

EIGENWELT

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Eigenwelt: The Self-World in Psychology

The Core Definition of Eigenwelt

The concept of **Eigenwelt**, often translated as "self-world" or "own-world," represents a fundamental idea within psychology, particularly in existential and humanistic frameworks. At its most basic, it refers to an individual's unique, subjective experience of their inner world, encompassing their thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and personal understanding of reality. This inner realm is not merely a passive recipient of external stimuli but an active, self-regulated, and autonomous space where an individual processes existence and defines their personal meaning. It is the sphere where one authentically experiences their being, distinct from the objective, physical world (the Umwelt) and the social world of relationships (the Mitwelt).

Expanding on this foundational understanding, **Eigenwelt** is predicated on the profound idea that human beings are inherently self-regulating entities. This implies a profound capacity not only to observe and reflect upon one's own behaviors, emotions, and motivations but also to actively modify and guide them in accordance with deeply held values and personal goals. This internal capacity for self-observation and **self-regulation** is central to how individuals navigate their lives, forge a sense of coherence, and establish their unique identity. It provides the psychological framework for understanding how a person cultivates and maintains a robust sense of personal autonomy, allowing them to act with intention and purpose rather than being solely driven by external forces or unconscious impulses.

The principle behind **Eigenwelt** emphasizes the irreplaceable role of subjective experience in shaping psychological reality. It posits that an individual's inner world is the primary locus of meaning-making, where perceptions are interpreted, emotions are felt, and intentions are formed. This internal landscape, ever-evolving and uniquely constructed, serves as the operational base for an individual's psychological functioning. Consequently, understanding a person's **Eigenwelt** becomes crucial for comprehending their actions, their emotional responses, and their overall interaction with both their immediate surroundings and the broader social fabric, highlighting the intrinsic link between inner experience and outward behavior.

Historical Origins and Development

The term **Eigenwelt** was originally introduced by the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank in the early 20th century, a period of significant intellectual ferment within the nascent field of psychoanalysis. Rank, initially a close associate of Sigmund Freud, eventually developed his own distinct theoretical perspectives that diverged from orthodox Freudian thought. His work began to emphasize the individual's drive towards independence and the inherent human capacity for creativity and self-creation, shifting focus from purely deterministic drives to the dynamic interplay

of will and autonomy. This intellectual journey led him to articulate the concept of **Eigenwelt** as a "self-regulated, autonomous world," a departure from the more externally determined views of human psychology prevalent at the time.

Rank's formulation of **Eigenwelt** emerged from his broader re-evaluation of psychoanalytic principles, particularly as outlined in his seminal work, "The Trauma of Birth" (1924). In this context, he posited that the individual's struggle for separation and differentiation from the maternal bond, akin to the physical trauma of birth, laid the groundwork for the development of an independent self and a unique inner world. This formative experience instilled an intrinsic drive towards individuation and the establishment of one's own psychological space. This perspective provided a framework for understanding not only the process of internal self-observation and personal **self-regulation** but also how individuals actively construct and navigate their personal realities, asserting their will and creativity in the face of both internal and external challenges.

While Rank introduced the term, the concept of **Eigenwelt** found a more profound and widespread resonance within the later development of existential psychology and phenomenology. These schools of thought, emerging mid-20th century, placed paramount importance on subjective experience, personal responsibility, and the search for meaning in human existence. Thinkers like Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, drawing heavily from the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and Husserl, adopted and expanded upon Rank's idea, integrating it into their *Daseinsanalyse* (existential analysis). They viewed **Eigenwelt** as one of the three fundamental modes of being-in-the-world, alongside the Umwelt (the natural world) and the Mitwelt (the social world). This integration solidified **Eigenwelt's** position as a critical lens through which to understand the unique, subjective reality of each individual.

Philosophical Underpinnings and Scope

The philosophical underpinnings of **Eigenwelt** are deeply rooted in phenomenology and existentialism, traditions that emphasize the primacy of subjective experience and the individual's lived reality. These philosophies assert that rather than merely being objects in a world, humans are subjects who actively participate in the creation of their own meaning and understanding. The **Eigenwelt**, therefore, is not a static mental compartment but a dynamic, ever-unfolding process of personal interpretation and engagement with existence. It encompasses an individual's unique perspective, their personal narrative, their hopes, fears, and aspirations, all contributing to a singular way of being-in-the-world that cannot be fully grasped by objective, external observation alone.

Central to this philosophical perspective is the notion of personal autonomy and responsibility. Within one's **Eigenwelt**, individuals are confronted with the freedom to choose and, consequently, the responsibility for those choices. This internal space allows for self-reflection, introspection, and

the development of a unique moral and ethical compass. It is the realm where existential concerns such as meaning, freedom, isolation, and death are processed and integrated into one's personal understanding of life. This active engagement with existential realities further solidifies the **Eigenwelt** as a crucible for personal growth and the authentic expression of self, highlighting the individual's capacity to transcend mere biological or social determinism.

Furthermore, the concept extends beyond simple introspection to encompass the individual's capacity for creating and maintaining a coherent sense of self amidst the complexities of life. This involves the continuous process of integrating new experiences, reconciling internal conflicts, and adapting one's worldview to evolving circumstances. The **Eigenwelt** serves as the central organizing principle for these processes, providing a stable yet flexible foundation for identity and personal coherence. It underscores the idea that each person is the ultimate author of their own life story, continually shaping their inner world through choices, interpretations, and engagements with the world around them, thereby underscoring the profound depth and complexity of human psychological functioning.

Eigenwelt in Psychotherapy

In the realm of psychotherapy, the concept of **Eigenwelt** offers a powerful framework for understanding and addressing psychological distress. Therapies rooted in existential, humanistic, and certain psychodynamic traditions often utilize this concept to guide their approach. The therapeutic process, from this perspective, involves assisting the client in exploring, understanding, and ultimately taking greater ownership of their own "self-world." This often begins with fostering enhanced self-observation and self-examination, encouraging the patient to delve deeply into their subjective experiences, beliefs, values, and the unique ways in which they perceive and interpret their reality.

According to Rank (1924), the therapeutic journey centers on the patient's "ability to observe and modify one's behavior," and critically, "the ability to create and maintain a sense of autonomy in one's life." This is not a passive process of the therapist imparting wisdom, but rather an active engagement where the patient examines their thoughts, feelings, and behavioral patterns. The goal is to gain profound insight into how their inner world influences their external actions and relationships, and subsequently, to develop the capacity for conscious choice and meaningful self-regulation. By understanding the unique dynamics of their **Eigenwelt**, individuals can identify incongruities between their authentic self and their lived experiences, paving the way for more congruent and fulfilling ways of being.

Modern psychotherapeutic applications of **Eigenwelt** extend to helping clients navigate feelings of alienation, lack of purpose, or existential anxiety. By focusing on the client's subjective reality, therapists can assist them in identifying core values, understanding personal meaning, and making

choices that align with their authentic self. This approach empowers individuals to move beyond reactive patterns, fostering a deeper sense of personal responsibility and agency. Ultimately, the therapeutic goal is to strengthen the client's capacity for self-regulation and self-direction, enabling them to construct a life that truly reflects their unique **Eigenwelt** and promotes psychological well-being.

Eigenwelt in Development and Identity Formation

The concept of **Eigenwelt** is profoundly relevant to understanding human development, particularly the intricate processes of establishing personal autonomy and forging a stable sense of identity formation. From early childhood, individuals embark on a continuous journey of differentiating themselves from their environment and significant others, gradually constructing their unique inner world. This developmental trajectory is not merely about acquiring skills or knowledge but about developing an internal compass that guides behavior, emotions, and personal understanding, forming the bedrock of one's distinctive **Eigenwelt**.

As articulated by developmental psychologists such as Fonagy and Target (1997), the emergence of autonomy in children is intrinsically "associated with the emergence of a sense of self-regulation and the capacity to act in accordance with one's own values and goals." This involves the child's evolving ability to observe and reflect on their own behavior, thoughts, and feelings, gradually moving from external regulation to internal self-governance. The development of a robust **Eigenwelt** provides the internal space for this reflection, enabling children to make choices based on their nascent values and to begin understanding themselves as distinct, agentic individuals, rather than merely extensions of their caregivers.

Furthermore, the process of identity formation throughout adolescence and adulthood is deeply intertwined with the ongoing construction and refinement of one's **Eigenwelt**. As individuals encounter new experiences, relationships, and societal expectations, they continuously integrate these into their subjective understanding of who they are. This internal world provides the coherent narrative and stable sense of self that allows individuals to navigate complex social landscapes while maintaining their personal integrity. A well-developed **Eigenwelt** fosters a strong sense of self-cohesion, enabling individuals to articulate their values, pursue their passions, and establish meaningful connections while remaining true to their authentic selves.

Eigenwelt and Interpersonal Relationships

The concept of **Eigenwelt** also provides crucial insights into the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. While emphasizing the individual's unique inner world, it simultaneously acknowledges that these personal realities inevitably intersect and interact with the inner worlds of others. The challenge and richness of relationships lie in the ability to bridge the gap between

distinct **Eigenwelten**, fostering connection and understanding without losing one's sense of self. This interplay highlights the delicate balance between maintaining personal autonomy and engaging authentically with another's subjective experience.

As posited by developmental psychologist Daniel Stern (1985), the development of meaningful relationships involves "the ability to observe and regulate one's own behavior in the context of the other person." This perspective underscores that effective relational engagement requires not only an awareness of one's own **Eigenwelt** but also a capacity for empathy--the ability to imaginatively grasp and understand the subjective experience of the other. This reciprocal process of self-awareness and other-awareness allows individuals to adjust their communication and behavior in ways that foster mutual respect and understanding, thereby building stronger and more profound connections.

The healthy interaction between individual **Eigenwelten** in relationships is characterized by a balance where both parties feel understood, respected, and free to express their authentic selves. Problems can arise when one's **Eigenwelt** becomes rigidly closed off, leading to isolation, or when it is excessively permeable, resulting in a loss of personal boundaries. Thus, the concept emphasizes the importance of cultivating a flexible and resilient inner world that can both sustain personal integrity and open itself to the enriching experiences of shared existence. This dynamic interplay is fundamental to fostering intimacy, resolving conflicts, and navigating the complexities inherent in all human connections.

A Practical Illustration of Eigenwelt

To illustrate the practical application of **Eigenwelt**, consider a situation common in professional life: an individual, Sarah, is working in a corporate environment and feels increasingly dissatisfied with her current role despite its financial stability. Her external world (Umwelt) presents her with a comfortable salary and social approval, and her social world (Mitwelt) might reinforce the idea that she "should" be happy with her success. However, within her **Eigenwelt**, a different reality is unfolding.

Initially, Sarah experiences a vague sense of unease, a feeling of disconnect that she can't quite articulate. This is the first stir of her **Eigenwelt** signaling an incongruence. Through self-observation and introspection, she begins to acknowledge her internal experience: a yearning for creative expression, a desire for work that aligns with her core values of social impact, and a growing frustration with the bureaucratic nature of her job. She spends evenings reflecting on past passions, journaling about her ideal future, and contemplating what truly brings her joy and a sense of purpose. This deep dive into her subjective world allows her to identify the underlying values and aspirations that her current professional path is failing to meet.

The "how-to" of **Eigenwelt** in action becomes evident as Sarah moves from mere observation to

active self-regulation. She might start by researching alternative career paths that resonate with her newfound clarity. This could involve enrolling in evening classes, volunteering in a field of interest, or networking with individuals who have made similar transitions. Each step is a deliberate choice, originating from her internal understanding of her needs and desires, rather than external pressures. Even if these actions are small, they are significant because they are authentic expressions of her developing autonomy, allowing her to modify her behavior and external circumstances to better align with her inner world, ultimately fostering a greater sense of fulfillment and personal integrity.

Significance and Contemporary Relevance

The significance of **Eigenwelt** within psychology lies in its profound emphasis on the subjective, agentic nature of human experience. It challenges purely mechanistic or deterministic views of human behavior by asserting the individual's inherent capacity for meaning-making, choice, and self-regulation. By acknowledging and prioritizing the unique inner world of each person, it provides a more holistic and respectful understanding of psychological health and distress. This perspective is vital for fostering therapies and interventions that empower individuals to take an active role in their own well-being, moving beyond mere symptom reduction to genuine personal growth and self-actualization.

In contemporary psychology, the applications of the **Eigenwelt** concept are multifaceted and far-reaching. In psychotherapy, particularly in humanistic, existential, and client-centered approaches, understanding a client's **Eigenwelt** is paramount. Therapists strive to enter the client's subjective world, validating their unique experiences and helping them to explore their values, choices, and sense of purpose. This fosters self-awareness, personal responsibility, and the development of coping mechanisms rooted in the individual's authentic self, leading to more resilient and adaptive psychological functioning.

Beyond the clinical setting, the principles derived from **Eigenwelt** inform various other domains. In education, recognizing students' unique subjective experiences and fostering their autonomy can lead to more engaged and self-directed learners. In leadership and organizational development, an appreciation for individual **Eigenwelten** promotes authentic leadership, diverse perspectives, and a more inclusive work culture. Furthermore, in understanding social behavior, the concept highlights how individual interpretations and values shape collective action and societal norms, underscoring its broad relevance across various psychological and social sciences.

Connections and Related Psychological Concepts

Eigenwelt is deeply intertwined with several other key psychological terms and theories, primarily within the broader categories of existential psychology, humanistic psychology, and developmental

psychology. Its relational concepts help to illuminate the various facets of human experience that contribute to the formation and function of the "self-world."

Self-Concept: This refers to an individual's knowledge about their own traits, abilities, and characteristics. The **Eigenwelt** provides the internal framework within which the self-concept is formed, evaluated, and continually updated based on subjective experiences and reflections.

Self-Efficacy: Defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. A strong **Eigenwelt**, characterized by a sense of autonomy and self-regulation, is foundational for developing robust self-efficacy, as it empowers the individual to act on their intentions.

Self-Actualization: A core concept in humanistic psychology, referring to the realization or fulfillment of one's talents and potentialities. The pursuit of self-actualization is an ongoing process rooted in the individual's **Eigenwelt**, driven by internal values and the desire for personal growth and meaning.

Phenomenology: This philosophical and psychological approach emphasizes the study of conscious experience as it is subjectively lived. **Eigenwelt** is a direct application of phenomenology, focusing on the individual's unique subjective reality as the primary source of psychological understanding.

Intersubjectivity: While **Eigenwelt** focuses on the individual's inner world, intersubjectivity explores how two or more individual subjective experiences (Eigenwelten) interact and influence each other in shared understanding and social interaction, particularly important in relational development and psychotherapy.

The broader category of psychology to which **Eigenwelt** belongs is primarily existential psychology and humanistic psychology, both subfields that prioritize the individual's unique subjective experience, personal meaning, and potential for growth. It also holds significant relevance for developmental psychology through its emphasis on autonomy and identity formation, and for certain psychodynamic approaches that recognize the importance of the individual's internal world and self-regulation capacities.