

# What is Wisdom?<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In many cultures which we call “primitive”, people who transgress the norms of custom or manner are not punished as in our patriarchal western culture, rather they are reincorporated through various practices. Restitution and reincorporation are forms of being, of living, beyond the transgression. In this way the natural order of existence is recovered, and everything returns to its proper place in the cosmic order. When we see this happening, we recognize the wisdom of it, and at the same time we realize that lack of wisdom in human relations with the natural world leads to suffering. But what is wisdom? Is it something to be studied and learned? Or is it a talent?

The authors think that in the present time of our patriarchal culture we humans have lost wisdom as a natural aspect of our daily lives. What is it that we have lost?

To explore this question we, the authors, will look at how the natural order came to be, and how we humans evolved as part of this natural order. Then we will discuss different ways of thinking, and in what circumstances we recognize wisdom. Finally we will talk about how we may recover what we have lost, if we so desire. First, however, let us look a little more closely at our current circumstances, in which we the authors, and you the readers, live in, as do most humans living at this time.

## 2. Our Culture

We live immersed in a culture which endows rationality with such supremacy that it devalues emotions. As they are devalued, emotions are presented as if they only happen occasionally, as a disturbance in our rational existence. Indeed, most of the time we only recognize those emotions which are extremes, which do not fit in the day to day operation of our culture. This is evident in the way we refer to someone when we say they are “being emotional”.

But we do not see the fundamental emotion that pervades this culture. It is so pervasive that we are blind to it. We are stuck in an emotion of distrust. Distrust leads to a search for certainty and control, which in turn leads to a desire to appropriate everything - blindly oblivious to what this manner of living brings with it. But we are not happy in this. Now and then we catch a glimmer that this is not right, that this manner of living leads to the destruction of not only the spiritual and ethical aspects of our lives, but also the natural world which has given origin to us and which makes possible our very existence as human beings. No wonder we experience anxiety as we catch this glimmer!

What do we do? What we have done is to continually try to improve our situation by developing new approaches and new technologies. This seems entirely reasonable since we have noticed

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that whatever we conceive or imagine can be realized, as long as we don't confuse domains in our designs. Thus we pursue the knowledge and information which will lead us to the right designs. We live in the assumption that our problems can be solved through rational analysis and the development of appropriate technologies. Since we can realize any technology given enough resources and effort, and since technology is seen as the solution, and the problems are clearly worth the effort, it is technology which we pursue.

But, in doing this we make a mistake. The designs we invent are not in the same domain as our problems. Our problems do not arise in the inadequacies of technologies, or the lack of information! They arise through the ambitions that we acquire, encourage and applaud as appropriate to success. And in our culture success is recognized as competitive advantage, as control of resources, or institutions - or even the manipulation of beliefs and ideas. And all this happens in the devaluation of emotion as a contrast to rational, civilized living.

If you look at any situation, you will see that human problems arise in the domain of relations. They arise as emotional conflicts in the intercrossing of contradictory desires, intentions, aspirations and fears. Because of this their resolution is not possible through rational argument or a technological solution. Indeed a rational argument is always an argument for compliance with someone else's desires or ideas. And a technological solution at best shifts the problem to a new domain where it may not have presence in the moment. Even in the short history of modern technology we have noticed that each technological "solution" leads to a new set of problems. Solutions in this culture are always based in a linear causal logic which supports the notion of control - but as you shall see this is not the only logic of the biosphere, and thus is in itself inadequate.

When a problem does disappear, or is resolved, it is not through a logical solution, but rather through an insight or an expansion which provides a new perspective in which the contradictions cease to exist. Such an insight has nothing to do with a logical solution, and it is based in an emotional shift. Later in this paper you will see that the fundamental emotional shift which allows problems to be resolved is from distrust to trust, from aggression and control to love. But before that statement will make sense to you we, the authors, will have to explain why trust is so fundamental, and what love is, as we do not mean it as a sentiment.

There are many examples of problems disappearing as the domain is expanded and the emotioning is changed. The following story comes from Heinz von Foerster, the esteemed father of second order cybernetics.

*Concentration camps were the setting for many horrific stories. Imagine then the incredulous delight of a couple who returned to Vienna from two different camps to find each other alive. They were together for about six months, and then the wife died of an illness she had contracted in the camp. At this her husband lost heart completely, and fell into the deepest despair from which none of his friends could rouse him, not even with the appeal of "Think if she had died earlier!". Finally he was convinced to seek the help of Viktor Frankl, known for his ability to help the victims of catastrophe. They conversed for several hours, and eventually Frankl said: "Lets assume God granted me the power to create a woman just like your wife: she would remember all your conversations, she would remember the jokes, she would remember every detail: you could not distinguish this woman from the wife you lost. Would you like me to do it?"*

*The man kept silent for a while, then said “No thank you!” They shook hands; the man left and started a new life.*

*When asked about this astonishing and simple change, Frankl explained, “You see, Heinz, we see ourselves through the eyes of the other. When she died, he became blind. But when he saw that he was blind, he could see!”*

### 3. The Wisdom of Nature

All life, all living beings, whatever their manner of living, live coherently in the sphere of interactions which makes their living possible. If this coherence is lost, the being disintegrates. Most of the time this does not surprise us, rather we hardly notice it - except in moments of wonder which lead us to comment on the wisdom of nature. But what would surprise most of us, if we were to notice it in the course of our daily living, is that what we call wisdom in humans is like what we see as the wisdom of nature. Human wisdom is lived as a coherence between thought, feeling, and awareness of human action in the cosmos; it is innocent and effortless. Human wisdom happens in our animal living, in our participation in the wisdom of nature, and is not a human construct.

But how does the “wisdom of nature” come about, how does it arise? And how is it that human wisdom is not a result of our civilization? We, the authors, think that what we humans call wisdom is possible as a simple result of the systemic dynamics of existence.

The existence of any system begins whenever a collection of elements relates in such a manner that this particular constellation of relations begins to be conserved. This is so when a particular constellation of relations between electrons, protons and neutrons is conserved to form an atom that we recognize as an element, or when a constellation of relations between atoms is conserved as a molecule. It is also so when a complex network of relations is conserved between molecules to form a living system, e.g. a protozoan. Living systems are those constellations of molecular relations which not only conserve themselves but also produce themselves, in a process called autopoiesis<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, in the moment a system begins to be conserved, it appears as an entity separate from a medium which arises with it. The medium is what the system both exists in and interacts with in a manner which makes it possible for the system to exist. Yes, this is circular, but much more of existence is indeed circular than linear logic can account for.

Thus, the medium appears as a relational domain which arises out of nothing along with the system which it henceforth contains. In the experience of the observer who makes the distinction, system and medium appear from nowhere, out of what simply did not exist before the distinction was made. Another way of putting this is that system and medium arise out of chaos - that is from a background of structural coherences that can only be imagined or perceived by an observer through an intent to explain the operation of the system after it has already been distinguished.

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<sup>2</sup> An autopoietic system is a network of molecular interactions that results in the production and transformation of molecules which a) through their interactions constitute the same network that produced them, and, b) specifies the extension of the molecular network realizing it as a singular entity.

All entities or systems arise thus, in the conservation of relationships which define them, always simultaneously with the medium that makes this possible. A formal statement that corresponds to the above paragraphs would be:

*Whenever a particular constellation of relations begins to be conserved among a collection of elements, there arises simultaneously a system as an entity and the medium which contains it as a domain of interactions. This opens the space for everything to change around those relations which are conserved and which thus define the identity of the system.*

As a result, system and medium necessarily arise in structural coherence as they arise together. Furthermore system and medium remain coherent as they change together in the spontaneous flow of their interactions, or they disappear. This coherent structural change which occurs in the course of evolution of a system, in conservation of its existence, and in adaptation with its medium is called structural coupling.<sup>3</sup>

From the very beginning, the history of living beings on earth has taken a path of continuous spontaneous changes around the conservation of living (autopoiesis) and of variations in the form in which living is realized. The variations of form are surprising to us humans, we are often amazed at all the possible shapes and sizes of living beings. And as we contemplate this, we may become even more amazed to notice that each living being, whatever its form, always realizes and conserves its living in a reciprocal structural coupling with its medium - which includes all other beings as well as the abiotic medium which contains them. As long as living is conserved, the form may be conserved, or it may vary, and it often does so in a drift. Sometimes living is not conserved, and a particular form ceases to exist. If we were to draw the path of this drift we would see a shape like an immense tree with innumerable branches some of which extend to the present, and others which do not.

One of the results of this historic process is that all living beings that exist in any moment have come to this moment through a history of congruent changes. In this history each has changed congruently, each with each another, and all together, as each constitutes the medium for the other, either directly or indirectly. This great system of systems in which each living being lives in operational coherence with other living beings and with the non-living systems of earth is the biosphere.

When all this is considered from a global perspective, the full result of the constitutive dynamic of systems is the biosphere: an immense system of systems of systems which continually arises out of nothing in a spontaneous dynamic of interactions which gives coherence to the totality. In this dynamic, the various types of living beings which now exist on earth are the present moment of different lineages. The identities of all these different lineages are constituted and defined in the systemic dynamic of their conservation through reproduction. The result is that all living systems are interlaced through the circumstance of living as an immense, continuous, and coherent structural dynamic in the configuration of our biosphere.

What we have just said applies equally to us human beings as cultural beings. In general terms:

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of structural coupling indicates a relation of dynamic structural congruence between system and medium which results in the continuous conservation of the organization of the system while everything else is open to change.

*Living beings always maintain coherence with all the changing circumstances that touch their living as a result of the dynamics of conserving structural coupling.*

Something very wonderful happens as a result of this. Because the biosphere is constituted as a coherent systemic dynamic, any local perspective integrates the whole. It is not that every point contains information about every other point, but simply that the look from any perspective is necessarily one that is in harmony with all the rest, whether or not we are able to see the details. Usually we do not, but so called “intuitive” people grasp the implications of this coherent dynamic. So, is this what we call wisdom? No, there is more to wisdom than the comprehension of the coherent connections of our culture, the biosphere, and cosmos.

#### **4. Human Origins**

About five or six million years ago, the lineage of primates that gave origin to us began in an evolutionary trend of continuous expansion of childhood. This expansion of childhood has also happened with other species; zoologists call it neoteny. In the case of humans, childhood has expanded to such an extent that it now involves practically our whole life span. What is particularly relevant to the kind of being that we now are, is that with us neoteny includes not only the retention of a child-like body and physiological features into adult life, but also the retention of a manner of relating that is usual to mother child relationships among mammals. All mammals have a trusting relationship between the mother and offspring, though many shift into a different way of living as adults. We see this shift in deer, in cats, in mice, and even other primates, all of which become less tender and more aggressive as adults. We look at these others, especially our close relatives the chimpanzees, and often refer to them as if their adult living were our own norm.

But humans are different from the chimps, and the differences we usually cite are our expanded brain, our opposable thumb, and our use of tools. But how did these differences arise? The flat hand and opposable thumb appeared well before tools... did they evolve with pre-sentience of the possibilities of technology? Did they evolve “on purpose”?

Nothing in nature happens because it will be needed for something else, or to fulfill a purpose. It was no more necessary for photosynthesis to evolve (and in the process pollute the earth with the dangerous chemical, oxygen), than it was for computers to be invented. Both happened along a drift of changes that happened coherently with everything else, so now they fit, and thus appear necessary.

As we have already mentioned, the expansion of childhood has distinguished the human lineage. The mammalian relationship proper to childhood is one of total mutual trust, body acceptance, and tenderness. This is what our ancestors lived, and preferred to live, so it expanded and expanded to become the basis of humanness. The result was the constitution of a system of lineages whose evolutionary history was centered on love as the basic emotion in community relations as opposed to aggression or competition as has happened with other primates like chimpanzees. We have evolved as a loving animal, this is what characterizes us. And the 5 to 6 million years of this evolution has brought with it all our other attributes, in particular our bodies, our expanded intelligence, our languaging, and eventually our technologies. Since our concern in this essay is wisdom, we will look at how the expansion of human intelligence is related to wisdom.

One of the aspects of the expansion of childhood relations was the expansion of human sexuality from a yearly estrus cycle to a continuous desire for the pleasure in the intimate body proximity of the other. One consequence of this was the separation of sexual intercourse from reproduction to a fundamental manner of relation between the members of a group. In this shift sexuality became a source of stability and joy of living together in body intimacy, tenderness, and sensuality. It is in this drift towards bodily intimacy that our hands became caressing hands, and it is in this milieu that language arose as an expansion of consensuality.

Language arose as a manner of living together that expanded the consensual coordination of behaviours - simply as that is what our ancestors wanted to do, or rather what they did because they liked doing it. We say that language is a manner of living together in the flow of consensual coordination of consensual coordinations of behaviour. The recursion that is made explicit in this statement is critical as the constitutive dynamic of language, but for the moment it suffices to notice that language arose in the emotion of love in the pleasure of conserving relationship. As language became part of the medium of growing children, it acquired its own dynamic of being conserved from generation to generation, and in this became part of the manner of living of humans. Thus humans began to live in networks of conversations, interlacing emotions and language in a process of endlessly proliferating richness. And it is this richness that our large brain evolved to support, bit by bit, over the millennia.

Another way of saying this is that our evolutionary history is a history of expansion of the capacity for consensuality, and, hence, the expansion of intelligence. Intelligence is not primarily the capacity to solve problems, rather it is the capacity to participate in the generation and expansion of, and operation in, consensual domains - as domains of coordinations of behaviors and emotions through living together. The so called "instruments" for measuring intelligence in our current culture do exactly what all instruments do, they measure an abstraction that we make of something that occurs in a systemic dynamic.

Due to the nature of intelligence as a relational biological aspect of our living, different emotions affect it differently. Thus, ambition, competitiveness, anger, envy, aggression, fear, all reduce intelligence because they restrict the domain of openness for consensuality. Only love expands intelligence because love is the domain of those behaviors through which the other arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself. The other may be another human, or another living being, or all living beings, or all existence. To live fully in love, in the acceptance of the conditions of existence that one lives as a source and not as an opposition, restriction, or limitation, has been the fundament for the evolutionary trend of conservation of the continuous expansion of intelligence in our lineage. In this sense human intelligence has arisen as a grasping of all the richness of existence and all the coherences of the medium, that is the biosphere and cosmos, in which we find ourselves existing.

Is this then wisdom? Does human wisdom consist of the intelligent grasping of cosmic coherences in an emotional look of acceptance of the other and all existence? No, as this does not yet lead to adequate behaviour in the local circumstance, in the present moment. Cosmic "grokking", as it may have been called a few decades ago, is not seen as wisdom if it does not lead to action.

## 5. Systemic and Causal Rationality

Living systems have not only evolved in conserving the coherences of the biosphere as a whole, but also in conserving the proper coordinations of each living being within this - in the present moment, in whatever domain is relevant to its living. Living happens in the local circumstances in a manner that is coherent with the whole. It is through the moment by moment local integration through its actions that each being maintains its continuous participation and inclusion in the biosphere.

Through living in language we humans distinguish two different ways of thinking as we grasp the cosmic coherences and choose our local behaviour. Although both ways of thinking are rational, that is have to do with exercising one's reason in a proper manner, only one of them is emphasized in our current culture. Our culture values causal linear rationality, and only grudgingly acknowledges the existence of the other, namely systemic rationality.

Systemic thinking pertains to the history of the evolution of our nervous system, not only over the 5 or 6 million years of the evolution of humans as distinct beings, but over the whole multi-billion year evolution of living beings. Systemic thinking happens in the fundamental reciprocal coherence of the nervous system and the medium, and results in the total adequacy of each living being to grasp what is relevant to its manner of living. Systemic thinking is comprehensive, it is not based in language and is thus not easily represented by language.

Let us give you an example. Good sailors, sailors who can confidently sail across oceans and amongst unknown archipelagos without recourse to an engine, are very aware of waves. From the configuration of the waves in the little locus that surrounds their boat they can sense coming storms, shoals, currents, islands... yet they cannot explain what it is they are looking at in words. They just "know". If they are pushed, as we sometimes push experts in trying to design so called "expert systems", they will generate descriptions - but such descriptions are inevitably like flat projections of a multidimensional and fluid phenomenon. Not many people would feel confident in setting across an ocean with only expert descriptions to navigate and live by.

What happens with the sailor is something that happens with all living beings. Their nervous systems "just know" things that are relevant to their living even when these things are not directly present. Though the island over the horizon is not directly present, it reveals its presence through the patternings of the local circumstances. It is not a matter of learning those particular patterns, one could not do that as each circumstance is new, but a matter of being able to map these patterns onto others that have been experienced by grasping the same relational configurations in them. The ensuing actions are effective because both sets of patterns belong to the same history of transformations in the biosphere and cosmos.

Part of the difficulty of describing such patterns has to do with their rich dimensionality. But perhaps even more significant is that the experience that had the same configurations as the patterns that are now seen may have happened in a different context, or in a different domain. The mapping happens in an analogic manner. Without such mapping, each domain would be isolated from others in strict adherence to its own internal logic. Systemic thinking makes connections between domains, and integrates understanding. It is this that enables one to have an inspiration from apparently unrelated events, to wake up to an "AHA!" from a vision or dream that brought to conscious awareness some of the relational coherences among the dimensions of a coherent existence.

In this culture we do not give systemic thinking much consideration, or value, but we do have some awareness of it. On reflection we would, however, notice the presence of our own systemic thinking whenever we find that a metaphor serves our desire to speak that which we grasp better than a description or an explanation. We also allude to it as insight, inspiration, or intuition, and often attribute it to the female members of our culture. Mostly it remains mysterious, as it is not readily explained in the linear logical rationality, that is the mode of rationality which we most value and teach in modern western cultures.

In causal linear thinking one sees the regularities in closely connected processes. In focusing on a local look, one notices how the flow of changes necessarily results from the structural properties of the elements, and thus the notion of causality emerges. If a certain perturbation touches a particular structure, that structure becomes modified in a particular manner - thus A causes B. It is this kind of thinking that has enabled us to obtain many of the effects we desire, and it is in this kind of thinking that we have invented procedures, tools, and technologies. Linear logical thinking with the notion of causality enables us to engage in effective local action.

In our culture we are trained to focus on causality. Causality can always be found in a local situation, and irregularities can always be externalized - as random effects, or outside influences, or changed conditions. In effect we cannot prevent our own grasping of systemic connections, but we can rationalize them. An observer who lives immersed in the local linear rationality will treat those analogic systemic relationships that he or she grasps in an unconscious poetic look as if they too corresponded to linear logic. That is, if one believes all thinking is causal, then all that one has grasped must be given a causal rationale. In linear causal logic we are trained to look for "the reason" for any circumstance we do not like, for any unhappiness or conflict, so that we may change that. Thus in this logic anything irregular or undesired is a "problem" implying a "solution".

We, the authors, like to refer to systemic thinking as the poetic look and logical linear thinking as the engineering look. The poetic look is one which grasps the coherences in one domain and expresses this in another, whether poetry, art, or science. The engineering look is one which is firmly grounded in the local coherences and is entirely consistent within, as well as limited to, the domain it pertains to. The engineering look enables constructs, artifacts, that can endure for a time. These two looks are not fundamentally in opposition, rather they fundamentally complement each other. Together they comprise the basis for local action in a systemically coherent manner. Together they comprise the basis for realizing natural wisdom in the living of any living being, us humans included.

## **6. Human Wisdom**

We recognize what we call wisdom in humans when we encounter it, and what surprises us is the spontaneity and fluidity of the behaviour which reveals it. Yes, it happens effortlessly when it happens, and the conditions for it to happen are ones that are lived as well-being. Wisdom when experienced in oneself or another is always delicious. But what is it indeed? We, the authors, have taken some time to develop the background for explaining wisdom, now we can say what, according to our view, wisdom consists of:



*In daily life wisdom happens when one lives in the emotion of love that enables both knowledge and comprehension so that all actions and reflections arise in harmony with the coherences of the systemic medium in which one lives.*

Comprehension happens in open reflection as one sees the local situation as participant of the systemic relations that constitute the world (cosmos, biosphere, culture) to which it pertains. This is a systemic look which grasps multidimensional configurations in multiple domains in an analogical manner. Knowledge, or at least that which we refer to as knowledge in this culture is different. Knowledge happens through a look which grasps the local linear coherences of any particular domain without implicating any systemic connections with other domains. Thus knowledge is always proper to the domain in which it happens, and it pertains to recognizing causal relations.

Comprehension and knowledge are thus both looks that grasp configurations of relationships; comprehension in a systemic view and knowledge in a local linear view. Both can only happen in a way of looking which accepts the legitimacy of what is seen, that is in a look of love. Any other emotion obscures vision, restricts intelligence, and one is unwittingly restricted to one's own prejudices.

In these circumstances, wisdom happens in the domain of human living when people live their daily lives, with or without problems, following a course in which their conduct arises from an interlacing of comprehension and knowledge. Further, this happens when people live together as a community founded in the conservation of social living. Since the emotion which founds and conserves social living is love, wisdom only happens in love.

We recognize a wise man or woman because their actions reveal both comprehension and knowledge. This happens in an awareness of relations that is only possible through accepting the legitimacy of emotions for the comprehension of the relational space that they live in every moment. And this is possible because the wise woman or man move in a poetic look which captures systemic coherences, and in their respect for emotions they see the emotions which are in every instance the fundament for human existence, and thus they can use their knowledge and comprehension in a manner that is adequate for the conservation of social living as part of the biosphere, community or cosmos. Thus, the wise man or woman clearly sees the fundamentals of local behaviour, and does not live in lies. And with such people human social living participates in the systemic dynamics of all existence in a manner which conserves well-being in a harmony among cultural, biological and cosmic domains - without ideologies, without religious truths, and without sentimentalities.

The wise woman and man always looks in the biology of love, and always thinks and acts out of what he or she sees in the conservation of human well being without doubts concerning its legitimacy. This is what enables the proper participation of his or her culture in the biosphere and cosmos.

## **7. Learning Wisdom**

The implications of what we have said are of fundamental significance to everyone who is concerned with the learning of our children. The notions we have discussed are of particular significance to those teachers who wish to see their students come to a tranquillity of self

awareness and self trust, to assume a responsibility<sup>4</sup> for their participation within their cultures as well as a responsibility for the participation of their culture within the biosphere, and to do all this in an mood of joy. We, the authors, invite teachers, and all other readers of this article, to reflect for themselves on the implications of what we have presented, and to consider how it might reveal openings in their own path of living.

As you reflect you will undoubtedly see how spontaneous natural wisdom is denied in our culture. You will see how we humans are stuck in rational linear logic suitable for the proliferation of technology, but inadequate for sensing our participation in the biosphere. You will perhaps see too how the yearning for spirituality and meaning arise in the denial of our own biological heritage as beings who like to live in the open look of love, and who have the capability for aware participation with the cosmos. Indeed we humans deeply desire the ecstasy of our aware participation with another or with allness, whatever we name it, in which we sense the validity of our singularity within a vastness. You may see too how many attempts to reach what we often call “enlightenment” become ritualized and deadened as they are cooped into the emotional context of a desire for certainty and control, and in this are interpreted in a causal linear logic.

However, you will also see that teaching of wisdom is not something that can be done as a manipulation of students in any form. There is no information, no data, no procedure which will result in wise students. But this does not at all mean that a teacher cannot create a context for wisdom to arise. Teachers can indeed open a path for their students such that their own living, for the rest of their lives, will become a self enhancing expansion of awareness in all the dimensions that manifest as wisdom. You no more need to teach children this than parents need to “teach” their babies to talk. But you do need to do something analogous to what parents do that enables their children to discover their existence as humans, and to begin the recursive consensual coordinations which manifest as language.

You need to live with them that which you wish them to learn. In this sense the most important thing you can do as a teacher is to expand your own living, to expand your own awareness, and to accept your own adequacy and legitimacy, and follow your own desire to live in love and participation as an integral singularity in the society, biosphere and cosmos. Out of this all the rest will flow, without effort or strain, no matter how much energy you devote. You need only play with you students in joy, play in the fullness of the knowledge and comprehension that pertain to the domains that you are teaching. You have always known this, we have but offered you some of the biological explanation of how this happens.

We are all equally intelligent and loving. In our competitive culture we learn to think that we are only good if we are better, but this is a big trap. We do not need to pat ourselves on the back for our intelligence and care, or our wisdom, but we can take pleasure in this, and recognize that it is no little thing to rise as legitimate loving and wise beings out of a culture which denies this.

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<sup>4</sup> To be responsible means simply to be aware of the consequences of ones actions and to choose or not to choose those consequences. This is not a matter of control, neither of the other, nor of oneself, but one of aware preference.

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