37c).¹³ Forms belong to

¹² Here Lankila invokes 'hyperintellection' to show that, for Proclus, soul contains more than discursive reason alone. It bears not only rational principles (*noeroi logoi*) that image the intelligible forms, but also divine symbols (*synthēmata, symbola*) implanted within it by higher divine realities. These symbols enable soul to rise beyond ordinary thought. Hyperintellection, in this sense, characterises soul's supra-intellectual activation of these divine traces within itself (Lankila 2010, 155-163).

¹³ The Platonic conception of time as the 'moving image of eternity' proved immensely influential historically, though space allows only a brief indication here. As Heller notes in his *Philosophy in Science: An Historical Introduction*, this influence was chiefly based on the understanding that eternity belongs to the immutable realm of Ideas, while time belongs to the cosmos of becoming, with soul mediating between them by transmitting intelligible order into cosmic motion and thus linking eternal being with temporal life, change, and movement (Heller 2011, 14-17).

this eternal order; their ‘operation’ is unchanging ideals. This operation means that forms cannot be ontologically disclosed from within *dianoia*, for any such operating on the part of forms is itself uncharacterisable by the thought-in-motion that shuttles between principles and conclusions. Only in *noēsis*, as the act of *nous*, is all that is thinkable dissolved in the perfect stillness of intellect; at that point, forms are no longer posited but dissipate into the intellect.

Nevertheless, we ultimately learn here that mathematics in the Platonic paradigm disciplines and articulates the ascent from changing diagrams to unchanging ratios supplied by the *ideas*. By marking its own limits with utmost clarity, it guides soul to the threshold beyond which forms are apprehended without the motion of inference; soul must relinquish itself to cross that boundary, becoming, as it were, beyond soul in intellect. While soul recognises these limits from within *dianoia*, it also learns that boundary and mathematical projection trace the same itinerary: self-abolition is imperative. But even at this apex of delimitation, soul’s mathematical prowess can only imagine what such abolition entails; it can only picture what *noēsis* sees without mediation. In effect, mathematical cognition is propaedeutic and participatory, whereas intellectual intuition is definitive and self-sufficient; the ultimate *telos* toward which the former continually strives and in which the latter eternally abides.

To trace soul’s boundary through thinking-in-motion is to set it alongside embodiment, the corporeal ground of said boundary. We can gain another Neoplatonic perspective into these boundaries from Plotinus’ partially descended soul, where entwinement with the body marks the limit-line along which intelligible activity is guided by corporeal condition. In his undescended soul doctrine (which Proclus contested), Plotinus maintained that the aspect of soul which remains ‘above’ is not bound by discursive or calculative motion. There is a pre-calculative register in which “before calculative reasoning takes place one does want to eat or drink,” for bodily appetite can be stirred prior to deliberation, and “the appetite extends to a certain point, to the extent that it is in the body so qualified.” Here, “nature does not join in or attach itself ... as if it were not in accordance with nature,” since embodiment exposes soul to change, and with the rise of desire comes the movement of discursive thought (*Enn.* IV.[28] 21:12-14).

In the relatable Buddhist or Schopenhauerian terms, this is representational willing or clinging with the body’s operations co-arising alongside *dianoia*; bodily desire and the contemplative movement between means and ends co-emerge. Despite Proclus’ later contestations of the unde-

scended soul theory, Plotinus' point is that calculative reason is a secondary, derivative motion of the ensouled composite, whereas the soul's highest part, remaining 'above,' is free of such motion and orients the ascent back toward *noēsis*. But to push the ensouled-composite character of soul further, Plotinus' analysis of sensation betrays a hierarchy of soul. The body here bears the affection; the perceptual faculty (*aisthēsis*) cognises it without being affected, reporting upward to soul's calculative faculty (*logismos*).¹⁴ This architecture makes calculative reason secondary, an instrument of embodiment for managing affections.

Furthermore, pleasure and pain are bodily affections with a cognitive relay; pain is perceptual soul's cognition of the qualified body's privation of soul's *logos*, and pleasure is soul's cognition of restoring *logos*. Consequently, affection lies 'there' in the corporeal body, while the perceptual soul, positioned adjacent to it, cognises without being affected and reports upward. Only then can the unaffected perceptual operation serve as a 'messenger' and deliver a sound report; for were soul itself affected as a whole, it could not locate the pain 'there' but would suffer indiscriminately (*Enn.* IV.[28] 19). Calculative reason, therefore, belongs to this derivative circuitry of affection – cognition – report, whereas soul's undescended aspect remains eternally impassible, merely 'localising' the *pathos* without undergoing it. It is within this middle band of cognition that mathematics functions consistently with Proclus' metaphysic, training soul away from mutable affections toward invariant ratios in preparing its ascent.

Again, the activity of *dianoia* remains a mediated report, forever distinct from *noēsis*, which, unlike any 'messenger,' is the immediate, simultaneous identity of knower and known. Effectively, the boundaries of soul reflect these limits within cognition itself, more precisely, of intellection in its graded modes, i.e., pre-calculative, calculative, intuitive and so on, with *noēsis* naming transcendence; all-at-once intellection of the intelligible forms. These cognitive limits prove inseparable from soul's corporeal con-

¹⁴ The theme of non-discursive or non-propositional thought in Plotinus and Neoplatonism more generally has become increasingly prominent in modern scholarship. Lloyd was an early example who claimed that, for Plotinus, soul's highest cognition surpasses discursive and propositional thought in favour of a non-representational intellection in which intelligible reality is grasped all at once rather than through sequential judgement (Lloyd 1970, 261-69; 1986, 258-65). More recent discussion has refined this picture by arguing that the Plotinian intelligible is non-discursive without being simply ineffable. As Harter shows, discursive philosophy may still articulate the intelligible's objective constitution, even if it cannot reproduce its proper mode of presentation. Harter's comparison of Plotinus and Bhāviveka is especially illuminating here, since both preserve the necessity of discourse while denying its adequacy to ultimate reality, and the volume as a whole is a valuable contribution to Platonist-Buddhist comparative philosophy (Harter 2024, 142-166).

dition, namely, the body. Accordingly, the hierarchy of soul appears both as a scale of a given soul's capacity and, more holistically, a shared horizon disclosed by inconsistencies evident to all bodies. Ultimately, *aisthēsis* is ordered teleologically for the utility of soul-composite and cannot belong to the cosmic whole, for "parts would have sense-perception in relation to other parts which are also subject to affections, but what sense-perception could there be for the Whole in respect of itself, when it is, in all parts of itself, unaffected in respect of itself?" (*Enn.* IV.[28].24:14-17).¹⁵

By this reasoning, we see that the inner workings of bodily desire and discursive thought must be studied together to understand soul, tracing how both promulgate themselves through number, theory, mathematics, concept, and so on. For where number strains against antinomies such as infinitude, indivisibility, and incommensurables, or where geometry lays bare paradoxes of continuity such as Democritus' cone puzzle, those are where the limits are most legible. As Plutarch explains Democritus' cone puzzle, if a plane cuts a cone parallel to its base, are the two circular faces equal or unequal? If unequal, the cone would be notched in steps; if equal, it would collapse into a cylinder (*Mora.* 1079e-1080c). Ancient solutions typically generated fresh contradictions and left the paradox of continuity intact. But what modern mathematics does here is not explain what is immediately visible so much as articulate the intelligible structure that escapes the senses.

In other words, it is not self-evident that there are 'step-like notches,' for perception has a finite resolution incapable of observing such notches directly. Meanwhile, modern geometry shows there is no 'next slice' in a continuum; the underlying order is dense and gapless. Between any two levels, there are always others strictly between; any 'adjacent' slices therefore arise from the limits of perception, not from geometry itself. Cross-sections vary continuously, any two distinct sections are unequal, and a cone is smooth without implying cylindricity. In essence,

¹⁵ Consider also Plotinus' distinction between soul's unaffected higher activity and the embodied circuitry of appetite, sensation, and report, in which desire begins in the qualified body before deliberation and can 'reach a certain point' there, while soul cognises bodily affection without itself undergoing *pathos* (*Enn.* IV.4 [28].19.12-13, 26-27; 20.14-18, 25-36; III.6 [26].1.1-4). For the view that Plotinus does not sever 'us' from 'ours', and that Intellect remains 'ours without being ours' as 'our king,' see Mortley 2013, 68-78. Emilsson similarly suggests a qualified non-severance, though cast more cautiously as hierarchical inclusion, since bodily and composite functions belong to us without being identical with the soul's highest self (Emilsson 2017, 144-184). The more important case, though too large to treat here, is Plotinus' own view of soul. Without denying individual soul, Plotinus distinguishes higher soul from soul 'from the world as a whole' (IV.3 [27].1.1-3), affirms a 'unity of soul' (IV.9 [8].3:10-12), says that something of 'soul of the universe' is in us (IV.9 [8].1:10-12), and maintains that 'we are not cut off' from intelligible whole (VI.4 [22].14:18-21)."

the deficiency of the senses discloses soul's limited capacity to apprehend true order without recourse to calculation and proof. Although soul participates in an infinite order, its finite reasoning can never fully embody the unchanging absolute it intimates. Since antiquity, such empirically intractable cases have shown this incapacity; where perception under-determines structure, discursive analysis must supply the ratios and limits that appearances cannot reveal.

To this end, Schopenhauer was remarkably prescient; what we consider epistemic limits here are nothing over and above the organism's own physiognomic form, the body as the will objectified, so that intellect, being a tool the will has fashioned, cannot exceed the observational bounds that ground it. Limits, therefore, coincide with character just as it does soul; cognition tracks the body's mixture (*krâsis*), as Schopenhauer's citation of Parmenides (via Aristotle) attests (*WWR I*, 133-34; *Met.* [5].1009b21):

For as each man has a union of the much-wandering limbs,
So is mind present to men; for it is the same thing
Which the constitution of the limbs thinks,
Both in each and every man; for the full is thought (Fr. 16)

This graded economy of knowledge was articulated with utmost clarity by al-Fārābī, who located the senses at a comparably necessary albeit limited threshold.

The senses deliver singulars entangled with the variable accidents of time, place, and circumstance, and are therefore prone to said under-determination: "Things perceived by the intellect are as such free from the states and accidents [they have] outside the [thinking] soul" (*KS* 59). Consequently, perception cannot disclose intelligibles *as such*; in existing outside soul, intelligibles are joined to accidents, whereas the intellect alone grasps the species ('Man,' for instance) as a unified whole despite its variable instantiations. Hence, when defining 'secondary intelligibles,' al-Fārābī explains that once sensibles are received by soul as intelligibles, they acquire "attachments" (*lawāḥiq*) that belong to them precisely insofar as they are in soul. Some become genus or species because they are "predicated of many;" some stand in relations of "more general" and "more specific;" some render others known. Even their being "known" (*ma'lūma*) or "intellectually perceived" (*ma'qūla*) is itself an attachment of this in-soul mode. These are, in short, intelligibles *about* intelligibles, not intelligibles of things outside soul (*KH I. IV.7*).¹⁶

¹⁶ As Janos shows in his exemplary study of al-Fārābī's cosmology, al-Fārābī sharply distinguishes sensation, induction, and *tajribah* (experience). Repeated sensation yields par-

Further insight can be gained from distinguishing the sciences, which shows how each remains bound to its ‘attachments,’ that is, to the categories (*al-maqūlāt*). Mathematics interrogates its objects purged of designated ‘thisness’ (*hādihā al-mushār ilayh*), restricting itself to the ‘what-it-is’ (*mādhā huwa*). Natural science, by contrast, considers those same natures as embodied species and therefore asks not only ‘what it is’ (*mādhā huwa*) but also ‘from what’ (*ammādhā/‘an mādhā*), ‘by what’ (*bi-mādhā*), and ‘for what’ (*li-mādhā*). Within these discursive procedures, both remain within the categories. But when natural science presses each ‘whatness’ to its ultimate articulation, it is driven upward to the ‘agent of the agent’ and the ‘end of the end’, thereby encroaching upon intelligibles that transcend (*mufāriqa*) the categories and yet still belong to the very ‘whatness’ (*māhiyya*) of categorical things (KH I. V.16).¹⁷

Evidently, in al-Fārābī’s ladder from sensation to mathematics to natural science to metaphysics, though claiming the highest exactitude, mathematics lacks explanatory reach and therefore ranks below that which confers meaning upon intelligibles; calculation confined to abstraction is without direction.¹⁸ Natural science outstrips mathematics in causal scope, while mathematics surpasses natural science in precision. Nevertheless, the completion of both lies in metaphysics.¹⁹ The bodily faculties,

particulars, but certainty arises only when the intellect forms a universal judgement from them. This confirms that sensibles, once received in soul, become available for specifically intelligible determinations that are not present in them merely as external particulars (Janos 2012, 60-63).

¹⁷ See also al-Fārābī’s *Short Commentary on Aristotle’s Prior Analytics*, where sensory evidence serves as the basis from which intellect secures universal premisses through ‘transfer’ and syllogistic inquiry, so that once a given ‘matter’ is recognised as standing for a universal, judgement can be extended beyond the immediately given case to other particulars falling under it (AQ 117); and his *Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione*, where utterances signify through thoughts, and traces in soul function as likenesses or representations of what exists outside soul, so that affirmation and negation arise in soul as acts of signification rather than as opposites existing outside it (AB 52-53).

¹⁸ As Janos shows, where mathematics considers objects abstracted from matter only in the mind, natural philosophy considers material bodies and therefore what falls within the categories, while metaphysics alone reaches the immaterial causes not encompassed by the categories. Hence, inquiry into the whatness of categorical things ultimately points beyond the categories to separate intelligibles, as he writes: “al-Fārābī regarded mathematics as a useful tool to investigate the world around us and as a science possessing its own method and subject matter, he did not, on the other hand, endow mathematical objects with a special metaphysical status or value” (Janos 2012, 65; 64-66).

¹⁹ This line of thought helps explain how al-Fārābī’s logical and epistemological programme could support later doctrines of the unity of souls in Islamic philosophy. If intellect rises from repeated sensibles to universal judgement, then its highest object is not isolated particulars but what is common and intelligible. As Hawi shows, Ibn Ṭufayl extends this tendency into psychology and mysticism; observation already moves thought beyond bodily plurality towards unity, while mystical experience confirms subjectively what abstraction reaches rationally. Ibn Ṭufayl’s vision of souls as many yet one may thus

heretofore, propound an under-determined base that mathematics and natural science progressively rectify; still, their very completeness intimates a consummation beyond discursive bounds. Hence, intellect must both abstract the first intelligibles and supply the second-order architecture (genus, species) that completes knowledge.²⁰

Al-Fārābī, however, offers more than a negative verdict on sensation. As the chief Islamic Platonist, or ‘Father of Islamic Neoplatonism,’ he prescribes a rigorous pedagogy for perfecting soul and embodiment alike.²¹ The senses are to be trained by bodily regimen, habituation of the appetites, and the exact arts. The aspirant must, among other traits, possess “a good memory and be able to endure the toil of study ... not be gluttonous for food and drink ... by natural disposition disdain the appetites” (KS 60). Complementing this physical programme, mathematics and the natural sciences function as a crucial propaedeutic, accustoming soul to non-sensible precision and demonstrative order, training perception’s deliverances into measured ratios, while logic purifies inference. Under such discipline, imagination is stabilised and *dianoia* refined, rendering it ready for *noēsis*. To this end, the senses serve as a proximate cause of intellectual perfection; they are disciplined, not dismissed, so that soul may ultimately apprehend intelligible truths that they themselves cannot disclose.²²

be read as developing a Fārābian impulse, namely that intellect most truly grasps not sensible dispersion but higher unity (Hawi 2023, 154-56).

²⁰ The imaginative or poetic syllogism in al-Fārābī and Avicenna, though too large a topic to pursue here, has drawn renewed scholarly attention. In both, poetic premises aim less at *taḍīq* (assent or affirmation) than at *takhyīl* (imaginative representation or evocation), producing images that move soul toward desire or aversion, and evoke wonder, exaltation, diminishment, grief, or delight. Al-Fārābī treats this power as practical and affective, since poetic discourse can prompt pursuit or flight without assent. Avicenna heightens the point by distinguishing it from assent-based reasoning and denying that its force depends on literal truth. As Black, Kemal, and Schoeler show, poetic syllogism is thus to be taken seriously as a mode of discourse mediating cognition and action through imagination, working through figurative likeness rather than explicit argument (Black 1989, 245-47, 253-54; Kemal 2001, 393-95; Schoeler 2013, 1-4). Owen usefully extends this discussion by treating poetic syllogism as both a medieval logical doctrine and a modern interpretive tool for tracing the inferential structure of figurative discourse, showing how formal analysis can clarify the production of imaginative and affective states even where no fully explicit or deductively valid syllogism appears (Owen 2016, 240-247).

²¹ As Fakhry adds, al-Fārābī was the first Muslim philosopher to develop a full emanationist metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology from Plotinian and Proclean themes, thereby becoming the chief transmitter and architect of Islamic Neoplatonism (Fakhry 2002, 1-9).

²² Although Netton’s discussion in *Allah Transcendent* centres on al-Fārābī’s doctrine of the First, it is an important resource for clarifying the setting in which soul must be placed. Soul is not self-subsistent, since absolute simplicity, eternity, and independence belong to the First alone. Rather, it is a derived mediating principle through which divine order is communicated into life, motion, and cognition, while its perfection lies

The idea that bodily faculties can obstruct insight into reality, dimming higher modes of being and thereby marking soul's limits, aligns with several classical Asian metaphysical programmes, from Vedānta to Buddhist and Daoist traditions. Soul in these paradigms, broadly speaking, is nothing over and above the boundaries that structure our knowing, i.e., the horizons of cognition and perception granted by the bodily faculties. More precisely, one's soul is considered the limit of one's world, in something like Wittgenstein's sense. Still, care is needed in using the term 'soul' here, especially with respect to Buddhism, where the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) is central.²³ Even so, these traditions converge on the conviction that knowledge requires intellectual rectification together with various forms of regulating the senses. The *Bhagavad Gītā* for instance, praises the one "free from desire and motive, whose action is burned in the fire of knowledge (*jñānāgni*); the wise call him 'learned' (*budhāḥ*)," for "though engaged in right action, does not act; with self and thought restrained (*yata-cittātmā*), having abandoned possessions and acting only with the body, he incurs no guilt" (BG 4.19-21).

But our focus remains on the Daoist perspective, which rests on the famously elusive corpus, the 'Three Mysteries' (*Sanxuan*) – *Dao de jing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Liezi*, ideas found therein some scholars trace to Shang-period shamanism.²⁴ Though often obscure and inviting ongoing hermeneutic work, these texts are just as explicit about bodily regulation as the *Gītā*. Already by the fourth century BCE, drawing on this inheritance, Daoists set out a regimen of inner cultivation, nourishing *qi* (vital energy), preserving *jing* (essence), and consolidating *de* (potency/efficacy), thereby treating bodily regulation as the condition of clear

in purification from material entanglement and reorientation towards intellect and ultimate felicity. This also helps explain the wider logical and epistemological programme, since soul is defined by an intermediate status between intellect and matter, its relation to matter marking the incompleteness that distinguishes it from intellect proper (Netton 1994, 99-109).

²³ Recent scholarship reassesses the strict *anātman* narrative in Buddhism. Some maintain that *tathāgatagarbha* can be read as a precursor concept to 'self,' housing the potential for enlightenment that persists across countless lives. The seemingly categorical denial of self may also have been, in part, a strategic polemic against competing Brahmanical (especially Vedāntic) claims rather than a dogma attributed to the Buddha himself, for example, see Jones 2021; Sutton 1991.

²⁴ Some replace the *Leizi* with the *Yijin*, and a few even opt for the *Guanzi* on the strength of its *Neiye*, a short Warring States manual of inner cultivation (breath, posture, sensory restraint, stillness). In his landmark study *Sufism and Taoism*, Toshihiko Izutsu maintains that the *Dao de jing* was shaped in the Zhou Bronze-Age milieu, exhibiting the 'spirit of Chu,' that is, a shamanic tendency of mind or shamanic mode of thinking (Izutsu 1984, 290).

knowing.²⁵ As the Daoists were prone to insisting, reducing desire, and harmonising the breath, clarity and steadiness followed, and *de* was ‘settled’ and ‘retained.’²⁶

For example, in the *Zhuangzi*’s “Great Honoured Master” (*Dazongshi*) chapter, bodily existence is treated as in some sense superfluous, an adjunct or excrescence: “When the body of man comes from its special mould [...] there is even then occasion for joy; but this body undergoes a myriad transformations (*wanhua*) and does not immediately reach its perfection (*wei shi you ji*); [...] the sage enjoys that from which there is no possibility of separation, and by which all things are preserved” (ZZ VI.6). Here, *ji* (極) leans toward ‘finality,’ ‘limit’ or ‘endpoint’ rather than ‘perfection’ as James Legge translates.²⁷ Because *ji* underpins the central Daoist principle of ceaseless transformation (*bianhua*), a process without consummation, the *Dao de jing* can say: “Those who preserve this method of the Dao do not wish to be full (of themselves) (*bu yu ying*)” (DDJ 15). Hence, for *Zhuangzi*, true joy lies in attunement to the ‘myriad transformations,’ a boundless, factual existence without end.²⁸

As such, *Zhuangzi* relocates ‘regulation’ from volitional control to alignment via non-action (*wuwei*). The ‘True Person’ (*zhenren*) here re-centres life by de-centring the body’s compulsions, whereby “breathing

²⁵ Later Daoist sources codify an inner discipline centred on the body’s three *dantian* and the preservation of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*, presenting bodily purity, energetic balance, and internal divine governance as prerequisites of vitality and higher realisation. See (Kohn 2008, 854-856; Robinet 2008, 856).

²⁶ Pregadio confirms the pattern, dating the *Dao de jing* to the mid-fourth century BCE, and characterises *de* as efficacy or potency. He also defines *qingjing* as purification through removing desires and passions, cites the maxim “when desires do not arise, that is true quiescence,” and consistently links cultivation to gathering *jing*, nourishing *qi*, and the *jing – qi – shen* triad to be discussed shortly (Pregadio 2025, 125).

²⁷ Ziporyn translates the passage as “never stopping for an instant,” highlighting the same sense of finality or extremity at stake in *ji* (Ziporyn 2020, 56). Wu similarly writes that “human forms are undergoing endless changes,” so that bodily existence is understood not as fixed substance but as ongoing transformation (Wu 2008, 96-97). The body is thus not the stable centre of the self, but a mutable form within a larger cosmic process, and clear knowing requires a loosening of attachment to bodily permanence, security, and preference.

²⁸ ‘Myriad transformations’ captures the Daoist conviction that beings are not fixed substances but mutable forms, capable of passing from one state or category into another. As the *bianhua* entry in the *Encyclopedia of Taoism* shows, this idea runs from the *Zhuangzi* onward and treats human bodily formation as part of the same transformative processes that govern the natural world, later extending to the adept’s cultivated metamorphosis (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 229-30). The same view underlies *bianshen*, ‘transformation of the body’ or ‘transformation of the spirit’, where the body is understood as a mutable site of identification with the cosmos and the gods. Andersen likewise emphasises the Daoist parallelism between body and universe, through which bodily transformation becomes both cosmological fact and ritual discipline (Andersen 2008, 230-31). Both concepts are important for the boundless perspective of soul advanced here.

of the true man comes (even) from his heels,” sleeps without dreams, and does not use the mind to “oppose the Tao,” nor the “Human to assist the Heavenly” (ZZ VI.2). In other words, bodily ‘regulation’ becomes subtractive, ‘sitting and forgetting all things’ (*zuowang*), wherein life and death alternate like day and night; the “connexion with the body and its parts is dissolved ... [the] perceptive organs are discarded” (ZZ VI.9). Daoist self-cultivation this way advances a loosening that lets ‘things as they are’ (*ziran*) and one’s vital energy (*qi*) settle of themselves. Regulation is, in different wording, not abolishing will but relaxing into a non-coercive, ‘not-forcing’ attunement to emergence.²⁹

This attunement goes together with recognising the Dao’s ungraspable nature, for as the *Zhuangzi* records, the Dao may be handed down but cannot be received; it is self-rooted, prior to Heaven and Earth. Those who ‘get it’ from sun and moon to ancient sages do so without ‘eccentric movement,’ for “it does nothing and has no bodily form” (*wuxing*) (ZZ VI.3). In effect, the rationale for this releasement and the regulation of bodily functions rests in the Dao’s mysterious ground; self-cultivation and world-ordering are a single, coextensive project. Releasement is not a mere surrender to desire or pleasure, but a letting-go of whatever maintains a rigid divide between the heavenly and the human. Therefore, to speak of soul’s ‘boundaries’ in the Daoist sense is to outline a twofold tension, on the one hand, grasping ends by sheer volition (*yi*); on the other, letting aims dissipate into all that makes up Heaven and Earth. Boundaries, in short, are a matter of willing (*youwei*) and non-willing (*wuwei*).³⁰

²⁹ In Daoism, *ziran* is fundamental to the attainment of sagehood and spiritual consummation, a mode of ‘sitting to forget’ that moves in harmony with things as they are. *Ziran* is not impulsiveness, but the condition of being ‘so of itself,’ free from artificial imposition and subjective intention, so that life may operate through one spontaneously and without contrivance (Robinet 2008, 1302-03). Wu’s commentary on this passage shows that such forgetting involves relinquishing both external attachments, including body and form, and internal attachments, including intelligence, knowledge, *ren*, and justice, in order to unite with Dao (Wu 2008, 107-8). Self-cultivation, and the loosening of perspective that it entails, therefore, do not reject the body. Rather, they release it from being treated as a fixed and independent centre of selfhood, restoring it to its deeper naturalness within Dao’s transformations.

³⁰ According to Pregadio, *you wei* (有為) and *wu wei* (無為) are complementary concepts in both Daoism and *neidan*. *Wu wei* is a primary attribute of the Dao, denoting spontaneous, non-interfering action and serving as the sage’s model. But in *neidan*, these terms also mark the two main stages of alchemical practice. Where *you wei* defines es the initial, intentional stage of cultivation, directed towards one’s embodied existence (*ming*) and providing the necessary foundation (*genji*) for later practice, *wu wei* designates the higher, spontaneous stage aligned with *ziran*, oriented towards the realisation of one’s inner Nature (*xing*). It marks the culmination of the process, when deliberate effort falls away (Pregadio 2025, 284-85, 343).

The *Zhuangzi* adds further clarity by distinguishing between the ‘great knowledge’ (*da zhi*), which is wide and comprehensive, and ‘small knowledge’ (*xiao zhi*), which is partial and restricted.³¹ These mirror the contrast between sleep when the ‘soul’ (*hun*) communes with what is outside, and waking, when the body is set free (ZZ 2.2). Any step beyond the *Zhuangzi*’s explicit claims on bodily regulation would demand philological as well as philosophical study, which lies beyond our present scope. That said, we can turn to where the pattern takes a more explicit form in Liu Yiming, an eleventh-generation Longmen *neidan* master, who is venerated for combining inner alchemy with Yijing cosmology, Confucian thought, and Chan Buddhist interpretation.³² By Yiming’s time, *neidan* had already synthesised a Daoist cosmology with meditation, breath practice, bodily discipline, and techniques of nourishing life, all ordered towards immortality or union with Dao. At its core lies the premise that the human being is composed of the aforementioned triad of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*, and that spiritual realisation unfolds through their progressive refinement, from ‘refining essence into *qi*,’ to ‘refining *qi* into spirit,’ and finally to ‘refining spirit and reverting to Emptiness.’³³

In *Awakening to the Dao* (*Wudao lu*), Yiming writes that once one has grasped the Way (*Dao*) of escaping the ‘great affliction’ (*da huan*), one sees that the body above and below, within and without, contains not a single element that is not like “evil spirits and ghosts.”³⁴ Outwardly, “the

³¹ Coutinho sees in *Zhuangzi*’s contrast between the petty and the vast an “ever-expanding frame of reference” and a “cultivation of breadth of perspective,” so that the sage lives “from the perspective of the whole.” He likewise interprets the butterfly dream not primarily as an epistemological problem, but as an ontological and existential image of the “processive nature of things,” in which waking and dreaming figure as cycles of transformation and the discontinuity of knowledge across stages of change. This supports our reading of bodily knowing and perspectival loosening (Coutinho 2014, 92-97).

³² For an encyclopaedic overview of Yiming’s biography, see Baldrian-Hussein 2008, 690-91.

³³ While some of the techniques later incorporated into *neidan* go back to pre-imperial China, inner alchemy emerged as a distinct Daoist tradition only relatively late. The *Encyclopedia of Taoism* links its mature formation especially to the Tang and Song dynasties, while noting that earlier occurrences of the term in fifth- and sixth-century materials are textually uncertain. Its widespread use and systematic development belong to the early Song. In this mature form, *neidan* understands the body as an alchemical field in which microcosm and macrocosm correspond, and through which the adept reverses ordinary decline, returns to origin, and undergoes voluntary metamorphosis (Baldrian-Hussein 2008, 762-66).

³⁴ Yiming’s remark in the *Wudao lu* belongs to a broader Qing effort to clarify *neidan* within the post-Song horizon of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao*). Pregadio presents him as a major commentator, especially through the *Wuzhen zhibi* of 1799, and cites his warning against becoming ‘mired in the words and stuck in the images’ (Pregadio 2025, preface). His language about the body is therefore best read symbolically. His bodily language is therefore symbolic, targeting not embodiment itself but the postcelestial configuration of *hun*, *po*, yin essences, conscious spirit, and errant intention, all of which must be re-

eyes, ears, mouth, tongue, and body form cliques” to “beckon external evils” (*kexie*); inwardly, “the heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys link up to produce errant thoughts” (*wangnian*). Such inner – outer depredations “hew away” one’s “innate authenticity” (*tianzhen*) until they imperil “nature-and-life” (*xingming*) (WL 17). Yiming even stresses that the extent of the ‘harm and delusion inflicted on people’ is impossible to put into words. Accordingly, he cites the *Dao de jing*: “What makes me liable to great calamity (*huan*) is my having the body (*shen*) (which I call myself); if I had not the body, what great calamity could come to me?” (DDJ 13). From this, Yiming concludes: “We therefore know that this body is our great affliction. If we can escape (*tuo*) this affliction, then that which is unafflicted (*wú huàn*) will remain. Only what is unafflicted is the true self (*zhen wo*)” (WL 17). Yiming accordingly makes the theme of regulating bodily perception imperative by itemising (much like Proclus’ analyses of soul’s cognitive thresholds, though not in mathematical form) the streams of perceptual input to which the *hun* is exposed and the disciplines by which they are governed.

As mentioned earlier, we must recall here that Yiming’s programme arose in response to Qīng-dynasty predecessors, when Daoism had become entangled with herbology and external alchemy (*waidan*). Yiming sought to return Daoist metaphysics to *neidan* as the authentic path to realisation.³⁵ The human being here is a microcosm of the macrocosm; this intrinsic interconnection calls for a symbolic, ontological-hermeneutic reading of the world of experience as correspondences rather than clinging to conceptual fixities, i.e., herbological fixes and the like. Hence, his emphasis on overcoming ‘discrimination’ (*bian*) by way of disciplined discernment in practice and understanding, which naturally culminates in the dissolution of boundaries and complete realisation. To speak of

integrated until the ‘mind of the Dao’ governs the ‘human mind’ and practice yields to *ziran*. Cleary similarly portrays Liu as a major early modern Daoist writer whose simple, explicit, and pedagogical style made the symbolism of inner alchemy newly legible for later readers. Cleary emphasises Yiming’s mastery of Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist learning, his major commentaries on the *Wuzhen pian* and *Cantongqi*, and that the *Wu-dao lu* condenses a lifetime of reflection and practice, see his introduction in the present translation being used here (WZP, xiii – xv). Both Cleary and Pregadio deserve credit for bringing Liu Yiming to an English-language readership. For the textual background to Liu’s standing as a major Longmen *neidan* author and commentator, whose writings circulated separately in his lifetime before being gathered in the nineteen-text *Daoshu shi’er zhong* (1819), see Baldrian-Hussein 2008, 690–91, and Pregadio 2008b, 331–32.

³⁵ As Pregadio shows, Yiming understands the path to realisation not in moral terms, but through inner-chemical cultivation. In this context, ‘superior virtue’ names the way of non-doing and the cultivation of *xing*, while ‘inferior virtue’ names the way of doing and the cultivation of *ming*; yet the latter, when fully completed, leads to the same realisation as the former. For Pregadio’s important study of this distinction, see (Pregadio 2014, 460–98).

soul's boundaries for Yiming, then, is to understand the rigid ontological fixations the mind imposes on the world, constructs akin to Schopenhauer's *principium individuationis*, itself refracted through Kant's transcendental subject. Realisation, for Yiming, is simply recognising the boundarylessness already at work.

For instance, in his discussion of 'Lead and Quicksilver,' Yiming treats the pair as symbolic rather than literal.³⁶ In Yiming's own symbolic vocabulary, quicksilver is 'flowing and unstable' and pertains to *Yin*, representing the conscious knowledge of the human mind, while lead signifies True *Yang* hidden within *Yin*.³⁷ Their conjunction thus figures the alchemical reordering of the unstable human mind through the recovery of its latent *Yang* principle, that is, the return from postcelestial division to precelestial unity. The *renxin*, in its frailty, is mercurial, stirred by appearances and confused by externals, whereas the *daoxin*, by remaining continuously aligned with Dao, leaves no room for that reactive instability to arise. The task, therefore, is a disciplined 'increase and decrease' (*zengjian*), adding to the *yangqi* of *daoxin* while reducing the *yingqi* of *renxin*; that is, "increasing and reducing until no more increase or reduction is possible, then the human mind dies and the mind of Tao is stable." At this point, the "foundation of essence and life" is established, enabling the "advanced work." Hence, the "seed of realisation" is already in hand, for the capacity to become "a sage, an immortal, a buddha" abides from the start (WL 9-10).

Yiming's interplay of opposites is integral to his symbolic reading of phenomena, where they serve as gateways to realisation. Our Platonists, by contrast, delineate with high rigour the geometrical patterns of phenomena, often tending toward ever-higher abstraction. Yiming's project is to read reality as symbolically charged and transformatively potent, albeit fundamentally ordinary.³⁸ This discipline is rigorous but remains

³⁶ Pregadio notes that *neidan* repeatedly uses Lead and Mercury as metaphors but also as familiar alchemical images for the conjunction of *Yin* and *Yang* (Pregadio 2025, 280; 2014, 472, 496).

³⁷ The earliest uses of *yin* and *yang* are more concrete than the later cosmological pair familiar from Daoist thought. The graphs first appear on Shang oracle bones, around the fourteenth century BCE, but not yet as fully developed cosmogenic principles. An early textual occurrence appears in the *Shijing* (*Greater Odes*, 'Decade of Sheng Min'), where Legge translates the line as '... he surveyed the light (*yang*) and the shade (*yin*) ...' Here, *yang* denotes the sunny slope and *yin* the shaded slope, with the movement of sunlight defining their relation (Legge 1960, 487-88). By the time of the *Yijing* and the *Dao de jing*, however, the pair had been elevated into primordial principles of cosmic generation. By the time of the *Yijing* and the *Dao de jing*, these terms had come to function as primordial cosmogenic principles.

³⁸ Part and parcel of this view is a distinctly Daoist understanding of nature, one in which there is no hard split between nature and value. As Miller explains, "Nature, then, is uni-

symbolic since the primordial, wondrous Dao is already present and evident; the deepest truth is “not strange” (*dao wu qi*). Hence, Yiming exalts the “Normal Tao,”

There is nothing strange in the Tao. People with a liking for the strange have already missed the road. The colourful symbolism of Taoist texts is just that – symbolism. Common sayings and proverbs accord with the Tao of sages. The foundation of wizardry exists in daily and nightly activities. The mysterious, marvellous Inner Design is perfectly obvious, but the ignorant do not contemplate it carefully (WL 87-88).

In essence, Yiming aims to demystify symbolic attachment, recognise the Dao’s ordinariness, and cultivate *daoxin* through attentive reading of phenomena as they appear.

Herein lies Yiming’s brilliance, his repeated symbolic reading of bare facts as conduits to realisation, from dung beetles’ mating to the plum’s fruiting, and even to lore about carp turning into dragons and foxes (WL 11-12, 9, 22-23). In this, he brings the *neidan* project to bear to show boundaries as prefigured by conceptual attachment, though ramified through every minute detail of reality, from organs and mind to the motions of moon and stars.³⁹ For there is a unified pattern of movement always ongoing, within which the mercurial posture of *renxin* proves not only inadequate but self-defeating. Whereas in *daoxin* all boundaries dissolve and one becomes the ‘immortal,’ figured in Yiming’s cryptic images as “merging into reality with the Tao,” transforming beyond mere “appearance,” bearing an “indestructible body,” becoming one with the “light of sun and moon,” and when practice reaches consummation being able to “break through space and have a body outside your body. Walking on the sun and moon without form, penetrating metal and stone without hindrance, you transcend creation” (WL 23,77, 4, 9).

tary in that it is comprised ultimately of one energy matter, Qi,” while “Viewing the body, and by extension nature, as a dynamic system that tends toward an overall equilibrium” remains central to the Daoist outlook (Miller 2009, 227-230). See page 228 for Miller’s particularly clear account of how the “principle is the same at the micro and macro levels,” with the various dimensions of reality understood to “function interdependently with each other” via a diagram of organs, seasons, directions, colours, and phases on page 228.

³⁹ Hall offers a notably philosophical and abstract perspective in his chapter here, which he titles “From Reference to Deference.” In a world where fixed objects oppose a subject, Hall discusses “natural parity” as “the denial of ontological privilege to any object, event, or state of affairs,” and later mentions that in Daoism “the self is forgotten to the extent that discriminated objects, or persons-as-objects, no longer form the world of the self.” The *wu*-forms for Hall “seek to allow the processes of the world to unfold spontaneously, each on its own terms,” thereby providing a clear, aesthetic explanation of how Daoism dissolves strict subject-object boundaries (Hall 2001, 227-28).

Much of Yiming's method requires close reading of the Chinese in Daoist texts; *wu* here is not a nihilistic 'nothing' but a philosophical operator preventing the Dao from being reified as any *you* (i.e., having or grasping). Hence, the recurring *wu* prefix in *wuwei*, *wuxing*, *wuxian*, etc, all signal disciplined, language-aware ways of thinking and practising without fixation.⁴⁰ Since this extends down to the bare use of names, themselves responsible for carving boundaries, Daoist namelessness functions as a method of de-limiting, eliminating the very boundaries that define 'soul' as soul. This tendency also belongs to the broader legacy of Daoist-Chinese thought, as LaFargue shows; Daoists do not merely value nature; the familiar Western opposition between nature and culture does not fit with Daoist material. Where "modern Western thought tends to conceive of nature in contrast to all human culture, but the corresponding Daoist ideas are clearly and straightforwardly conceived of as parts of a human cultural ideal," Daoism also exposes how "categories like 'nature' that seem to us simple, obvious, and universal are actually quite particular when set beside the categories other cultural communities have used" (LaFargue 2001, 52-54).

From the Chinese-Daoist context, then, humans are not imagined as standing outside the world and confronting it as an external object.⁴¹ Rather, the human ideal is itself formed within a larger pattern of attunement, one in which the distinction between self and world becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. It is with this commitment in mind that the *Dao de jing* shows the movement between contraries as fundamental:

The movement of the Tao
By contraries proceeds;
And weakness marks the course
Of Tao's mighty deeds.
All things under heaven sprang from It as existing (and named);
that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named) (DDJ 40).

⁴⁰ As Mou explains, reference is an 'aboutness' relation in which language picks out determinate aspects or identities rather than merely attaching labels. This clarifies the Daoist insistence that what can be named never exhausts *dao*, so that namelessness is not the abolition of language but a refusal to let finite distinctions harden into ultimate realities (Mou 2020, 38-49, 54-59). From this semantic standpoint, soul cannot be an ultimate metaphysical given, but as an effect of naming's delimiting operation.

⁴¹ For further discussion, see Chi-tim Lai on the *Taiping jing*, where "the world of nature and the world of humans are intimately connected" and where, when "the qi of Central Harmony gains, the ten thousand beings will flourish; people will live harmoniously." Also refer to Miller's view that "the dichotomy of nature/culture is here subverted and transcended" and that "we are implicated within our environment." Together, these chapters give a relatively comprehensive account of the issue (Lai 2001, 95-112; Miller, Wang, and Davis 2001, 149-52).

Yiming's symbols work this exact anti-reifying cue with opposites in mind, reducing the reactivity of the *renxin* as boundary until conceptual and affective fixations fall away. In the Daoist counterpoise, then, what we call the 'boundaries of soul' are boundaries prefigured by naming and desire alike; realisation is the recognition of the Dao's boundarylessness already present in the ordinary.⁴²

Strictly speaking, modern philosophy, especially phenomenology, avows that it has moved beyond a metaphysics of soul inherited from medieval thought, but it nevertheless proceeds with this relational centre as the background to any account of knowing. In practice, epistemology remains anchored in intentionality. We cannot here trace the full genealogy from soul as transcendent intellect within a rational cosmic order to the Scholastic figure of the willing subject; still, it is enough to keep this background in mind to see how soul continues to prefigure the boundaries of knowing in contemporary thought. It is also important to note that boundaries as such differ markedly between East and West. In modern East Asian philosophy, one seldom encounters the radical anthropocentrism that characterises much contemporary European thought, a point we have sought to show in our discussion of Daoism. Analogues of soul are framed within broader ethical and communal programmes that extend beyond Daoism to encompass Confucian and Buddhist legacies, *pace* the Western – medieval inheritance culminating in a willed, intentional subject.

As also alluded to in our introduction, a range of East Asian philosophers, Nishida, his student Nishitani Keiji, and other Kyoto-School figures such as Watsuji Tetsurō, and New Confucians from Xiong Shili to second-

⁴² It is worth commenting on Girardot's seminal *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* in conclusion, where his study of Daoism illustrates how Dao was perceived as the "hidden order of the Tao ... something which is neither being nor non-being," and the primordial "chaosmos" where "chaos, cosmos, becoming, time, and Tao are synonymous." Girardot showed that opposites are not ultimately solidified into fixed metaphysical entities but are maintained in relation through the reconciling "third term or central gap," making return to the Dao less about fleeing the world and more about freeing oneself from the civilisational rigidity caused by language, naming, and social "face." Accordingly, Girardot states that "face" and "name" are "the fatally deceptive characteristics of a fallen human nature," while Daoist practice aims at forgetting personal history to recover "the 'great image' of the Tao" and achieve a "more authentic human existence." Reinforcing our thesis here, then, soul's boundaries are not ultimate ontological limits but culturally layered distinctions. Realisation involves a return to the more primal whole, in Girardot's words, "the healing reidentification of man with the greater life of the universe," a return that necessitates "a necessary cosmological interrelation of body and spirit," thereby re-positioning humans within rather than above the world (Girardot 1983, 2-4, 43, 67, 98, 139, 258-59).

generation thinkers Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, and Xu Fuguan, carry this approach into the present. Despite being among the first of their generations to come under Kant's prevailing influence, they worked to assimilate post-Enlightenment advances into intellectual traditions that are largely non-subjectivist. Nor was the traffic one-way, from Schopenhauer and Schelling through Wittgenstein and Heidegger; European thinkers also drew on Asian thought. Indebted as we are to advances in digital technology, this inter-traditional exchange has encouraged and perhaps even legitimised the further broadening of philosophical discourse, offering some warrant for this present, albeit modest, contribution.

To conclude, we have sought to show that boundaries are best understood as an amalgam of embodiment and contemplative overreach, ever-persistent self-generating limits. So long as subjectivism is maintained as the relational centre-point from which meaning is conferred, boundaries follow of necessity. Consideration of problems at the highest levels of mathematical abstraction reveals the limits of discursive thought, perhaps limits made most clear by the paradoxes that accompanied the continued advances in the sciences, leading to the advent of quantum physics. In this respect, the Platonists and the Daoists were strikingly prescient, for boundaries arise only insofar as one pursues knowledge while retaining a fixed epistemic origin. The Daoists' appeal to *wuwei* over *youwei* invokes *wu* to resist the reification of any *you* parallels the Platonist contrast between motionless *noēsis* and the discriminative, discursive *dianoia* of the intentional subject. What we call the boundaries of soul mark vantage points of knowing, not ontological barriers but indices of epistemic perspectives.

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I confini platonici dell'anima e un controbilanciamento taoista

Il presente articolo si interroga sul significato dei «confini» nel contesto dell'anima, attingendo alla metafisica tardo-platonica in contrapposizione al taoismo. Dal punto di vista platonico, dimostriamo che la matematica delimita l'orizzonte della contemplazione e i limiti del pensiero discorsivo segnano le soglie epistemiche che, a loro volta, determinano l'anima in quanto tale. In questo sistema, la matematica disciplina l'ascesa dai diagrammi sensibili ai rapporti intelligibili e, tracciando i propri limiti all'interno del paradigma platonico, punta oltre la *dianoia* verso la *noësis* immobile, dove le forme vengono colte in modo non inferenziale. Proprio su quel confine, l'anima supera tutte le condizioni limite, ovvero non è più anima in quanto tale. Estendendo questo discorso, la funzione spesso trascurata della regolazione corporea si rivela coestensiva alla disciplina contemplativa, cosicché l'anima appare non come un'entità, ma come il contorno entro il quale il pensiero e l'incarnazione coabitano. Dal punto di vista taoista, i programmi di coltivazione corporea e il *wuwei* dimostrano che i «confini» postulati dallo *youwei* non sono mai esistiti. Di conseguenza, il programma taoista allenta la morsa illusoria dei limiti epistemic, allenta la fissazione volitiva e tratta i confini come artefatti della denominazione e del desiderio. Il distacco rivela un'assenza di confini immanente già presente nell'ordinario. Alla fine, definiamo i confini dell'anima come contorni della conoscenza piuttosto che come limiti rigidi; come punti di vista epistemic, non come barriere ontologiche.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Forme; platonismo; *noësis*/*dianoia*; taoismo; *wuwei*/*youwei*.

The Platonic Boundaries of Soul and a Daoist Counterpoise

This paper asks what 'boundaries' mean in the context of soul, drawing on late-Platonist metaphysics in counterpoise with Daoism. On the Platonic side, we show that mathematics polices contemplation's horizon; the limits of discursive thinking mark epistemic thresholds that, in turn, determine soul as soul. In this system, mathematics disciplines the ascent from sensible diagrams to intelligible ratios and, by tracing its own limits within the Platonic paradigm, points beyond *dianoia* toward motionless *noësis*, where forms are grasped non-inferentially. At that precise brink, soul exceeds all boundary conditions, that is, no longer soul as such. Extending this discourse, the oft-neglected work of bodily regulation proves coextensive with contemplative discipline, such that soul appears not as an entity but as the contour within which thinking and

embodiment cohabit. From the Daoist side, programmes of bodily cultivation and *wuwei* show that the 'boundaries' posited by *youwei* were never there to begin with. Accordingly, the Daoist programme loosens the illusory grip of epistemic limits, relaxes volitional fixation, and treats boundaries as artefacts of naming and desire. Releasement discloses an immanent boundarylessness already present within the ordinary. In the end, we define soul's boundaries as contours of knowing rather than strict edges, epistemic vantage points, not ontological barriers.

KEYWORDS: Forms; Platonist, *noēsis/dianoia*, Daoist, *wuwei/youwei*.