

WISSENSRAUM NO. 11

WHEN LIFE IS MERELY ADMINISTERED

Modern human beings between responsibility, exhaustion, and undivided life

“Life does not begin where there is nothing left to administer. It is already here.”

AKADEMIE DER WEISHEIT — WISSENSRÄUME

◆ 1. The Paradox of Our Time

People in the twenty-first century have possibilities earlier generations could hardly have dreamed of — and yet they sense, at the same time, how narrow their lives can still become.

Knowledge can be retrieved within seconds, distance has lost much of its former weight through digital communication, and work can now take place in settings once reserved for private life. Medical and technical advances widen the scope of action, and almost every part of daily life can be organized, measured, planned, optimized. The tools grow more precise, faster, more capable. And yet, as they multiply, something seems to fade that no tool can measure or replace: that undivided space in which a person still experiences their own life as a coherent movement.

Herein lies the peculiar paradox of our time. Possibilities grow, while the sense of freedom by no means grows at the same pace. A day can be filled to its very edges with meaningful, necessary, even freely chosen activities and still leave, by evening, the feeling of having been barely present in one's own life. Much was accomplished, answered, organized, decided. And yet a barely graspable question remains: Where, in all of this, was life itself?

This question is directed neither against responsibility nor against organization. Bills must be paid, appointments kept, children accompanied, relatives cared for, professional duties fulfilled; organization creates reliability, and order can open spaces in which freedom becomes possible in the first place. The real shift begins elsewhere: where ordering life gradually claims so much space that less and less is left for living it.

“The tools keep improving, yet the space for what matters keeps shrinking.”

◆ 2. From Shaping to Administering

Life has always been bound up with work, care, and responsibility. What is new is not the existence of demands, but their constant simultaneity.

Every era knew uncertainty, illness, economic hardship, family obligations, social upheaval. What has changed is the ability to respond to nearly all of it at almost any moment. Modern people carry their open areas of life with them: in the smartphone, the calendar, the inbox, in digital accounts, in deadlines and messages — and just as much in thoughts that keep working even when outward calm has long since settled in. So the inner shape of everyday life quietly changes. Individual tasks turn into a system of continuous responsibility. Hardly has one thing

ended before the next emerges; an answer produces a new question, a settled matter opens the view onto the next.

In the process, people administer far more than their work. Health demands attention, relationships want tending, finances need ordering, leisure needs planning, recovery needs enabling, the future needs preparing. Even areas that once stood as a counterweight to function are drawn into this movement. Exercise then serves health, sleep serves performance, vacation serves recovery, and silence serves the restoration of strength that is meant to be available again afterward. What was once allowed to be free of purpose acquires a goal, a method, a measurable effect.

The decisive change happens quietly. People do not lose their capacity to live. They simply occupy themselves more and more often with the preconditions of their life — and less and less with that immediate unfolding for which those preconditions were once created.

“We occupy ourselves ever more with the preconditions of life — and ever less with life itself.”

◆ 3. The Limit of Administering Life

Administration is not the enemy of life. It becomes a problem where it ceases to serve life and begins to set its measure.

It would be a misunderstanding to look for the cause of exhaustion in administration itself. Someone who cares for a relative carries a responsibility that would hardly be bearable without organization: medication, appointments, applications, arrangements — none of this is incidental; it is care in its most reliable form. Order creates security, reliability creates trust, and a life in which nothing could be planned ahead would not be freer but more exposed. Administration is among the quiet achievements of a culture that makes people less dependent on the whim of the moment.

The question is therefore not whether one may administer, but how far administration reaches. As long as it serves life, it remains a means: it creates the conditions under which encounter, work, recovery, and reflection can take place, and it steps back once what it has made begins. The balance tips where the viewpoint of organization, optimization, and function gradually penetrates areas that had so far eluded it. Then one no longer plans in order to live, but lives in order to be able to plan. The walk acquires a step goal, the conversation an appointment, the

friendship a slot in the calendar. None of this is objectionable in itself — and yet, in sum, what counts as real shifts: what seems real is what can be recorded, planned, and ticked off.

Such a limit cannot be fixed as a rule, but it can be experienced as a question. Does this order create space, or fill it? Does this planning serve what matters to me, or has what matters to me itself become part of the plan? Are there still areas in my life that may be disordered, unmeasured, and without aim — and do I experience them as a gain or as negligence? Where such questions can be asked again, administration has regained its proper place: as a serving order, not a ruling one.

“The limit runs not between much and little order, but between means and measure.”

◆ 4. The Weight of the Unfinished

Among the barely visible burdens of modern life is the sheer number of things that are neither being dealt with now nor truly finished.

A message awaits a reply. A decision has been postponed. An application has been filed but not yet answered. A conversation is still owed. A health question remains open. None of these things fully occupies a person at any given moment — and yet none of them disappears. Together they form a second present: a person sits at a table writing while part of their attention already lingers on tomorrow's appointment. They hold a conversation while remembering a message that still needs answering. They go for a walk while an open decision keeps working in the background.

The unfinished carries a peculiar weight. It rarely demands immediate action and still binds attention. The more open matters accumulate, the less the day consists of the present moment alone. What is past reaches in, what is coming announces itself, and between the two, people try to manage what lies immediately before them. This produces a simultaneity that can hardly be measured in hours: a person can have objectively free time and still feel inwardly unfree, because that time is already occupied by what still needs to be clarified, decided, or prepared.

“The unfinished demands no action — and still binds the present.”

◆ 5. The New Exhaustion

Alongside the exhaustion of too much work, a second kind can be described: the exhaustion of too little presence.

Exhaustion is usually understood as the result of too much: too much work, too little sleep, physical overload, prolonged strain. With these forms, the source of the burden is comparatively

easy to recognize, and with it the direction of the remedy — rest, sleep, relief. Alongside them, another experience can be described, one whose burden lies less in any single activity than in continual fragmentation: in the constant switching between demands, roles, and messages, in a readiness that is never fully laid down. Those who live it are everywhere a little and nowhere fully present. Sleep alone often does not dissolve this tiredness; it calls for undividedness. This is not a new diagnosis, but an attempt to describe an experience that many people know without being able to name.

Attention research offers a striking parallel. Its studies show that when people switch from one task to the next, part of their attention can remain with the previous one, especially if it was left unfinished — and that this can impair performance on the following task. Studies of interruptions in everyday work describe how people often try to make up the loss by working faster, and pay for it with more tension, time pressure, and effort. What everyday language knows as “not being quite there” has a name here: after every switch, a person carries a residue of what came before.

Where attention is allowed to linger, a rhythm can form. A thought begins, develops, deepens, and eventually takes shape. Where this process is repeatedly broken off, attention must start over again and again. At the end of such a day, what is missing may be less strength than the sense of a completed movement. Much was begun, some of it finished, some postponed — yet hardly anything reached the depth in which doing and presence fall back into one.

“It is not only the amount of work that exhausts us — it is also the absence of presence.”

◆ 6. The Loss of Depth

Depth has its own time. It can be set in motion, but its ripening largely escapes command.

A conversation can be scheduled, but encounter itself remains beyond our control. Knowledge can be found within seconds, yet understanding arises only where individual pieces of information enter into relation with one another. Grief, insight, creativity, and inner transformation, too, follow no calendar. Depth is not a measurable quantity but a way of experiencing: the sense of having truly met something.

The loss of depth does not mean people have become less interested or less creative. It describes a form of life in which one’s own capacities are granted, ever more rarely, the undivided time they need to unfold. A thought that is interrupted again and again remains a different thought from

one allowed to grow for an hour. A landscape glimpsed in passing meets a person differently than one before which they linger in silence for a long while. And an experience often begins to teach something only once it is not immediately overtaken by the next.

Frequent task-switching draws on attention anew each time. What appears as flexibility can thereby shorten those longer phases of undivided concentration in which complex thoughts can be carried further and experiences deepened. One of the quietest losses of our present moment lies exactly here: people lose less their access to information than the time in which information can become insight.

◆ 7. Life as Constant Coping

There is a harshness that is not loud. It does not march, it does not strike. It is the absence of any interruption.

An ordinary day rarely begins with a great existential decision. It usually begins with what lies closest at hand — the tax return, the rent, the insurance, a message from the doctor, worry about an aging parent, uncertainty at work, the news from a world that reports one crisis after another and from which no one can fully withdraw without losing something of their alertness. People answer all of this, day after day. The more they answer, the less they ask for themselves. The day consists of reaction, hardly of shaping.

It is not any single responsibility that becomes unbearable. Rather, responsibility piles upon responsibility until being accountable becomes a basic condition of existence: for work, body, future, finances, relationships, often for other people as well. None of these burdens is, on its own, too heavy. What is missing is the pause between them — a moment in which a person simply is, without also being accountable.

A life that only reacts loses, over time, the experience of being its own author. It no longer feels like leading one's life. It feels like administering it — conscientiously, correctly, but without inner participation, like a foreign estate one is liable for without owning it.

“There is a harshness that is not loud. It is the absence of any interruption.”

◆ 8. Waiting for Real Life to Begin

Many people believe that real life will begin once everything is in order. But this state, structurally, never arrives.

Out of constant coping grows, almost inevitably, a hope: to be finished at last. Once this matter is settled, that obligation fulfilled, the difficult phase overcome, there will be room again. Real life seems to wait just behind the tasks. But life carries no final, completed state. Every resolved phase opens onto a new one. Once financial questions are settled, health concerns move to the fore; once professional pressure ends, family tasks arise. People grow older, relationships change, certainties disappear, new possibilities emerge. A life in which everything was concluded would, at the same time, be a life in which nothing more could come into being.

One of the quiet illusions of our time is the belief that peace is a state that arrives only after all effort has ended. Peace is not a state that follows hardship. It is an inner stance that must exist alongside it. It is not the absence of tasks that grants calm, but an inner place from which those tasks can be regarded without claiming the whole of a person's being. Incompleteness is not, in this light, a deficiency but part of the open structure of human existence. A coherent life is not a finished one.

“Peace is not a state that follows hardship. It is an inner stance that must exist alongside it.”

◆ 9. The Longing for Undividedness

Modern people are probably not looking, first and foremost, for happiness, nor even for meaning — that large, often overused word of our time. They are looking for something more modest and at once deeper: the experience of being allowed to be only one thing again.

Not simultaneously an employee, a parent, a debtor, a patient, an organizer, a taxpayer, and a crisis manager of one's own existence. But, for a few hours, sometimes only for minutes: a person who thinks, feels, listens, sees, is silent, or creates — undivided. Undividedness does not mean a state free of disturbance. It describes that increasingly rare experience in which perceiving, thinking, and acting once again belong to the same movement. For a moment, a person does not stand beside their own doing. They are within it. This is precisely why activities that look exhausting from the outside can be deeply fulfilling: a person can write, research, make music, build, or care for hours on end, and feel less depleted by it than after a short spell of scattered busyness.

From this longing grows a freedom that seems almost unfamiliar in a world of unlimited possibility: the freedom to leave something untapped. Modern people are used to reading every possibility as an obligation. Whatever could be done seems to demand being done. Yet every life that is lived consists just as much of what was left unlived. Every decision gives shape to one path by leaving others behind. A thought may be thought without being published. An ability may exist without becoming a source of income. Maturity, seen this way, shows itself not only in realizing possibilities but equally in being able to let them rest — not out of resignation, but because a life does not gain its worth by exhausting every possibility it holds.

◆ 10. The Dignity of the Purposeless

May anything in human life exist without having to serve a later purpose? On the answer depends whether a person may be more than the sum of their usefulness.

Where everything is administered, a question gains weight that seldom had to be asked in this way: whether something can be meaningful even when it leads to nothing. A conversation at whose end no decision stands. A book that brings no qualification. A walk through the woods without a step goal and without a record. A stillness not meant to serve tomorrow's performance. In a form of life that prizes impact and results, such moments have an almost foreign ring — and yet many people remember them as especially precious.

Various philosophical and religious traditions have explicitly honored the purposeless. In ancient philosophy, leisure was not mere recovery from work but the space in which understanding becomes possible at all; the word “school” goes back to the Greek *scholē*, leisure. The Sabbath is often interpreted in the Jewish tradition not as regeneration for the working week but as its very point. No common doctrine joins such traditions, but they share the thought that part of time should not be accounted for.

This fits a distinction philosophy has long drawn between price and dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else. What has dignity can be exchanged for nothing, because it does not draw its worth from where it leads. In this sense the purposeless has a dignity of its own. It is not useless; that a person rests in it, thinks more clearly, or grows calmer may follow as an effect, but should not become the condition. Whoever practices silence only to become more productive has already taken it back into administration.

In this way the purposeless protects people from using themselves up entirely. It preserves an experience in which they are not a means — not even a means to their own future. It allows the moment to stand for itself, and reminds us that a person is not exhausted by their functions.

“The purposeless is not the superfluous. It is what cannot be accounted for.”

◆ 11. What Silence Really Means

Silence means far more than the absence of sound. A person can sit in a soundless room and still be inwardly torn apart.

Just as they can, amid wind, music, or a busy street, suddenly feel gathered. Silence begins where attention stops fragmenting among countless demands. It is inner collectedness: the state in which perceiving, thinking, and acting fall back into one — not as mere quiet, but as that space in which experiences can settle, thoughts connect with one another, and perceptions unfold their meaning.

Silence requires neither flight from the world nor secluded monasteries or untouched landscapes. Religious and philosophical traditions have developed their own forms of withdrawal, contemplation, leisure, and deliberate interruption — prayer, meditation, time in nature, art. They differ considerably in interpretation and practice. What can be drawn from them is therefore not a historical certainty but an interpretation this Wissensraum proposes: understanding does not arise from the intake of new information alone, but also needs stretches of time in which nothing new is added. In this sense silence is not the opposite of life but one of those spaces in which life finds its coherence again — carrying with it what the accelerated world finds so hard to bear: tiredness, limits, the unfinished, and a quiet that need serve no purpose.

“Silence is the state in which attention finds its way home.”

◆ 12. The Creative Space — How Reality Is Transformed

People do not merely perceive reality. They transform it.

The earliest pictorial testimonies — hand outlines and animal figures in caves, some of which are dated by current methods to more than thirty-five thousand years ago — show that people very early on did not merely perceive but depicted what they perceived. How imagination, language, narrative, and worldview developed from such beginnings cannot be reconstructed as a sequence. What is certain is only that people receive a world and bring forth, out of their encounter with it, something that did not exist before: images, music, tools, sciences, philosophies.

For the individual, this movement can be described as ripening. Between perception and expression lies an interval. An experience is taken in and may at first carry no recognizable

meaning. Later it meets a memory, an observation, a thought. Connections form that were previously invisible, and many people describe that a thought takes shape precisely when they are not pursuing it. Eventually something emerges: a sentence, an idea, an insight, a work.

This process can be encouraged but hardly forced. Insight resists acceleration. It grows in what is hidden, in the creative space of silence — not as a luxury for artists, but as the very nature of human existence. Herein lies the difference between creation and administration. Administration works with what already exists. Creation opens a space for something that does not yet have a shape.

“This space is no luxury reserved for artists. It is the very nature of human existence.”

◆ 13. Conclusion — Life as a Weave

A life consists of individual events, yet their meaning rarely arises in isolation.

An encounter takes on a different meaning years later. A failure opens a path that was not visible before. A loss changes the way what remains is perceived. And so, over the years, a weave forms — not a record of concluded matters. Joy and loss, certainty and doubt, closeness and parting do not simply stand side by side within it — they change one another. In this light, even the unfinished loses something of its threatening character. Not everything has to be concluded in order to find its place. Some questions accompany a person for a whole lifetime and can still become part of a greater whole.

Maturity, then, consists less in bringing ever more areas of life under control. It shows itself just as much in the ability to carry what remains open without being wholly claimed by it. The inner coherence of a life does not arise because every contradiction disappears. It grows where different, even conflicting things are allowed to stand side by side and are still recognized as part of the same biography.

At the end of a life, what will matter is hardly whether every list was completed, every possibility used, every area brought into perfect order. Much will remain open. And still, a life can have been whole — not through how flawlessly it was administered, but through how a person met the world, what they perceived, understood, and transformed within it, which relationships they entered into, and what expression they gave to what became visible through their life. A person does not need to finish their life like a project. They live it while it remains unfinished.

The freedom so many people seek within their obligations begins exactly here: in the recognition that life does not begin only where there is nothing left to administer. It is already here — between

the tasks, beneath the open questions, in encounter, in the creative moment, and in that quiet presence in which, for a moment, nothing needs to be accomplished for something to be whole.

| *“We are more than the sum of our tasks.”*

∞ Depth & Further Reading

Those who wish to explore the questions touched on here will find related depths within the WISSENSRÄUME series:

- Wissensraum No. 3 — The Stillness of Rest: Space for Consciousness, Education, and Change
- Wissensraum No. 9 — Burnout in the Shadow of the Perpetual Motion Machine
- Wissensraum No. 10 — Depression as a Blocked Transition

◇ Sources & Traces of Thought

This Wissensraum does not present itself as a scientific treatise. The sources below mark the scholarly and scientific traces of thought to which its statements connect — above all those of chapters 3, 5, 6, 10, and 12. Where studies are named, they support individual empirical statements; the remaining thoughts are anthropological-philosophical interpretation and are meant as such.

Scientific references

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- Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith, Ulrich Klocke: The cost of interrupted work: more speed and stress. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '08)*, Florence 2008, pp. 107–110. Interruptions, pace, and tension (chapter 5).
- World Health Organization: Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: *International Classification of Diseases*. Geneva, 28 May 2019 (ICD-11, QD85). For orientation: burn-out is classified as an occupational phenomenon, not as a disease; the “new exhaustion” of this Wissensraum is expressly not a clinical term (chapter 5).
- Graham Wallas: *The Art of Thought*. London 1926. A description of a ripening phase in creative thinking (chapter 12).
- Maxime Aubert et al.: Pleistocene cave art from Sulawesi, Indonesia. *Nature* 514 (2014), 223–227. Early pictorial evidence of human capacity for creation (chapter 12).

Philosophical and cultural-historical references

- Jürgen Habermas: *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* [The Theory of Communicative Action], vol. 2. Frankfurt am Main 1981. On how system logics penetrate the lifeworld (chapter 3).
- Hartmut Rosa: *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* [Resonance]. Berlin 2016; *Unverfügbarkeit* [The Uncontrollability of the World]. Vienna/Salzburg 2018. Acceleration, relation to the world, and the unavailable (chapters 3 and 6).
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- Hannah Arendt: *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* [The Human Condition]. Stuttgart 1960. Labor, work, and action (chapters 2 and 12).
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York 1990. Undivided absorption in one’s own doing (chapter 9).
- Immanuel Kant: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals]. Riga 1785. The distinction between price and dignity (chapter 10).
- Josef Pieper: *Muße und Kult* [Leisure, the Basis of Culture]. Munich 1948. Leisure as freedom from purpose (chapters 10 and 11).
- Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The Sabbath*. New York 1951. The Sabbath as a point in itself, not a means to the working week (chapter 10).

○ WISSENSRÄUME — Appreciation

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