

What Holds When Certainty Fails?

On Trust, Freedom, and the Conditions of a Living World

After several months, a couple are finally offered an apartment. The rooms are smaller than they had hoped, the rent is high, and the contract contains provisions whose consequences will only become apparent later. They sign it nonetheless.

They do not know whether either of them will still have the same job in two years. They do not know whether their relationship will withstand every change or whether the apartment will eventually become too small. The landlord cannot foresee how their circumstances will develop either. Still, he hands them the keys.

From that moment, things can begin that were barely possible before. An address is shared. Furniture is chosen. Friends are invited. Perhaps one room will first be used as a workspace and later by a child. Out of a contract, a few walls, and mutual expectations, a place emerges in which the future is not secure, but can be imagined.

Neither side possesses certainty.

What they possess is sufficient trust to act.

We often think of trust as a personal feeling. Someone appears honest, reliable, or well disposed towards us. Yet trust reaches far beyond relationships between individuals. It belongs to the quiet conditions underlying almost every action.

Someone boarding a train has not personally inspected the signals, tracks, or maintenance protocols. Someone transferring a deposit relies on contracts, banks, and the law not having to be invented anew each morning. We continually act within conditions that we neither fully understand nor create alone.

Without such conditions, every action would have to begin from zero.

Every piece of information would have to be verified personally, every possible harm excluded in advance, and every relationship approached with the suspicion that it would last only for as long as immediate advantage allowed.

That would not be greater independence.

It would be an inability to act.

Trust does not remove uncertainty. It makes action under uncertainty possible without allowing uncertainty to occupy all of our attention.

This is precisely why trust is vulnerable. Whoever trusts places part of their future within conditions they do not determine alone. They do not give up all control. But they accept that a life is possible only with people and orders whose behaviour can never be entirely predicted.

This is already visible in a promise.

Two people can promise one another that they will stay. The promise cannot foresee which pressures will arise, who will change, or which expectations may later prove incompatible. It does not guarantee that the relationship will succeed.

Still, it changes how they act.

We plan differently when we assume that another person will still be part of our life tomorrow. Decisions about work, where to live, money, or children acquire a shared horizon. Some possibilities are surrendered. Others emerge only through the commitment.

Love does not enlarge freedom by keeping every path open. It closes paths so that a particular form of shared future can acquire depth at all.

Limitless openness would hardly be liveable.

An infinite field of possibilities may initially sound like perfect freedom. Yet without language, memory, commitment, or existing measures, there would be no reason to prefer one possibility to another. We could choose, but would scarcely be able to decide.

Freedom needs form.

A language limits what can be said immediately and makes understanding possible in the first place. A promise withdraws one possibility and opens a shared duration. A profession binds time and excludes other activities, but can allow experience, responsibility, and the ability to master something to develop.

Not every boundary is an injury to freedom.

Some boundaries are what give freedom a foothold.

The question begins where forms no longer merely support, but begin to determine.

A relationship can make intimacy possible while treating every change as betrayal. A profession can develop ability while binding someone so completely to a role that other capacities become difficult to imagine. An institution can protect people from arbitrary decisions through established procedures and later continue those procedures even when they scarcely serve their original purpose.

What supports can also hold in place.

It is therefore not enough to ask whether an order is stable. We must ask what its stability makes possible and what it prevents.

Every system directs rules, resources, and responsibilities towards a purpose. A tenancy agreement is meant to organise the reliable use of a space. A company organises work in order to provide goods or services and continue economically. A school creates structures through which knowledge can be passed on and abilities developed.

Rules are never entirely neutral. They contain assumptions about what should be protected, which risks are acceptable, and what kind of behaviour is considered normal.

A system can function.

It can achieve its intended goal.

And that goal can nevertheless have become questionable.

A company may organise its processes so successfully that every hour is used in measurable ways. Employees handle more cases, respond more quickly, and meet every expected metric. The process functions. Productivity rises.

At the same time, another experience may develop. No one has enough time to understand an unusual case properly. Colleagues help one another less because every act of support makes their own performance appear weaker. Knowledge remains with individuals because passing it on

produces no immediate visible return. Someone who sets a limit appears less capable than someone who moves their exhaustion into the private evening.

The system achieves its goal.

The question is what that goal has become.

Work can be more than income. It can develop abilities, make responsibility possible, and involve people in a shared task. But it can also produce an order in which everyone learns to protect their own advantage against the limits of others.

The difference does not lie only in how hard someone works.

A person may devote themselves voluntarily to a difficult task for years and still experience the binding of their time as meaningful. They understand the purpose, can shape something of the rhythm, and recognise themselves in what the effort is directed towards.

Another person may work fewer hours and still experience themselves almost entirely as a response to demands arriving from outside. The next message, the next metric, and the next reorganisation are already present within the current day.

Freedom therefore depends on more than the number of possibilities that remain formally open. It also depends on whether a person participates in shaping the form of their actions and can recognise the purpose their effort serves.

The same applies to the relationship between personal freedom and shared conditions.

A person may leave a secure job, train for another profession, or pursue a possibility whose outcome remains uncertain. A society also depends on people doing more than simply continuing what has already been assigned to them.

The matter changes when every shared condition is treated only as a resource for personal advancement.

No one owes an employer their entire working life. No one must surrender every possibility merely because others hope for reliability. The problem begins where people expect lasting reliability from others while judging their own commitments solely by their immediate usefulness.

Something similar can occur in housing.

An owner may use property to provide for old age. Repairs cost money, loans have to be serviced, and risks must be carried. But when housing appears solely as an opportunity for maximum extraction, the tenant is no longer perceived as someone whose life depends on the reliability of that place. They become available demand.

A decision can be legally permitted and economically reasonable while still damaging conditions on which other people depend in order to shape their own lives.

This is where a limit of personal freedom becomes visible.

Not in the desire for a life of one's own.

Not in the pursuit of success.

Not in differences of ability or outcome.

The limit appears where freedom depends on shared conditions whose preservation is no longer recognised as part of one's own responsibility.

Freedom then becomes parasitic.

A society does not become antisocial only when people openly violate its rules. It can also become so when its rules particularly reward those who most effectively convert shared conditions into private advantage.

What counts as intelligence then begins to change.

The intelligent person is the one who can pass on costs. Who leaves risk to others while claiming the success. Who uses a rule to its furthest limit without formally breaking it.

Under such conditions, consideration easily appears as weakness. Whoever commits can lose. Whoever accepts responsibility carries burdens that others avoid. Whoever preserves a shared margin may surrender an advantage that someone else immediately takes.

Under such conditions, it is not enough to call for greater trust.

Trust cannot endure if some remain reliable while others profit from their reliability.

It requires fairness.

This does not mean that everyone must possess, contribute, or achieve the same things. People differ in ability, experience, need, responsibility, and willingness to take risks. Equal outcomes can be unjust when they ignore all of these differences.

But abilities do not develop in an empty space either.

Someone who had early access to education, was allowed to make mistakes, and knew people who could explain possible routes begins with different conditions from someone who had to function reliably from an early age. An achievement may be exceptional while still benefiting from conditions that were not open to everyone.

Fairness therefore demands neither uniformity nor the denial of individual achievement. It demands that people have a genuine opportunity to develop and contribute their abilities. It also demands that differences in outcome do not become differences in human worth or in the right to belong.

Not every inequality is unjust. But differences must remain open to justification and change. Power must not make its own conditions invisible. The freedom of some must not be purchased through the lasting restriction of others.

A good order must therefore do more than secure its own continuation.

It must be reliable enough for people to plan, commit themselves, and begin something. At the same time, it must remain open enough to recognise errors, respond to changed realities, and measure its means once again against its purpose.

Aliveness does not mean happiness or uninterrupted change. Nor does it mean continually choosing new possibilities or turning every unused ability into performance.

Such a demand would turn aliveness itself into another form of compulsion.

Existence means first that a life can continue.

Aliveness begins where something can still emerge within that life.

A relationship remains alive when not every change is understood as a threat to its form. A profession remains alive when experience means more than repeating established procedures. An institution remains alive when it can remain faithful to its purpose by changing a procedure that no longer serves that purpose.

The fidelity is not to the form alone.

It is to what the form was meant to make possible.

This requires criticism.

Trust and criticism are not opposites. Criticism can be a way of preserving trust. It asks whether rules still serve the purpose for which they were created. It makes visible when some people must reliably carry what others experience as freedom. It treats an order as capable of correction rather than either confirming it blindly or abandoning it completely.

This also applies where an order must protect itself.

A democracy needs institutions, procedures, and limits. It must be capable of defending itself against those who would use its freedoms to remove those freedoms from others. An order with no capacity for self-defence makes its openness dependent on the restraint of its opponents.

Yet the defence of democracy can also lose sight of its purpose. When doubts about state action are already treated as disloyalty, when dissent appears primarily as danger, and when the protection of order becomes a permanent reason for exception, the democratic form may remain while its liberal meaning narrows.

Democracy answers the question of how power is legitimised. Liberalism reminds us that legitimised power also requires limits.

An order does not deserve trust merely because it can preserve itself. It must be able to preserve itself without allowing freedom, plurality, and the possibility of dissent to disappear — precisely those things that make its defence meaningful in the first place.

Trust becomes unstable when it is demanded as a duty.

An institution that has lost trust cannot restore it by morally condemning mistrust. It must create conditions under which trust can become reasonable again: visible responsibility, real consequences, changed procedures, and the experience that criticism is not only heard but can have an effect.

Trust therefore does not rest only on the expectation that nothing will break.

It also rests on the possibility that a break will not destroy every future.

For a long time, trust had another form for me. It rested on the assumption that the essential risks of life could at least be kept manageable through careful planning, work, and a willingness to accept responsibility. That expectation collapsed during the construction of our home. A developer failed to meet his obligations, work was defective, and money disappeared. Decisions intended to create security for my family temporarily threatened that security instead.

During that period, the conditions I had planned did not carry us. Relationships did. My partner stayed, although the consequences affected her life as well. My parents did not relieve me of responsibility, but neither did they make my failure a reason to withdraw their commitment to me.

The trust that emerged was no longer trust that responsible action must guarantee a responsible outcome. It was trust that after the loss of an order, relationship and the capacity to act can emerge again.

This does not make the destruction necessary or good. Some experiences leave injuries that no later insight can justify. Not every crisis makes a person stronger.

But trust can change. It can become less dependent on the intactness of a form and more directed towards the possibility of entering into a new relationship with reality when that form no longer holds.

A reliable relationship is not necessarily one in which no one is ever disappointed. It may also be one in which disappointment does not immediately lead to the complete withdrawal of belonging. A durable order need not be able to prevent every mistake. But it must not exhaust the possibility of correction.

This trust is not directed only backwards, towards what has already proved that it will remain.

It is also directed towards something that does not yet exist.

A house exists as a plan before anyone pours a foundation. A family imagines a shared life before knowing whether reality will correspond to that image. A school rests on an idea of what knowledge is and which abilities a society wishes to pass on.

Ideas do not materialise by themselves. They require language, work, resources, rules, and people willing to act towards a goal whose outcome remains uncertain.

Imagination opens a possibility.

Trust allows us to begin building it.

Once an idea takes form, however, it changes the possibilities of those who later live within it. A house becomes a home, an asset, a burden, or a boundary. An institution develops procedures, responsibilities, and interests of its own. A cultural form passes on experience while also shaping what a later generation comes to regard as self-evident.

Not everything people create towards an uncertain future takes the form of a house or an institution. Experiences, warnings, and ideas are also passed on through images, songs, and stories.

Art can give such experiences a form in which they outlast an individual life, can be shared, and can be contested. It can keep something available whose meaning has not yet been completed.

Not every idea it produces is liberating. Images and stories can also consolidate power, carry hostile representations forward, and narrow what can be thought. Art is not automatically open or good.

But it can preserve a space in which experience is arranged differently and another form becomes visible before rules or institutions already exist for it. It can bring something into the shared world whose meaning is not yet settled and whose effects cannot be fully foreseen.

A human world does not live only by distributing food, building houses, and honouring contracts. It also lives by passing on experience, examining existing purposes, and keeping other futures imaginable.

What supports us is therefore not automatically what lasts longest.

Oppression can also be organised durably. An unjust distribution can stabilise itself over generations. A relationship can continue because one person carries the entire cost of peace. A company can succeed because the damage it creates remains outside its accounts.

Continuation does not prove aliveness.

Change does not prove it either.

An order can modernise continually while becoming ever more effective at pursuing the same purpose. A person can repeatedly choose new possibilities while avoiding every commitment through which something other than personal advantage would acquire weight.

The question, then, is not whether something remains or changes.

It is what its form still allows to live.

The couple in the apartment may separate years later. Perhaps they will have a child. Perhaps one of them will lose their job. Perhaps the apartment will be sold, the rent increased, or the space will become too small.

The first contract guarantees none of this.

But for a time, together with walls, rules, and mutual reliability, it created a ground on which a shared life could begin.

Perhaps trust can never do more than this.

It cannot guarantee a future.

It can only create conditions under which people are willing to begin one.