



WISSENSRAUM No. 16

DEGRADATION OF THE SELF

An account handed down of the forgetting of the ground

“The falling is not the fall. The forgetting of the ground is.”

AKADEMIE DER WEISHEIT — WISSENSRÄUME

◆ 1. Out of Love for Clarity

At the beginning of this movement stands no crime, but a thoroughly human need: the wish to make the indeterminate graspable.

It is told that the human being once began to measure the world, and that this happened neither out of malice nor out of need, but out of love for clarity. For heavy to bear was that indeterminate thing which clung to the human being as mist clings to water, and whoever cannot say himself does not know whether he is. So they took the measure. First the measure of the field, then of the grain, then of the years. Later of sleep, of the step, of the breath. They counted what came and weighed what remained, and held the one against the other, and much that had been dark to them before grew bright.

This movement deserves respect before it is questioned. Without measure there would be no bridge that holds, no harvest that suffices, no medicine whose effect could be told apart from its danger. Without number there would be no understanding about what one person alone could never survey. Measure is one of the great inventions of humankind, perhaps the most consequential after language, and it is closely akin to it: both cut something out of the stream of happening, hold it fast and make it communicable. Whoever measures says: here this ends and that begins. Whoever names does the same.

And because the measure served them, they trusted it. This too follows. A tool that holds is not questioned anew each morning. It migrates out of attention into self-evidence, and precisely there it begins to work unnoticed. For a tool that no one examines any longer will in the end examine the one who uses it.

Here already lies the ground law of this whole account, and it is quieter than one would expect. The degradation does not begin where measuring takes place. It begins where the means of knowing becomes, unnoticed, the measure of what is real. It is not measuring that lowers the human being. The equating of measurability with reality does.

And it happens slowly. So slowly that no one could witness the beginning, for the measuring went slower than a human life, and no one lived through both: the ground and its loss. What is barely perceptible as a shift within a single biography becomes, over generations, the new level of the floor. Each generation finds already in place what the one before held to be reasonable, and holds it in its turn for the nature of things. In this way no catastrophe arises that one could report, but a habituation that no one reports at all.

“*Whatever let itself be fitted into number counted henceforth as real.*”

◆ 2. What Bears No Name

Every measure has a reverse side of which one speaks more rarely: together with what it grasps, it produces what it does not grasp — and what is not grasped begins to fade.

Whatever would not fit remained without a name, and what remains without a name soon counts as never having been. This sentence describes no theory but an everyday experience that can be found again in nearly every area of modern life. In a hospital what can be coded is recorded: diagnoses, length of stay, case severity, procedures. What a person experienced in those days, what fear kept him awake at night, which conversation carried him, enters none of these columns. It is not denied. It is simply not provided for. In long-term care, a person's independence is assessed across six domains, weighted and converted into a score from which a care level follows. The procedure is carefully built and adequate to its task. And yet none of its categories describes whether this person is still present in his own life.

In school a single digit decides access that still has effect years later. At work, agreed targets and key figures describe what counts, and what is not counted does not appear at year's end. Online, reach, dwell time and approval are measured, and what cannot be expressed in those quantities has taken place without having taken place. Even rest has been drawn into this movement: there are sleep scores, recovery scores, strain scores. A person can look at a device in the morning to learn whether he feels rested.

What is disquieting about this is not the inaccuracy of such procedures. Many of them are more precise than anything earlier ages had at their disposal. What is disquieting is their suggestion of completeness. Where something is recorded without gaps, the impression arises that it has thereby also been grasped without remainder. The gap becomes invisible, because it has no place in which it could appear.

So something shifts without anyone having decided it. The unmeasured becomes measurable, the living graspable, the open narrow. And with every new quantity that can be recorded, not only knowledge grows but also the zone of what this knowledge covers over — for every measure directs attention, and a directed attention looks past other things.

“*The unmeasured became measurable, the living graspable, the open narrow.*”

◆ 3. The Mirrors Made of Words and Glances

Then came the mirrors. Not those of glass, but those made of words, glances and judgements — and in them the human being appeared as an image, and the image was more manageable than he was himself.

It would be too easy to speak here of the present and to stop at profiles, photographs and signs of approval. These mirrors are old. They consisted of what the neighbourhood said about one, of the reputation that preceded one, of the family name, of what remained when one had left the room. What is new is not their existence but their density, their speed and their durability. What a village once knew, a network now knows that forgets nothing and is able to give information at any hour.

The reason the image can overgrow the human being, however, lies deeper than in any technology. It lies in a fundamental disproportion: the living is unwieldy, its representation is manageable. A human being was hard to have. He changed, contradicted himself, loved today what he had feared yesterday, fell silent when an answer was demanded of him, and spoke when everything seemed long since said. He could become strange to himself and suddenly close to a stranger. No measure held him for long.

His image, however, was light. It could be shown, bettered, exchanged, defended. It could be carried to places no body reached. One could compare it with other images and give it a place among them. And because it was light it was loved, and because it was loved it was tended, and because it was tended it grew, until it overgrew the one whose image it was.

This tending has in our time become an activity of its own that consumes lifetime. There are curricula vitae written for an algorithm that reads them first. There are ratings that decide the existence of a craftsman's business. There are credit scores that determine whether someone receives an apartment, and whose derivation the person scored does not himself know. In all of this the same thing happens: not the human being appears, but his representation — and it appears more reliably, more calculably and more advantageously than he ever could.

The quiet consequence is a reversal of care. At some point a person no longer takes care that the image corresponds to him, but that he corresponds to the image. He corrects not the description but himself. And from this point on he works for something that would not exist without him, but that can go on existing without him.

“A human being was hard to have. His image was light.”

◆ 4. Being — Naming — Belonging — Function — Valuation — Number

What the account tells in six steps is not a history of humankind but the biography of each one: out of the being there came one who was named, out of the named one who belonged, out of the belonging one who was useful, out of the useful one who was valued, out of the valued a number.

Every human being begins before he has become his own measure. He lies there and breathes, does not yet know his name, has no yesterday to defend and no tomorrow to reach. This beginning too already knows rhythm, difference and regulation — hunger and satiety, nearness and distance, waking and sleep. What it lacks is not measure but self-measurement: no one is there who observes, examines and assesses himself. Warmth is felt, nearness sought, pain wept through, and none of it has to account for itself before a standard.

Then comes the naming, and it does not come as an enemy. It comes from the mouths of those who love one: *This is you. This you can do. This you cannot. This is how others see you.* Out of such voices a figure grows, and it is necessary, for without it no one walks through the world. It gives direction, guards memory, wards off what comes too close, and lets one be recognisable again the next morning. The naming is no misfortune. It is a condition for becoming recognisable as someone among others.

Out of the naming follows the assignment. Whoever bears a name soon bears an origin, a class, a role, a diagnosis, a belonging. This too is at first orientation and protection. Belonging carries a person through times in which he does not carry himself.

Out of the assignment, however, follows almost imperceptibly the question of function. What is this person good for, in this role, in this order? And here the first real break occurs, for from now on a person is no longer measured by what he is but by what he does. The transition is so hard to notice because it is rewarded with recognition. Usefulness feels good. To be needed is one of the deepest human needs.

Out of function follows valuation, and with it something enters that can no longer be taken back: comparability. Whoever is valued stands beside others who are valued. A value is never absolute; it is always a relation. From this point on a person no longer lives only his life, but his position.

And at the end stands the number. Score, grade, rank, quota, level, point value. The number is the most perfect form of assignment, for it is unambiguous, transferable and no longer needs the single case. It can be passed on, stored, offset and carried along for years. And the number had need of him no longer.

In this lies the meaning of the word degradation in this Wissensraum. It means neither humiliation nor insult. It means a lowering of dimension: from the not fully graspable to the graspable, from the one who experiences to the one who is described, from the being to the named. At first nothing need be visibly damaged. A part is merely taken for the whole — reliably, repeatably and with good reasons.

“*And the number had need of him no longer.*”

◆ 5. They Carried the Scales Within Them

At this point the account pauses. For here the listener expects that now a master will be reported, chains, a yoke and watchmen who walk the alleys by night.

That way the story would be bearable. One can escape a yoke, and a watchman can be struck down. An oppression that has an author is an oppression against which something can be done. It permits outrage, resistance, liberation — and above all it permits innocence.

Yet no master is named. No chain is described. They carried the scales within them.

Each one weighed himself, morning and evening, and when he found himself too light he accused no one but himself. They guarded the measure that no one had given them, whose origin none of them knew any longer, and which they nevertheless questioned every hour as to whether they had been enough.

This is the point at which this Wissensraum differs from any ordinary critique of society. There is no unambiguous perpetrator and no unambiguously passive victim. A person receives the measure, applies it to himself, passes it on — to his children, to those who work for him, to those entrusted to his care — and at some point no one knows its origin any longer. There is no authority with which one could lodge an objection, because the authority sits within each single person.

In the present, this self-examination has found forms that require no office. No overseer is needed to measure work performance when the worker documents his own productivity. No regulation on rest is needed when the one resting evaluates his own recovery. No decree on visibility is needed when visibility is tended voluntarily. Where outward compulsion is replaced by one's own participation, the location of resistance changes as well. What was imposed from outside could be recognised as foreign. What a person carries out himself already bears his consent within it — or at least its appearance.

Later they no longer knew that it was a scale. They called it reason. They called it reality. Some even called it themselves. And in this lay what was hidden: as long as one knows that one is bowing to a foreign measure, a distance remains. Within that distance, contradiction can live, criticism, freedom, at least an exhaustion with a reason. If the distance disappears, so does the place from which contradiction would be possible.

And because no master was there, no uprising was handed down either.

“One does not rise up against what one takes oneself to be.”

◆ 6. “That Is Me” — When the Measure Becomes the Inner Arbiter of Truth

The real depth of this movement shows itself in a small shift of language that hardly anyone notices, because it takes place within.

There is a sentence that still keeps a distance: *They demand of me that I succeed*. In it, two are separate — one who demands and one to whom the demand is addressed. This sentence can make a person tired, angry, sad. But it can also be refused.

And there is the sentence in which no distance remains: *I have failed*. Not: my performance was evaluated. But: *I am not enough*. Here the measure is no longer something that is applied. It has become the inner arbiter of truth, the voice that decides about one's own reality — and this voice is no longer heard as foreign but as one's own.

A psychological kinship can be found in research on self-objectification. It describes how an external observer's perspective can be internalised until a person regards himself permanently from outside — even when no one is looking — and how this constant self-observation binds attention, overlays the immediate experience of body and feeling, and makes shame more likely. The research model, however, is more narrowly framed than what is at stake here; it arose from the question of how an objectifying cultural gaze upon the body is taken over. What is meant here reaches further: it concerns performance, role, origin, diagnosis, usefulness and finally the question of what a human being is at all. Common to both is the condition in which someone encounters himself only as an object.

In this lies the actual reversal. The human being is not merely reduced. He permits the reduction, carries it out himself, and mostly does not notice it in doing so. He observes himself, evaluates himself, categorises himself, optimises himself, compares himself — and is described ever more precisely, while the question of who or what experiences all this grows ever quieter. The self-description becomes more detailed, and the one to whom it belongs disappears behind it.

It would be wrong to see in this only weakness. This shift also brings forth something one might call maturity: self-examination, responsibility, the capacity to regard oneself from outside and to learn from it. A person who never regards himself remains unteachable. The question is not whether one may regard oneself, but whether the regarding still has a place from which it happens — or whether it has taken up the whole room.

For they no longer said that it was demanded of them to be enough. They said: *I am not enough*. And they said it not in lament, but as one speaks of a task that has been resolved.

“*They said: I am not enough.*”

◆ 7. What in a Person Is Willing to Take Part

Here begins the most uncomfortable question of this Wissensraum. It is not: what has the system made of the human being? It is: what has the human being learned to make of himself in order to exist within this system — and why does he do it so willingly?

The answer begins not with weakness but with something very human: the unnamed gives no hold. It lets nothing be grasped, it knows no origin, it shows nothing. An image gives hold. A name gives hold. A rank gives hold. Even a wound gives hold, if it is told long enough to say who someone is. And so some bowed not because it was demanded of them, but because the indeterminate within them was greater than they dared to bear.

To this is added relief. It is an enormous unburdening when a system says what is right. Whoever fulfils a target need not decide whether it was the right target. Whoever reaches a specification is relieved of the question whether it corresponds to him. The number takes from a person a burden heavier than any requirement: the burden of forming his own judgement. This is why standards are not merely tolerated but sought. This is why there are people who become restless when no one tells them whether they were good enough.

To this is added belonging. Whoever fits in belongs, and for a social being exclusion is no side matter but an existential threat. Much of what appears as adaptation can also be the avoidance of loneliness.

And to this is added recognition — the most effective of all. It rewards precisely that movement which takes a person away from himself. Whoever orders his life according to the measure is not punished for it but praised. The degradation does not happen against resistance; it happens along the line of reinforcement. Herein lies one reason why outrage can fail to arise. For it is hard to rise up against what one is recognised for.

Here it also shows why a critique of economy, technology or administration alone does not suffice for this theme. Such a critique strikes something real — structures do reduce people, and many are subjected to that reduction without having taken part in it. For this Wissensraum, however, a purely external explanation would remain incomplete, because it would leave out exactly that inner participation which is to be examined here. The philosophically more uncomfortable question therefore runs: what in a person makes him willing to take part in his own reduction? Recognition, security, convenience, belonging, the fear of exclusion, habit, the longing for orientation — and the relief when another says what counts.

One sentence has been preserved from that time, and they said it not in lament but in relief, as one speaks of a task that has been resolved: *We have fitted ourselves in.* Whoever hears this sentence and is not startled has heard it rightly.

“*We have fitted ourselves in.*”

◆ 8. The Maker Serves What He Made

The same people who had created the measure in order to order the world began one day to order themselves according to the measure. And no one could say when the servant had become the master.

They had divided time so that they would know when to sow the grain and when to set out on the road. Later they ate when the hour demanded it, slept when the hour permitted it, and woke because the hour had come. They had given names so that things could be told apart. Later only what bore a name counted as real. They had made orders so that many could live together. Later they spent their lives corresponding to the orders. They had made images so that the absent could remain present. Later they left what was present in order to preserve the image of it.

This reversal is old. It is no invention of the modern age and no consequence of any particular technology. It is a recurring movement of the human spirit: what was made to serve begins to determine. Tool becomes the rule of the tool. Order becomes submission to the order. Name becomes captivity in the named. Measure becomes a life lived according to the measure. Image becomes a life lived for the image.

The present has only given this old movement a new density. There are key figures that were introduced to make quality visible and that today determine what counts as quality. There are documentation duties that arose to secure care and that today consume the time care lacks. There are evaluation systems in education, medicine and administration that were to enable better decisions and that now influence which decisions are made at all. Economics has found a sober formulation for this: a measure raised to the status of a target loses its suitability as a measure. What is measured is optimised — even when what it was measured for is thereby lost.

Yet the sentence that carries this Wissensraum is older and wider than any of these observations: what the human being had made to serve him began to determine his days. And the human being served it well.

“And no one could say when the servant had become the master.”

◆ 9. Nothing Was Wanting to Them

What is remarkable is mentioned expressly, because without this passage everything preceding it would tip over into a longing for earlier times that would be neither honest nor true.

Nothing was wanting to them. They had light in the night and warmth in winter and news across the seas and images of everything that ever was. Their children no longer died as before. Their roads had grown short. Their stores sufficed. Illnesses that had once been a sentence could be healed. Voices reached one another across distances for which a human life would formerly scarcely have sufficed.

That sentence about the children is the most important of this whole chapter, and it prevents any romanticising. Whoever speaks of the loss of the unmeasurable must at the same time acknowledge what systematic observation, comparison, statistics and standardisation have made possible: medical knowledge, more reliable procedures, better estimation of risk, hygiene, the relief of pain and numerous advances in care and safety. Much of this would hardly have come about in this form without systematic observation, number, record and comparison.

Much was given to them. And perhaps it was for this very reason so hard to recognise what had happened. For how should anyone speak of loss when everything had become more?

Here lies the more radical question, and it cannot be answered without losing one of the two sides one would gladly keep: can a civilisation give the human being ever more and at the same time make access to a dimension of himself harder? Can both happen at once — progress and loss — without the one outweighing or devaluing the other?

This Wissensraum does not resolve this question. It holds it open, because any resolution would be too quick. Whoever says that progress has brought everything overlooks what slipped out of view. Whoever says that progress has damaged us would have to explain which of the lives gained he would be willing to do without. Gain and narrowing can happen simultaneously, and neither cancels the other. Perhaps the real demand of this age consists in bearing both at once, without being permitted to decide for one of the two stories.

“How should anyone speak of loss when everything had become more?”

◆ 10. Not the Lie That Covers Over

Two interpretations have been handed down, and they contradict each other. The one says: they lost their self. The other says: nothing was lost — it was only covered over, layer upon layer, with nothing but what was true.

This is the philosophically decisive sentence of this Wissensraum, for it prevents the cheap deliverance. It would be consoling if the degradation consisted of errors, of false sentences, false images, false convictions. Then enlightenment would suffice: one would only have to find the untruths and remove them, and underneath the human being would come forth.

But it is not so. The name is not false. The story is not false. The image need be no deception. The measure can be exact. A diagnosis can be correct, a biography can be accurate, a description of character can be so precise that the one described is himself startled by it. An evaluation can be well founded, a number correctly calculated, a judgement fairly reached.

And still the exact can miss the whole.

In this lies the distinction with which this entire Wissensraum is concerned: the truth about a person is not the reality of a person. Everything that can be said about him is something other than he is. The sum of all accurate statements about a person does not yield that person — just as the sum of all accurate statements about a piece of music does not yield the music, and whoever knows every figure about a thunderstorm has not therefore experienced one.

Philosophy has described this fallacy as the confusion of the abstract with the concrete: we form a concept that grasps something, and then take the concept for the thing. It is no error of individuals but a property of thinking itself, and it is all the more effective the better the concepts become. The more precise a model grows, the greater the temptation to take it for reality.

Not the lie covers over. What is accurate covers over. And it covers more thoroughly than any lie, for against a lie an objection can be raised. Against what is accurate it cannot.

Therefore, those others say, that age was not the age of loss. It was the age of confusion. The account does not decide this. It reports only that both interpretations came from people who had weighed, and that none of them had been present when there was not yet any weighing.

“The measure can be exact. And still the exact can miss the whole.”

◆ 11. Who Is It That Undergoes All This?

Only one question ceased to be asked. Not the question “Who am I?” — that one they asked unceasingly, and they answered it with lists.

The lists grew longer and more precise, and in them stood origin, inclination, suffering, talent, rank and nature, until a person knew himself as an administrator knows his register. Nothing in it was invented. Everything had been gathered, examined, confirmed.

But that other question, the one that lies beneath all lists and appears in none: *Who is it that undergoes all this?*

For he who counts does not appear in his count. He who weighs does not lie upon his scale. He who names does not enter into his name. And so the one who measured had remained the only unmeasured thing. But because he appeared nowhere in what he knew of himself, he was asked after less and less — and what is no longer asked ceases at some point to exist as a question.

This Wissensraum does not answer it. It poses it and lets it stand. For in the moment an answer is given — you are not the measured but the one who measures — the shock has become a teaching, and a teaching can be learned, repeated, passed on and finally entered into a list as well. There is hardly an insight that lends itself to appropriation as readily as this one.

That is why the question remains uncomfortable here. It is neither consolation nor method. It is a gap in one's own description, and it cannot be closed, only noticed.

“Because he appeared nowhere in what he knew of himself, he was asked after less and less.”

◆ 12. What No Measure Found

The same account also reports what no measure found. And it is remarkable that precisely the unwelcome things resist measuring most stubbornly.

Of the pain that never asked permission and halted before no register. One can ask for it on a scale from zero to ten, and one should, for without that question suffering would go untreated. And yet everyone who has ever answered it knows that the number is not the pain. It makes something of it communicable without containing the experience itself. Pain does not withdraw out of defiance. It withdraws because it is not an object but a condition of the one who experiences.

Of the longing that could visit a person in the midst of everything attained and could be explained by none of it. It appears precisely when nothing is lacking, and is therefore unintelligible to every logic of deficiency.

Of boredom, that dreaded hour in which nothing was to be done and everything administered fell silent. This they feared more than fire, and they invented much to escape it, for in it the

question stood unconcealed in the room. Today no invention is needed for that; a movement of the hand suffices. The hour in which nothing is demanded of a person seems to have grown rare in our time. And perhaps it is one of those hours in which a person's own description falls silent for a moment.

Of dying, for which no rank suffices and which is not exhausted by its order even where whole systems are directed towards accompanying, describing and administering it. Before it the lists remain in place — and at the same time show their limit.

And of attention, that turning towards which can open itself to a person or a thing before it classifies. It does not abolish measure, and it is no mysterious remainder; individual aspects of it can be investigated, measured and trained. Yet for the span of a moment what is recognised need not be all that is seen — and precisely that enters into no account. The account calls it the light that shows things and is not itself among them. Simone Weil called this turning towards the rarest and purest form of generosity. That attention has in our time at the same time become a tradable quantity, measured in seconds and sold in reach, belongs to the most precise descriptions of what this Wissensraum is about.

Of shame the account also speaks, and it is the most ambiguous of all. It can be the witness of what did not take part — that remainder which knows that something is not right, even when every measure has been fulfilled. But it can just as well arise from internalised outside evaluation and then be the sharpest instrument of self-reduction. Whether it is witness or instrument cannot be decided from outside, and from within often only late.

“... like the light that shows things and is not itself among them.”

◆ 13. When the Accurate Comes Between Us

Until now it has been a matter of how a person measures himself. The same movement, however, also takes place in encounter — and there it concerns not the other person but my categories, my prior information, my order and my gaze.

In nursing, in medicine, in accompaniment, in counselling, in teaching and in every public office, the same thing happens daily: a person enters and is received — as a case, a diagnosis, a care level, an applicant, a relative, a number on a list. None of this is false. Without such classification there would be no provision of care, no fairness in distribution, no accountability, no protection against arbitrariness. Whoever works in accompaniment knows that documentation is not the enemy of attentiveness but often its precondition.

And yet here too what this whole Wissensraum describes holds good, and it carries the thought of the tenth chapter over into relationship: what is accurate covers over. The difficulty lies not in the designation being wrong, but in the accurate category appearing to contain the person

entirely. It is accurate that this person has care level four. It is accurate that his prognosis is unfavourable. It is accurate that he is considered difficult, that the relative was described as demanding, that the pupil is recorded as unfocused. Each of these descriptions can be true, and each of them steps in front of the person before he could say anything himself. Whoever has read a file no longer meets anyone without prejudice — he meets the image, and the image was there first.

The question is therefore not whether one can stop measuring, and it contains no moral demand not to judge people. Without categories, medicine, nursing, education and any just order could hardly work. The question is: can the category remain a tool without becoming an image of the human being? And, in the single encounter: what happens to it when I already know who the other is?

This is less a question of time than it seems. There are brief encounters in which a person was wholly meant, and long ones in which he never was. What makes the difference is an inner movement: that the one who accompanies does not, for a moment, take his knowledge for reality, but for what it is — an accurate statement about a person that does not contain this person. Precisely here lies the practical meaning of that turning towards of which the previous chapter spoke: it does not abolish the category, it merely keeps the person from coinciding with it entirely.

To this belongs the reverse as well. Whoever accompanies is himself weighed: by key figures, time specifications, quality indicators, evaluations, by his own exhaustion and by the quiet standard each person applies to himself. It is hard to leave another the room one does not leave oneself. Whoever measures himself all day by his usefulness will hardly be able to see in another person anything that lies beyond usefulness. The capacity not to reduce a person to his description depends on whether one can still manage that with oneself.

Perhaps in this lies the only practical conclusion this Wissensraum permits — and it is no method but an attentiveness: to notice when one's own scale is speaking, and for the span of an encounter not to believe everything it says.

“It is accurate. And it is not the person.”

◆ 14. Conclusion — The Scales Lay Still

Last of all a small thing is told that no one could explain.

It happened that single ones among them stood still in the middle of the day. Without occasion. Nothing was pending. No misfortune had occurred. And for the span of one breath there was

no one who observed himself, and nothing that had to be measured, and no question how much all this was worth.

The scales lay still.

Sometimes a fright went before it for which there was no reason. One saw his hands and did not know when they had grown old. One heard the voice of a person he loved and noticed how long he had not truly listened to her. One stood somewhere between what still had to be done and what had already been done, and for a moment it occurred to him that this was his life. Not the preparation for it. Not the administration of it. Not the image of it. This.

And then it went on, as it goes on.

But it is said that those to whom this happened were strangely useless for the rest of the day. Some forgot something. Some came too late. Some sat longer with another person although the matter had long been discussed. One is said not to have taken a road although it was shorter. Of a woman it is reported that one evening she put out the light and stayed a long while at the open window. Why, she could no longer say the following morning.

It is remarkable that the account chooses precisely this word. Useless — the same word that earlier designated a stage of the degradation returns at the end.

More than this the account does not say about it. It does not say that the human being returns to himself in that moment. It does not say that he becomes free. It does not even say that anything was gained. It reports only: the scales lay still.

But what would have come to pass, had one laid the scales out of his hand for a single breath longer?

“*Of that, nothing is handed down.*”

◇ Sources & Lines of Thought

This Wissensraum is not a scientific text and gives no references within its body. Those who wish to pursue the movements described here will find connections in the following lines of thought:

Alfred North Whitehead described in *Science and the Modern World* (1925) the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: the confusion of an abstraction with the reality it describes.

Max Weber examined the rationalisation and disenchantment of the modern world and the casing that issues from it (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1904/05; *Science as a Vocation*, lecture 1917, printed 1919).

Max Horkheimer distinguished in *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; German *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft*, 1967) a reason that asks after ends from one that only examines means.

Günther Anders placed *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (volume 1, 1956) under the opening section “On Promethean Shame”: the shame of the human being before the perfection of the things he has himself produced.

Michel Foucault examined how human beings become objects of knowledge (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) and, in his late work on the technologies of the self, how they learn to govern, examine and form themselves.

Martin Buber distinguished in *I and Thou* (1923) the encounter in which a counterpart is experienced from that attitude in which everything becomes an object.

Søren Kierkegaard determined in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) the self not as a property but as a relation that relates itself to itself — and described what it can fall ill of.

Simone Weil is credited with the formulation that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity; it is handed down from a letter to Joë Bousquet of 13 April 1942 and quoted in Simone Pétrement's biography of Weil (1973). Her reflections on attention are also found in *Waiting for God*.

Charles Goodhart formulated in 1975 that any observed statistical regularity tends to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for purposes of control. The short form widespread today — when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure — became known through Marilyn Strathern (1997), who herself attributes the thought to Goodhart. Donald T. Campbell described a related connection for social indicators from the late 1960s onward.

Research on self-objectification goes back substantially to Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997); their model examines in particular how an objectifying cultural gaze upon the body is internalised, and describes habitual self-monitoring, increased occasions for shame and a diminished awareness of inner states. Research on the overjustification effect shows how external reward and evaluation can displace an originally intrinsic motivation.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (III, 4, 2) stands the thought that the seer of seeing cannot be seen, the hearer of hearing not heard and the knower of knowing not known — the one who experiences everything appears in no experience as an object.

∞ Further Exploration

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

- Wissensraum No. 7 — Beyond Listening: The Essence of True Presence
- Wissensraum No. 9 — Burnout in the Shadow of the Perpetual Motion Machine
- Wissensraum No. 11 — When Life Is Only Administered
- Wissensraum No. 12 — The Reality of Non-Duality
- Wissensraum No. 14 — Faithfulness to One's Own Perception
- Wissensraum No. 15 — Fear as the Longing for What Must Happen

○ WISSENSRÄUME — Appreciation

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△ WISSENSRÄUME — Notes

This text serves orientation, deeper reflection and personal engagement. It replaces neither medical, psychotherapeutic, nursing nor legal advice, and constitutes neither a diagnosis nor a recommendation for treatment. Anyone in a burdensome life situation will find professional support with physicians, in psychotherapeutic practices, in counselling centres and in pastoral care.

The lines of thought named here stand for possibilities of connection, not for a complete account of the respective works. The connections presented here are a model of thought, not a scientifically established doctrine.