Touch and Breath: The Ravine in the Lǎozī as a Paradoxical Image for a Way of Being Human

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Abstract

“Become hard!” is the supposedly “new tablet” that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra has placed above us. It can hardly be denied that modernization in particular has relentlessly imposed a need to develop one’s hardness and strength. Is it even possible to imagine a form of modernization based on the commandment to “Become soft!”? While this is the old and always new instruction to which Lǎozī pointed in his advice to become like water, Nietzsche finds it unbearable. He asks, “Why so soft?”, and “Why so soft, so retiring, and yielding?” And Lǎozī answers that hardness is deadly: “The hard and strong are the followers of death.” Then Nietzsche responds, “Don’t you want to conquer and win?” And Lǎozī replies, “The soft and weak win over the hard and strong”. Where are the modernizers who believe in the old “tablet” Lǎozī has given us in the praise of softness and weakness? Where are the modernizers who know about the hard but are able to preserve the soft? Where are the modernizers who are able to philosophize not with the hammer but with the brush?

The “good old authoritarian character” (Theodor W. Adorno) has been educated to (masculine) hardness. For this mode of being human (feminine) softness is nothing but a form of weakness on which the creator wants to put his stamp. As a philosophical source of criticism of the authoritarian character, the Daoist classic Lǎozī has a value that can hardly be overestimated. It moves toward a paradigm of self-relation or subjectivity in which the eye and light cannot claim primacy as the means by which humans can access the true and the good, but touch and breath form a pivot by which they can learn to walk a Way that wanders between hardness and softness. Therefore, at the centre of character formation and cultivation is a self-relation described in the sixth chapter of the Lǎozī by the paradoxical image of the “ravine” (gǔ 谷).

The ravine is a natural image in which the hard stone of the mountain cliffs and the soft water flowing through them belong together. At the same time, this chapter of the Lǎozī has been associated with the motif of the female in commentaries since antiquity. Moreover, the analogy between the ravine and the female sex organ opens up a thought-provoking approach to the relation between the female and the soft in the Lǎozī. However, the ravine as a paradoxical image does not stop there. Rather, the Way it suggests leads in a direction that can be summed up in the phrase “knowing hardness

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and preserving softness”. In the following paper, the discussion of the female and the male in relation to the soft and the hard aims at a broader reflection on a theory and practice of breath (qi 氣) that constitutes a transcultural philosophy of the Way (dàozhéxué 道哲學).

**Keywords:** Laozi, philosophy of breath, ravine (gǔ 谷) softness, hardness, touch

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**Dotik in dih: global kot paradoksalna podoba načina človeškega bivanja v delu Lǎozì**

**Izvleček**

»Postanite trdni!« je domnevno »novi« napotek, ki nam ga je dal Nietzschejev Zaratustra, in težko je zanikati, da je predvsem modernizacija neusmiljeno vsiljevala potrebo po razvijanju neomajnosti in moči. Ali si je sploh mogoče predstavljati obliko modernizacije, ki bi temeljila na napotku »Postani mehak!«? Čeprav je ta stari, vselej nov napotek, naj postanemo kot voda, podal Lǎozì, se ta Nietzscheju zdi neznosen. Tako sprašuje: »Zakaj tako mehak?«, »Zakaj tako mehak, tako umaknjen in popustljiv?« Lǎozì odgovarja, da je trdota smrtonosna: »Trdi in močni so privrženci smrti.« In Nietzscheju odgovori: »Ali ne želite osvojiti in zmagati?« Lǎozì odgovarja: »Mehki in šibki zmagajo nad trdimi in močnimi.« Kje so modernizatorji, ki poznajo trdo, a znajo ohraniti mehko? Kje so modernizatorji, ki znajo filozofirati, ne s kladivom, ampak s čopičem?

»Dobri stari avtoritarni značaj« (Adorno) je bil vzgojen v (moško) trdnost. Za tak način človeškega bivanja (ženska) mehkoba ni nič drugega kot oblika šibkosti, na kateri želi ustvarjalec pustiti svoj pečat. Kot filozofski vir kritike avtoritarnega značaja ima klasično delo Lǎozì vrednost, ki je skorajda ne moremo preceniti. Pomika se proti paradigmi samoodnosa ali subjektivnosti, v kateri oko in svetloba ne zahtevata prvenstvenosti kot sredstva, s katerim lahko ljudje dostopajo do resničnega in dobrega, ampak kot dotik in dih tvorita središče, s katerim se lahko naučijo hoditi po poti, ki vodi med trdoto in mehko. Zato je v središču oblikovanja značaja odnos do samega sebe, ki je v šestem poglavju daoistične klase Lǎozì opisan s paradoksalno podobo »globali« (gǔ 谷). Globel je naravna podoba, v kateri sta združeni trdota kamna gorskih pečin in mehko vode, ki teče skoznje. To poglavje dela Lǎozì je v komentarjih že od antike povezano z motivom ženske. Še več, analogija med globeljo in ženskimi spolnimi organi odpira razmišljanje o odnosu med ženskim in mehkim v delu Lǎozì. Vendar se globel kot paradoksalna podoba ne ustavi pri tem. Nasprotno, Pot, ki jo predlaga, vodi v smer, ki jo lahko povzamemo s frazo »poznavanje trdote in ohranjanje mehkev«. V članku je razprava o ženskem in moškem v povezavi z mehkim in trdim namenjena širšemu razmišljanju o filozofiji dihanja.

**Ključne besede:** Lǎozì, filozofija dihanja, global (gǔ 谷), mehkoba, trdota, dotik
Aesthetic Cultivation

Chinese modernization since the 19th century has been obsessed with the need for self-strengthening in order to better meet the challenges of the violently imposing and invading West, and a phrase from the Book of Changes has served as a motto for this: “unceasing self-strengthening” (自強不息 zì qiáng bù xī). In this situation, the age-old aesthetic practices cultivated in the realm of Chinese literati culture—and especially the arts of brush writing, mountain water painting, and playing the zither (琴 qín)—entered very difficult times. The aesthetic cultivation associated with these arts has in common with them the fact that in such arts seeing and hearing are related to the “touch” of certain utensils and materials (brush, paper, ink, musical instrument). The first thing one notices when handling these utensils and materials is their softness and fluidity: the brush is soft, the paper is soft, the ink is fluid, and the silk strings of the zither respond to the most delicate touch. The cultivation of touch begins with the cultivation of softness and tenderness. The rejection and condemnation of literati culture by cultural revolutionaries in 20th-century China is related to the undeniable impression that the way of life practiced in literati culture cannot withstand modern hardness. Education for softness was thus widely suspected of being an obstacle to modernization, and was replaced by a new education for hardness.

However, it was never completely forgotten that hardness alone does not lead to success, but that softness and plasticity are indispensable, at least as flexible and strategic behaviours applied at the right time and in the right place. In this context, openness and receptivity to modern Western ideas and achievements have been recognized as indispensable qualities for Chinese modernization. Meanwhile, since the 1980s, Chinese literati culture and classical aesthetic practices have resurfaced from the abyss of rejection and denigration into which they were thrown by the narrowing of modernization to Westernization.

In this context, the question arises: Is it possible to imagine a Way of modernization that is compatible with the Daoist praise of softness? Softness is closely related to the experience of breath and water. But what are breath and water? Life on Earth is impossible without them. Breath and water go through (通 tōng) all living things. There is nothing in the world through which both do not enter and exit (出入 chū rù). The “transmissibility” of “emptiness, being-without, softness, and weakness” is not hindered by anything (see Wáng Bì’s commentary to Lǎozǐ 43). The softness of breath and water “goes through” all things. It “communicates” in and through the solidity and resistant hardness of things. Such softness is omnipresent in the most inconspicuous way. In the Lǎozǐ, softness is associated with this utmost inconspicuousness from which all vitality emanates. Breath and
water can be distinguished by understanding breath as the softest thing “without physical form” (wúxíng 無形) and water as the softest thing “with physical form” (yóuxíng 有形) (Xiāo 1979, 300). More abstractly, awareness of the soft and the softest is a way into the realm of “being-without” (wú 無), and thus into the world of inconspicuously concealed being that escapes every hard grip of human domination.

It is Lǎozǐ’s conviction that any will and effort to master the forces of breath and water through hardness and strength are doomed to failure. Nevertheless, the whole world believes in the superiority of hardness and strength, thinking that they are useful (“with use”; yóuyòng 有用), while softness and weakness are useless (“without use”; wúyòng 無用). This is because the people who dwell “under heaven” know little about the “un-use” or “use of the without” (yòng wú 用無) (Xiāo 1979, 300). Moreover, this is also because they want to control and channel breath and water through hardness rather than being educated and formed by the softness of breath and water. But access to “un-doing” or “without-doing” (wúwéi 無為) is granted by the soft, not by the hard. The hard is incapable of un-doing. Access to un-doing, and thus to the Way, is blocked by the violence of hardness. The hard is not able to allow for the vital “self-change” (zìhuà 自化) of things or people (see the commentary by Lù Xīxīng 陸西星 (1520‒1606) in Lù 2011, 596). Therefore, in relation to the world, hardness and strength may be successful in the short term, but in the long term they are destructive or even deadly.

Lǎozǐ says that he knows about the benefits of “un-doing” from the “softest” (zhíróu 至柔) (Lǎozǐ 43). Indeed, constant dripping wears away stone or grinds it to sand, and the soft tongue outlasts the hard teeth. But how can a Lǎozǐ-inspired cultivation of softness be described more concretely? We may approach this question through the example of the Chinese art of writing. It is a field of aesthetic cultivation in which Chinese is revealed as a language that must be touched and be touching in order to be learned. The brush used in the art of writing and ink painting is very soft. The very materiality of this brush contains the demand to deal with the philosophical significance of the relation between the soft and the hard. This context foreshadows the extent to which Lǎozǐ’s critique of the authoritarian character or authoritarian personality is connected to a philosophy of nature that is highly aware of the “permeating” softness of “breath” (qì 氣) and “water” (shuǐ 水). Cultivating the use of breath and water opens up the material and spiritual dimensions of the art of the brush. Related to this are the aesthetic experiences of “un-taste” (wúwèi 無味) and “blandness” (dàn 淡), from which it becomes clear what it means to say that hard and soft, Without (wú 無) and With (yǒu 有) or being-without and being-with, belong together in “counterturning” (in German, Gegenwendigkeit).
Through the brush dipped in water or ink, the breath touches the world. The movement of the soft brush creates the possibility of a form of communication in which the human relationship to the world can breathe. In this breath, the world touches us. In breathing, the world enters and exits through us. Art that is centered around the breath and not the eye is imbued with a peculiar experience of touch. The “sense of touch” (chùjué 触觉) can therefore be understood as the beginning of writing as an aesthetic cultivation. Chinese characters must be repeatedly exercised in movement, in writing, in order to be remembered and understood. The need for continuous exercise persists through the very nature of the Chinese written language, although in modern China the brush has largely been displaced from the practice of writing. Modern technology tends to obscure that writing and language have long been associated with a fleeting touch, in which a soft brush tip soaked in ink moves in lines and circles on and across a thin, absorbent paper, leaving traces of ink. It is in this movement of breathing touch that the transition from an instrumental technique of writing to an artistic Way of writing takes place.

When we speak of wanting to grasp or conceive (in German, begreifen) a text, a violent way of touching language easily creeps in. Whoever wants to grasp a text, does he not at the same time strive to master it, to appropriate it, and to absorb it as spiritual nourishment? Whoever grasps a text, does he not violate it? Such a critique of the violent character of language seems to sound a warning that the names and concepts with which we name things and with which we deal in writing and reading texts touch things primarily in order to make them controllable, to be able to handle or manipulate them. In chapter 29 of the Lǎozǐ we find a phrase about the seizer who loses (zhízhě shì zhī 執者失之) “all under heaven” or the world (heaven-under; tiānxià 天下) precisely because he wants to “take” (qǔ 取) it more or less by force and bring it under his control by “doing” (wéi 為). However, the “taking of all under heaven” (qǔtiānxià 取天下), a phrase that occurs several times (Lǎozǐ 29, 48, 57), is linked to the criticism of “doing” and “busyness”. Touching the world all too easily becomes a violent appropriation through which people risk losing their relation to the world. They lose their world precisely because they want to take possession of it. But is it possible to touch the world without appropriating it, or at least without trying to appropriate it? No, it is not.

In the softness of breath and water constant change is implied: just as water evaporates when it is warm and freezes when it is cold, breath is in a state of change that links it equally to spirituality and materiality, as even spiritual creations can harden into buildings that imprison us and in which we cannot breathe. More than that, hardening is inevitable, for without becoming harder and firmer, living things could not grow and thrive. At the same time, with each moment of growth,
the soft, weak, and at the same time very much alive infant approaches the final hardening toward which its corporeal being is heading: the rigidity of the corpse that has stopped breathing and that it will one day become. To think of softness and weakness, then, is to remember, in the necessary hardening of life, the possibility of a breath that “communicates” (通) the corporeal and the spiritual, reaching the “soft” by gathering itself (zhuān qì zhì róu 專氣致柔; Lǎozǐ 10).

Lǎozǐ opens up the possibility of a philosophizing that focuses on the breath, not the eye, and comparatively and stereotypically speaking, the philosophizing of the “Chinese breath-man” now emerges alongside the philosophizing of the “Greek ‘eye-man’” (Heidegger 2018, 215). Derrida’s reflections on perception move along the way from one to the other when he attempts to make the sense of sight understandable as a sense of touch, and thus to perceive seeing as a way of touching. In doing so, he already touches upon a history of the forgetfulness of air and breath (Irigaray 1983). In his book on touch, Derrida poses the following question, “Quand nos yeux se touchent, fait-il jour ou fait-il nuit?” (When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?) (Derrida 2000, 11) The absurdity of this question opens a critical perspective on the “excessive primacy” accorded to the sense of seeing in “our culture” (Derrida 2000, 227; Irigaray 1997, 163). Derrida goes beyond Aristotle by following the seemingly absurd question he encountered on a wall in Paris, one that addresses what he calls the difficulty of touching with the eyes. Can the eyes and gaze touch like lips? The question “Quand nos yeux se touchent, fait-il jour ou fait-il nuit?” (“When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?”) does not stop with Aristotle, who assumes that touch or “feeling” (Gefühl) in the sense of tactile perception is always direct and unmediated perception. Close perception can be associated with an existential danger to life—if we are touched and grasped by other living beings then this can sometimes entail being attacked by them, and possibly even being killed and eaten. The eye, on the other hand, is capable of distant perception. Derrida tries to reverse this relation by reintegrating, following Jean-Luc Nancy, seeing into touching. What happens when we ask further, when we replace the eye with the breath and ask: “If our breath(s) touch, is it day or is

1 The motif that we are touched by something before we see it—as Derrida says of this question that it touched him before it let itself be seen—is already found in a book by Aristotle, which has come down under the title Of the Soul (Περὶ ψυχῆς). There we read: αἰσθήσεως δὲ πρῶτον ὑπάρχει πάσιν ἄφι, which Klaus Corcilius translates into German as “Und als erste Wahrnehmung kommt allen [Lebewesen] der Tastsinn zu” (Corcilius 2017, 74‒75) (And all [living beings] have the sense of touch as their first perception). Or in Hett’s English translation: “The first essential factor of sensation that we all share is the sense of touch” (Hett 1935, 74‒75). It is noteworthy that in a 1794 German translation “touch” is rendered simply as “feeling” (Gefühl) and is attributed exclusively to animals and not to all living things: “Vor allen anderen Sinnen haben die Tiere vorzüglich das Gefühl” (Above all other senses, animals have especially feeling) (Voigt 1794, 88‒89).
it night?” The idea that breath can touch seems even more absurd than Derrida’s question: Is it possible to touch one another not with the eyes, the lips, or the hands, but with the breath? Or: Is it possible to touch one another with the eyes, lips or hands through the breath, so that the eyes, lips or hands breathe and become perceptible as belonging to the world of breath?

Accordingly, a way of thinking and writing may be misguided in which we want to grasp a text only in a hard way, instead of letting it touch us or touching it in breathing way. Lāozi seems to point in this direction. He can be read as questioning the human perception of the world in such a way that in the word Wahrnehmung (truth-taking, perception) the -nehmung, the taking of the world, stands out as questionable. This German play on words corresponds to a motif of the Lāozi, which is to reverse the hard taking of the world into a “soft” (in German, weich) or “yielding” (in German, weichend) touch. The soft and weak indicate a relation to the world that seems to be low, but actually is higher than seeing with the eyes, hearing with the ears, tasting with the mouth, all of which are associated with running and chasing after sensations, expression, intensity, and appropriation (see Lāozi 12). If, with reference to Lāozi, it is possible to speak of aesthetics in the sense of a theory of perception, then, in my view, aesthetics does not revolve around a sensual perception that is opposed to spiritual cognition, but around an awareness (Besinnung, Gewahren) that is equally sensual and spiritual and is aesthetic in this sense, or aesthet(h)ic (sic): both aesthetic and ethic. The education toward the soft and yielding (Erziehung zum Weichen) tends toward an aesthetic education in which awareness and touch can be cultivated.

In his discussion of Lāozi 43, Heidegger plays with the relation of “das Weiche” (the soft) to “das Weichende” which means the yielding, receding and softening. First, he quotes from the chapter as follows: “Der Erde Sanftestes verwindet der Erde Starrstes” (What is most gentle on earth overcomes what is most rigid on earth) (Heidegger 2020, 5). After this quotation, which he introduced at the beginning of volume 101 of his collected writings, he says: “Das Sanfte: Was in der eigenen Ruhe das Heile birgt und darum das Nachgebende zu seyn vermag gegen alles im Ruhelosen Erstarrte” (The gentle: That which holds salvation in its own tranquillity and is therefore able to give way against everything that is hardened in the restless.). Then follows the key phrase “high giving way” (das hohe Nachgeben)—a faculty that human beings lack or have lost in their restless relation to the earth. Later, in apparent reference to Lāozi 43, he varies this idea as follows: “Das Weiche kann das Schwache sein; aber das in die Ruhe des Sanftmütigen Weichende ist vermögender als jede Gewalt und Härte” (The soft can be the weak; but that which gives way into the tranquillity of the gentle is more capable than any violence and hardness) (Heidegger 2020, 88). This connection between “Weichen” and “Weichendem”, softness and yielding, can already be found in Nietzsche, whose idealization of hardness, however, leads him to express contempt for this connection: “Why so soft? Oh, my brothers, this I ask you: for are you not—my brothers? Why so soft, so retiring and yielding?” (Nietzsche 1988, 268/172).
The Soft and the Hard Belong Together

The question arises as to whether in Lǎozǐ’s education to softness and yielding (Erziehung zum Weichen) “remnants of a more archaic civilization” survive, one less marked by the “logic” (of hardness) “that has dominated the West since the Greeks” (Irigaray 1977, 25/24). Moreover, if the image of the ravine that appears in Lǎozǐ 6 and other chapters is a paradoxical image in which remnants of an older image of the world and of humanity survive, the question arises whether this image is not already dominated by a human character that is characterized or even produced by a male gaze. Does the image of the ravine, in which an older cult of the female sex organ survives in a sublimated manner, already testify to a male sexual fantasy? Or does it not at least indicate a male conception of female fertility? Does the image of the ravine not already testify to a world in which men regard women as property and use or even abuse them accordingly? The praise of the “mysterious bearer” (das geheim Gebärende, xuán pin 玄牝) and the “inexhaustible” use of the “ravine” would thus be hard to distinguish from a patriarchal and paternalistic praise of motherhood, in which women are simultaneously naturalistically idealized and socially restricted by men because of their ability to conceive and give birth.

The relation between “the creative and the receptive” (qiánkūn 乾坤), “hard and soft” (gāngróu 剛柔), or “the shadowed and the bright” (yīnyáng 隱陽), which is central to the Book of Changes, was obviously invoked in ancient China to provide a naturalistic justification for a normative order that was unmistakably androcentric and paternalistic. Lǎozǐ’s thought, however, already problematizes the dominance of men and fathers over women and mothers. The Lǎozǐ overturns this order. It testifies to a gynocentric and maternalist worldview, in which the female and maternal are apparently not normatively subordinate to the male and paternal, but superior. But overturning does not mean reversal. Lǎozǐ aims not at replacing hard men and fathers with hard women and mothers, because that would not structurally change the problem of education to hardness and domination by hardness. Rather, it is about ordering the relation between the hard and the soft in a normatively different way. It is about another way of being human, not just about being male or female differently. Lǎozǐ avoids attributing hardness to men and softness to women. The distinction between feminine women and masculine men is foreign to him. He does not speak of men and women, but at best of males and females. The relationship between the soft and the female or the hard and the male is expressed in language borrowed from the animal or bird world (cí xióng 雉雄). In the relation of hard and soft, death (killing) and life (giving birth), male and female, natural history reaches into human history. The social history of
the relationship between men and women, seen in this way, is inevitably part of a broader history of natural transformation.

The other way of being human, as indicated in the *Lǎozǐ*, derives from a paradigm of self-relation or subjectivity in which hard and soft, strong and weak qualities paradoxically belong together. Lǎozǐ repeatedly criticizes the widespread preference for hardness and strength. He contrasts this with the praise of softness and weakness, with the claim that the soft can “defeat” the hard, like water, which can hollow out stone and corrode metal. This is what Lǎozǐ “found out” during his years of teaching and research, as expressed by a boy in one of Bertolt Brecht’s best-known poems: “That the soft water in motion / In time defeats the mighty stone. / You understand, the hard succumbs” (Brecht 1967, 660‒63). Yes, the softest “overruns” the hardest, but in the world—“under heaven”—this is something that can rarely be accomplished (*Lǎozǐ* 43). That the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard is something that “no one does not know”, but at the same time “no one is able to walk”, and thus realize in practice (*Lǎozǐ* 78).

Strength that can “preserve the soft” (*Lǎozǐ* 52) is rare. Therefore, the knowledge is also rare that “un-doing increases” and can be beneficial (*Lǎozǐ* 43). Without the knowledge of increasing by “un-doing”, it is difficult to “do the Way” (*wéi dào 為道*), because doing and walking the Way again is to “decrease daily”, while learning wants to “increase daily” (*Lǎozǐ* 48). It is apparent from the above references that the motif of the soft and the weak is closely related to the Way and un-doing. Lǎozǐ approaches another way of being human through the cultivation of softness. He advocates an education to softness that is opposed to that one-sided education to hardness in which the authoritarian character is rooted.

Lǎozǐ’s critique of learning and the juxtaposition of two kinds of doing—“doing of learning” (*wéixué 為學*) and “doing of the Way” (*wéidào 為道*)—grows out of the tendency to overcome modes of learning, which are primarily disciplining and civilizing and thus lead to a hardened and ossified self-relation. Several times Lǎozǐ mentions the image of the newborn child (*Lǎozǐ* 10, 20, 28), soft and weak, but at the same time almost open without limit and receptive to all that is new and unknown. The image of the infant is contrasted with that of the hard and rigid corpse, or the withered and dried plant, in which the cycle of life and death, of giving birth and dying, comes to a temporary end. Therefore, Lǎozǐ does not stop at praising the soft and weak, but also points out that the hard and strong are indispensable. For the relation of softness and hardness permeates the relation of life and death, of generating and dying. The individual existence of a tree is not possible without its hardening from a soft and weak seedling to a hard and strong trunk. But it is precisely because of this hardening, which is inseparable from living and growing, that the tree that has become a strong trunk is in danger of dying: namely, being cut down and made into weapons (*Lǎozǐ* 76).
When Lǎozǐ says “whoever strengthens the military therefore does not win”, he does not mean that strengthening the military cannot lead to victory, but that this victory is at the same time a defeat: the loss of another possibility of being human. Every military victory is the victory of a hard logic of (self-)domination and struggle, which tends to fatally overemphasize hardness, strength, and greatness. Insofar as Lǎozǐ justifies struggle and war, he does so in a surprisingly restrained way: for example, he recommends holding a mourning ritual on the occasion of a military victory (Lǎozǐ 31). In this sense, what is soft and weak is normatively above, but what is firm and strong is below (Lǎozǐ 76). Although it is inevitable to harden and strengthen oneself, Lǎozǐ nevertheless attempts to distinguish the hardness necessary for survival from an attitude of struggle and belligerence that fatally accelerates hardening, withering, and (self-)destruction: Those who fight (wéi zhēng 为争) must strengthen and harden themselves to be able to attempt to defeat others; but those who wish to defeat others are in turn those whom others wish to defeat: both sides become entangled in a logic of struggle from which they can hardly escape.

Lǎozǐ invites us to perceive the creative from the receptive, doing from letting, the high from the low, the full from the empty, or the limited world of “being-with” (yǒu 有) from the unlimited world of “being-without” (wú 無). To explain this motif, he not only uses the image of the ravine (Lǎozǐ 6) but also that of making a clay bowl (Lǎozǐ 11). Only an empty bowl is usable, and the potter who makes the bowl grow from a lump of clay on his wheel is, strictly speaking, not creating the visible and tangible bowl in its limitedness, but the being-without or emptiness in the bowl, that is open for unlimited use.

The potter’s creative activity revolves around the receptive, around the possibility and significance of receptivity and generation. Thus, insofar as the connection between the soft and the female (not the feminine in the sense of socially constructed roles of femininity) is implied in the Lǎozǐ, it is not a matter of attributing softness and weakness to women, or of confining them to the social role of mothers. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing the empty, open and generative side of the human character. It is a matter of recognizing that all human beings can and should preserve and nurture within themselves character traits that have historically been associated with the female. Why? Because a human being who is not able to recognize and preserve softness and weakness tends to develop an authoritarian, destructive, and therefore pathological character structure. People with an authoritarian character, dominated by a one-sided fixation on hardness and strength, tend to be violent and (self-)destructive: they become “followers of death” (sǐ zhī tú 死之徒; Lǎozǐ 76)—regardless of their sex or gender.
Primacy of Gaze or Primacy of Touch?

In the Lǎozǐ, more abstract terms such as the “Without” (wú 無; being-without) and the (empty) “middle” (zhōng [kōng] 中[空]) correspond to more concrete terms such as the “ravine” and the “belly”. The “holy human” is said to “do for [the] belly, not for [the] eye” (Lǎozǐ 12). “Belly” is not addressed here in the feminist sense of the provocative slogan “Mein Bauch gehört mir” (“My Belly/Womb is Mine”), which German women used in the 1970s to resist their degradation to child-bearing machines and to demand bodily self-determination. When Lǎozǐ speaks of “holy humans”, the juxtaposition of “belly” and “eye” testifies to a critical turn against an outward-looking perception and the intensification of sensual stimuli, in contrast to which attention is turned inward, toward the “belly”. In the Daoist context, this is associated not only with self-preservation through drinking and eating, but also with life-nourishing exercises of breathing, in which the “belly” or, more precisely, the “vermilion field” (dāntián 丹田) is given the significance of a bodily “bellows” (see Lǎozǐ 5) through which human beings can ignite the hearth of their own life forces. A self-determined relationship to oneself, to others, and to the world thus begins with an awareness of breathing, through which we touch the world and through which what is inner and what is outer, what is concealed and what is obvious, communicate with one another—it is not by chance that awareness of breathing, for example, is associated with closing one’s eyes during meditative sitting.

In China, the breath has been politicized since ancient times, understood as a life force to be nurtured or governed, or as a mediator of individual and collective energies, forming a hinge between human and cosmic order. In both Daoist and Confucian texts, there are clear references to a politics of breath-change, in which breathing techniques and regimes of nourishing life come together. Today, with the modern respiratory crisis in the form of air pollution, climate change, and global respiratory diseases, new forms of politicizing the breath, or pneumopolitics, emerge.

It is remarkable how consistently Irigaray’s theoretical development starting from the problem of female sexuality has paid attention to the philosophy of breath (Irigaray 2000; 2019; 2021). Stepping out of the primacy of the gaze is a crucial condition for being able to reflect on the meaning of breath. Irigaray’s thinking has gradually developed from the feminist critique of the primacy of the gaze and the associated “authoritarian discourse” of men and fathers (Irigaray 1977, 27/27) into the direction of philosophizing the breath. The step from the eye to the breath, from seeing to breathing, has thus been connected to reflections on breathing practice, but also to theoretical elaborations. Through her approach it
becomes clear that the difficulty of thinking about the “female sex” and about approaching the “cultivation of the breath” are intertwined, and that the cultural and philosophical resistance to both is ontologically rooted. Irigaray insists that in Europe, historically, the female sex has not been recognized as a sex, because it is not, because it has no being, or more precisely, because it is not determinable in the mode of being visible. The female sex, in its concealment, is “not one” like the male sex, because it is not recognizable as one. Irigaray thus describes the female sex as one that is not one and has “no form of its own”.

Such an approach is reminiscent of Lǎozǐ 41, which says that the “great image is without form”（大象無形）and the “Way is concealed [and] without name”（道隱無名). Irigaray reactualizes these old motifs, which do not sound very contemporary, in the context of a critique of civilization that surprisingly coincides with that of the Lǎozǐ: “This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own. And if woman takes pleasure precisely from the incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over and over again, indefinitely, by itself, that pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism” (Irigaray 1977, 26/26). From the definable form of the one (phallus), Irigaray distinguishes “the touch of at least two (lips), which keeps the woman in contact with herself, but without any possible separation of what is touched”. And Irigaray goes on to speak about “the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units, to inventory everything as individualities. She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no ‘proper’ name. And her sex [sexe], which is not one sex, is counted as no sex” (ibid.). From the perspective of paradoxical thinking in the Lǎozì, it is not difficult to relate to such a language.

For Irigaray, one task of “female writing” is to distinguish a female sex from a male sex in order to open up to the former a language that belongs to it, that is, a language that is not “phallogocentric”. The condition of the possibility of such a language is linked to the philosophical reevaluation of the relationship between what is considered high and low, above and below, bright and shadowed. Irigaray is concerned with the task of allowing not only the upper but also the lower lips to speak. For her, phallogocentrism means silencing the lower lips of the female sex, those labia that the male sex lacks. The lower lips are thus a material and embodied reality that permanently challenge the metaphysics of the One, which rules by dividing and splitting the world: into high and low, light and shadow, truth and un-truth, essence and un-essence, good and evil, freedom and un-freedom, being and non-being. The monistic One possesses the power of imposing dualistic divisions. Such metaphysical thinking gives this divisiveness the character of
the absolute, which prevents the two sides from being experienced as belonging together in difference, as being that is in itself counterturning (in German, gegenwendi
dig). Feminist theories have long struggled with the old tendency of patriarchal civilizations to place the female sex on the side of the secondary, the low, the shadowed, or even the nothing: it is not, it is a nothing in relation to being, it is a “being nothing”: “rien d’être”, “nothingness” (Malabou 2009, 115/98). In this critical feminist language, however, nothingness is already turning into being. Nothing stops being a nothing that is dualistically opposed to being. With the help of Lǎozǐ we might say that nothingness is turned into being-without. But it is difficult not only for logocentric ontology to think of being-without, that is, to think the Without not as nothing that is opposed to being.3

Irigaray's texts approach the language of the lower lips that are characteristic of female bodies. Why does she insist on this very physical understanding of sexual difference? For her, the necessity of this understanding is imposed by the critique of metaphysics. She associates the concept of the “female sex” with a way out of the cave, out of an “occidental metaphysics” that has been paradigmatically expressed in Plato's cave: the “female sex” is for her a passageway into another way of philosophizing, whose centre is touch and breath, not vision and light. As mentioned before, such an approach is similar to the emphasis on the “belly” and the critique of the “eye” in Lǎozǐ 12. Irigaray insists on sexual difference because she is afraid that its deconstruction actually means a relapse into “phallocentrism” and the “logocentrism” associated with it, and thus a renewed silencing of the language of the lower lips. The possibility of a different way of philosophizing concerns the whole of modern humanity, insofar as the idealistic primacy of seeing is, of course, not only a problem of men. The structural change of thinking that Irigaray has tried to foster throughout various phases of her work is about overcoming the (post-)metaphysical paradigm of the ascent from the cave to the light. This kind of thinking wants to liberate being human from the image of the cave as a paradigm of liberation.

The feminist critique of Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic interpretation of “female sexuality,” expressed by Irigaray in the 1970s, develops a highly idiosyncratic discourse of the female genitals that is experience-oriented and begins with “touch”, but at the same time includes a model of unblocked communication. Irigaray assumes that the labia touch and communicate with each other as long as they are not separated. In her early writings, she sees the male intruder as the cause of a breakdown in communication that leads women to

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3 Here we touch on the conventional translation of 无 (wú) as “nothing”, “nothingness”, or “non-being” in Daoist and Buddhist studies. My translation as “without”, “without-being” or the prefix “un-” is based on ontological considerations that cannot be elaborated in this paper.
become insensitive to the elemental character of (self-)touch associated with the structure of their sex organ:

[...] the auto-eroticism of women is very different from that of men. In order to touch himself, the man needs an instrument: his hand, the woman's sex, language.... And this self-touching [auto-affection] requires a minimum of activity. As for the woman, she touches herself in and out of herself, without the need for mediation and before there is any possibility of distinguishing activity from passivity. Woman ‘-touches herself’ all the time, without any possibility of forbidding it, since her sex consists of two lips that are in constant contact with each other. She is, therefore, always two touching each other. (Irigaray 1977, 27/28; see also Malabou 2020, 71/67)

Female sexuality is, therefore, at once double and one, double and “plural” (plurielle). However, this auto-eroticism is disrupted by a violent break-in [l’effraction violente]: the brutal separation [l’écartement brutal] of the two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this ‘self-touch’ [auto-affection; Porter translates ‘self-caressin’] she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations. (Irigaray 1977, 24/24)

Seen in this light, it is the violent interruption of female “self-touch” that degrades the “female sex” to a shadowed “hole” or dark “cave”. This interruption is realized by the penetrating and splitting penis and is reinforced by phallocentric discourse. For philosophy such language is provocative, if not revolutionary. Since the publication of This Sex Which Is Not One, the task has been to search for another language and another logic, namely one capable of thinking a sex that is “not one”. This task is paradoxical in that Irigaray fights for the recognition of the female sex as a sex—as the other sex, to speak with Simone de Beauvoir—that is to be distinguished from the male sex. Related to this is the suggestion that female sexuality is not “one” but “at least double”, if not “plural” (Irigaray 1977, 27/28). Drawing on the experience of the female body, Irigaray touches upon a way of philosophizing that is equally capable of doing justice to oneness, twoness/doubleness and plurality, or to monism, dualism, and pluralism. This way of thinking that does not perceive these three moments as mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather engages in their paradoxical communication. Irigaray thus deals with the task of thinking the female sex as one that is not fixed in oneness, but one that is simultaneously open to duality/doubleness and plurality. Understood in this way, Irigaray’s concrete and provocative discussion of the female sex organ and the motif of the
breath-change meet in the recognition of a paradoxical structure in which oneness and doubleness can belong together by way of counterturning. Although, as far as I know, the Chinese philosophy of breath has never discussed the problem of the “female sex” or “shadowed character” (yīnxìng 陰性) as it appears in Irigaray, her problematization of the metaphysics of light, the eye, and vision is particularly helpful in understanding the difficulties of reactualizing a philosophical paradigm of breath that has been handed down and elaborated in the East since antiquity. Moreover, recalling this historical context helps to better understand the extent to which even Irigaray’s reflections still bear witness to the ontological difficulty of thinking oneness, doubleness, and plurality paradoxically together.

The struggle for liberation has empowered women to overcome feminine role patterns. At the same time, however, it has entangled humanity even more deeply in the chains of masculine role patterns, according to which freedom is possible only through hardness against nature but not also through softness with nature. The attempt to realize liberation more or less exclusively through domination and manipulation of nature is an aberration that makes human domination of nature possible in the short term, but leads to human self-destruction in the long run. Seen in this light, it is a tragic fate for the whole of humanity, caught up in the spell of European modernization, not to be able to free itself from an idea of liberation that is based on the continued misperception and domination not only of external nature, but also of the nature that we ourselves are as human beings. “Being-nature” (Natursein) and the cultivation of being-nature points to another way of understanding the relation between nature and freedom (Gahlings 2016, 685). Being-nature (in German, Natursein) and freedom can belong together once we realize that the philosophy of nature and the theory of subjectivity are “internally clamped together” (in German, intern miteinander verklemmt). This means that “nature is a presupposition of the very subjectivity that wrests itself from it: nature precedes freedom as much as it follows it. And that would mean that just as nature liberates subjectivity, so subjectivity liberates nature” (Menke 2023, 268). However, such a “liberation from liberation” seems only possible if both women and men succeed in liberating themselves from feminine and masculine role ethics. Ascribing to women the role of soft proximity to nature and to men the role of hard domination is of little help in developing the awareness that being-nature can liberate subjectivity.
The With and the Without of Being

The discursive deconstruction of the biological difference between the sexes risks further disconnecting all human beings from the awareness of being-nature. It thus risks prolonging an old, deeply entrenched regime of violent domination over nature and the self. In the name of critiquing “essentialism”, it perpetuates an attitude familiar from the history of metaphysics and religion: the devaluation and denial of being-nature, which in turn enabled and enables the manipulation and instrumentalization not only of bodies but also of souls. The denial of being-nature juxtaposes freedom and nature: Freedom is reduced to the liberation from being-nature. Such freedom remains tied to the image of Plato’s cave. The image of the ravine, on the other hand, points to a paradoxical togetherness of freedom and nature, to the fact that freedom is only possible by way of recognizing the nature that we ourselves are.

The air in the ravine is the being-without that fills and blows through it. The world breathes in being-without: “No being without the Without of being; no letting be without the Without of letting be. Only being-without allows being [...]” (Hamacher 2021, 107).\(^4\) The image of the ravine signifies the possibility of letting being-without be. Thus, we touch on the assumption that being-without is not nothingness. Being (Sein) should not, in the traditional way, be opposed to nothingness (Nichts); rather, the “without of being” and the “with of being” belong together in being. Thus understood, the forgetfulness of being can be understood as the forgetfulness of the “Without of being” or being-without. The forgetfulness of the Without corresponds to the forgetfulness of the air that we must breathe in order to stay alive and nourish life. Conversely, awareness of breath and breathing air is the closest possible recollection of nature in the subject (in German, Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt). Nature and freedom can meet in the cultivation of breath when the without is recognized as the being-without of being. With the forgetfulness of the breath that moves in and through the ravine, humanity breathes without breathing, so to speak. She breathes without awareness, and in her relationship with nature she falls under the spell of a domination of nature that is breathless and hard.

Against the background of an ontology in which being differentiates itself in being-without and being-without, it is now possible to say more about the analogy of the “ravine” (mentioned in Laozi 6) and the female sex organ. This analogy raises the question of the position of women in a world in which being-without is denied recognition. In feminist discussions, the difficulty associated with the inability to

\(^4\) “Kein Sein ohne das Ohne des Seins; kein Seinlassen ohne das Ohne des Lassens. Erst das Ohne lässt sein [...]”
think *being-without* is clearly evident. This difficulty is significant not only for the philosophical discussion of sexual difference, but also for thinking about a way of being human for which being-without is no longer a deficiency to be covered up or a hole to be filled: “We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfilment from the other. By our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfilment” (Irigaray 1977, 209/209–10).

The uneasiness about the being-without of the female sex lives on. Catherine Malabou’s critical discussion of “post-feminist” anti-essentialism touches upon the violence done to “woman” by the abolition of her “essence”. In the accompanying “ontological negation of the female” feminism repeats, she says, a violence traditionally done to “woman” by men: she is once again assimilated to a “being nothing” (*rien d’être*). This is possible to the extent that the female sex is again “counted as no sex”. She remains the “negative, the underside, the reverse” of the penis, which considered the “only visible and morphologically designatable sex” (Irigaray 1977, 26/26). Thus, the female sex organ is, still or once more, seen as *nothing* in relation to male *being*, as deficient emptiness: because *she* is empty, open and indeterminate, no being is conferred to *her*. How does *she* connect to being? The shocking answer Malabou gives is very similar to the one Irigaray gave in the 1970s:

‘woman’ has never been able to define herself other than through the violence done to her. Violence alone confers her being—whether it is domestic and social violence or theoretical violence. The critique of ‘essentialism’ (i.e. there is no specifically feminine essence) by gender theory and deconstruction is but one more twist in the ontological negation of the feminine. (Malabou 2009, additional sheet/V)

Understood as an “absence of being. Woman is nothing any more, except this violence through which her ‘being nothing’ continues to exist. She’s nothing but an ontological amputation [*moignon ontologique*], formed by that which negates her” (ibid., 115/99). At this point, however, Malabou sees the possibility of a turn, and suggests that the assimilation of ‘woman’ to ‘being nothing’ perhaps opens a new path that goes beyond both essentialism and anti-essentialism. Let us envisage the possibility that, in the name woman, there is an empty but resistant essence, an essence that is resistant precisely because it is emptied, a stamp of impossibility. This could augur a new era in the ‘feminist’ fight, a new stage in the battle against the violence that claims woman is impossible because of her lack of essence. (Malabou 2009, 115/98)
The new era that is emerging seems not to be just one of “feminist struggle”, but one in which we search for an ontology that, at the very moment it becomes capable of thinking the Without of being, must also rethink the With of being. The possibility of a turn arises precisely from the awareness of “woman’s” lack of essence—of her being without essence—Malabou speaks about. It arises from the misrecognition of her being in the context of traditional metaphysics, in which the Without of being can only appear as an inferior and unfree shadow world that, consequently, relegates woman to the shadow of man. Thus, the discussion of Plato’s cave and Lāozī’s ravine enters the sphere of an ontological discussion that leads to contemplating the doubling of being into Without and With.

Malabou says that to speak of “the woman as ‘philosopher’” requires a rethinking of “ontology and biology” (Malabou 2009, 11‒12/4). This is, of course, a difficult undertaking. Nevertheless, I try to think further at this point, especially with reference to Irigaray, Malabou, Derrida, Nancy, Hamacher, and Heidegger’s interpretation of being as in itself counterturning. In this context a double ontology of being-without and being-with emerges, that is structurally related to Lāozī’s philosophy of the Way.

If being-without thereby gains ontological independence, a turn in the perception of the claim that “woman is impossible because she has no being” opens up. The ontological relation of Without and With (wú yǒu 無有) opened up in Lāozī 1 develops, in Lāozī 6, towards the motif of using the Without (yòngwú 用無) of the ravine in a “spiritual” (shén 神) way. This Way of “un-use” (wúyòng 無用) becomes possible not through the violent hardness of doing but through the non-violent softness of “un-doing” (wúwéi 無為). By conceptually bringing together the Without, softness, and un-doing, Lāozī touches upon an understanding of the “female”, which is by no means tied to the human category of “woman”. In this context, it is perhaps not insignificant that the Chinese characters for man and woman (nán nǚ 男女) do not appear in the Lāozī.

Following the analogy of the ravine and the female sex organ, I will now attempt to further explore the ontological significance of Lāozī’s image of the ravine. Irigaray’s philosophical discussion of the “forgotten vagina” and the (pubic) lips, constantly touching and communicating, has strongly influenced the discussions about the female sexuality in contemporary philosophy. “Being is communication” (l’être est communication), says Jean-Luc Nancy in the context of his reflections on “being-with” (être-avec) (Nancy 1996, 47). Seen in this light, Irigaray’s response to the ontologically rooted misrecognition of being-without also emphasizes the constitutive importance of being-with. The significance of the image of the ravine in Lāozī 6 corresponds to this ontological topic in an almost uncanny way, namely
in a way that repeatedly makes clear that Heidegger’s intuitive opening to philosophical Daoism was only the beginning of a conversation whose potential for thought is far from exhausted. Understood in terms of the image of the ravine, the female sex organ is not so much a cave or an empty and dark void, but rather a “communicative way” or “passage” (tōng dào 通道) that connects the “multiplicity of things” (wànwù 萬物) by generating and nourishing them (Lǎozǐ 8): The ravine is a passageway through which water flows down from the high mountains in order to nourish all that lives and thrives in the valley and on the plains, not least human civilization, which in many cases has developed in cities along large rivers. In this sense, the ravine is life-generating and life-nourishing.

The ravine is formed by two mountain sides whose double being-with (in German, doppeltes Mit-sein) makes possible the empty middle, the being-without between the two sides. Understood in this way, it again becomes clear that being-without cannot claim ontological independence from being-with: being-without (of the empty and more or less open ravine) is only possible in the midst of being-with (of the mountain slopes) (wú zài yǒu zhōng 无在有中). Being-without and being-with paradoxically belong together. They form a relationship of “mysterious sameness” (xuán tóng 玄同; see Lǎozǐ 56). To elucidate such a double ontology of being-without and being-with, Malabou’s critical engagement with the lips, in which she connects the labia and the lips of the mouth, proves helpful. She wants to detach the motif of the lips from its connection to the bodily characteristics of women. This also seems necessary in order to further explore the ontological content of the ravine, for in the Lǎozǐ it is by no means tied to the female body. Instead, it is concerned with a Way of being human that is open to all human beings.

If it is, according to Malabou, impossible for women to gain access to philosophy without immediately being forced to “disappear as a [female] subject” (Malabou 2009, 11), then the question arises whether, conversely, it is still possible, or at least desirable, to gain access to philosophy as a (male) subject. If this means above all becoming a subject of self-control, capable of hardening against the experience of one’s own “fragility” (fragilité), then the question emerges as to whether such a paradigm that connects the philosophical subject to the authoritarian character should be defended and sustained. Should we not all turn away from a way of philosophizing in which it is impossible to be “female”? If it becomes a problem that the mainstream of philosophy in Europe since antiquity—from Plato to Nietzsche—has been connected with the education to hardness and strength, then it becomes philosophically significant that in Chinese antiquity there was a male philosopher to whom slogans of the authoritarian character such as “praised be whatever makes hard” (gelobt sei, was hart macht) and “what does not kill me makes me stronger” (was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker) were suspect
long before Nietzsche proclaimed them to the world. Lāozī thought and taught self-cultivation as an aesthetic education that emphasizes softness and weakness, he did not try to “hide his fragility” (Malabou 2009, 12). On the contrary, he says that being “soft and fragile” (róucuí 柔脆) is a sign of life, while being “firm and strong” is a sign of death (Lāozī 76).

The name Lāozī thus refers to a philosopher, or a plurality of philosophers, who can explain why it is necessary to critically rethink models of “ontology and biology” (Malabou) that tend to misrecognize being-without and to downgrade the softness of all living things as effeminate weakness. It is certainly desirable that female (and male) philosophers be given the opportunity to speak about the female in philosophy. As long as this is and remains “impossible”, philosophy is also “impossible”. When will a way of philosophizing become possible that knows about being-with and hardness, but is also able to preserve being-without and softness? Lāozī does not emphasize the female for the sake of the female, but because the female character is, historically speaking, more capable than the male character of becoming aware of the meaning of being-without and softness. For him, however, such awareness is a way of life to which all humans, not only women, should aspire.

In feminist discourse, the strategic primacy of the female corresponds to the emphasis on those “two fleshy lips and two delicate folds of skin that surround the entrance of the vagina” (Malabou 2009, 13/5). Irigaray, notably, has drawn the attention of concrete philosophizing to the lips of the vulva, thus stimulating a far-reaching discussion. Malabou, in her book on the clitoris, recapitulates how the male philosophers Derrida, Levinas, and Nancy have taken up this suggestion and developed it further (Malbou 2020).

Women’s lips are as much those of her mouth as those of her vulva. But the vulva is better than the mouth at incarnating the existence of lips that cannot open by themselves (Malabou 2009, 25/16). For Irigaray, the lips of the vulva testify that “the woman is constantly touching herself” (se re-touche tous le temps) (Irigaray 1977, 28/29). They do not require the opening and closing of the mouth to communicate. The opening of the lower lips, as already mentioned, is associated for her with a “brutal separation of the two lips by a raping penis” (Irigaray 1977, 24/24). Malabou does not want to limit her discourse within the framework of this polemical polarization of female self-conversation and male violence. She wants to emphasize that “the female cannot be reduced to women”, but neither can violence be reduced to men:
Perhaps more than any other schema the silent, withdrawn and folded lips, offered and defenseless, of the woman’s anatomical sex organ allow us to figure absolute, defenseless fragility. But this schema does not also play the role of model or paradigm. Nothing prevents us from seeing the two lips in other beings than woman, seeing them in any exposed, suffering subject. Nor must we forget that defilement, rape, and evil can also be the acts of women. The violence done to lips can come from everywhere; it can be the fact of anyone, the work of all, including women. […] Obviously woman can desecrate the feminine, perpetrate evil, abuse children, other women, men, animals, or offend justice and thought […] The feminine is detachable from ‘woman’. (Malabou 2009, 32‒33/23‒24)

It seems obvious to me that Lãozi, on the contrary, did not attach the “female” to “woman” in the first place. For his paradoxical thinking, it is also not surprising if “women” in particular do not want to be (perceived as) soft and weak, but want to be hard and strong, as it is inherent in the human understanding of the counterturning belonging together (in German, gegenwendige Zusammengehörigkeit) of the female and the male that the former cannot be reduced to femininity and the latter cannot be reduced to masculinity.

The detachment of the female from women begins with the tenderness and unclosability of the lower lips, and then turns to their fragility and weakness. All human beings are open to violence. There is no human being who is completely protected from violent influences and intrusions. In her discourse, Malabou not only removes the female from the category of woman, but also removes the experience of “fragility” from the female. By making the female recognizable as fragility and vulnerability in the bodily concreteness of women’s lower lips, she also detaches herself from the female and moves into the ontological recognition of an openness and fragility inherent in human life as such, indeed in all living things. Irigaray and Malabou discuss this extension of the meaning inherent in the awareness of the lower lips by addressing the relationship that exists between the soft lips of the vulva and the soft lips of the mouth. The fragility of the lower lips is thus connected to the fragility of language.

The search for a female language, which gives Irigaray’s early texts an unmistakably experimental character, revolves around the motif of touch. How is it possible to speak a philosophical language that is able to accommodate and preserve the whispering self-touch of the lower lips? A philosophical language oriented toward the alleged hardness and constancy of definitions and identifications has great difficulty in accommodating the mutability, fluidity, and softness of language formation. On the other hand, it is poetic language in which language does not have
to and cannot “hide its fragility”. The male philosophers to whom Malabou refers have all sought to open their language to a way of philosophizing that does not need to hide its fragility. Philosophy thus becomes soft enough to pass through and transform the hardness of the “identical, purposeful, masculine character of man”. This authoritarian character has also worked its way into the language of philosophy, into the ramifications of its conceptual world, inscribing in it “the hypostasis of hardness and exclusivity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2003, 39). “Terrible things humanity has had to do to itself”, say Horkheimer and Adorno, in order to ossify the authoritarian character into a paradigm of subjectivity that must be repeatedly exercised in every childhood (ibid., 50). Against this historical trend Irigaray has moved into the direction of a philosophical language that touches because it is capable of preserving being-without and softness.

The Horror of Nothing to See

The “ravine” (gǔ 谷) at the beginning of Lǎozǐ 6 has been widely read as an image of the Way (dào 道) that is itself an image. The chapter was also already linked to the female sex organ and the cultivation of sexual practices in one of the earliest extant commentaries of the Daoist classic (Gù and Zhāng 2015, 21). In this context, there is reference to a “dark” or “shadowed hole” (yīnkǒng 陰孔). The concealment of the “female sex” or “shadowed character” (yīnxìng 陰性) is thus associated with a place of lightless obscurity. But in the Lǎozǐ what is shadowed and dark is not subordinated to what is luminous and bright. Indeed, tendencies toward such a hierarchization are unequivocally rejected (see Lǎozǐ 27). This counterturning belonging together of the shadowed and the enlightened stands in contrast to the dualistic opposition of shadow and light as expressed in many ancient cultures. This hierarchic order continues to have a largely unbroken effect up to the present.

Plato’s cave is a “shadowed hole” in a derogatory sense, because this cave is a “dwelling” (Heidegger 1976, 111) in which human beings in chains live in un-freedom and take as true an untrue world of shadows. But as soon as the phenomenological description of the female sex organ as “concealed” and that of the male as “unconcealed” is transformed into a normatively charged relationship between the sexes, philosophical questions arise that have long gone unnoticed in the interpretation of the cave. Luce Irigaray’s psychoanalytic and feminist interpretation reveals a highly problematic side of the normative order between shadow and light as expressed in many ancient cultures. Her analysis of the cave as an image of the female sex organ is provocative not only because the directness of her interpretation critically undermines Plato’s metaphysics of light, but also because
it makes clear the extent to which his exaltation of light and seeing continues to affect modes of thinking that no longer feel indebted to, or even reject, the Platonic legacy.

For Irigaray, “the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks” is characterized by the primacy of the gaze. She contrasts the *primacy of the gaze* with the *primacy of touch*:

*Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. (Irigaray 1977, 25/25‒26).*

In speaking of a “scopic economy”, the critique of the one-sided preference for looking/seeing and visibility is radicalized into a critique of the purposeful, “scopic” gaze by which she characterizes the male gaze—“scopic” comes from the ancient Greek σκοπεῖν (*skopein*): to look at, to consider, to examine, and σκοπεῖα (*skopeia*), which is an instrument of contemplation and investigation. The title of the book *Speculum* (Irigaray 1974), in which Irigaray discusses Plato’s allegory of the cave in detail, already indicates the context she wants to address, as *speculum* is also the name of the instrument used in gynaecology by the examining gaze to explore the interior of the female sex organ, which is inaccessible to the naked eye and, in this sense, invisible and concealed.

Irigaray enters Plato’s image of the cave through this connection between the eye and the female sex. To contrast in this way the “male” primacy of the gaze and the “female” primacy of touch is obviously a polemical move whose intention is not to reduce men to seeing and women to touching. She is, however, concerned with the question of how (male) seeing could historically assert its primacy over (female) touch and establish a civilizational model based on the “taboo against touching” (*le tabou du toucher*; Irigaray 1977, 27/27). In Plato’s cave, this taboo corresponds to the prisoners’ fixation on seeing the shadows on the wall in front of them, while they are not allowed to turn around or touch each other because they are tied to their places. In a male economy of seeing understood in this way, the female sex organ represents

*the horror of nothing to see.* A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A ‘hole’ in its scoptophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such
a scene of representation. Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'. (Irigaray 1977: 25‒26/26)

In ancient Greek art, women are often depicted naked or semi-naked, but their genitals are closed and formless, and Irigaray criticizes the fact that they look “sewn back” because the labia are shamefully omitted. She links this phenomenon to the claim that because there is nothing to see, the female sex has no “form of its own” and is therefore “nothing”. She not only is it not an eye-catcher, but causes the (male) gaze to fall into a hole of seeing, so to speak, which is frightening and repelling. Because this “shadowed hole” eludes the order of light and seeing, it is also difficult to grasp linguistically. It conceals itself not only from the gaze, but also from linguistically illuminating access. The logos of the male subject, which considers itself universal, is thus confronted with a void or nothingness of which, consequently, nothing or almost nothing can be said, and concealment and speechlessness reinforce each other. Consequently, Irigaray emphasizes that “her sex organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none. The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable sex [...] : the penis” (Irigaray 1977, 26/26).

The physical concealment of the female sex organ has therefore been perceived in Europe, from antiquity to modernity, as a negative shadow of the true thing. European philosophy, based on the “primacy of the gaze”, has thus failed to think through the Without (wu 無) of the female sex, because it has remained attached to a metaphysics of the One—the one light, the one truth, the one thing: “This model, a phallic one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility ... and erection” (Irigaray 1977, 85/86). The “forgotten vagina” (vagin oublié; Irigaray 1974, 306/247), on the other hand, refers to the oblivion of the normative meaning of the female or the “shadowed way” (yīndào 陰道)—“shadowed way” is a common term for the vagina in Chinese. This way is a passage that necessarily moves between the inside and the outside, between the concealed and the revealed, between shadow and light. In French, Irigaray is able to play with the relationship between the words “antre” (cavity), “ventre” (belly/womb), and “entre” (between) in order to criticize the tendency to imagine “this primitive cavern or womb [...] as a dangerous fault-line, as chaos, as ‘empty vase’” (Irigaray 1985, 300/242‒43). Irigaray claims that this perception and the related discourse have caused women to lose and forget contact with their bodies, and thus with themselves.
Philosophy of Breath

For Irigaray, “woman” is condemned to remain a sexless “body without organ(s)” (*corps sans organe*) in the world of identifying language marked by masculine hardness and within the phallocentric order of discourse, because this hardened order can neither think nor express the structure of female sexuality (Irigaray 1977, 88/93). Why does the “logic of reason” fail to think and recognize this sex which is “not one”? Irigaray does not discuss this question abstractly from a distance, but by following a way of concrete philosophizing that is not afraid to address perceptions and bodily experiences that have long been excluded from philosophy as low and unworthy: Against the male view that “woman [...] has no sex,” Irigaray insists that she has “at least two” of them:

So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as one. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality is always at least double, even further: it is *plural*. [...] Indeed, woman’s pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman’s pleasure. Among other caresses... Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures which are somewhat misunderstood in sexual difference as it is imagined—or not imagined, the other sex being only the indispensable complement to the only sex. (Irigaray 1977, 27‒28/28)

This description is directed against an understanding of the female sex for which the “pleasure experienced by touching, caressing, opening the labia, the vulva” does not exist (Irigaray 1974, 30/33). The persistence of this problem is pointed out by Malabou in a discussion that does not focus on the sexual difference between women and men, but on the difference within female sexuality, which Irigaray already addressed in the above quotation, namely between vagina and clitoris. For Malabou, “the clitoris, anarchy, and the feminine” are inextricably linked: “The clitoris interrupts the logic of command and obedience” (Malabou 2020, 121/122). While the vagina and the uterus can hardly escape the image of a void waiting to be used and filled, the clitoris is only useful for touch and pleasure. Its resistant uselessness is thus also a challenge to Lǎozi’s image of the ravine that deserves to be considered. However, since the “use of being–without” (*yòng wú* 用無) and uselessness are closely related, it seems obvious that a “spiritual” use of
the ravine is related to preserving and acknowledging the moment of anarchic uselessness that Malabou evokes.

While Lãozi gives an indirect and poetic expression to thinking about the female sex through the image of the ravine, Malabou speaks a more direct language as a “French woman philosopher” (femme-philosophe française; Malabou 2019, 10/3). Irigaray and Malabou are experimenting with a language that has no place in the European tradition of philosophy. They obviously do not proceed in a very poetic way. Why does their way of philosophizing go so “low”? Why is sexual difference, for Irigaray, the focus of her critique of a male philosophical discourse that she traces from the present to antiquity and from Freud to Plato’s cave? Is this not a betrayal of a philosophical way that seeks the ascent to the light and at best descends (again) into the world of shadows in order to enlighten those imprisoned there and to guide them upwards, to the exit of the cave?

Initially, mainly the “dark writers of the bourgeoisie” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2003, 130–40) departed so drastically from the traditional contempt for the body that they became “crushers and criminals” (Brecher und Verbrecher) and aroused the hatred of the “good and just” (Nietzsche 1988, 26, 87). In Zarathustra, there are repeated references to “descent”, whose layers of meaning Nietzsche plays with: from the setting of the sun, the descent into the valley and into the body, to the disintegration of the prevailing order of values. In the 18th century the long imprisoned and tabooed Marquis de Sade exposed through violent exaggeration how men find pleasure in tormenting and exploiting female bodies. Irigaray extends the critique of the despisers of the body to a critique of the despisers of the female body, countering de Sade’s philosophically charged depiction of the “phallic empire” (Irigaray 1977, 201/203) with a perspective that is precisely non-pornographic in its experiential directness of language.

Irigaray approaches female sexuality along a philosophical way that begins with a descent to the lowness of the “lower lips” in order to bring about a reversal of perception: she moves from the problematization of the discourse of sexual difference toward a profound transformation of thought and life. In doing so, she contrasts the masculine idea of active penetration into a passive cave with an understanding of female sexuality as both active and passive in itself. She thus attempts to depart from the traditional paradigm of subjectivity as self-mastery by opening subjectivity to the “anarchy” (Malabou 2020, 119–22/120–23) of the one female sex, which she perceives as one, double, and plural at once. The one male sex, on the other hand, stands for a “oneness, with its prerogatives, its domination, its solipsism: like the sun’s” (Irigaray 1977, 207/207)—not to forget that in Plato’s allegory of the cave, the one sun is contrasted with the plurality of shadows.
Irigaray rethinks subjectivity not only by way of touch—distinguished from the distance of the gaze—but also by way of the female sex organ, which is commonly perceived as low or even as disgusting. This is a turn of thought that has many correspondences in the Làozi, where the cultivation of the Way often begins not above and on high, but below, in the uncanny ravines, lowlands and abysses of being human. For Làozi the cultivation of the Way not only entails ascending, but always descending as well. The ravine is a paradoxical image of a way that is one but always also double.

Irigaray contrasts visual and bodily intrusion with an awareness of touch that focuses on the self-touch of the two lips of the female sex, not solipsistic but communicative in themselves (Irigaray 1977, 205–17/205–18). Starting from touch in her early work, the attention of her reflections later shifted towards air and the “cultivation of breath” (Irigaray 2021, 15, 121). She approaches this topic through a critique of Heidegger’s “forgetfulness of air” (Irigaray 1983), as breathing along with yoga helped her alleviate the painful after-effects of an accident (Irigaray 2021). Although the transition from the philosophical revaluation of touch to the cultivation of breath appears rather preliminary from the perspective of Chinese “breath theory” (qìlùn 氣論), her search for a language based not on gaze and representation, but on touch and breath, contains important clues for a philosophy of breath and the profound difficulties involved in developing it in the context of contemporary European philosophy.

In her research into the reasons for the “hegemony of the gaze and the eye” (Irigaray 1983, 143) over other perceptual faculties, Irigaray came across Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which those imprisoned in the cave are limited to their sense of sight. They can see, speak, and hear but their hands are bound. Twentieth-century European philosophy has explored this theme extensively, even going so far as to counter the metaphysical primacy of eye, light, and sight with a philosophy of touch (le toucher; touch, touching). This tendency is expressed, for example, in the attempt to understand the eye as an organ of touch, and thus to draw it into the realm of touch. Jacques Derrida has done this in an extraordinary text, mentioned earlier, that revolves around a seemingly absurd question: “Quand nos yeux se touchent, fait-il jour ou fait-il nuit?” (When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?) (Derrida 2000, 11). He thus opens up a perspective that allows us to discuss a juxtaposition of European and Chinese aesthetics whose significance is not diminished by the fact that it has become a cliché: the European primacy of vision is juxtaposed with the Chinese primacy of “breath” or “breath energy” (qì 氣)—in France, François Jullien in particular has elaborated on this understanding (see Heubel 2021, 175). Related to this is the idea that breathing is a perception of the world that precedes or at least accompanies bodily and
spiritual perception: through breathing we touch the world and are touched by it. Only as long as we breathe can seeing and other sensory perceptions have meaning for us. And before a dying person takes his or her last breath, all other perceptions fade behind breathing, the final struggle for air. In phrases such as “I breathe, therefore I am” (Irigaray 1983, 145) or “philosophy dies—without air” (ibid., 13), Irigaray articulated such a view. According to her, the identification of being with thinking as well as of thinking with seeing already led philosophers in ancient Greece to a breathlessness (Atemlosigkeit) that became a topic of critical self-reflection in Europe during the 20th century.

Heidegger is one of the modern philosophers who prepared a way of philosophizing that takes breath seriously. Irigaray criticized Heidegger’s “forgetfulness of air”, but in the openness of the “clearing” (Lichtung) she also perceived a “free space” in which there is again air for philosophy to breathe (Irigaray 1983, 13, 59). In her critique of Heidegger, however, she underestimated the extent to which his concept of being—inspired by pre-Socratic thought—as counterturning in itself, moving between revealing and concealing, rising and falling, ascending and descending already comes close to philosophize breath-change (qìhuà 氣化). At this point, being and breath meet in a promising way. For both Heidegger and Irigaray, however, it is equally true that they lack the linguistic and cultural sources for a philosophical breath-turn (Atemwende). Both have turned to Asia in different ways and explored the possibilities of an Easternization of European philosophy. Where these ways might lead is difficult to predict, but the philosophy of breath will help to find an answer.

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