

Verticality

The horizontal plane of life is one of desires and aversions, aims and actions. It is thirst and fever in growth, maturation and decay. A central prerequisite for finding one's way and reaching one's goals is being unified enough as a self to be able to act coherently and forcefully.

But life can also have a more or less pronounced vertical dimension, and this plane is at least as essential to the meaningfulness of life as the natural, horizontal one. Verticality means detachment and freedom from one's self and situation, release and elevation above earthly concerns. It is transcendence, airiness of spirit. I as it were look at myself and my world from above, and may even address my desiring self in second person. Wittgenstein writes: "My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple that serves as a surrounding for the passions, without meddling with them."

While horizontality is movement motivated by desires, detachment is immobility and non-involvement. Meister Eckhart says: "True detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable against whatever may chance to it of joy and sorrow, honor, shame and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind." Immobility: non-judgement and nonaction.

Horizontality and verticality intersect. Rising above our hopes and fears equals stoic courage, endurance and resilience in dangers, sufferings and adversities. It thereby engenders tranquility and lucidity of mind even in intense efforts and difficult undertakings. Verticality is also flexibility and readiness to let go of all determinate aims when things do not go as planned. It gives relief from stubbornness and impatience.

High, inhuman mountains of rock and ice lift our spirits and reorient us towards verticality, as do harsh, barren, impersonal deserts like Antarctica that offer scant support for horizontal human flourishing. Desolation prevents our spirits from attaching to anything in particular and enables us to loosen our ties to the small things of our lives.