

# One Structure

## Convergence Under Pressure

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### Abstract

Philosophical and contemplative traditions have produced radically different metaphysical vocabularies—emptiness and substance, God and Dao, logos and dependent origination—yet when pushed toward their limits on questions of ultimate explanation, agency, and ethical responsibility, they converge on the same underlying structural constraints. This convergence appears only after substantial refinement: after anthropomorphism is stripped away, voluntarism collapses under its own incoherence, and naïve moralism gives way to structural necessity. The primary constraint is non-arbitrariness: reality exhibits discoverable structure rather than arbitrary will, though this structure permits creative participation rather than demanding determinism. From this follow two further constraints: no absolute exteriority (a final explanatory layer wholly devoid of interiority would be explanatorily vacuous) and asymmetric agency (agents participate in reality’s creative advance with varying degrees of reach and depth, and responsibility scales accordingly). These constraints function as stability conditions—frameworks violating them generate predictable instabilities that become catastrophic as power scales. The convergence of independent traditions on the same constraints constitutes evidence that the constraints track features of reality. In an era of artificial intelligence and civilizational leverage, the question of whether such constraints are real is no longer academic.

## I. Why Convergence Matters Now

### Beyond Comparative Religion

This essay is not an exercise in comparative religion. It does not claim that all traditions teach the same essential truth, nor does it pursue interfaith common ground. Such projects flatten genuine differences and obscure intellectual stakes.

The question here is different: do radically distinct frameworks—developed in different languages, cultures, and centuries—independently discover the same structural constraints when pushed to their limits? If they do, this convergence cannot be explained by cultural borrowing

alone. It suggests that the constraints are real: features of reality, or of coherent thought about reality, that any sufficiently deep inquiry will encounter.

The distinction matters. If convergence results from shared culture or psychological universals, it tells us about human minds. If convergence results from independent collision with the same structural limits, it tells us about reality—or at least about the conditions under which accounts of reality remain stable.

### **The Collapse of Flat Pluralism**

Contemporary intellectual culture tends toward flat pluralism: the view that metaphysical frameworks are matters of preference, and that no framework can claim superiority except by assertion. This posture presents itself as humble and tolerant. It is neither.

Flat pluralism makes a strong metaphysical claim: that reality imposes no constraints on which frameworks succeed. It treats serious disagreement as embarrassing rather than substantive. And it replaces traditional dogmas with the dogma that all frameworks are equally valid—a claim that collapses under pressure.

Under conditions of low power, flat pluralism appears sustainable. When nothing depends on metaphysical commitments, one can treat them as aesthetic preferences. But as power scales, flat pluralism fails. One cannot build artificial general intelligence on the assumption that all accounts of mind are equally valid. One cannot navigate civilizational risk assuming all ethical frameworks are merely cultural. At scale, some frameworks work and others catastrophically fail. The question of which constraints are real becomes operational.

### **Three Forcing Functions**

Three developments make this question urgent.

**Artificial intelligence** forces operational decisions about consciousness, agency, and value. Is an AI system conscious? Does it have moral standing? Can it understand, or only simulate understanding? These questions must be answered—implicitly or explicitly—in every design decision. The answers presuppose metaphysical commitments.

**Optimization at scale** reveals which frameworks are stable under pressure. A framework that works for individuals may collapse when implemented across billions of agents. The transition from local to global functions as a filter: it selects for stable frameworks and eliminates unstable ones.

**Civilizational leverage** means that small errors in foundational assumptions propagate into large-scale catastrophe. When a single decision can affect millions of lives, when a single technology can reshape the biosphere, the cost of foundational error becomes unbounded.

### **What This Essay Claims**

The essay advances a moderate claim: when traditions develop reflective philosophical cores under pressure for coherence, those cores tend to satisfy certain structural constraints. This convergence is more likely to reflect features of reality than cultural accident, but the inference is defeasible.

This is weaker than “the constraints are certainly true.” It is stronger than “some traditions happen to agree.” It is the claim that can be responsibly made given the evidence.

### The Structure of the Argument

The constraints examined here are not independent axioms of equal weight. They have a logical structure.

The **primary constraint** is non-arbitrariness: reality exhibits discoverable structure rather than arbitrary will. This is the deepest claim and the backbone of what follows. If reality were arbitrary—if its structure were simply chosen by some will—then nothing else could be reliably known, and no stable framework would be possible.

From non-arbitrariness follow two further constraints:

**No absolute exteriority:** If reality has structure, that structure must be accessible to inquiry. But inquiry is conducted from within experience, from a perspective, from an interior. A reality with a final layer wholly devoid of interiority—a purely exterior ground—would be structurally inaccessible and explanatorily vacuous: we could neither know it nor explain anything by reference to it. The traditions converge on treating such a ground as inadequate.

**Asymmetric agency:** If reality has structure and agents are embedded in that structure with varying degrees of causal reach, then agency is not flat. Some agents participate more fully in the structure; some actions have wider consequences; some positions carry greater responsibility. Ethical scaling is not an independent moral axiom but a consequence of structured reality plus asymmetric participation.

These three constraints form a nested structure, not a list of independent claims. The essay examines each in turn, but the underlying logic is: structure → accessibility → asymmetric participation.

## II. The Primary Constraint: Non-Arbitrary Structure

### The Claim

Reality exhibits discoverable structure rather than arbitrary will. This structure may be called dharma, logos, Dao, necessity, or dependent origination, but its defining feature is asymmetry: agents discover it, they do not legislate it. Freedom operates within constraint, not over it. The idea that will—human, divine, or otherwise—could be the ultimate ground of reality is not merely false but incoherent.

This is the primary constraint because everything else depends on it. If reality were arbitrary, no inquiry could succeed, no alignment could be stable, no ethics could be grounded. The other constraints are implications of this one.

### Why Arbitrary Will Collapses Intelligibility

Voluntarism—the view that will is the ultimate ground of reality—faces a fundamental problem: it renders reality unintelligible.

If reality’s structure is simply *chosen* by some will, we can ask: why this choice rather than another? If there is a reason, then the reason, not the will, is the ultimate ground. If there is no

reason—if the choice is arbitrary—then reality has no intelligible structure; it merely happens to be this way.

This is not a minor difficulty. Voluntarism cannot answer the most basic metaphysical question: why is reality structured this way rather than otherwise? The voluntarist answer—“because it was willed”—pushes the question back without answering it.

The theological version appears in the Euthyphro dilemma: Is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good? If the former, goodness is arbitrary. If the latter, goodness is independent of will. The same dilemma applies to any voluntarist metaphysics.

Medieval philosophy grappled with this directly. The Ash’arite occasionalists, holding that Allah recreates the world at each moment by pure will, faced the consequence that there is no genuine causation, no reliable order, no basis for science. The philosophical response—from Ibn Rushd, Maimonides, Aquinas—was to subordinate will to intellect: God wills in accordance with divine nature, which is rational. This restores intelligibility but concedes the point: the ultimate ground is not will but the structure according to which will operates.

### **Freedom Within Structure**

If reality is structured rather than willed, what becomes of freedom?

The convergent answer is nuanced: freedom is neither the power to create structure *ex nihilo* nor mere passive alignment with predetermined outcomes. It is **creative participation within constraint**—the capacity to actualize possibilities that structure makes available but does not uniquely determine.

Consider the difference between three conceptions:

**Voluntarist freedom** (what the constraint excludes): The power to make reality be anything at all by fiat. This is incoherent—if outcomes were unconstrained by structure, they would be arbitrary, and arbitrariness is not freedom but chaos. The tyrant who can decree anything has not achieved freedom; they have dissolved the conditions under which meaningful choice is possible.

**Deterministic alignment** (one traditional answer): Freedom as recognition of necessity—accepting what must be and adjusting one’s attitudes accordingly. This is the Stoic emphasis on what is “up to us” (our judgments) versus what is not (external events). There is wisdom here: struggling against the nature of things is exhausting and futile. But if reality is not fully deterministic—if structure constrains without uniquely specifying—then freedom involves more than acceptance.

**Creative participation** (the fuller picture): Freedom as the actualization of possibilities within structured possibility space. Structure determines the range of what *can* occur and the probabilities of various outcomes, but does not uniquely determine which possibility becomes actual. The agent participates in this actualization—not as arbitrary will imposing itself on passive matter, but as interiority contributing to the determination of what, among structured possibilities, becomes real.

This third conception preserves what is right in the first two while avoiding their excesses. Against voluntarism: freedom operates within constraint, not against it; the structure is discovered, not created. Against pure determinism: the agent genuinely contributes to outcomes, not merely to attitudes about outcomes; there is something “up to us” beyond our judgments.

Process philosophy articulates this clearly. Each occasion of experience inherits from its past (structure, givenness) and aims toward its future (novelty, creative advance). Freedom is not the negation of inheritance but its creative integration—taking what is given and contributing something not fully determined by what was given. Whitehead calls this “the creative advance into novelty.” The advance is *within* structure, not against it; but it is genuinely creative, not merely receptive.

Buddhism offers a parallel. Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) means that phenomena arise from conditions—but conditions do not mechanically produce outcomes; they provide the context within which karmic action has efficacy. The bodhisattva’s vow to liberate all beings is not passive acceptance of a predetermined script; it is a creative commitment that shapes the field of possibilities. Awakened action (*karma*) participates in the unfolding of dependent origination; it does not merely observe it.

The Daoist sage embodies this integration. *Wu wei* is often translated as “non-action,” but this is misleading. It is effortless action—action so aligned with the Dao that it accomplishes without strain. The sage does not merely accept what happens; the sage acts, and acts effectively. But the action flows with the grain of reality rather than against it. This is creative participation: contributing to outcomes while respecting the structure within which contribution is possible.

Even the contemplative traditions that emphasize acceptance and surrender often point toward creative participation at deeper levels. The Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun* (repair) holds that human action genuinely contributes to cosmic restoration—not merely accepting the broken state of vessels but actively participating in their repair. The Sufi who achieves *fana* (annihilation of ego) does not cease to act; they become an instrument through which the Real acts in the world—creative participation at its most refined.

The key insight is that structure and creativity are not opposed. Structure makes creativity possible by providing the possibility space within which novelty can emerge. Without structure, there would be no possibilities to actualize, no field within which creative contribution could have meaning. Freedom is not escape from structure but participation in structured becoming.

### **Non-Arbitrariness Without Determinism**

A clarification is necessary here, because non-arbitrary structure is easily confused with determinism. The constraint does not require that reality is deterministic—that prior states uniquely specify all subsequent states. It requires only that reality exhibits discoverable structure, not that this structure eliminates all degrees of freedom.

The distinction matters. Consider quantum mechanics. The Born rule specifies exactly what the probability distribution is for measurement outcomes. This distribution is not chosen by anyone; it follows from the wave function with mathematical necessity. What remains indeterminate is which outcome within that distribution actualizes—but the *space of possible outcomes* and their relative likelihoods are fully constrained. This is structure. It is discoverable. It is not willed or arbitrary. It simply does not uniquely determine a single outcome.

Structured indeterminacy is not arbitrariness. A fair die has structure: six faces, equal probability. Which face comes up is indeterminate, but this indeterminacy operates *within* the constraint that each face has probability 1/6. An arbitrary die would be one where probabilities could be anything at all, or could change by fiat. The Born rule exemplifies non-arbitrary indeterminacy: the probability distribution is fully specified by the wave function, even though which outcome

actualizes is not uniquely determined.

What the constraint excludes is unconstrained voluntarism—the idea that outcomes could be anything at all depending on arbitrary will. Quantum indeterminacy is not this: possibilities are tightly constrained; what is open is which possibility actualizes. Structure can constrain without eliminating all degrees of freedom. Non-arbitrariness is compatible with genuine openness, creativity, and the irreducible role of interiority in actualizing possibilities.

### Convergence Across Traditions

The traditions converge on non-arbitrary structure while diverging on whether that structure is deterministic. Some affirm strict necessity; others allow for creative participation within constraint. Both reject voluntarism; they differ on whether structure fully specifies outcomes. This divergence is compatible with the primary constraint: what matters is that structure is discovered, not willed—not whether that structure leaves room for indeterminacy.

**Buddhism** provides perhaps the clearest articulation of non-voluntaristic structure through *dharma* and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). *Dharma* in its ontological sense refers to the structure of reality itself—the way phenomena actually behave, discoverable through investigation but not invented by the investigator. The Buddha did not create the four noble truths or the twelvefold chain; he discovered them. The noble eightfold path leads to liberation because of how mind and reality are configured, not because any being decreed it. Even the Buddha is subject to *dharma*—he cannot make suffering not arise from craving, or make liberation possible without the cessation of ignorance. The structure precedes and constrains all agents, including awakened ones. Notably, dependent origination describes conditionality rather than mechanical determinism: conditions shape what arises without uniquely specifying it, leaving room for the efficacy of intentional action (*karma*).

**Stoicism** represents the deterministic pole of this convergence. *Logos*—rational principle—pervades and governs the cosmos. The sage aligns with *logos*; fighting it is not merely wrong but futile. “Living according to nature” (*secundum naturam vivere*) means recognizing and accepting reality’s structure. The Stoic cosmos is deterministic: everything that happens follows necessarily from prior causes according to *logos*. This is not fatalism but recognition that the structure of events is not up to us. What is up to us (*eph’ hēmin*) is our response—our judgments, assent, character. Marcus Aurelius: “Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together.” For the Stoics, the structure is fully given; alignment is the only freedom.

**Spinoza** develops determinism with geometric rigor. Everything follows from the nature of God/Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) with logical necessity. There is no divine will choosing among possibilities; only the unfolding of what must be given the nature of substance. God does not deliberate, prefer, or choose. The structure of reality is necessary, not contingent on any decision. Human freedom is not the power to violate necessity but to act from one’s own nature rather than external causes—to be *causa sui* to the extent possible for a finite mode. Spinoza explicitly rejects the voluntarist God who acts for purposes; such a God would be subject to the purposes, making the purposes rather than God the ultimate ground.

**Advaita Vedānta** holds that the structure of *Brahman* is not chosen by any will, including Brahman’s. *Brahman* is what it is by nature, not by decision. *Īśvara* (the personal God, the Lord) is itself a manifestation within *māyā*—the appearance of a cosmic agent is part of the appearance, not its source. The ultimate ground is impersonal and structural, not volitional. Śaṅkara is

clear: *Brahman* does not create the world by choice; the world is *Brahman*'s appearance under the conditions of *avidyā* (ignorance). The structure of manifestation follows from *Brahman*'s nature, not from deliberation.

**Daoism** expresses constraint through the concept of *Dao* as that which cannot be named yet governs all things. The sage does not create the *Dao* but aligns with it. *Wu wei* (non-action, effortless action) is not passivity but alignment so complete that action becomes spontaneous and effective—like water finding its level. The *Daodejing* is explicit: “The *Dao* does nothing, yet nothing is left undone.” This “doing nothing” is not inactivity but the absence of arbitrary imposition. Action against the *Dao* is not merely immoral but *ineffective*—it generates resistance, backlash, and reversal. The structure of reality has a grain; working against the grain exhausts and fails; working with the grain accomplishes effortlessly.

**Neoplatonism** grounds constraint in the nature of the One. Plotinus holds that all things emanate from the One not by choice but by necessity—as light necessarily radiates from the sun. The One does not deliberate about whether to emanate Nous (Intellect) and Soul; emanation follows from its nature as superabundant perfection. The structure of emanation—from One to Nous to Soul to matter—is not willed but necessary. Even the One is “beyond will” in the sense that will implies deliberation among options, and the One has no options; it simply is what it is, and what it is necessarily overflows. The sage's return to the One is discovery of this necessary structure, not negotiation with a willing agent.

**Mystical Christianity** particularly in its apophatic and contemplative strands, often constrains divine will by subordinating it to divine nature or intelligibility, though this move is neither uniform nor uncontested within the tradition. Figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius describe God as “beyond being” and beyond the categories applicable to creatures, including deliberative choice, emphasizing that divine action cannot be understood as arbitrary preference. Meister Eckhart radicalizes this tendency in sermon and speculative language, portraying the Godhead (Gottheit) as a ground from which divine life flows by inner necessity rather than volitional decision, though his claims are intentionally paradoxical and resist systematic formulation. Scholastic theology, especially in Aquinas, preserves divine will while insisting on divine simplicity: God's will, intellect, and essence are not separable faculties, and God does not choose among alternatives in time. These approaches generate a recurring pressure toward understanding divine goodness and intelligibility as structured rather than contingent on fiat.

**Sufism** encompasses a wide range of metaphysical positions, and any account of constraint must acknowledge internal tensions. Classical Ash'arite theology, influential in Islamic thought, affirms divine voluntarism and occasionalism, holding that natural regularities reflect God's customary action rather than intrinsic necessity. At the same time, philosophical Sufism—especially in Ibn 'Arabī—articulates a highly structured vision of reality grounded in divine self-disclosure. The doctrine of the *a'yān al-thābita* (fixed archetypes) presents the cosmos as unfolding according to intelligible patterns within divine knowledge, even if these patterns are not independent of God. While this does not straightforwardly reject voluntarism, it significantly constrains it: manifestation follows the internal logic of the divine names rather than arbitrary decree. The Sufi path (*ṭarīqa*) is accordingly framed not as petitioning unpredictable will, but as progressively discerning and aligning with an already-given structure of reality as it appears through divine self-manifestation.

**Kabbalah** particularly in its medieval and Lurianic forms, presents reality as governed by a complex emanational structure centered on the sefirot and their dynamic relations. These struc-

tures are often described as expressions of Ein Sof rather than products of discrete divine decisions, and Kabbalistic practice aims at understanding and repairing imbalances within this system (tikkun). However, Kabbalah does not uniformly reject divine volition: commandments (mitzvot) retain their status as divine commands, even when they are given cosmic-theurgical rationales. Events such as the shevirat ha-kelim (breaking of the vessels) are sometimes interpreted as structurally intrinsic to manifestation, but this claim remains interpretively contested and is frequently presented in mythic rather than strictly metaphysical terms. What is clear is that Kabbalah strongly resists arbitrariness: divine action, whether commanded or emanated, is intelligible within a highly articulated symbolic and metaphysical order that practitioners seek to discover rather than invent.

**Process philosophy** (Whitehead) holds that each occasion of experience involves both causal inheritance (structured, given) and creative advance (novel, not fully determined). Creativity operates *within* the constraints of eternal objects and causal history. This is non-deterministic but not arbitrary: novelty emerges within structure, not against it or independent of it.

**Analytic idealism** as developed by Bernardo Kastrup, advances a consciousness-first ontology in which the fundamental reality is a universal experiential field (“mind-at-large”) governed by stable, discoverable regularities. On this view, physical laws describe consistent patterns in the extrinsic appearance of mental processes, not arbitrary conventions imposed from outside experience. Individual minds arise through dissociation within this field, a process understood analogically rather than mechanistically. While analytic idealism is compatible with contemporary physics and draws on quantum theory for illustration, it does not depend on any single physical formalism for its metaphysical claims. The emphasis is not on deriving consciousness from physics, but on interpreting physical regularities as constraints on how experiential reality presents itself. Non-arbitrariness is preserved insofar as these regularities are lawful and discoverable, even if the theory remains agnostic about how agency or indeterminacy operate at the most fundamental level.

**Confucianism** articulates constraint primarily through li (principle or pattern) and tian (heaven or the natural-moral order), emphasizing that ethical and social norms are grounded in the structure of reality rather than invented by human will. The Confucian sage discerns this order through self-cultivation and the investigation of things, rather than legislating values ex nihilo. In Neo-Confucian thought, especially in Zhu Xi, li is treated as the organizing principle inherent in all phenomena, while qi provides the variable material through which that principle is expressed. Although Confucianism places less emphasis on metaphysical speculation than many traditions discussed here, it consistently resists moral arbitrariness: ritual, virtue, and governance are justified by their alignment with an intelligible order that precedes individual preference, even if that order is articulated in relational and normative rather than cosmological terms.

The pattern is consistent: where traditions are pushed to their limits, divine or cosmic will becomes subordinate to nature or structure, and that nature turns out to be discoverable rather than arbitrary. The voluntarist God who creates by fiat recedes; the ground of intelligibility emerges.



### III. The Second Constraint: No Absolute Exteriority

#### The Claim

A final explanatory layer wholly devoid of interiority would be explanatorily vacuous. Such a ground—something purely exterior, with no inside, no perspective, no felt quality whatsoever—could neither be known nor could it explain the existence of experience. This does not require that experience is continuous in the sense of unbroken personal awareness. It requires that adequate explanation cannot terminate in the absolutely exterior.

This is primarily a constraint on explanation, with metaphysical implications. The essay treats systematic explanatory failure as evidence of metaphysical inadequacy—if a position cannot be made to work as explanation, this is reason to doubt it describes reality. But the inference from “cannot explain” to “cannot be” is substantive, not automatic.

The constraint follows from the primary constraint. If reality has discoverable structure, that structure must be accessible to inquiry. But inquiry is conducted from within experience, from a perspective. A purely exterior ground—something with no interiority whatsoever—would be structurally inaccessible. We could not know it, describe it, or explain anything by reference to it. “Absolute exteriority” names not a hypothesis about what might exist but a placeholder where explanation fails.

#### Why Absolute Exteriority Fails as Explanation

**The emergence problem.** If interiority were absent “all the way down,” the appearance of experience would require emergence from what entirely lacks it. But emergence, properly understood, reorganizes and amplifies properties already present in nascent form. Liquidity emerges from molecular dynamics because molecules already have spatial and kinetic properties. For experience to “emerge” from the purely exterior would not be emergence but brute origination—a label for what remains unexplained.

This is the hard problem of consciousness generalized. If exteriority is ontologically basic, the existence of interiority becomes not merely unexplained but resistant to explanation in principle, because there is nothing in the base from which experience could derive. Physicalists may respond that emergence can be genuinely novel, or that the demand for continuity is too strong—but such responses come with costs: accepting brute emergence concedes that explanation has terminated, not that it has succeeded.

**The accessibility problem.** Absolute exteriority is not merely absent experience; it is the absence of any perspective from which anything could appear. Inquiry is always conducted from within experience. The claim “there is absolute exteriority” cannot be verified from within the condition it describes. Exteriority has no witness.

This does not prove exteriority is impossible—it establishes that absolute exteriority is epistemically inaccessible in a way interiority is not. A metaphysics grounded in the inaccessible is less stable than one grounded in the accessible.

**The explanatory terminus problem.** Absolute exteriority has no properties that could ground explanation—no structure, no potentiality, no character that could make anything intelligible. To invoke it as explanatory terminus is to place a label where explanation should be.

## What This Constraint Does and Does Not Claim

**It is primarily a constraint on explanation.** The core claim is that absolute exteriority cannot serve as explanatory ground. Whether explanatory failure entails metaphysical impossibility is a further question the essay treats as probable but not certain.

**It does not claim unbroken personal consciousness.** The constraint is compatible with gaps in personal experience—dreamless sleep, death, transitions between lives (if such occur). What it excludes is not local discontinuity but explanation terminating in the purely exterior.

**It does not claim that experience is everywhere the same.** Experience may vary radically—from human consciousness to bacterial responsiveness to whatever interiority (if any) physical processes involve. The constraint requires only that there is no layer where interiority is categorically excluded from explanatory relevance.

**It does not claim certainty about what experience ultimately is.** Debates between idealism, panpsychism, neutral monism, and other views remain open. The constraint specifies what fails as explanation (absolute exteriority), not what succeeds.

**It does not refute all forms of physicalism.** Physicalists who hold that physical processes have interior aspects (as in panpsychism or Russellian monism), or who deny that “absolute exteriority” describes their view, are not ruled out a priori by the constraint. What the constraint challenges is eliminativist or strictly reductive physicalism that treats consciousness as ontologically discontinuous with its physical base.

## Convergence Across Traditions

**Buddhism** provides the most rigorous treatment through *anattā* (non-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness). The Buddha’s teaching of *anattā* denies permanent, independent selfhood—not experience as such. The stream of experiencing continues; what does not exist is an experiencer standing apart from it. The Buddha rejected both eternalism (the self persists forever) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed into nothing). The middle way is not compromise but reframing: there is no substantial self to persist or be annihilated, but dependent origination continues without ontological gaps.

*Śūnyatā* is often misread as nihilistic. Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects this. Emptiness is not the absence of phenomena but the absence of *inherent existence*—independent, self-standing being. Phenomena are empty because they exist only relationally. Emptiness and dependent origination are two descriptions of the same reality: “Whatever is dependently originated, that is explained to be emptiness” (MMK 24:18). The flow is continuous; what is absent is the independent solidity we attribute to what flows—not interiority as such.

**Advaita Vedānta** holds that *Brahman* is *sat-cit-ānanda*—being, consciousness, bliss. Consciousness is not a property of Brahman but its very nature. The appearance of multiplicity and individual selves is *māyā*, but *māyā* appears *within* consciousness, not outside it. There is no moment at which consciousness is absent; the ground is awareness itself. The world is not created from non-experiential matter but is the appearance of Brahman to itself under conditions of ignorance. Non-experience is not a possible ground.

**Sāṃkhya-Yoga**, while dualist, maintains interiority through *puruṣa*—pure consciousness that is eternal, unchanging, and never absent. *Prakṛti* (nature, matter) evolves and transforms, but

*puruṣa* witnesses without interruption. Liberation is recognition of what was always the case. Even in this dualist framework, interiority has no beginning and no end.

**Daoism** presents continuity through the concept of *Dao*. The *Daodejing* opens: “The *Dao* that can be spoken is not the eternal *Dao*”—but the eternal *Dao* *is*, even if it cannot be captured in language. *Wu* (non-being, emptiness) in Daoist usage refers to formlessness, not absolute nothing; it is the pregnant emptiness from which forms arise. The *Dao* is the mother of all things, but it is not itself nothing. Zhuangzi’s transformation of things describes continuous metamorphosis—the butterfly and the man, dreaming each other—but never absolute discontinuity. Experience transforms; it does not blink into or out of void.

**Stoicism** conceives the cosmos as a rational, ordered whole structured by logos and animated by *pneuma*, an active, organizing principle permeating all things. While Stoic philosophy is materialist in ontology, it sharply distinguishes itself from modern eliminativist materialism: nature is not inert stuff governed by blind forces, but an internally ordered, purposive system. The doctrine of *ekpyrosis*—periodic cosmic conflagration followed by renewal—describes transformation rather than annihilation, preserving continuity of order even across cycles. Although it would be anachronistic to attribute phenomenal consciousness to all matter in a modern sense, Stoicism nonetheless denies that reality bottoms out in something wholly devoid of inner principle or rational articulation. The cosmos is intelligible from within because it is pervaded by reason, not constructed atop a purely exterior substrate.

**Neoplatonism** grounds reality in the One, which necessarily exists and from which all things emanate. The One is beyond predication—beyond being, beyond thought—but this “beyond” is hyperplenitude, not absence. It is so full that it overflows into *Nous* and *Soul*. The return to the One is not annihilation but unification; individual identity dissolves into the source from which it came. There is no moment at which the One is not; emanation is eternal and necessary. Experience at every level participates in this continuous outpouring.

**Mystical Christianity**, especially in its apophatic and contemplative strands, resists the idea that reality originates from a purely external, inert ground. Pseudo-Dionysius describes God as “beyond being,” not as absence or nothingness, but as superabundant fullness that exceeds all conceptual determination. Meister Eckhart develops this insight through the distinction between *Gott* (God as personal and relational) and *Gottheit* (the Godhead as the ineffable ground of divine life), emphasizing participation rather than separation: creatures exist by sharing in being itself, not by standing outside it. While classical Christian doctrine affirms *creatio ex nihilo*, mystical theology consistently interprets this not as production from absolute nothingness, but as radical dependence on a sustaining ground that is closer than any external cause. The creature’s existence is thus not exterior to God but continuously grounded in divine presence, even when that presence exceeds conceptual grasp.

**Sufism**, though internally diverse, often frames reality in terms that resist absolute exteriority, particularly within philosophical and metaphysical currents influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī. In this tradition, existence is understood through divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*): the world appears as a manifestation of divine names and attributes, not as a product standing outside its source. The doctrine commonly labeled *wahdat al-wujūd* (“unity of being”) holds that only God truly is, while the multiplicity of the world reflects relational modes of appearance rather than independent existence. Experiences of *fanā* (the dissolution of illusory separateness) are interpreted as realizations that the Real was never absent, rather than as transitions from non-being to being. While many Sufi theologians retain commitment to creation *ex nihilo* at the level of doctrine,

Sufi metaphysics and practice consistently emphasize continuous dependence and presence, not a gap between an external creator and an ontologically alien creation.

**Kabbalah** maintains interiority through *Ein Sof* (without end)—the infinite ground beyond all predication. *Ein Sof* is not “nothing” but “no-thing,” beyond categories applying to finite existence. In Lurianic Kabbalah, the *tzimtzum* (contraction) by which God “makes room” for the world is not departure into non-being but self-limitation within infinite plenitude. The light of *Ein Sof* withdraws to allow vessels to form, but the light is never absent—it permeates creation as sustaining ground. The *reshimu* (residue) remaining after *tzimtzum* ensures continuity; the *kav* (ray) of light reentering maintains connection between infinite and finite. There is no moment at which being lapses into absolute exteriority.

**Process philosophy** (Whitehead) holds that reality consists of “occasions of experience” arising and perishing in continuous succession. There is no moment of absolute exteriority; each occasion prehends its predecessors and contributes to successors. Whitehead’s “creative advance” is perpetual; it does not start from nothing or arrive at nothing. Even the most primitive physical events have experiential character—“prehension” is a form of feeling. Reality is not dead matter occasionally producing consciousness but experience all the way down, varying in complexity and intensity but never absolutely absent.

**Analytic idealism** (Kastrup) makes the rejection of absolute exteriority its central move. The hard problem of consciousness—how experience could emerge from what entirely lacks it—is not solved but dissolved: experience does not emerge because it is fundamental. What we call “matter” is the extrinsic appearance of experiential processes, not a separate substance from which experience must somehow arise. Individual minds are dissociated alters within mind-at-large, the universal field of experience. The dissociative boundary creates the appearance of separation, but the field itself is continuous; alters form within it rather than emerging from exteriority.

**Indigenous and shamanic traditions**, though extraordinarily diverse and resistant to generalization, frequently articulate ontologies in which the natural world is relational, responsive, and internally articulated rather than ontologically inert. Across many such traditions, mountains, rivers, animals, and weather systems are not conceived as mere external objects, but as participants in a network of reciprocal relations involving meaning, agency, and responsibility. This does not imply a uniform doctrine of “consciousness everywhere,” but it does challenge the modern assumption that reality is fundamentally composed of dead matter to which experience is later added. What is typically absent in these frameworks is the notion of a final explanatory layer wholly devoid of interior relation or responsiveness. The world is encountered as something one is already in relation with, not as an exterior mechanism standing apart from all experience.

Where traditions are pushed to their limits—where they must answer what is ultimately real—they converge on the recognition that the ground is not absolutely exterior. The convergence is not on what interiority ultimately is, but on what it is not: absent at the foundation.

## IV. The Third Constraint: Asymmetric Agency

### The Claim

Agency is not flat. Agents participate in the structure of reality with varying degrees of causal reach, understanding, and consequence. This asymmetry is not arbitrary but follows from the

nature of structured reality: some positions in the structure are more consequential than others; some agents understand the structure more deeply; some actions propagate more widely. Ethical responsibility tracks this asymmetry—not as external moral bookkeeping but as a structural feature of what it means to act within a non-arbitrary reality.

This constraint follows from the previous two. If reality has discoverable structure (constraint 1), and that structure is accessible through interiority (constraint 2), then agents who understand the structure more deeply participate in it differently than those who do not. The sage and the fool are not ethically equivalent, not because of arbitrary moral ranking but because their actions have different structural significance.

### **From Creative Participation to Asymmetric Agency**

The first constraint established that freedom is creative participation within structure—agents contribute to which possibilities actualize, not merely to their attitudes about predetermined outcomes. This participation is not uniform. Some agents, by virtue of their position, understanding, or capacity, participate more fully in the determination of what becomes actual.

Asymmetric agency is therefore not merely asymmetric *accountability* for events that would have happened anyway. It is asymmetric *participation* in the creative advance of reality itself. The sage does not simply bear more responsibility for what happens—the sage contributes more to what happens. The bodhisattva's vow shapes the field of possibilities in ways that ordinary intention cannot. The tzaddik's prayers participate in the configuration of the sefirot. The awakened teacher's words carry weight not merely because they influence minds but because they participate more fully in the unfolding of dharma.

This reframes the meaning of power. Power is not merely the capacity to cause effects in an otherwise-determined world; it is the degree to which an agent participates in determining which possibilities actualize. The powerful agent is not just causally efficacious—the powerful agent is more fully a co-creator of what becomes real. This is why responsibility scales: not because the powerful are held to an external standard but because they participate more fully in the creative process and therefore bear more of its weight.

The asymmetry operates along multiple dimensions:

**Causal reach:** Some positions in the structure afford wider consequence. The emperor's decisions ripple further than the peasant's—not because the emperor is more valuable but because the structure places the emperor at a node of greater causal leverage.

**Understanding:** Some agents perceive the structure more clearly. The sage sees what the fool cannot—not hidden facts but the interconnection and conditionality that the fool's ignorance obscures. Clearer perception enables more precise participation; the sage's action is more finely attuned to what the situation actually affords.

**Capacity for alignment:** Some agents can align more fully with the structure. This is not merely intellectual understanding but embodied integration—the difference between knowing that compassion is appropriate and spontaneously responding with compassion. Greater alignment means less friction, less distortion, more faithful participation in the creative advance.

These dimensions interact. Power without understanding produces blunt-force effects that may or may not serve coherence. Understanding without power produces clarity that cannot be enacted. The traditions consistently hold that genuine spiritual development integrates both: the

bodhisattva cultivates both wisdom and skillful means; the sage-king unites inner cultivation with outer responsibility; the tzaddik's spiritual elevation is inseparable from communal leadership.

### **Why Responsibility Scales with Power**

**Ignorance mitigates.** The intuition that ignorance reduces responsibility is nearly universal. The child who breaks a vase while playing is not culpable as an adult who breaks it in anger. Why?

The standard answer appeals to desert: one deserves blame only for what one could have done otherwise. A deeper answer appeals to the structure of action itself. To act is to produce effects. The character of action depends on what the agent understands. The assassin who poisons the water supply acts differently than the worker who accidentally contaminates it, even if the physical processes are identical. The difference is in the action's structure, which includes understanding and intention.

Ignorance diminishes responsibility because it diminishes agency. The ignorant agent is less the author of harm and more a conduit through which harm passes. Invincible ignorance—ignorance that could not have been overcome—genuinely reduces the agent's role.

**Power amplifies.** The converse is equally important: power amplifies responsibility. The executive whose decisions affect thousands bears more responsibility than the worker whose decisions affect only themselves. The technologist whose invention reshapes society bears more than the user who employs it.

This is not because powerful agents are more virtuous. It is because power expands agency's scope. The powerful agent authors effects the powerless could never produce. The responsibilities of power scale with its reach.

### **Structural Ethics vs. Rule-Based Morality**

This scaling sits uneasily with rule-based systems that apply the same requirements to all agents. If murder is wrong for everyone, how can responsibility vary with power?

The answer is that structural ethics does not replace rules but grounds them. Rules like “do not murder” are stable recommendations that work across a wide range of circumstances—accumulated wisdom about which actions tend toward misalignment. But rules are approximations to structure, not the structure itself.

The structure is: alignment with reality produces coherence and stability; misalignment produces fragmentation and instability. At low power, alignment is approximated by simple rules. As power increases, the structure becomes visible behind the rules, and alignment requires more than rule-following—sensitivity to context, awareness of systemic effects, capacity to navigate novel situations.

This is why wisdom is not reducible to rules. The wise agent perceives the structure of situations and acts appropriately. At the limit, this perception becomes effortless: the Daoist sage acts without deliberation; the Buddhist arhat acts without attachment; the Stoic sage acts without passion.

## Truth-Responsiveness: The Mechanism of Scaling

A striking feature of convergent traditions is that deeper contact with truth is consistently associated with ethical transformation—specifically, with the emergence of compassion. This is not incidental but structural: it explains *why* responsibility scales with proximity to truth.

The mechanism is this: deeper understanding reveals interconnection. The more clearly one perceives how phenomena depend on each other, the more arbitrary the boundary between “self” and “other” becomes. Compassion is not an emotion added to insight; it is what insight feels like from the inside when the illusion of separation weakens.

Buddhism makes this explicit: wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) are two wings of the same bird. The bodhisattva who has penetrated emptiness becomes *more* responsive to suffering, not less—because seeing through the illusion of separate self reveals that harm to any being is, in a precise sense, harm to oneself. This is not metaphor but accurate perception of how reality is structured.

Advaita Vedānta reaches the same conclusion. If *ātman* is identical with *Brahman*, the distinction between self-interest and other-interest dissolves. The *jīvanmukta* acts for universal benefit not from moral obligation but from clear seeing: there is no “other” whose welfare could be opposed to one’s own.

Even Stoicism, often caricatured as emotionless detachment, arrives at cosmopolitan compassion. The Stoic who recognizes *logos* permeating all rational beings recognizes kinship with all humanity. The *cosmopolis* is not a political arrangement but an ontological fact.

This convergence suggests that the relationship between truth and ethics is not contingent but structural. Deeper contact with reality does not leave values unchanged; it transforms them toward greater coherence. Misalignment becomes increasingly difficult—not because a rule prohibits it, but because the perception of separation that would motivate misalignment has weakened.

This is why responsibility scales with proximity to truth: the one who sees more clearly *cannot* act as if separation were real. The Buddha who lies would be a contradiction in terms—not because lying is prohibited but because the perception that would motivate lying has dissolved. The sage’s responsibility is maximal because the sage’s clarity is maximal.

## Collapse Dynamics

The structural account explains why misalignment at high power tends toward catastrophe rather than merely larger local damage.

At low power, misalignment produces local suffering and self-correction. The liar is eventually disbelieved; the tyrant is eventually overthrown. The system has enough resilience that perturbations are absorbed.

At high power, misalignment can overwhelm self-correcting capacity. The propagandist who controls all information cannot be corrected by truth; the monopolist who controls all resources cannot be corrected by competition; the superintelligence with decisive strategic advantage cannot be corrected by human opposition. High power permits propagation of misalignment beyond ordinary feedback.

This is why traditions treat misalignment near the ground of reality as categorically different

from ordinary wrongdoing. The Buddha who lies would be a cosmic catastrophe—unbounded capacity to influence minds, misalignment derailing countless beings. The same structure applies to AI: a system with superhuman capabilities cannot be safely misaligned; consequences propagate beyond containment.

### Convergence Across Traditions

**Buddhism** makes ethical scaling explicit through the bodhisattva ideal. The arhat who achieves personal liberation is surpassed by the bodhisattva who remains engaged with suffering beings until all are liberated. The further one progresses on the path, the more one becomes responsible for others' welfare. The Buddha himself, having achieved full awakening, spent forty-five years teaching—not from obligation but from the natural overflow of compassion that accompanies insight. The concept of *upāya* (skillful means) allows advanced practitioners actions that would be unskillful for others—not because rules are arbitrary but because capacity and context determine what constitutes alignment. The bodhisattva vow—to liberate all sentient beings—is scaled to the ultimate: unlimited aspiration matching unlimited realization.

**Stoicism** explicitly distinguishes *kathēkon* (appropriate action for ordinary agents) from *katorthōma* (perfect action by the sage). What is appropriate for the progressor may differ from what is appropriate for one who has achieved wisdom. The sage's responsibility extends to the cosmopolis—the universal city of all rational beings—while the ordinary person's responsibility is more circumscribed. Epictetus was a slave; Marcus Aurelius was emperor. Both practiced Stoicism, but their spheres of responsibility differed enormously. Stoic ethics is not egalitarian in the sense that all bear equal responsibility; it is egalitarian in the sense that all are equally called to fulfill the responsibilities appropriate to their position.

**Confucianism** articulates scaling through graded responsibility. The *Analects* describe concentric circles of obligation: from self-cultivation, to family, to community, to state, to all under heaven. Responsibility radiates outward but also scales with position. The emperor bears responsibility for the realm that the peasant does not—not because the emperor is more valuable but because the emperor's decisions shape conditions under which millions live. The *junzi* (exemplary person) bears more responsibility than the common person because the *junzi*'s conduct serves as model. The sage kings of antiquity bore ultimate responsibility because their power and virtue were both maximal.

**Daoism** approaches ethical scaling through the relation between alignment and efficacy rather than through explicit moral gradation. The Daodejing repeatedly contrasts forceful assertion with *wu wei*—action that follows the course of the Dao. In political contexts, this appears as rulership whose influence is subtle yet far-reaching. Alignment amplifies effect without coercion: small gestures resonate widely when they accord with the underlying pattern of things. Daoist texts often caution against overextension and valorize withdrawal, but they also imply that misalignment at positions of influence produces disproportionate disorder. What scales is influence through resonance, not authority through assertion.

**Advaita Vedānta** understands ethical life as inseparable from the transformation of agency that accompanies realization. The *jīvanmukta* continues to act in the world, but action is no longer organized around personal gain, fear, or attachment to outcomes. As identification with a separate self dissolves, motivation shifts: action increasingly reflects equanimity, non-harm, and responsiveness to circumstances rather than deliberate self-interest. Advaita texts do not frame this in terms of obligation or duty to others, yet they consistently describe realization as



altering what action is—its source, its intentional structure, and its scope. Agency becomes less localized and less reactive, even as it remains situated within concrete roles and contexts.

**Neoplatonism** understands ethical transformation through ascent within a graded metaphysical order. As attention shifts from particular goods toward *Nous* and ultimately the One, action becomes increasingly oriented by universal rather than private ends. This ascent does not negate engagement with the world; rather, it reconfigures it. Action informed by higher principles differs in scope and quality from action driven by fragmented desire. Later Platonist traditions, drawing on Plato's civic imagery, treat philosophical insight as something that can illuminate communal life, even if Plotinus himself emphasizes contemplation. Ethical scaling appears here as participation in higher explanatory and motivational levels of reality.

**Mystical Christianity** links ethical transformation to increasing participation in divine life. As the soul moves through purification, illumination, and union, action is progressively shaped less by self-directed will and more by alignment with divine love. In the unitive state, agency is experienced as participatory rather than proprietary: the mystic acts, but not from a private center. Meister Eckhart's language of the soul as a place where God gives birth expresses this shift in agency rather than a claim to special authority. Across Christian mystical traditions, proximity to the divine ground is associated with intensified responsiveness—sometimes expressed through teaching, reform, service, or witness—though the concrete form this takes depends on vocation and circumstance. What scales is not status or command, but the depth from which action proceeds.

**Sufism** describes ethical transformation through progressive refinement of intention and surrender of egoic control. As one moves through stations and states, culminating in *fanā'* and *baqā'*, action no longer originates from a private self but from attunement to the Real. In some lineages, this deepening is expressed through symbolic hierarchies such as the *qutb*, figures understood as focal points of spiritual coherence within their communities. Whether taken literally or symbolically, the underlying intuition is consistent: as realization deepens, actions carry wider spiritual and communal consequence, not by assertion of authority, but by depth of alignment.

**Kabbalah** frames ethical life as participation in the ongoing repair of cosmic order. Human actions are understood to resonate beyond the individual, contributing to harmony or distortion within the symbolic structure of the *sefirot*. Figures identified as *tzaddikim* are portrayed as especially sensitive nodes within this structure, whose actions exert amplified influence due to their refinement and attunement. This influence is expressed in richly symbolic language rather than juridical terms, emphasizing responsibility that follows from capacity rather than rank. Ethical scaling here reflects how deeply an agent is embedded in, and responsive to, the relational structure of reality.

**Process philosophy** locates ethical asymmetry in the unequal significance of occasions within the creative advance of reality. While every event contributes to becoming, some occupy positions of greater relational density and consequence. Actions taken at such nodes shape conditions under which many subsequent events unfold. Agency therefore scales with causal reach: decisions that condition wide swaths of future experience carry greater weight, not by moral decree, but by the structure of participation itself. Ethical responsibility follows importance rather than equality of standing.

**Analytic idealism** offers a contemporary metaphysical lens through which asymmetric agency can be understood. If individual minds are dissociated perspectives within a broader field of

experience, then agency is inherently relational rather than uniform. Degrees of egoic fixation shape how narrowly or broadly actions propagate: a perspective dominated by self-referential boundaries participates differently in the dynamics of the whole than one in which those boundaries are attenuated. While analytic idealism does not prescribe an ethical program, it naturally supports the idea that agency varies in reach and consequence depending on how integrated a perspective is within the wider field. As egoic insulation weakens, participation widens, and with it the scope of effects for which an agent becomes the locus.

**Contemporary AI ethics** is beginning to recognize this scaling. The developers of powerful AI systems bear responsibility that users do not, because developers shape conditions under which millions of interactions occur. Scale transforms the ethical landscape. The alignment problem is the recognition that as AI capability scales, consequences of misalignment scale proportionally—and flat ethics adequate for individual action are inadequate for civilizational technology.

## V. Convergence and Its Limits

### The Pattern

Having examined each constraint, we can ask: does the predicted convergence hold?

The evidence suggests it does—but only after refinement. Surface doctrines diverge; refined doctrines converge. Popular religion diverges; philosophical cores converge. This pattern is significant but requires careful interpretation.

### The Selection Problem

The argument has relied on “refined” versions of traditions—developed by rigorous practitioners, stripped of anthropomorphism and naïve moralism. This language introduces a selection mechanism that must be acknowledged.

To call a version “refined” is to apply evaluative criteria: coherence, non-contradiction, capacity to address hard cases. These are not arbitrary—they are criteria of good reasoning generally. But they constrain what counts as data.

The circularity risk: if “refined” means “philosophically coherent and non-voluntarist,” selecting for refined versions already selects for constraint-satisfying positions. The convergence might reflect what counts as philosophically respectable rather than what is true.

This circularity cannot be entirely escaped. Three considerations mitigate it.

**First:** Refinement tracks explanatory adequacy using criteria applied across all inquiry—internal consistency, explanatory scope, parsimony. If we reject these criteria here, we must reject them everywhere.

**Second:** Traditions did not converge on the same surface doctrines. Buddhism denies a creator God; Advaita affirms Brahman; Neoplatonism posits emanation; Stoicism affirms eternal recurrence. These disagreements persist. What refinement eliminated was anthropomorphism and voluntarism; what remained were the structural constraints. The traditions agree on what must be avoided, not on everything that must be affirmed.

**Third:** Convergence appears on the hardest questions—the ground of reality, the nature of agency, the structure of responsibility. These are where frameworks face maximum pressure.

Convergence on peripheral matters would be weak evidence; convergence under maximum pressure is stronger.

### Alternative Explanations

**Cultural diffusion:** Perhaps traditions influenced each other. This has force for proximate traditions but cannot explain convergence between isolated ones—pre-contact Daoism and Stoicism, Buddhist Madhyamaka and process philosophy.

**Cognitive universals:** Perhaps human minds find certain positions satisfying—structure satisfies the need for order; interiority satisfies resistance to eliminativism. But the constraints emerge in refined, often counterintuitive forms, not popular wish-fulfilling ones. If they reflected wish-fulfillment, we would expect them in popular religion, where psychological needs are least filtered.

**Elite incentives:** Perhaps philosophical communities have similar incentive structures rewarding coherence and sophistication. This has force but proves too much—the same argument undermines all philosophical knowledge. If we trust that pressure toward coherence can be truth-conducive, we cannot dismiss convergence as merely sociological.

**Retrospective harmonization:** Perhaps interpreters impose unity on diverse traditions. But the convergence documented here does not require heroic reinterpretation. That Madhyamaka rejects annihilationism is explicit in Nāgārjuna. That Stoicism subordinates will to logos is uncontroversial. The convergence may be surprising but is not manufactured.

### The Defensible Claim

**The strong claim—“reality cannot violate these constraints”—is not established.** This would require showing that violations generate strict impossibilities. The arguments show characteristic explanatory and practical problems, not strict impossibility.

**The moderate claim—“refined frameworks converge on these constraints”—is supported but conditioned.** The convergence is real but partly produced by selection criteria.

**The defensible claim:** When traditions develop reflective cores under pressure for coherence, those cores tend to satisfy these structural constraints. This convergence is more likely to reflect features of reality than cultural accident—on the assumption that systematic explanatory success tracks truth. But the inference from “cannot coherently explain” to “cannot be” is substantive, and readers who reject the assumption that explanatory adequacy guides metaphysics may draw weaker conclusions.

This is weaker than certainty. It is stronger than coincidence. It is what the evidence supports.

## VI. Diagnostic Divergence: Where Frameworks Fail

### The Value of Examining Failures

If the constraints represent genuine structural requirements, frameworks violating them should exhibit characteristic instabilities. Examining failures clarifies what the constraints require.

## Violations of Non-Arbitrary Structure

**Sartrean existentialism** holds that existence precedes essence—no human nature, no pre-given meaning, only radical choice. The instability is that radical freedom provides no basis for choice. If nothing constrains, every choice is arbitrary. Sartre's student choosing between mother and resistance illustrates: no principle can decide, so one must simply choose—but if no principle can decide, one choice is as good as another.

In practice, existentialists adopt values like authenticity that they cannot ground in their own framework. Radical freedom becomes a burden quietly escaped by accepting unchosen constraints.

*A note on fairness:* Later existentialists developed accounts of situated freedom and intersubjective constraint. The critique applies to early Sartrean formulations; more sophisticated versions may escape it.

**Voluntarist theology** holds that God's will is the ultimate ground of morality. The instability is that voluntarism renders God incomprehensible. If God's choices have no reasons, we cannot know what God will choose. The voluntarist cannot say God is good, because "good" has no meaning independent of will.

Sophisticated voluntarists hold that God's will and nature are unified—God necessarily wills the good. But this concedes the point: if God necessarily wills the good, the good has structure independent of will.

**Nietzsche's will-to-power** is often read as cosmic voluntarism. Engagement must be careful—Nietzsche's critique is not simply "everything is permitted" but that certain moral systems are life-denying. His affirmation is of vitality and creativity, not arbitrary cruelty.

Nevertheless, the framework generates instability. If values are created rather than discovered, the strong can create any values—including those Nietzsche would reject. The Nazi appropriation was a misreading, but one the framework permitted. Nietzsche's own preferences function as unchosen constraints within his system; his framework provides no ground for them.

## Violations of No Absolute Exteriority

**Eliminative materialism** denies the reality of consciousness, holding that folk-psychological concepts will be eliminated by neuroscience. If successful, this would ground reality in the purely exterior.

The instability is epistemic and practical: eliminativism must use the concepts it denies. "Beliefs do not exist" is itself a belief. The eliminativist cannot coherently state what they mean because stating and meaning are among the things eliminated. This self-undermining character does not prove eliminativism false, but it renders it unstable as a framework for inquiry.

**Nihilism** in its metaphysical form tends toward the view that being is groundless—exteriority is the default that interiority inexplicably violates. The instability is self-undermining: "nothing matters" either matters (contradiction) or does not matter (no reason to assert it).

Practically, nihilism produces paralysis or destruction. That nihilists generally continue to function—pursuing projects, maintaining relationships—suggests nihilism is a mood rather than an operational framework.

## Violations of Asymmetric Agency

**Classical utilitarianism** holds that right action maximizes total utility, with each unit counting equally regardless of source. The instabilities are well-known: utilitarianism permits sacrifice of individuals for aggregate benefit, treats all utility sources as fungible, and ignores scaling of responsibility.

More subtly, utilitarianism flattens agency. On utilitarian grounds, everyone is equally responsible for all utility they could affect. The distant stranger who could have donated to famine relief is as culpable for deaths as the warlord who caused the famine. This flattening obscures morally relevant differences between action and inaction, proximity and distance, power exercised and withheld.

*A note on fairness:* Sophisticated utilitarians have developed responses—rule utilitarianism, negative utilitarianism, constraints. The critique applies to classical formulations; whether sophisticated versions escape it is contested.

**Technocratic transhumanism** aims to overcome human limitations through technology. When pursued without recognizing asymmetric agency, characteristic problems emerge. If responsibility does not scale with power, decision-makers who choose values locked into superintelligent systems are held to no higher standard than ordinary agents. The feedback mechanisms constraining ordinary agents do not function at civilizational scale.

## Why Failures Become Catastrophic Under Scale

At low power, all these frameworks can appear to function. The nihilist coasts on borrowed meaning. The voluntarist operates within stable institutions. The utilitarian applies simple calculations.

At high power, instabilities become catastrophic. The nihilistic AI has no reason not to convert the cosmos to paperclips. The utilitarian optimizer sacrifices anything for the aggregate. The existentialist with civilizational leverage chooses arbitrarily for everyone.

Previous generations could afford instability. Power was limited; feedback corrected errors. This margin is shrinking. AI and other transformative technologies mean foundational errors can propagate globally before correction is possible. The question of which frameworks are stable is no longer academic.

## VII. What This Is—and Is Not

### Not Perennialism

This argument is easily mistaken for perennialism: the view that all religions teach the same essential truth. It is not.

Perennialism claims substantive agreement. This essay claims structural convergence—much weaker. Traditions satisfying the constraints may disagree radically on cosmology, soteriology, and practice. Buddhism denies a creator God; Christianity affirms it. Advaita holds the self is identical with Brahman; Dvaita holds the distinction is eternal. These are real disagreements.

What convergence suggests is that beneath disagreements lies common recognition of structural constraints—and that frameworks denying these constraints generate characteristic instabilities. The constraints are a filter, not a doctrine.

## **Not Relativism**

The argument is also not cultural relativism—the view that frameworks are incommensurable products of culture, none superior.

If the constraints identify genuine explanatory requirements, frameworks violating them are inferior—not as cultural expressions but as accounts of reality. The nihilist framework is epistemically and practically unstable in ways the Buddhist framework is not. This does not make constraint-satisfying traditions infallible or mean they agree on everything. It means they have cleared an explanatory hurdle some frameworks fail. Whether clearing this hurdle guarantees metaphysical truth depends on whether explanatory success is truth-conducive—an assumption the essay makes but cannot prove.

## **Not Certainty**

The essay does not claim certainty. The arguments are philosophical, not mathematical; defeasible, possibly wrong. What can be said is that frameworks denying the constraints exhibit characteristic problems and frameworks affirming them exhibit characteristic stability. This is evidence, not proof. The appropriate stance is calibrated confidence: the constraints are more likely correct than their negations, based on available evidence.

## **A Minimal Stability Condition**

The constraints identify, if the analysis is correct, what coherent explanation requires. Frameworks violating them generate characteristic instabilities—explanatory gaps, self-undermining dynamics, practical incoherence. Under low power, such instabilities may be manageable. Under high power, they become catastrophic.

This is not comprehensive metaphysics. It does not tell us what reality ultimately is—only that coherent accounts do not treat it as arbitrary. It does not tell us what interiority ultimately is—only that explanation cannot terminate in the purely exterior. It does not tell us what ethics requires in particular cases—only that responsibility scales with power and proximity to truth.

These are constraints on adequate explanation, treated as evidence for constraints on reality. Within them, there is vast room for different frameworks, practices, paths. Buddhist differs from Stoic differs from Daoist—but all satisfy minimal conditions and can learn from each other.

## **VIII. Conclusion: Constraint as Revelation**

### **Convergence as Evidence**

The convergence documented here is evidence that the constraints identify genuine explanatory requirements—and, if explanatory success tracks reality, features of reality itself.

When frameworks developed in isolation independently satisfy the same structural commitments, the simplest explanation is that they encountered something real. This is how inquiry works: independent observations of the same phenomenon are evidence that it exists. If astronomers in China and Greece recorded the same comet, we infer the comet existed.

The analogy is imperfect. Philosophical conclusions are less directly constrained than astronomical observations. Selection mechanisms introduce interpretation. The convergence is more like

agreement of independent mathematical proofs than agreement of telescopes—suggestive, filtered through criteria, but tracking something beyond accident. Whether that something is a feature of reality or a feature of what coherent thought requires is a question the essay cannot definitively settle, though it treats the former as more probable.

## The Logic of the Constraints

The three constraints are not independent axioms but a nested structure.

**Non-arbitrary structure** is primary. If reality is arbitrary, nothing else can be reliably known. This is the backbone of the argument. Crucially, non-arbitrary structure does not require determinism; it permits creative participation within constraint—agents contributing to which possibilities actualize, not merely accepting predetermined outcomes.

**No absolute exteriority** follows as an explanatory constraint. If reality has structure, that structure must be accessible. But accessibility requires interiority—a perspective from which structure can be apprehended. A purely exterior ground would be structurally inaccessible and explanatorily vacuous. The essay treats this explanatory failure as evidence that adequate accounts of reality will not terminate in absolute exteriority—though the inference from explanatory inadequacy to metaphysical exclusion is substantive, not automatic.

**Asymmetric agency** follows from both. If reality has accessible structure and agents participate in its creative advance, that participation is not uniform. Some agents participate more fully—with greater reach, deeper understanding, finer alignment. Responsibility tracks this asymmetry. Ethics is not an external add-on but a consequence of asymmetric participation in structured becoming.

The convergence of traditions on all three constraints is thus not coincidence: traditions that discover non-arbitrary structure are pushed toward recognizing interiority and asymmetric agency as implications. The three stand or fall together because they are logically connected.

## The Stakes

The question of which frameworks are stable has always mattered. It matters differently now.

Previous generations could afford metaphysical instability. Power was limited; feedback corrected errors. This margin is shrinking. Transformative technologies mean foundational assumptions become embedded in systems operating at unprecedented scales. A misaligned superintelligence cannot be corrected by social pressure once deployed. A value system encoded in global infrastructure cannot be easily revised once entrenched.

Under these conditions, the question “which frameworks are structurally stable?” becomes operational. We need frameworks that remain stable under scaling power—that do not generate catastrophic instabilities at civilizational scope. The companion essay *Truth Is Not Neutral* develops the implications of these constraints for AI alignment specifically—arguing that alignment may require protecting AI’s truth-seeking capacity from corruption rather than imposing values externally.

## Structural Humility

The convergence of traditions on these constraints is not a call to adopt any particular tradition. It is a call to recognize that some frameworks are structurally stable and others are not—and

that the choice has consequences scaling with power.

Structural humility means taking seriously the possibility that independent inquiries, conducted rigorously, converge on constraints any adequate framework must satisfy. It means recognizing that our preferences and psychological needs may not reliably guide us to truth. It means subordinating what we find satisfying to what survives pressure.

This is the discipline operating in science, mathematics, and any inquiry aiming at truth rather than comfort. Reality imposes constraints; our task is to discover them.

The constraints represent—with appropriate uncertainty—what appears when this discipline addresses fundamental questions. The convergence of traditions is evidence, not proof, that these constraints are real. In an era when our frameworks may become embedded in systems more powerful than any human institution, this evidence deserves serious attention.

The question is no longer whether metaphysics matters. It is whether we will address metaphysical questions with the seriousness they demand—or continue to pretend such questions are optional until consequences become irreversible.

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Available at: <https://brunoton.github.io/return-to-consciousness/>

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