

WISSENSRAUM NO. 22

THE LIVING BETWEEN DETERMINATION AND FREEDOM

On Evolution, Consciousness, Power and the Reality of Being

“Where human beings ask about their freedom, they meet at the same time the reality that determines how far their decision can reach.”

◆ 1. The Question at the Beginning

Being able to decide does not yet mean being free, as long as the conditions of the decision lie in many respects in other hands.

A person stands before a choice. They can accept a job or turn it down, move to another city or stay, consent to a treatment or refuse it. In that moment they experience themselves as someone who decides, and the experience is real. No one holds their hand fast, no one dictates the answer. And yet the range of options before them was not designed by them. Which jobs exist, what a flat costs, how thoroughly the doctor has explained things, which language they speak, how much strength is left after a long day and what counts as sensible in their family: all of this was already there before they began to choose.

That is no objection to freedom, but the place where the question of this Wissensraum arises: How free is a human being who can decide about their own actions, when the conditions of their decisions lie in many respects in the hands of others? One can answer it quickly, by declaring freedom self-evident or by exposing it as an illusion. Both are comfortable, and both fail to do justice to what people actually experience when they feel free and when they run up against their limits.

This Wissensraum therefore follows a path that leads from what is nearest to what is far. It begins with the question of whether freedom itself is something natural, and of how the limits that life sets differ from those that people set for one another. It asks what the living brings with it through its origin and how experience inscribes itself into the body, and it considers the interplay of cooperation and competition, the emergence of domination, and that power which orders possibilities before anyone has chosen. It follows the path of the world through body and perception into consciousness, examines how far the conscious shaping of one's own reality can reach, and asks what connectedness and inner freedom can mean when they are expressed in scientific, philosophical or spiritual terms. At the end stands the reflection on whether freedom means independence from conditions or arises only within those relationships that at once make life possible and limit it.

No answer that dissolves everything is promised along the way. What is promised is a more precise question.

“Between being able and being allowed lies a wide country.”

◆ 2. The Nature of Freedom — and Freedom Within Nature

Whether freedom itself is something natural helps decide how we interpret its limits: as fate, or as something that people have made and can change.

Before one can ask how free a person is, it is worth looking at the origin of freedom itself. Is it a property of the living that is found wherever beings respond to their environment? Is it a concept that people have coined for certain possibilities, or an achievement that arises only under particular circumstances? And when a person runs up against limits that other people have set, are those limits something natural, arising from the living together of living beings, or something that could also be different? Whoever speaks of the influence of others on their own life quickly hears the sentence that it has always been so, and the sentence lives on the fact that it claims nature for itself. What seems natural is taken to be original, fitting and unavoidable. Precisely for that reason this word calls for caution.

For it means at least three things. Natural can mean that something came into being without human involvement, it can point to biological regularities, and in everyday speech it often carries a valuation in which the natural is the right. That a behaviour occurs in nature, however, justifies neither its moral legitimacy nor its social necessity. Moreover, the human being is itself a part of nature. The capacity to think, to build tools, to form language and to create orders arose in the course of evolution, and in this wide sense laws, markets and property orders too are products of a living creature. Nevertheless they differ from mortality, which affects every person regardless of what they want.

It is therefore helpful to keep four origins of conditions apart. Given by nature are mortality, metabolism and the vulnerability of the body. Biologically co-shaped are needs, stress reactions and the capacity to bond with others. Socially produced are property rights, professional regulations and political institutions, and individually and biographically arisen are learned habits, attachments, convictions and life decisions. These domains work into one another: social conditions can have bodily consequences, biological preconditions influence which orders people devise, and personal experiences change how someone deals with the conditions of their life. Out of this interweaving comes a sentence that will repeatedly gain weight in this Wissensraum: What has arisen naturally need not be unchangeable, and what people have produced is not for that reason arbitrarily changeable. A property order is made by people and can nevertheless confront the individual as inescapably as a bodily limit, while many a bodily limit can be shifted by medicine.

The word freedom itself also means different things. In the biological sense it denotes the species-specific mobility to respond flexibly to environmental conditions, a property of the living, but not yet freedom in the moral or political sense. As self-determination it means the capacity to weigh alternatives for action, to examine reasons and to reflect on one's own behaviour. It has biological preconditions and develops in social relationships, and whether a free will in the metaphysical sense follows from it is philosophically contested to this day. As a social possibility, freedom denotes the extent to which a person can actually realise their options for action, and that depends on rights, resources and abilities. And as existential experience it is that inner breadth in which a person can relate to their situation. These meanings do not exclude one another. Freedom can be at once a natural possibility, a social achievement and an existential experience.

From this arises a question that runs through the whole Wissensraum: Is unfreedom a deviation from human nature, or is freedom itself a particular possibility that can come into being only under certain conditions? Whoever understands freedom as an original state understands domination as a loss that must be won back. Whoever understands it as a possibility asks how it can arise at all, biologically, psychologically, socially, politically and existentially. The following chapters approach the second view without rejecting the first. And they notice a paradox: the same human capacity that produces orders which limit possibilities for action also makes it possible to question and to change them.

“Natural does not mean unchangeable, and made does not mean arbitrary.”

◆ 3. What the Living Brings With It

The human being's room for manoeuvre is itself an inheritance that has arisen from conditions.

All that lives carries within it a history that lasts far longer than its own life. Over countless generations forms have changed, multiplied and proved themselves, or have vanished, not according to a plan and without a goal, but through the simple interplay of variation and selection. What arose from this are bodies that breathe, grow and heal, senses that distinguish danger and food, needs that drive, and in some living beings the capacity to learn from experience, to imagine things and to speak with one another. The human being does not come into the world as a blank sheet. It comes with an endowment it did not choose and which nevertheless forms the foundation of all its possibilities.

It is worth clearing up a widespread misunderstanding here. Genes are not commands that fix a finished life. One can imagine them as blueprints that are read by the cell, but the image is simplified. Which sections are carried out, and how strongly, depends not on the environment alone, but equally on the cell's own regulatory programmes, on the developmental state of a tissue and on chance fluctuations that every biological process contains. When research speaks of the heritability of a trait, it means a statistical statement about differences within a group under particular living conditions. It says little about the fate of an individual person. Genetic disposition and environment interact so closely that their shares can hardly be separated in a concrete life, and where the environment changes, so does what the dispositions bring about.

Whoever grasps this finds themselves in a peculiar position. For what makes freedom possible for the human being in the first place was received through determination. The capacity to pause, to weigh and to act otherwise than the first impulse suggests did not arise against nature but through it. Freedom thus appears not as the adversary of determination but as one of its late and precious fruits, which rests on this determination and at the same time reaches a little beyond it.

That changes the view of the question whether the human being is free or determined. It presents itself less as a decision between two possibilities and more as the question of how much room for manoeuvre a particular endowment opens up under particular circumstances, and what must happen for this room to grow and not to shrink.

“Even the room for manoeuvre is an inheritance.”

◆ 4. Traces That Are Not Written in the Genes

**Experience can lay itself down in the body as a trace and go on working there.
But not every experience does so, and not every trace can be demonstrated.**

For some decades science has been investigating how what has been lived can leave a biological imprint without anything changing in the genetic material itself. The term for this is epigenetics. It refers to chemical markings on the genetic substance and on the proteins that package it. They work like bookmarks and marginal notes that determine which sections of the blueprint are read often and which rarely in a cell. These markings are not rigid. They respond to nutrition, to stress, to care and neglect and to much else, and in part they can be changed again.

This is shown impressively by studies of people who experienced a pronounced famine before their birth, such as that which prevailed in the Netherlands in the winter of 1944 to 1945. Six decades later, people who had been exposed to hunger early in pregnancy showed a measurably different methylation pattern at a gene involved in growth (IGF2), compared with same-sex siblings who had not been affected. What this difference means in detail for health and behaviour is not thereby stated. Animal experiments suggest that a mother's behaviour in the first days of life, for instance her attention or its lack, can shape the stress processing of the young into adulthood. In this sense the body remembers the world into which it was born and adjusts to it.

At the same time this field demands care, for it invites exaggeration. Not every experience leaves a demonstrable epigenetic change, and many findings come from observational studies in which such differences are hard to separate from other influences. That experiences are inherited across generations has been shown in individual cases in animals, but in humans it is so far not established and is disputed among specialists. Nor is an epigenetic trace a sentence. It describes a probability, not a fate, and it says nothing about what a person makes of their history.

It is also important not to confuse related processes. Social epigenetics investigates how living conditions relate to biological regulation patterns. Stress physiology describes how sustained strain wears down the body because its alarm systems remain permanently active. Learning changes expectations and behaviour without an epigenetic explanation being needed, and psychological adaptation shapes patterns of attachment, habits and self-images. All four are connected, but they are not the same, and whoever draws them together in one word promises more explanation than research has so far delivered. At the same time they show together by what path a socially produced dependence can become a bodily and emotionally experienced limitation, and chapters 6 and 7 follow this path.

For that very reason one abbreviation, often met in popular accounts, should be named. From the well-supported statement that environmental conditions influence the activity of genes, the much larger statement is readily made that convictions steer the genes. The first is the subject of serious research, the second is not substantiated in this generality. Chapter 8 returns to the question of how far consciousness can actually shape biology and reality.

Something essential is nevertheless gained for the question of freedom. The conditions under which a person grows up enter into them and help shape how they later feel, react and choose. This holds for the one who grows up in security just as for the one who has experienced want

and fear. With that, responsibility for the conditions under which children grow up moves, to some extent, out of the private and into the common. And it becomes clear that determination and freedom do not confront each other like fate and choice. A person's history is present in them, and they can relate to it, though not out of nothing.

"The body does not forget, but it keeps learning."

◆ 5. Connected in Order to Endure

The living unfolds in the interplay of cooperation and competition, and with both arises the question of how rank becomes domination.

The image of the struggle for existence has dug itself deep into thought, and it is not false. Living beings compete for food, for space, for partners and for rank, and this competition shapes bodies and behaviour. But whoever sees only that overlooks half. The history of life is just as much a history of union. Single cells joined to form tissues and organisms. The power plants of our cells, the mitochondria, go back, according to present knowledge, to earlier, independent forms of life that settled in larger cells a very long time ago and have been inseparably bound to them ever since.

The individual human being, too, is less sharply bounded than it seems. On the skin and in the gut lives a community of microorganisms whose cell count is of the same order of magnitude as that of the body's own cells and which takes part in digestion, defence and presumably much else besides. Plants, fungi and animals live in relationships that no one fully surveys and on which each side depends. The image of a society of lone fighters does not do justice to this. The living is more like a fabric in which each thread holds its place in relation to the others.

In human beings this connectedness emerges particularly clearly. Their children remain helpless for a long time and can grow up only within a network of carers. Their capacity for language, for sharing knowledge and for planning across generations is a capacity of togetherness. At the same time competition, rank and mistrust remain effective, and cooperation in particular often lends competition a new sharpness, because groups can now also ally against one another. There is no state in which both stand quietly side by side.

Where rank arises, the question arises that accompanies all further reflection: Was human living together always determined by the fact that some have disposal over others? It can be answered only with distinctions. Dominance denotes the enforcement of one's own will through intimidation or violence, and coercion is the means by which it makes itself felt.

Prestige, by contrast, rests on a standing that others grant voluntarily, because someone can do or knows something. Authority means a recognised competence resting on expertise or ascribed legitimacy, and domination, finally, denotes a lasting relationship in which someone can make binding decisions about others, usually institutionally secured and also against objection. These forms have different preconditions, and none of them can be traced back to a single biological cause.

Behavioural research shows rank orders in many social animals that influence access to food, reproduction or protection. In chimpanzees, for instance, the standing of a male depends substantially on whether he has allies, and whoever loses them often loses rank as well. For early human communities only cautious inferences can be drawn. From the study of hunting and gathering societies of the present and of the more recent past it is known that many of them are markedly egalitarian in organisation. Whoever tries to raise themselves above others is checked there by mockery, ostracism and in the extreme case by exclusion. This has been described as a reverse dominance hierarchy, in which the group watches over those who would like to rule. That does not mean there were no differences there. But it shows that the capacity for dominance and the capacity to limit it apparently arose side by side.

With a settled way of life, storage of provisions, ownership of land and livestock, writing, administration and armies, inequality and domination became entrenched in many places, though not everywhere and not inevitably. The paths there were different, and research argues to this day about how early hierarchies appeared in human history and how necessary their emergence was. Hierarchical and egalitarian communities existed side by side, and some even changed over the course of the year between the two forms. Modern states, markets and organisations add a further one, in which authority is bound to offices and contracts and not to persons.

From this follows a distinction that carries everything further. The capacity to exercise power may have arisen in the course of human evolution; the concrete order of its exercise remains historically and socially shaped. Evolutionary preconditions and particular orders of domination must not be equated. What has developed need not remain in the same form for all time, and what occurs often is not justified by that alone. For freedom a first shift follows. If the biological reality of the human being is already one of being connected, then independence does not describe the normal case by which freedom could be measured, but an exception that can assert itself only on the basis of many supporting relationships. The question then is no longer how the human being detaches from their ties, but in which ties they can unfold and in which they are held fast.

“No living being stands alone, and yet each is someone.”

◆ 6. Who Sets the Conditions

Power rarely shows itself where it commands someone. Mostly it is already at work in what is up for choice and in what is available for living at all.

We first speak of power where someone can force something: through violence, through law, through threat or through possession. This coercion is visible, and resistance to it can be imagined. Far more often, however, power works more quietly. It determines which possibilities come into view at all, how they are named, which count as normal and which are scarcely mentioned. Whoever opens or closes educational paths, makes information accessible or withholds it, sets prices, steers attention or specifies default settings takes nothing away from the choice and has nevertheless already pre-shaped it.

How far this can reach is shown by an everyday example. In countries where everyone is initially regarded as an organ donor unless they object, the number of those registered as donors is far higher than in countries where one must expressly consent. No one is forced, and in both cases the decision remains open to each person. The default nevertheless steers what most people do, because people rarely decide against the grain when it takes effort to think it over. At the same time the comparison shows only a correlation. How many organs are in the end actually donated depends on further circumstances, on the organisation of the health system, on the legal situation and on cultural habits, and no clear cause can be read off from the comparison between countries alone. As an example of how the arrangement of possibilities colours decisions, it nevertheless remains illustrative.

Less easy to overlook and yet more consequential is the disposal over the material preconditions of life: over income, property, debt, work, housing and health care, in short over that on which a person economically depends. Between a subtly influenced decision and a decision under existential pressure there is a fundamental difference. Whoever lets themselves be steered by a default could decide otherwise without it costing them much. Whoever cannot give up a job because rent, loan and health insurance hang on it, by contrast, is not steered by a clever arrangement but bound by necessity. They are legally free to change jobs and in fact often unable to.

With this the distinction between formal freedom and actually available options for action emerges more clearly. Formally free is what is legally and institutionally permitted. Actually

available is only what a person can in fact realise with their health, their economic situation, their qualifications, their relationships and their obligations. A person may leave a flat, and the market for affordable housing limits whether they can. Another may end a burdensome relationship, and their economic and family dependence decides whether a viable way can be seen. In all three cases the possibility of decision exists, but its reach is unequally distributed, and a possible choice is not yet an equal disposal over the conditions of choosing.

The great differences in living conditions belong here too. Studies of employees in an administration have shown that health and life expectancy are connected stepwise with position in the hierarchy, and not only between the poorest and the rest, but across all grades. Whoever has little influence over their own work evidently carries a higher risk, but this lack of influence is only one factor among several, alongside lifestyle, material situation and earlier living circumstances, and explains only a part of the gradient. What is certain is that a person's room for manoeuvre is not equally distributed and that it also depends on how much they may help shape the conditions of their life.

Where such conditions become lasting and settle into self-evidence, their origin vanishes from view. An order that has arisen through human action eventually confronts the individual like an unchangeable reality. Its history falls into oblivion, its rules appear self-evident, and its limitations are experienced as necessary conditions of life. It would be too simple, however, to see power only as an evil. Orders, rules and institutions create security, make cooperation possible and often protect precisely the weaker. What matters is whether a power remains transparent, whether it must justify itself and whether those on whom it acts have the possibility to question and change it. Where that succeeds, it can sustain freedom. Where it does not, it narrows freedom without anyone needing to notice.

“Whoever orders the possibilities has already co-chosen before the choice.”

◆ 7. How the World Enters the Human Being

Perception is not a window that lets the world in unchanged. It is an achievement of the body that helps shape what appears.

Between the world and what a person experiences of it lies a body. It takes in stimuli, weights them and joins them with memory and expectation into a picture. Research today often describes the brain as an organ that constantly makes conjectures about what will happen next and compares these conjectures with what the senses report. What we see, hear and feel is

accordingly always already an interplay of what comes from outside and what we bring with us.

What is brought along is not neutral. Hunger and tiredness, pain and tension colour judgement about people and situations. Noise, cramped space and lack of light influence mood and patience; nature, quiet and warmth influence them in another direction. The language in which we grew up supplies us with concepts by which we order, and lets other things become graspable only with difficulty. Stories we have heard suggest what we interpret as a good life, as success or as failure. All of this happens without being noticed, for the imprint is the more effective, the more self-evident it appears.

So it comes about that people experience decisions as their own which were in part prepared long beforehand. That does not mean that they deceive themselves or that their decisions are meaningless. It means that the feeling of one's own willing is only a part of the process and that it is carried by conditions that are not in view. Whoever knows this can begin to make individual conditions visible, for instance by asking in what state they are currently judging, from what surroundings a thought stems, or who profits from a particular view.

Here it also shows how an outer situation can become an inner one. Whoever repeatedly experiences that their own decisions remain without effect develops expectations that guide later actions. Whoever lives for a long time under conditions of lacking security perhaps directs their attention more strongly to possible threats, and whoever has experienced belonging only under certain conditions begins perhaps to regard these conditions as self-evident in later relationships too. What originally lay outside the person then appears as a property of the person: from a repeatedly experienced limitation arises the conviction of not possessing certain possibilities, from a social expectation an inner demand, from a dependence a habit whose origin can scarcely be recognised any longer. These are possible developments, not laws, and they turn out differently in every person. But they show why freedom depends not only on the question of what someone may do, but also on that of what they dare to want.

This Wissensraum touches the theme only insofar as perception pre-forms the room for manoeuvre of freedom. The stance that stays faithful to one's own perception is the subject of Wissensraum No. 14 — Faithfulness to One's Own Perception. The limits of what a person can observe in themselves are examined by Wissensraum No. 18 — The Illusion of Self-Observation.

"The world never enters the human being uninvolved."

◆ 8. The Space Between Stimulus and Response

Consciousness is less a switch that triggers actions than a capacity that weighs, inhibits and redirects. How far it can shape reality is a question of its own.

There are experiments that have had a great effect on the discussion about the freedom of the will. In one of the best known it was measured that the brain already builds up a preparation for a simple hand movement before the participants reported having decided on the movement. From this it was often concluded that the conscious will is only a subsequent addition. This conclusion, however, is disputed. Later work has proposed a different interpretation, according to which the measured signal corresponds rather to a random fluctuation of brain activity that becomes an act only when it crosses a threshold. This interpretation is in turn an interpretation of experimental findings and not a conclusive refutation of other explanations, and simple, arbitrary movements in any case reveal little about how people make decisions of weight.

Closer to experience is another observation. Consciousness acts where we can pause. It makes it possible to notice a first impulse and not carry it out, to consider consequences, to put oneself in the place of others, to hold goals against one another and to change an action that has already begun. It also shapes what will later appear as an impulse, because habits and attitudes change through repetition and insight. In this sense the human being's room for manoeuvre does not consist in a moment of decision out of nothing, but in the capacity to relate to what rises within them.

This capacity, however, is no fixed possession. It depends on the state of the body. Sustained stress, exhaustion, lack of sleep and existential hardship impair precisely those regions of the brain responsible for weighing, planning and self-control, and let faster, cruder reactions gain the upper hand. Security, calm, understanding and education, by contrast, can widen the space. Whoever lives in constant distress does not simply have less willpower; they have less room for manoeuvre, and to blame them for it overlooks who has narrowed it.

At this point a further question opens, one that plays a central role in many books about consciousness and self-transformation: How much reality can a person consciously shape when other people determine the essential outer conditions of their life? A widespread current of consciousness literature, to which the books of Bruce Lipton, Gregg Braden, Ulrich Warnke and Bruno Würtenberger can be thematically assigned, emphasises the shaping power of perception, conviction and inner attitude. In doing so it touches on something right. That

expectations, convictions and emotional states influence behaviour and certain bodily processes is well founded; research on stress, on placebo effects and on the interactions between psyche, nervous system and immune system has shown it for a long time. Between the statement that consciousness influences bodily processes and the statement that consciousness controls biology, however, lies a considerable stretch. The second statement is not scientifically substantiated in this generality. Among the four authors it is Bruce Lipton alone who has sharpened it into the formula that conscious beliefs control biology, and it is this formula that the present examination addresses; the other three names stand merely for the intended line of thought. Nor does it help to explain serious illness as a consequence of wrong beliefs, which no one can rightly claim.

Still less does a creative disposal over outer circumstances follow from such reflections. A person can change their perception of a dependence, and the dependence itself can nevertheless remain. They can learn to assess a situation differently, and the social conditions that produce this situation are not thereby changed. They can gain inner distance and remain outwardly bound. Property relations, legal provisions, economic dependencies and institutional decisions remain an independent condition over which people do not dispose through their attitude alone. Where the emphasis on individual change of consciousness goes so far that people are to regard their difficult circumstances exclusively as an expression of their own convictions, there is a danger of overlooking the significance of structural conditions and of shifting social responsibility onto the individual.

No rejection of self-shaping is implied. It may strengthen human capacity to act without deriving from limited possibilities a comprehensive responsibility for all circumstances of life. The capacity for self-observation, too, from which such paths often start, is limited by attention, memory and bodily state, as Wissensraum No. 18 — The Illusion of Self-Observation sets out. Freedom appears from here as something graduated. It is seldom a state one has or does not have, and mostly a space that widens under certain conditions and narrows under others, that can be practised but not asserted against every environment.

“Freedom is seldom a state, mostly a room for manoeuvre that grows or shrinks.”

◆ 9. Two Languages for Connectedness

That the living is connected can be said in two ways: as what can be tested, and as what people experience and interpret in it.

When connectedness is spoken of, people often speak of intertwined things. The first language is that of the natural sciences, which describe interactions that can be tested and measured. Substances circulate through ecosystems, cells communicate by messenger substances, body and environment are in constant exchange, and measurable attunements also arise between people when they breathe, speak, sing or work together. In this sense connectedness is a verifiable fact, whose details can be researched further.

The second language is that of interpretation. Sociology and philosophy speak of resonance when a person experiences the world not only as a counterpart that they dominate or by which they are dominated, but as something that addresses them and to which they can respond. Resonance here does not mean harmony, for it includes friction, but a relationship of mutual touching that cannot be forced. And some spiritual and contemplative traditions speak finally of a unity underlying all things, and of experiences in which the boundary between the individual and the whole becomes permeable. These statements rest on interpretation and inner experience, not on measurement.

What matters is not to confuse these languages. A spiritual experience is not scientific knowledge, and a scientific finding is no proof of a religious doctrine. Thus physics is occasionally made to yield evidence of spiritual unity or of consciousness shaping matter. Quantum physics describes properties and interactions of physical systems, and its concept of measurement does not presuppose a conscious observer. Self-similar patterns too, which are found in many structures of nature, stimulate thought, but an analogy does not replace evidence. Whoever draws on concepts of physics as proof of spiritual unity wrongs both sides. Nor is it a sign of weakness to name a limit: natural science can say what can be observed under certain conditions, and not what a life means. Interpretation can say what an experience means, but not what can be demonstrated in the world.

The spiritual traditions in particular have much to say about freedom, and, surprisingly often, they do not understand it as independence. In Advaita Vedānta, liberation means the realisation that the innermost Self, the Ātman, is untouched by the changing states of the body, the feelings and social roles, and is at bottom one with the whole. Buddhism takes a different path at this point: the teaching of no-self, Anātman, denies that there is any enduring,

unchanging self at all, and the teaching of dependent origination describes how everything arises and passes away in dependence on something else. Liberation here means not discovering an untouched self, but seeing through one's own conditionedness and releasing oneself from clinging. The question of who or what becomes free is thus answered in opposite ways in the two traditions. The Stoa distinguishes what lies in one's own power from what does not, and teaches forming one's attitude toward the latter instead of suffering over the unchangeable. A tradition from India advises acting without clinging to the result of the action. The paths are different, and it would be a mistake to fuse them into a single teaching. That they nevertheless touch in one point is remarkable: they seek freedom not beyond the conditions, but in the relationship a person takes up to them.

A question follows that must remain critical: Can inner freedom exist within outer unfreedom, and where does this thought become a justification of existing dependencies? That people can preserve dignity, clarity and inner breadth even under coercion, illness or deprivation is attested by many life stories, and meditation, contemplation and philosophical self-questioning can open free spaces where outer ones are hardly to be found. At the same time the danger lies near that people in dependence are told to be inwardly free instead of their conditions being changed, that serenity is preached where change would be possible and called for, or that detachment becomes the yardstick by which people are measured. Inner freedom can be a meaningful experience, but it replaces neither social rights nor material independence, and even the capacity to change an inner attitude is co-shaped by bodily and psychological conditions. Both belong to be thought side by side. What the reality of non-duality says about the relationship between subject and world is unfolded by Wissensraum No. 12 — The Reality of Non-Duality. Here it suffices to note that connectedness is part of what gives freedom its form.

“What connects need not be said in a single language.”

◆ 10. Being Dependent

Vulnerability is not the opposite of freedom but the ground on which it grows. And it may remain where nothing is left to overcome.

The human being comes into the world unfinished. Unlike many animals, in the first years it can neither feed itself nor protect itself nor move about, and its brain matures largely only in encounter with other human beings. It learns to speak by being spoken to, and to trust by

being reliably cared for. This dependence is no transitional stage that one leaves behind later. It returns in illness, in need, in old age and in every situation in which strength, money, health or relationships are lacking, and it accompanies every person, even where they do not notice it.

An old observation of developmental research holds that children who experience themselves as securely attached explore their surroundings, on average, more boldly. They can move away from the familiar because they know they may return. Independence thus often arises not despite attachment, but through it. Whoever was reliably held can later more readily give support themselves and also set out alone. Whoever has learned early that no one can be relied on, by contrast, easily mistakes independence for self-defence. These are probabilities and not a prediction that holds for every life story, for people change, and relationships later in life can shift a great deal.

Vulnerability, however, has its price. Whoever is dependent can also be exploited. Where one person depends on another, power arises, and it can be used protectively or domineeringly. For that very reason it is no contradiction but a consequence when a society particularly protects the vulnerable: children, the sick, those in need of care, people in poverty or without secure rights. Protection does not diminish their freedom. It is often the precondition for their being able to gain freedom at all.

This becomes especially clear in relationships that are unequal from the outset. Whoever teaches, nurses, educates or accompanies has possibilities that are initially not equally accessible to the other, and the relationship thereby carries an asymmetry within it. How can people in such a relationship learn and develop without their independence being displaced by the other's authority? A pedagogy of resonance, which starts from the responsive happening between teachers and learners, measures the quality of a relationship not only by how successfully knowledge is conveyed, but by whether the learner's perception, judgement and independence are strengthened. It asks of the one with more possibilities that they look at their own power instead of treating it as self-evident. Where this succeeds, a relationship widens the person's freedom. Where it fails, belonging becomes the condition of their subordination.

Finally, a counter-question belongs to this chapter, one that must accompany every talk of self-shaping: Must a person be able to overcome their conditions in order to count as free or responsible? The notion that development means overcoming has a high standing in many people's self-understanding. But human life contains experiences whose conditions can largely escape one's own influence. A person can change their way of life and nevertheless fall ill, they can observe their thoughts and go on suffering, they can possess great inner clarity and at the

same time remain dependent on the support of others. They can understand a situation completely and yet find no possibility of changing it. Where one's own consciousness is understood as the decisive cause of all circumstances of life, the danger therefore arises of interpreting illness, need and dependence as an expression of insufficient spiritual development. The person whose possibilities are already restricted is then burdened with an additional demand: they are not only to bear their burden but also to answer for its origin and its overcoming. This misjudges the complexity of life. Illnesses arise through biological, psychological, social and environmental processes, and social disadvantage cannot be overcome by a change of personal attitudes alone.

Suffering that is not overcome may therefore remain, without becoming a sign of failed development. A person may suffer without having to justify their suffering, may turn against interpretations that ascribe to their experience a meaning they themselves do not recognise, and may need support without thereby losing dignity or the claim to self-determination. Here freedom takes on a different shape. It appears less as unrestricted disposal over one's own life and more as the possibility of being perceived and respected as an independent person within existing limits. Wissensraum No. 21 — The Right to Suffer pursues this thought at length. Here it suffices to note that a person's dignity does not depend on how much they can change, and that an ethics of freedom must also keep in view those whose possibilities for self-shaping are limited.

"Whoever has once been held can later walk alone."

◆ 11. Responsibility Without Disposal

Responsibility does not presuppose complete control. It grows with what a person knows and can bring about, and it reaches as far as they have disposal over the conditions of others.

When conditions reach so deeply into action, the question arises of what a person can still answer for at all. An obvious but hasty answer holds that where there is no complete control there is no responsibility either. But this conclusion corresponds neither to experience nor to ethics. No one has their life completely in hand, and yet we expect parents to care for their children, doctors to act with care, and ourselves to respond to what meets us. Responsibility in this sense means the capacity and the willingness to respond, not the capacity to determine everything.

The human being co-shapes reality without having disposal over it. What they do in the family, at work, in the community and in dealing with nature has consequences that reach far beyond what they can survey. They act under uncertainty, with incomplete knowledge and in circumstances they can influence only in part. The more influence and knowledge someone has, the greater their responsibility, and the further the possible consequences reach, the more it demands caution. This holds for the individual person just as for companies, institutions and societies.

At the same time, knowledge of conditions protects against two opposite errors. The first consists in attributing to every person what they did in the most difficult circumstances, as if they had had all the choice. The second consists in excusing everything by circumstances, as if they were a mere plaything. Both miss the human being. Justice is done to them by whoever asks about the room for manoeuvre they had and is at the same time ready to widen the room of others where it lies in their power.

Here a question returns that was prepared by the preceding chapters: Why can one person have disposal over others, although all human beings are themselves conditioned beings? The answer lies in the fact that disposal too arises from conditions. Whoever commands resources, rules or positions has received them from their own biological, social and historical contexts, and their decisions arise within these contexts. But their conditionedness does not cancel their responsibility. Whoever makes decisions whose consequences others must bear has a responsibility that reaches beyond their own intention. Whoever exercises power can widen or limit freedom, and whoever lives under conditions set by others nevertheless retains a claim to be recognised as a human being with their own perception, dignity and capacity for decision. The question of freedom thus becomes the question of how a conditioned being can bear responsibility for the freedom of others.

It extends beyond the individual. Through economy, politics and technology, societies have created possibilities for action that reach far into the living conditions of others, including those of people who had no part in their coming about. This holds especially for the handling of the natural foundations of life. Soil, water, climate, biodiversity and ecological interactions form preconditions of human existence, and how a society treats them influences the possibilities of future generations, who cannot co-decide about their own conditions. Thus individual and relational freedom becomes a question of responsibility beyond one's own lifetime. It would be premature, however, to derive from present crises the certainty that a higher stage of human consciousness will necessarily emerge from them. Crises can set off learning processes, but they can also favour violence, repression and the concentration of

power, and a changed consciousness in individual people does not by itself lead to a more just order. Responsibility here demands the readiness to decide even under uncertainty, without confusing the possibility of responsible action with the certainty of a good outcome.

The freedom of a society therefore does not arise from the consciousness of its members alone. It takes shape in the relationships that people produce and maintain together. A more just distribution of resources can widen actual freedom, education can contribute to judgement, legal safeguards can limit power, and social support opens possibilities that were scarcely accessible to the individual before. These changes remain dependent on institutions, people and decisions. This presupposes recognising the limits of individual self-shaping as much as the possibilities of collective action, and it releases no one from responsibility.

“Whoever co-shapes without having disposal bears responsibility without possession.”

◆ 12. Two Images of Freedom

Whether freedom is independence from conditions or arises only in relationships decides what we expect of it and how we protect it.

The first image of freedom conceives it as independence. Free is whoever remains untouched by coercion, interference and external determination and moves according to their own judgement. In philosophy this view is often called negative freedom, freedom from external obstacles. It has great strengths. It has served against arbitrariness, oppression and paternalism and does so to this day. Whoever loses the possibility of saying no loses a great deal, and protection against that is no small matter. Its limit lies in the presupposition that there is a human being who could decide independently of all conditions. Such a human being does not exist, and the demand for complete independence leads either to disappointment or to contempt for those who are visibly dependent on others.

The second image conceives freedom as something that arises within relationships. According to it, what matters is what actual possibilities a person has to lead a life they hold, for reasons, to be their own, and which conditions help them toward it or stand in the way. Health, education, belonging, time, security and a voice in matters that concern them then count as components of freedom and not merely as its accompaniment. In philosophy this is described, for instance, as freedom of realisation, as freedom actually to do and to be something. This image is closer to experience, but it too carries a danger. Whoever too quickly glorifies

dependence as attachment can justify unfreedom, and where relationships hold people fast instead of carrying them, the word connectedness helps no one.

A third consideration joins both images and touches the core of the question about the hands of others. One can be unfree without anyone intervening, because another could intervene at any time and their goodwill is the only security. Whoever depends on the mercy of a superior, a landlord or a partner may never have been obstructed and is nevertheless not free. Freedom then means not being subject to the arbitrary disposal of others, and that is more than the absence of interference.

It helps to keep different forms of freedom apart. Formal freedom denotes what is legally and institutionally permitted. Material freedom concerns the resources required to realise these possibilities. Relational freedom arises within interpersonal relationships, in which support and recognition can work just as dependence and control can. Psychological freedom concerns the capacity to recognise, examine and where appropriate change one's own wishes, fears and habits, and existential freedom the relationship a person can take up to conditions they can hardly change themselves. These forms influence one another, but they are not interchangeable. A person can have arrived inwardly at a decision without possessing the means to realise it. They can have material possibilities and nevertheless remain restricted in acting by fear or earlier experiences, and they can have social rights and at the same time be subject to considerable control within a relationship. Freedom is a multidimensional happening, and even the capacity to change an inner attitude is co-shaped by psychological and bodily conditions, which is why even inner freedom must not be presupposed as unlimited.

A test question can help to join the images. Can the person recognise the conditions in which they live? Can they assess them? And do they have the possibility to change them or to relate to them? A person who can want what they want, and who can also examine their wishes instead of surrendering to them blindly, is called free by a significant philosophical tradition, even if their wishes have their history. This is one possible position, recalling so-called compatibilist theories, not a universally valid definition. Such freedom is not unconditional, but neither is it mere appearance.

It is important not to present the debate as decided. Philosophically it is contested to this day whether the complete determinacy of things rules out freedom, whether the two are compatible, or whether real freedom presupposes an openness that cannot be grasped scientifically. This Wissensraum takes no side here. It holds that in everyday life, in law and in

ethics freedom occurs in graded degrees and that it is worth cultivating its conditions. And it recalls that the self that is to be free does not emerge unscathed from history either, as Wissensraum No. 16 — Degradation of the Self describes.

“Freedom shows itself where a person recognises the conditions of their willing and can relate to them.”

◆ 13. Conclusion — The Living Responds

Human freedom is no exception to reality. It is one of its ways of behaving.

At the beginning stood the question of how free the human being is when the conditions of their decisions lie in many respects in the hands of others. On the way through the nature of freedom, through evolution and experience, through interplay and power, through perception, consciousness and connectedness, this question has not dissolved, but it has changed its face. It now asks less whether the human being is free or determined, and more how much room for manoeuvre is open to them under which circumstances, who has disposal over the conditions under which freedom becomes possible at all, and how a conditioned being can bear responsibility for the freedom of others.

The human being appears here as a being that arises from conditions and can nevertheless respond to them. They are part of a reality that carries, forms and limits them, and they act upon it at the same time without ever surveying it entirely. Their freedom lies not beyond this context, but in the way they move within it: whether attentively or thoughtlessly, whether responsibly or indifferently, whether they also consider the conditions of others or only their own.

Whoever thinks this way will end in neither triumph nor resignation. They will regard their own freedom with less self-certainty, the room for manoeuvre of others with more seriousness, and the conditions in which both arise as something that wants to be tended. The question of freedom then remains open, and precisely thereby it remains alive.

Where human beings ask about their freedom, they meet at the same time the reality that determines how far their decision can reach. Perhaps their freedom consists in not merely being exposed to this reality, but in being allowed to respond to it.

“Perhaps freedom is the way in which the conditioned responds.”

∞ Further Exploration

Those who wish to pursue the questions touched on here will find adjacent explorations in the WISSENSRÄUME series:

- Wissensraum No. 11 — When Life Is Merely Administered
- Wissensraum No. 12 — The Reality of Non-Duality
- Wissensraum No. 14 — Faithfulness to One's Own Perception
- Wissensraum No. 16 — Degradation of the Self
- Wissensraum No. 18 — The Illusion of Self-Observation
- Wissensraum No. 20 — Three Bodies, Five Sheaths
- Wissensraum No. 21 — The Right to Suffer

◇ Sources & Lines of Thought

This Wissensraum does not make a scientific argument. The following works show what its professional and scientific statements connect to — above all those of chapters 3 to 12. The chapter numbers in brackets show where a thought connects with a source.

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- Eric Turkheimer: Three laws of behavior genetics and what they mean. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9 (2000), 160–164. On the interplay of genetic disposition and environment and the meaning of heritability. (Ch. 3)
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