

The Freedom to Exist

Consciousness, Beliefs, and Personal Autonomy

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General Foreword to the Seven-Volume Series

Some books try to explain existence; others aim to guide the way we live it. This series arises from the meeting of both tasks. It presents neither a closed doctrine nor a promise of universal well-being: it proposes to examine, through experience and critical reflection, what it means to live by one's own judgment without losing sight of others.

Its seven volumes share three principles: self-sufficiency, responsible freedom, and attention to the experience of the here and now. Self-sufficiency does not mean being wholly sufficient unto oneself; responsible freedom does not deny our ties to others; and the present does not require us to forget memory or renounce the future. Each principle acquires meaning precisely by recognizing its limits.

The itinerary begins with consciousness, beliefs, and autonomy. It then opens to understanding others, to chosen simplicity, and to the experience of being alive. It examines solitude as a possibility of inner independence, the relationship between thought and action, and, finally, the human and social roots of conflict.

The series can be read as a journey, but each book is conceived to sustain its own question. Overlaps between volumes are deliberate where they connect different questions; repetition should never replace analysis. The unity of the series comes not from repeating answers but from keeping the same disposition to ask.

Readers will find arguments they may accept, question, or reject. That freedom of examination is not a secondary concession: it belongs to the very purpose of the work.

Foreword to Volume I

Before asking what we ought to believe about life, we can recognize that we are already living it. This book begins with that experience and examines how we construct explanations that may eventually come to govern us.

The inquiry begins with perception and embodiment, considers certainty and dogmatism, and develops an account of autonomy that does not demand living without help or turning existence into a contest of self-sufficiency.

The freedom defended here does not mean always doing whatever one wants. It involves attending to the consequences of our actions, respecting others and retaining the ability to reconsider our convictions.

The chapters offer arguments and examples that readers may test against their own experience. They do not constitute a closed doctrine or claim to provide universal answers to differing circumstances.

The Seven Volumes of the Series

1. The Freedom to Exist — Consciousness, Beliefs, and Personal Autonomy
2. The Art of Understanding — Empathy, Equanimity, and Coexistence
3. Less Is More — Self-Sufficiency, Simplicity, and Freedom
4. The Gift of Being Alive — Feeling, Contemplating, and Enjoying Existence
5. Solitude, a Divine Treasure — Inner Independence and Freedom from the Group
6. Flowing with Existence — Thought, Action, and Personal Fulfillment
7. The Root of Conflict — Beliefs, Power, Resources, and Human Responsibility

Volume I contains the complete text. Volumes II–VII are planned; their proposed outlines may change.

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PART I · THE EXPERIENCE OF EXISTING

Chapter 1 · Existence Before Explanations

Before asking ourselves about the meaning of life, we are already living. Experience does not wait for a finished explanation of the universe. We perceive, learn, form relationships, and act before developing a philosophy. This existential priority does not require a radical separation of feeling and thinking: experience comes to us from an embodied, situated perspective. It means that what we live through is not exhausted by what we can express about it.

Our ability to explain greatly extends our understanding. We can investigate the origin of a sensation, test hypotheses, and revise a belief. Yet a description of rest does not replace resting, just as an explanation of flavor does not amount to tasting. Reflection and experience complement one another; neither should claim a monopoly over our relationship with existence.

The priority of experience does not prove that thought is dispensable. Immediate perception may be described as an embodied relationship with a meaningful environment, without that description establishing a precise cognitive mechanism. Rather than setting pure experience against interpretation as though the latter were a contaminant, we propose distinguishing degrees and forms of elaboration: sensing a temperature, recognizing a situation, assigning it value, and formulating a theory are related activities, but they are not equivalent. This distinction protects the original intuition from becoming an untenable psychological claim.

The phrase ‘living does not require believing’ has a precise meaning: it does not require allegiance to a doctrinal system concerning the ultimate meaning of existence. It does not mean that we can cook without expecting food to be edible, drive without anticipating the movements of others, or conduct research without holding revisable hypotheses. A critical philosophy of belief should not contradict our ordinary need to orient ourselves through knowledge and expectations.

Living does not require adopting a doctrine about the ultimate meaning of the world. We may hold religious, naturalistic, or agnostic convictions, or leave certain questions open. The value we find in an encounter, a creative task, or a quiet moment need not wait until metaphysics has been settled. Nor are we obliged to find satisfaction: suffering, loss, and uncertainty belong to the human condition.

Our first freedom is to allow ourselves to recognize the life taking place while we search for explanations. This does not mean abandoning knowledge, but avoiding the idea that understanding everything is a precondition for taking part in our own experience.

The fact that life comes first is not a metaphysical theory

When we say that living precedes explaining life, we are making an observation about the order of our experience, not a definitive claim about the ultimate foundation of the universe. A young child begins responding to the surrounding world before being able to express philosophical propositions. This observation does not prove that consciousness exists apart from physical processes, nor does it permit us to infer that all living beings have identical experiences. It indicates something more modest, and sufficient for our purposes: taking part in the world does not require us to wait until we have developed a personal theory about what the world is.

This distinction protects the argument from two confusions. The first would be to imagine that all experience is pure and free of interpretation. Describing an experience is never wholly separate from our ways of attending, distinguishing, and making sense. The second would be to believe that, because life precedes our explicit explanations, it directly provides infallible knowledge. Experiencing something does not guarantee a correct understanding of its causes. We may feel afraid on hearing a noise and be mistaken about its source. Experience deserves attention; inquiry allows us to correct the conclusions we draw from it.

Lived meaning and declared meaning

Someone may claim that the purpose of life is to accumulate achievements and yet experience their most valuable moments in a conversation, a task done with care, or the contemplation of a landscape. The reverse can also happen: someone may say they value simple things and discover that their decisions are governed by external recognition. What we say we value does not always coincide with where we devote our time.

This difference does not make every ambitious project misguided. It invites us to examine those projects. The meaning of an activity may emerge in its performance, not solely in the account we give of it. When asking whether we live in accordance with our values, it is worth looking at our actual decisions, our relationships, and our approach to ordinary tasks. Not to subject ourselves to a permanent moral audit, but to discover discrepancies we may be able to address.

The objection from suffering

Someone living through a painful illness or a serious bereavement might object that an invitation to enjoy being alive ignores their circumstances. They would be right if this philosophy demanded constant gratitude. It does not. The fact of existing is not necessarily experienced as a gift. There are circumstances in which life is felt as a burden, and in which seeking help and protection takes precedence over reflection about enjoyment.

Recognizing this objection requires us to frame our thesis as a possibility, not a command. Being alive opens a field of experiences, but it does not guarantee that they will be pleasant or within our control. Attention to ordinary life may be enriching when minimum conditions make it possible; when those conditions are absent, shared responsibility may mean helping to establish them. No personal philosophy replaces that practical responsibility.

Chapter 2. The Reality We Experience Is Subjective

We share a world, but we do not experience that world in identical ways. Our biographies and embodied situations help explain why we may interpret the same event differently. Two people may remember a conversation differently without this demonstrating the existence of two incompatible physical realities.

The subjectivity of our experience is a claim about our access to the world, not a denial of an independently existing reality. We can compare testimony, use instruments, and build intersubjective knowledge. We can be mistaken: the intensity with which we feel an interpretation is not, by itself, an adequate measure of its truth.

We must not confuse a situated perspective with subjective confinement. We share instruments, procedures, and language, and we can correct one another's mistaken perceptions. Scientific descriptions are not merely personal accounts, because they use public procedures for testing and revision. The subjectivity of our access does not entitle us to deny facts that disturb our convictions.

Philosophical Dialogue: Perspective and a Shared World

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology helps situate this argument within a historical debate about perception and embodiment. Recognizing that we perceive from a particular situation is not the same as claiming that each person creates a separate, true, and incommunicable world. Experiences can be compared, corrected, and enriched through observation, dialogue, and inquiry. This comparison clarifies the limits of our thesis; it does not attribute authorship of that thesis to Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Toadvine, 2023).

The distinction between observation and inference has practical consequences. If a friend arrives late, we may know that they were not there at the agreed time, but not necessarily that they intended to disrespect us. The latter claim requires additional information. Caution in making such attributions does

not prevent us from setting boundaries when the behavior recurs: it prevents us from prematurely confusing facts, intentions, and consequences.

The plurality of perspectives does not entail moral relativism either. The fact that people make different judgments does not mean that every action is equally justifiable. Understanding a form of conduct and evaluating its ethical consequences are different tasks.

An objection arises: recognizing many perspectives might lead us to suspend judgment indefinitely. The response is to form conclusions proportionate to the evidence and revise them when the information changes. Openness is not systematic indecision.

The Problem of Perspective

Imagine two people watching a busy street from opposite ends. Both describe a real scene, but each sees elements concealed from the other. If they disagree about what lies around a corner, their differing reports do not establish that there are two incompatible realities. They may simply occupy different positions. Changing position, seeking testimony, or checking the facts allows them to broaden the description.

The analogy has limits, because our perspectives differ in more than spatial location. Learning, our senses, memory, attention, and the personal significance of what we observe all play a role. That is why it helps to distinguish three questions: what happened, how each person experienced it, and how each interprets its causes. We may agree on the first while retaining legitimate differences about the second. The third requires arguments and is open to criticism.

Humility Without Treating All Opinions as Equivalent

Recognizing that our perspective is partial does not require us to grant equal credibility to every claim. When someone states that an event occurred on a particular date, we can look for documents. When the effectiveness of a procedure is disputed, we can consult appropriate studies. When people describe the emotional meaning of an experience, we should listen to their accounts without pretending that we have direct access to their inner life.

Epistemic modesty is not intellectual weakness. It is a willingness to specify what we know, how we know it, and what remains uncertain. Its opposite is not conviction but a claim to infallibility. We can defend a well-supported conclusion firmly and revise it in the face of better evidence. We can also withhold judgment when information is insufficient.

Perspective and Living Together

Subjectivity can become an ethical resource if it encourages us to ask questions before attributing intentions. Silence may be interpreted as contempt; a brief response as hostility. Yet a clarifying conversation might reveal tiredness or inattention. Not every misunderstanding can be resolved in this way, and the possibility of alternative explanations does not oblige us to tolerate repeated disrespect. It simply prevents an initial inference from prematurely acquiring the status of a fact.

Recognizing different perspectives does not guarantee harmony either. Two people may understand their respective interests perfectly and still compete over a scarce resource. Agreements, standards of justice, or institutions may then be needed. Understanding can improve coexistence, but it cannot universally replace negotiation or protection against abuse.

Chapter 3. The Body as a Condition of Our Experience

From the standpoint of lived experience, we do not encounter the world as though we were minds detached from bodies. Breathing, movement, tiredness, and pleasure are part of our way of being in it. This is a phenomenological description, not in itself an explanation of the neurological mechanisms of perception.

We can attend to our readiness to act and to our need for rest. The expression “flowing with the body” names an original phenomenological proposal made in this book: attending to experiences of vitality, fatigue, and recovery without continuously imposing mental arousal on ourselves. It does not refer to supernatural energy or to a medically validated technique.

Interoception, the perception of internal bodily states, can be studied by distinguishing what a person believes they feel, the accuracy with which they detect internal signals, and the extent to which their confidence matches that accuracy. These dimensions do not necessarily coincide (Garfinkel et al., 2015), and measuring accuracy itself presents methodological difficulties (Desmedt et al., 2023). Listening to a sensation does not mean identifying its cause infallibly: we must integrate bodily information, background circumstances, and reasoned assessment.

Listening to the body is not obeying it without examination. A sensation may be ambiguous, and enthusiasm may coexist with physiological limits. We need to integrate experience, reliable information, risks, and commitments. Sometimes rest will be the most reasonable choice; at other times, continuing with proportionate effort will be.

Practical self-sufficiency includes looking after our ordinary needs, but it does not require doing everything alone. Cooking, cleaning, or learning to make a repair may expand our options; asking for assistance or cooperating can be equally autonomous. Dignity does not depend on the degree of bodily independence.

An objection is that obeying the body might mean avoiding unpleasant tasks. But the body does not dictate complete moral decisions. Meeting a responsibility or providing care sometimes requires effort; the proposal is not to turn that effort into a permanent hostility toward our bodily condition.

The Lived Body and the Observed Body

We can study our organism from the outside through physiological measurements and experience it from within through sensations. These two registers are not interchangeable. A measurement may reveal a change we do not yet perceive; an intense sensation may not arise from the cause we assume. Both provide different kinds of information. Our philosophy values the lived body without setting it against scientific knowledge of the organism.

The distinction between the lived body and the observed body is related to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). In that work, one’s own body cannot be reduced to one external object among others: it participates in our practical openness to the world. This book adopts the distinction in a more limited sense, without deriving a medical theory from it or opposing lived experience to scientific observation.

This distinction helps explain why listening to the body requires discernment. Fatigue may suggest rest, but its persistence, context, and any possible need for assistance should also be considered. Enthusiasm may motivate a task, but it does not guarantee that the activity is safe or advisable. Internal perception informs our decisions; it does not determine them by itself.

Chosen Effort

Flowing with the body does not mean eliminating every discomfort. Learning to swim, undertaking a demanding walk, or developing a skill may involve effort. The philosophical difference lies in our relationship to that effort. Chosen, proportionate, and revisable effort can expand our capacities. A permanent demand sustained by fear of disappointing others can restrict our freedom even when it produces visible achievements.

We can ask what an activity means to us, what resources it requires, and how it relates to our commitments. Sometimes we will decide to continue despite moderate tiredness. At other times it will

be reasonable to reduce the intensity, seek help, or postpone the task. There is no single rule. The ability to adjust effort expresses autonomy better than an obligation to maintain a constant pace.

Bodily Capacity and Dignity

If we tied a person's worth to their strength, vitality, or functional autonomy, we would end up excluding those who need more support. Human experience encompasses diverse abilities, illness, aging, and changing circumstances. Some people can undertake tasks personally; others need everyday assistance. Dignity neither increases nor decreases in proportion to that independence.

For this reason, bodily self-sufficiency must be understood as a situated possibility. When we can preserve a skill, it makes sense to do so if it contributes to our lives. When we cannot, we can still exercise autonomy by expressing preferences, participating in decisions, and establishing respectful relationships of care. Receiving care does not automatically make anyone less free: what matters is how that care is organized and how much decision-making capacity it preserves.

Chapter 4. Thinking, Feeling, and Interpreting

Thinking enables us to remember, anticipate, argue, and create. To dismiss thought would be incompatible with a philosophy that defends independent judgment. What we need to examine is its relationship with experience and action, especially when mental repetition no longer helps us understand.

Prolonged reflection can be fruitful: research and creation take time. Rumination is not defined simply by duration but by certain forms of repetition that sustain distress or obstruct alternatives. Sometimes continuing to think is valuable; at other times, taking action, changing activities, or resting is preferable.

Visualization is an imaginative operation, not proof that the world must conform to our expectations. When we imagine a solution, we should move from the desired scenario to specific questions: What resources do we need? What risks have we overlooked? What small step could provide information? Imagination then becomes a tool without hardening into a rigid belief.

We can also listen to music or walk without continually putting everything that happens into words. This possibility is not a command to achieve inner silence. It means allowing life to be more than a constant running commentary.

Contemplation, theory, and silence are not justified solely by what they produce. The idea of thought and action needs a provision for freedom: there is valuable thinking without immediate action, and valuable experience without an objective that explains it.

Exploratory Thinking and Defensive Thinking

We can approach an issue with genuine curiosity, or use reasoning to protect a conclusion reached in advance. In the first case, we seek to understand which arguments withstand scrutiny. In the second, we select reasons that confirm our position and treat objections as nuisances. The same intellectual ability can therefore broaden or restrict our understanding.

This contrast supplies a useful criterion for the chapters on belief. Thinking extensively or possessing sophisticated arguments is not enough. We should observe whether we allow contrary information to change our conclusions. Intellectual autonomy includes the freedom to correct ourselves, not merely the freedom to formulate our own opinions.

The Pause as Part of Understanding

An intellectual difficulty is not always resolved by immediately increasing mental effort. Sometimes we need to gather information; sometimes to test a partial solution; and sometimes to rest. A pause does not necessarily mean giving up. It may allow us to return to a problem with a different quality of attention and recognize assumptions we had overlooked.

This does not mean that rest automatically leads to discoveries or that sustained work should be avoided. Human activities require different rhythms. The proposal is not to confuse perseverance with endless repetition. We can keep a problem in view without making it the sole content of our experience.

The Objection from Contemplation

A philosophy that recommends moving from thought to action might seem hostile to theoretical research or contemplation. That objection would be justified if we measured all reflection by its immediate productivity. But understanding can itself be a valuable activity. Mathematics, philosophy, and fundamental research need not justify every question through an imminent application. We can also reflect for intellectual pleasure.

What we wish to avoid is an involuntary relationship with mental discourse that occupies our time without providing what we seek. Moreover, action does not mean only producing objects: speaking with someone, changing a habit, or stopping can all be appropriate decisions. Thinking, acting, and contemplating do not form a fixed hierarchy. Our freedom lies in recognizing which of these possibilities best fits the situation.

PART II. THE FORMATION OF OUR BELIEFS

Chapter 5. From an Idea to Identification

Ideas help us organize what we experience. A belief, in the epistemological sense, involves accepting something as true and can be reasonable and revisable. Identification is different: a proposition can become part of our conception of who we are.

When a conviction becomes an indispensable sign of belonging, questioning it can feel like a personal threat. Yet not every collective identity is rigid, and not every firm conviction is dogmatic. We can share beliefs, relationships, and traditions while retaining the freedom to question and disagree.

An identity can be reflectively chosen and contribute to ethical commitment. Someone may identify with a cultural tradition while remaining open to criticism; another may assume a communal responsibility and strengthen their autonomy. Identification is therefore not inherently a defect. The problem is the closing off of examination, particularly when disagreement becomes a personal or social threat.

The transformation of an idea into dogma is not a universal psychological law. A belief may be only loosely connected to identity, and a strong sense of belonging can coexist with self-criticism. We should examine particular reasons, habits, and incentives before attributing closed-mindedness to a person.

We can have ideas without becoming those ideas. Intellectual freedom consists less in having no convictions than in retaining our ability to revise them.

The practical test is not whether we belong to groups, but whether we can acknowledge other people's reasons, revise a conviction, and maintain relationships without demanding unanimity.

Belief, Identity, and Evidence

Accepting a proposition because there are reasons to consider it true is not the same as making it the center of our identity. Consider a researcher who changes a hypothesis after observing results incompatible with it. Her commitment to knowledge may be firm precisely because she does not need to preserve every provisional conclusion. Another person, by contrast, might interpret an ordinary objection as a challenge to their worth or to the recognition of their group. The problem is not believing but the difficulty of distinguishing an idea's merits from the value of the person who holds it.

An Identity Can Also Be Emancipatory

It would be a mistake to assume that every collective identification diminishes autonomy. Some reflectively chosen identities make it possible to resist humiliation, organize mutual support, and claim rights. The pertinent question concerns the relationship we establish with them. Can we disagree with members of our own group? Can we acknowledge an injustice committed by one of its members? Can we still engage in dialogue with outsiders? Identity is compatible with freedom when it does not claim ownership over the whole of our judgment.

Disagreement as a Test of Freedom

Imagine two people who share a commitment to environmental protection but disagree about a particular measure. If each listens to the evidence, distinguishes ends from means, and accepts the possibility of changing course, commitment to the same cause has not eliminated their independence. If one interprets every doubt as betrayal, belief has become a means of discipline. It is not enough, then, to classify ideas by whether they originate in religion, politics, or science: we must examine how they are held, revised, and brought into our dealings with others.

Freedom Without Indifference

Critically revising beliefs does not mean holding them half-heartedly. We can commit ourselves deeply to a cause and bear personal costs to defend it. The aim is not to reduce every conviction to the same level but to prevent commitment from foreclosing recognition of our own mistakes. A belief that guides just action can strengthen autonomy; one that prevents us from recognizing the harm done in its name can undermine it.

Chapter 6. The Need for Certainty

Uncertainty can be uncomfortable. Anticipating risks, identifying patterns, and relying on well-tested knowledge help us live. Yet the desire for security can lead us to prefer definitive explanations over acknowledging what we still do not know.

A belief can provide comfort without that comfort demonstrating its truth. Nor does its emotional usefulness demonstrate that it is false. Separating psychological function from epistemic justification allows us to discuss religious, philosophical, and political convictions rigorously.

Religious faith is not a single phenomenon. It can take critical, communal, mystical, doctrinal, or hierarchical forms. Analysis should distinguish what a person believes from the institutional mechanisms governing their ability to dissent. Dogmatism should not be inferred from affiliation alone.

We can act reasonably under uncertainty: investigate until we have sufficient grounds, make decisions proportionate to their consequences, and revise them when new information becomes available. Not knowing can also be an intellectually honest position.

The Practical Value of Provisional Certainties

Everyday life requires a degree of trust. We cross streets assuming certain signals will be respected; prepare food relying on knowledge we have acquired; and undertake journeys based on forecasts that may prove wrong. It would be unreasonable to question every detail at every moment. Autonomy does not require permanent skepticism but rather matching our confidence to the available evidence, the reversibility of a decision, and the magnitude of its possible consequences.

Psychological Certainty Is Not Evidence

Two people can feel equally certain about incompatible claims. That subjective intensity does not decide which claim is correct. If the matter affects only a private preference, the disagreement may have little consequence. If a claim underpins an intervention affecting other people's health, education, or

rights, the demand for reasons must be stronger. Respecting someone who believes something does not oblige us to grant equal credibility to every claim.

Living With Open Questions

We can acknowledge that some existential questions remain without conclusive answers and still build meaningful lives. Uncertainty about what happens to consciousness after death does not prevent us from caring for someone today. Lacking an ultimate theory of the universe's meaning does not deprive a friendship or a project of value. Uncertainty is difficult when we seek complete guarantees; it becomes more livable when we distinguish questions that require investigation from those that need not be settled before we act responsibly.

The Legitimate Role of Consolation

Shared narratives can accompany grief, sustain relationships, and provide language for difficult experiences. Recognizing that function does not require accepting all their claims as knowledge. Nor does it authorize us to disparage those who find support in them. We can separate the human value of a practice, its possible factual truth, and the way an institution administers it. This threefold distinction allows rigorous criticism without turning criticism into personal disparagement.

Chapter 7. Conceptual Attachment and Dogmatism

Dogmatism is not defined by the strength of a conviction, but by its unjustified resistance to critical scrutiny. A well-grounded conclusion may be upheld firmly while remaining open to revision; a weak claim may be defended as unquestionable.

When protecting an identity matters more than understanding an argument, we may select evidence that confirms our position and turn disagreement into hostility. Groups can reinforce this tendency, but they can also provide spaces for debate, support, and learning. Belonging is not, in itself, a defect.

Criticism of dogmatism should not become an identity based on superiority. Saying "I do not believe" can become as rigid a gesture as asserting "only my belief is true" if it prevents us from listening to reasons. The consistency of this book is tested when it faces objections from religious people, political groups, or traditions the author does not share.

Disagreement may reveal a genuine contradiction, not merely a diversity of perspectives. It is therefore legitimate to argue, request evidence, and denounce harm. Respecting another person does not require us to suspend all assessment of that person's claims or practices.

Criticism should target mechanisms of coercion, imposition, and intellectual closure, not entire groups of people. We can respect someone who holds a belief while questioning their arguments or conduct. Understanding the causes of an action does not amount to justifying it.

The test of consistency is whether we apply this criticism to our own philosophy. If self-sufficiency becomes an identity that forbids asking for help, or opposition to dogmatism demands absolute allegiance, we will have recreated what we criticize.

We must avoid a common inference: if an ideology has been used to justify violence, it does not follow that it is the sole cause. Conflicts often combine power, territory, resources, institutions, and group membership. Conceptual attachment may intensify them without explaining them completely.

Strong Conviction Is Not the Same as Dogmatism

Someone who firmly holds that a particular action causes harm may do so on the basis of solid evidence and revisable arguments. Such a person does not become dogmatic merely by remaining firm when faced with a weak objection. Critical openness does not require permanently suspending judgment or treating all arguments as equally persuasive. Dogmatism emerges when protecting a conclusion

systematically replaces the evaluation of reasons. We must avoid both rigidity and a false equanimity that treats evidence and passing opinion as equivalent.

The Social Cost of Dissent

Questioning a shared belief can carry costs beyond intellectual disagreement: the loss of friendships, opportunities, or recognition. It is not enough to tell someone to think freely if their environment punishes dissent. Autonomy has a relational dimension. It is reasonable to argue that environments where questioning, dissent, and revision are possible offer better conditions for exercising independent judgment. The size of that effect in particular contexts would require empirical research. This observation applies equally to secular and religious associations, academic institutions, and professional organizations.

When Criticism Mirrors What It Criticizes

A philosophy opposed to dogmatism can itself harden if it labels every religious believer ignorant or alienated. Criticism then stops examining particular practices and attributes a general inferiority to an entire group. Our standard must be symmetrical: question claims through reasons, denounce demonstrable coercion, and recognize that there are religious believers capable of critical deliberation, just as there are non-religious people who cling to dogmas.

Understanding and Limits

We may ask how someone came to justify abusive conduct and use what we learn to prevent it. Yet understanding causes does not excuse harm. The defense of rights, protection of victims, and repair remain necessary. Likewise, recognizing the dignity of someone who holds an opinion does not require accepting threats or impositions. Freedom of conscience protects belief; it does not make every action undertaken in its name legitimate.

Chapter 8. Fruitful Thought and Rumination

We can use reflection to explore hypotheses, clarify problems, and plan activities. Its fruitfulness is not measured exclusively by immediate results. Theoretical research or philosophical contemplation can be valuable in themselves.

Repetitive thought may become unhelpful when it circles around the same worries without producing new information or perspective. Not all sustained thinking is rumination, and we cannot always interrupt it through voluntary choice. We should avoid turning the ideal of thinking less into a new source of guilt.

Psychological research on rumination examines patterns of repetition associated with distress and difficulties in problem-solving. The expression “blah, blah, blah” is a personal metaphor, not a diagnosis of someone who thinks a great deal. The aim is neither to stigmatize reflection nor to demand perfect mental control (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Creative activity can coexist with uncertainty. We can begin with reversible actions that yield information and learn in the process. When a problem has major consequences, however, more preparation may be advisable before acting. A philosophy of thought and action does not prescribe the same decision-making speed in every circumstance.

One possibility is to ask what reflection is contributing now: does it clarify a situation, enable a decision, or explore a meaningful question? In other cases, a proportionate action can teach us what we could not anticipate. Experience corrects our mental models.

Nor is doing something always better than doing nothing. Rest can be a worthwhile choice. Paying attention to someone we love or contemplating a work of art can be worthwhile too. A good life cannot be measured by the quantity of things accomplished.

Lengthy Reflection Can Be Fruitful

Scientific research, writing, or resolving a complex conflict may require returning to the same question many times. Apparent repetition is not necessarily rumination: each return may introduce a distinction, evidence, or another perspective. The practical criterion is not duration, but the relationship between reflective effort, the novelty it contributes, and its effects on our capacity to understand. Even a period of apparent stagnation may form part of a valuable exploration. This distinction between constructive and unconstructive forms of repetitive thought can be read alongside Watkins's review (Watkins, 2008).

Rumination Cannot Be Stopped by Command

Telling ourselves "stop thinking" may become another worry. Nor is it responsible to depict every form of repetitive thinking as a simple choice. Some forms of rumination are associated with emotional difficulties that may call for professional support. This philosophical proposal is not a clinical intervention. It can invite us to recognize the difference between working through a problem and repeatedly going around the same circuit, but it must respect that this difference cannot always be managed through immediate willpower.

Deliberation in Proportion to Risk

Not all decisions warrant the same amount of time. For an easily reversible choice, a cautious attempt may suffice; for a decision with serious consequences, research and consultation may be indispensable. Thought and action means adapting deliberation to the situation, not indiscriminately accelerating behavior. We can also decide not to act if the information is insufficient or if intervening would cause harm. Pausing is a deliberative option and not necessarily a renunciation.

Creation as a Non-Instrumental Experience

We can write without intending to publish, grow plants without quantifying results, or study a question out of curiosity. These activities need not be translated into economic productivity to be worthwhile. At the same time, ambitious projects demand discipline and sustained work: enjoying the process does not mean every moment is pleasant. Creative freedom consists in choosing commitments, recognizing their costs, and keeping a proportionate relationship with the outcome. Sometimes continuing expresses autonomy; at other times, stopping does.

PART III. Individual Freedom

Chapter 9. Orphaned from Our Existential Freedom

Early in life we depend on others for many forms of care. Over time, and in different ways according to our capacities and circumstances, our opportunities to take part in decisions may expand. We propose that education should enable this participation gradually and proportionately, without assuming that everyone follows one universal path toward autonomy.

Many adults may retain the habit of seeking authorization: we need approval before choosing, fear disappointing others, and delegate matters that we could examine ourselves. "Orphaned from our existential freedom" names this paradox: having opportunities for autonomy while living as though they constantly required someone else's permission.

Speaking of being "orphaned from our existential freedom" is a critical metaphor, not a diagnosis of a population. It describes situations in which we delegate our judgment out of habit or fear of exclusion. These must be distinguished from imposed dependencies and from support that genuinely makes choice possible.

The habit of delegating our judgment can be placed in dialogue with Kant's invitation to emerge from self-incurred immaturity in his essay on Enlightenment (1784), and with Fromm's examination of the

fear that can accompany freedom (1941). The metaphor of abandonment also recalls Sartre's existential reflection (1946). Here we propose neither a universal psychology nor a derivation from these authors: we distinguish between necessary dependence, voluntarily delegated deliberation, and avoidable subordination.

It may be rational to accept advice from someone with greater expertise. Autonomy is not lost through learning from others, but when authority unjustifiably replaces our ability to question, understand, and decide in matters that belong to us.

Belonging can offer affection and cooperation, but it can also inhibit dissent if acceptance depends on obedience. We do not need to abandon communities in order to think freely. We can contribute to them as individuals who are able both to agree and to disagree.

As an educational proposal, we argue that freedom can also be cultivated through real opportunities to decide: taking part in proportionate matters, facing consequences with support, and seeking guidance when useful. Complete independence does not exist, nor is there a single valid developmental path for everyone.

Initiative can be recovered gradually through proportionate decisions. Not every form of emancipation is immediately possible, and the costs of dissent are not equal for everyone. A responsible philosophy cannot demand courage without considering the person's resources and potential reprisals.

Formal Freedom and Effective Freedom

A person may have a recognized right to decide and yet have alternatives so limited that exercising that right is difficult. Freedom of conscience can coexist with severe economic dependence; the ability to dissent may be restricted by threats of exclusion. Thus, when we speak of recovering our initiative, we must distinguish between voluntarily renouncing a decision and genuinely lacking possibilities. Confusing the two would attribute to the individual a responsibility that is not wholly theirs. Philosophical reflection must ask about the conditions that allow a nominal freedom to become a freedom that can actually be exercised.

Reflective Belonging Is Not Servitude

A group can provide not only refuge but also tools for emancipation. We learn to argue with others, acquire skills through cooperation, and may find support when challenging abusive authority. The problem is not identifying with other people or shared projects, but ceasing to review the terms of that identification. Belonging that is compatible with autonomy allows disagreement, reasonable exit, and the transformation of its own arrangements. The opposite occurs when dissent is punished or collective identity becomes the only permitted answer to the question of who we are.

An Everyday Test of Autonomy

We can examine a simple decision that we habitually delegate: organizing our time, handling an administrative task, or expressing a preference. First, we distinguish whether we genuinely need guidance or are avoiding the discomfort of deciding. Next, we identify the consequences and legitimate commitments involved. Finally, we choose, even if the choice is to ask for help. The exercise does not guarantee a perfect decision; it can show us that we are able to recognize our own part in it. Freedom understood in this way is not heroic self-sufficiency but proportionate responsibility.

Chapter 10. Self-Sufficiency as a Vital Principle

We call existential self-sufficiency the disposition to develop, preserve, and exercise capacities for understanding, deciding, and acting within our circumstances, while seeking to avoid forms of subordination and dependence that unjustifiably restrict our autonomy, without denying the value of

cooperation or the legitimacy of receiving help. The term is used here in this stipulated sense: it means neither isolation nor a requirement to do without other people.

Being able to prepare a meal, make a simple repair, or handle an everyday administrative task expands our alternatives, but it does not oblige us always to carry out those tasks ourselves. We may delegate them for reasons of interest, time, accessibility, or a reasonable division of responsibilities. The possibility of choosing, rather than the accumulation of tasks performed personally, is the criterion of autonomy here.

Reciprocity and interdependence are not exceptions to self-sufficiency but part of its actual conditions. A person with a disability can make meaningful decisions with appropriate support. An institution may enable autonomy rather than extinguish it. Dignity must therefore never be measured by how many tasks a person performs alone.

Philosophical dialogue: relational autonomy

Contemporary discussions of relational autonomy challenge the automatic identification of self-government with isolation. A person may decide for themselves while maintaining relationships of care, learning, cooperation, or chosen dependence. What matters is not the absence of ties but the conditions shaping their effective ability to decide, reconsider, and act. This argumentative affinity does not establish any historical influence on the present proposal (Christman, 2025).

A dependence does not become unnecessary merely because another way of living can be imagined. Evaluating it requires attention to abilities, effective alternatives, costs, informed preferences, and the possible effects of coercion. Consensual support may increase autonomy; dependence imposed by a lack of alternatives may diminish it.

Self-sufficiency does not mean doing everything

In its more demanding sense, self-sufficiency cannot be measured by the number of tasks we perform without help. Someone may cook, repair their home, and manage their accounts while allowing a community to determine their fundamental convictions without scrutiny. Another person may need daily assistance to move around yet retain remarkable intellectual and moral independence. If only the first person counts as self-sufficient, we confuse instrumental skill with self-government. Our claim is different: practical capacities matter because they broaden possibilities, but their existential value lies in the effective freedom to use them and decide how we wish to live.

A necessary distinction: capacity, dependence, and subordination

Three levels should be distinguished. Capacity is what a person can do, even when they choose not to do it. Dependence describes a relationship in which a need or activity requires another person's involvement. Subordination arises when such a relationship unjustifiably restricts the capacity to choose, disagree, or change its terms. These levels do not coincide. Knowing how to cook broadens our options even if we share cooking duties. Relying on a professional for a complex procedure does not entail subordination. By contrast, receiving assistance under a threat that essential goods will be withdrawn unless we accept a doctrine may seriously compromise our autonomy. Self-sufficiency seeks to develop capacities and reduce avoidable subordination, not indiscriminately abolish every dependence.

Who decides which dependence is unnecessary?

The word "unnecessary" expresses a contextual judgment and should not become an external command. A task may be easy for one person and extremely costly for another. Available time, pain, knowledge, disability, family responsibilities, and financial resources change what is reasonable. Even someone who knows how to perform an activity may legitimately delegate it. The decisive question is not whether an observer thinks that person could do it alone, but whether they have genuine alternatives,

understand their consequences, and participate adequately in the decision. A philosophy of autonomy that imposed the same list of tasks on everyone would reproduce the paternalism it seeks to challenge.

The meal thought experiment

Imagine three situations. One person learns to cook and enjoys preparing their food, developing an ability and an experience they value. Another knows how to cook but agrees with their partner to divide tasks differently because both prefer it. A third cannot cook because of a functional limitation and needs assistance to eat, while retaining control over mealtimes and preferences. There is no reason to rank these lives on a simple scale of greater or lesser dignity. What matters is the quality of the decision and of the supportive relationship. In the first case, doing the task personally expresses autonomy; in the second, voluntary cooperation does; in the third, autonomy may be expressed precisely through receiving help that enables the person to exercise their preferences.

Emotional autonomy without insensitivity

Reducing excessive dependence on others' approval does not mean ceasing to need affection. Relationships matter, and criticism may hurt even when we know it is poorly founded. The aim is not to become emotionally immune to those around us but to avoid granting every external judgment the authority to define our worth or direct our choices. We may listen to someone who knows us, recognize their concern, and maintain our decision. We may also admit that their judgment reveals our own mistake. Emotional independence means neither feeling nothing nor obeying every feeling: it means retaining the possibility of examining our responses rather than turning them automatically into obedience.

Self-sufficiency as a possibility, not an obligation

The capacity to do something ourselves does not, by itself, create a duty always to do it. If learning a skill offers alternatives, turning its exercise into a permanent command may restrict those alternatives again. We may prefer to cook today and share the preparation tomorrow. We may enjoy solitude without rejecting company. We may develop a project on our own initiative and accept specialist collaboration. Self-sufficiency ceases to be liberating when it becomes an identity we must demonstrate to others. The criterion should be an increase in reasonable possibilities, not a display of independence.

Responsibility does not resolve structural injustice

We must acknowledge a political and social limit. Some individual possibilities are conditioned by barriers that personal perseverance cannot remove. Poverty, unjust restrictions of rights, and lack of access to support can limit autonomy even for competent and responsible people. It would be wrong to turn self-sufficiency into an explanation of why someone cannot escape those circumstances. Personal initiative and collective responses are not incompatible. We can assume responsibility for what lies within our power while also defending institutions and relationships that broaden the possibilities available to others.

A criterion for personal reflection

Self-sufficiency can be considered through questions rather than a universal list of duties. Do I have enough information to understand this decision? Can I disagree without fear of disproportionate retaliation? Do I have viable alternatives? Am I transferring a task to others through a conscious choice, or because I have stopped cultivating a capacity I want to retain? Does my decision unfairly affect someone else? These questions do not guarantee easy answers. Their advantage is that they prevent us from confusing the author's preference with a general rule. Each person can examine their situation without subscribing to a uniform model of existence.

The thesis in summary

The thesis can be summarized as follows: it matters to broaden our effective capacity to direct our own existence and reconsider our dependencies, without turning independence into a duty or overlooking inequalities in actual circumstances. Chosen cooperation can strengthen rather than weaken that capacity.

Why is that capacity worth protecting? The bodily and situated experience examined in Part I is always lived from some particular perspective. No normative conclusion follows automatically from this fact: further reasons are required. One is that, except where others are unjustifiably affected or duties of protection apply, being able to take part in decisions that shape our experience makes possible a life we can recognize as our own. Being subject to another person's arbitrary will deprives us of that participation and increases our vulnerability to decisions we cannot challenge. This is a reason in favor of autonomy, not proof that it must be exercised in one particular way. It connects the experience discussed in Part I with the responsible freedom explored in the following parts.

There is also a reciprocal reason: if we consider it valuable to be able to examine decisions that affect us, we must explain why we would deny others a comparable opportunity. The argument does not settle disagreements about justice or turn every desire into a right. It requires us to offer publicly defensible reasons for limitations and to distinguish care, cooperation, and subordination.

Dependence, support, and domination

The word "dependence" covers very different situations. We may depend on medical treatment, a supply network, or another person's voluntary care. None of these circumstances necessarily entails domination. By contrast, a relationship in which someone uses an indispensable resource to impose their preferences does raise a question of freedom. The relevant distinction is therefore between needs and subordination, not between doing something individually or with help. Self-sufficiency should promote decision-making capacity and access to alternatives while recognizing that some needs will be permanent.

When the principle turns against its defender

If someone refuses necessary assistance solely to preserve an image of independence, the principle of self-sufficiency has lost its function. Instead of expanding options, it has become an identity requirement. The same would happen if we used our abilities to judge those living with disability, poverty, or different circumstances. The test is straightforward: does this choice reasonably increase our participation in our own life, or does it merely protect the idea that we ought to do everything without help? Answering requires examination of facts and needs, not repetition of a slogan.

Chapter 11. The Responsibility of Choosing

Choosing has consequences in a shared world. We do not control every outcome, but we can try to anticipate foreseeable harm and answer for our commitments. Freedom does not mean the absence of obligations, nor can responsibility be reduced to obeying others' expectations.

We should distinguish chosen commitments, duties arising from our actions, and demands imposed without justification. Not every request from another person becomes our responsibility; nor may we arbitrarily abandon legitimate obligations simply because they no longer please us.

A decision should be judged in light of the information reasonably available when it was made, not solely by its outcome. A prudent action may end badly because of factors nobody controlled, while recklessness may escape consequences through chance. Responsibility requires distinguishing intention, foreseeability, ability to intervene, and results.

In some popular interpretations, "karma" is used as though it named a force distributing rewards and punishments in proportion to merit. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions have developed different and

far more complex accounts of the relationships between action, intention, and consequences. Our criticism is directed only at the simplification of karmic ideas into automatic retribution: suffering an injustice is never, by itself, evidence that someone deserves it. That actions have consequences does not imply that outcomes are fair.

We can correct mistakes, repair harm, and learn. Responsibility requires acknowledging what happened, but not making a mistake into a permanent identity. Self-compassion is meaningful when it accompanies rather than replaces reparation.

Personal responsibility does not eliminate duties we did not explicitly choose, including some obligations of care or the duty to repair harm. Practical autonomy operates within a framework of rights and responsibilities that requires justification in its own terms.

Legitimate obligations do not vanish when they become inconvenient

Choosing our commitments does not mean that every obligation depends on our present wishes. Caring for someone for whom we are responsible, respecting agreements, and repairing damage may remain justified requirements even when meeting them is uncomfortable. Responsible freedom is not a license to withdraw cooperation arbitrarily. But it does not demand unlimited obligations either: we must consider our abilities, the fairness of an agreement, and consequences for third parties. Honestly revising a commitment may be more responsible than maintaining it through promises we cannot keep.

Chapter 12. The Freedom to Say No

We may agree to demands out of affection and cooperation, or out of fear of losing recognition. Persistent people-pleasing diminishes the authenticity of our commitments when we stop considering our own possibilities and wishes.

Saying no allows us to establish boundaries, but it does not cancel legitimate duties we have assumed or the rights of those who depend on us. Refusal calls for discernment: distinguishing an arbitrary social expectation from a genuine responsibility.

We can communicate boundaries without requiring the other person to approve of them emotionally. A refusal may be respectful and still cause disappointment. The aim is not to control other people's reactions, but to communicate clearly and accept proportionate consequences.

Understanding another person's difficulty does not mean always solving it for them. We may offer attentive listening, guidance, or proportionate help while respecting their initiative. In emergencies and where essential needs are unmet, direct assistance may be indispensable.

Firmness need not be hostile. We can state a decision clearly, hear disapproval, and maintain reasonable composure. We do not need to become the "good child" who seeks approval at any cost.

Disagreement is not aggression

A refusal may disappoint without being unjust. If we mistake every instance of another person's sadness for harm we must prevent, we will end up yielding even when our reasons are legitimate. Conversely, the right to set boundaries does not justify expressing them with contempt. Saying no clearly means accepting that another person has wishes of their own and that these do not always coincide with ours. Responsible coexistence requires enduring some mutual frustration without turning it into a moral accusation.

Boundaries and the duty of care

There are situations in which someone depends on us because of prior agreements, caregiving responsibilities, or a lack of immediate alternatives. In such cases, saying no may have serious effects. Merely invoking autonomy is not enough to ignore them. We may need to negotiate a replacement caregiver, seek support, or arrange a responsible transition. Personal boundaries protect our lives, but

they must also take account of the legitimate commitments we have created. Responsible firmness is not abandonment.

Approval is not the only criterion

We may receive sound criticism and feel uncomfortable. We may also be praised for conduct that harms someone. Neither the pleasure nor the rejection we elicit can, on its own, determine whether our decisions are just. Applied equanimity means examining reasons, facts, and consequences before changing our position. If we discover an error, correcting it expresses independence of judgment. If disapproval offers no new reasons, we can calmly maintain our boundary without seeking victory over the other person.

Chapter 13. Integrity in the Face of Obedience

Institutions make coordination possible, but an order does not automatically make an action just. We remain responsible for examining, as far as we are able, the legitimacy of what we take part in.

Refusing to cooperate with abuse may involve risks. Integrity does not require reckless exposure: seeking support, documenting a situation, using institutional protections, or limiting our involvement may be responsible options.

From an ethical standpoint, obedience does not automatically remove moral responsibility. In evaluating conduct, we should consider the knowledge available, the actual freedom to act, and the risks involved. We should not demand reckless heroism from people under threat; sometimes only gradual forms of resistance or protection are possible.

Making assistance conditional on conversion or ideological allegiance raises serious problems when the recipient has too few alternatives. But many religious and secular organizations help without imposing such conditions; it would be false to attribute the same practice to all of them. Criticism must be specific.

We can act for the sake of justice without expecting supernatural reward or recognition. Even so, good intentions are not enough: we must consider the needs of those receiving help, the means we choose, and the foreseeable consequences. Firmness and tenderness can coexist.

Understanding the person who caused harm does not require the victim to forgive or reconcile. Protecting those who suffer, seeking possible reparation, and acknowledging responsibility remain essential.

Causal Understanding and Ethical Judgment

To explain an action is not to justify it. We can investigate how someone learned to obey harmful orders, the pressures they experienced, and the opportunities they had to act differently. This information makes the attribution of responsibility more accurate, but does not remove the obligation to protect those harmed. An ethics of understanding must retain two perspectives at once: attention to the causes of conduct and attention to the rights of those affected. Neglecting either impoverishes our judgment.

Respectful Assistance and the Recipient's Autonomy

Generosity is not defined solely by the giver's intention. The recipient's needs and understanding of the intervention also matter. Urgent help can resolve a crisis without creating unjust dependence. At other times, imposed assistance may displace people's capacities or demand gratitude and obedience. Whenever possible, we should ask what support is wanted and what alternatives exist. Making basic needs conditional on religious or ideological allegiance creates especially troubling pressure. Sharing convictions does not require exploiting another person's vulnerability.

Integrity Under Risk

Not everyone can oppose abuse in the same way. Someone dependent on a job, home, or institution may face threats an outside observer does not experience. Demanding heroism without considering those risks would be a form of moralism. Integrity can take the form of open refusal, seeking allies, documentation, reporting through safe channels, or gradually withdrawing from harmful cooperation. The point is to choose an ethical response proportionate to real capacities and risks, rather than publicly performing an idealized strength.

PART IV. Living from One's Own Center

Chapter 14. Independence of Judgment

Intellectual autonomy does not mean inventing all knowledge on our own. Much of what we know also depends on other people's testimony and shared practices of learning; learning from specialists does not require abandoning critical judgment. Thinking for ourselves means examining grounds for belief and recognizing the limits of our expertise.

Independence does not require habitual disagreement. Rejecting every piece of advice may itself be a way of remaining dependent on whatever one opposes. We can accept sound arguments without surrendering unconditional obedience to the person offering them.

When a decision calls for expertise, placing reasonable trust in it can be part of good judgment. Freedom does not require us to reproduce every investigation personally. It requires distinguishing competence, evidence, uncertainty, and the limits of authority.

Changing our minds in response to better reasons is an ability, not a defeat. A deeper consistency lies in retaining the willingness to correct our conclusions. Our decisions should reflect the best understanding available.

Nor do we need to persuade everyone. We can make an argument, listen, and recognize when disagreement no longer adds to understanding. Our freedom includes respecting other people's freedom not to agree.

An Objection to Independence of Judgment

If all human knowledge develops through learning and cooperation, how can we distinguish our own judgment from merely repeating someone else's ideas? We cannot answer by asking who first expressed a thought. What matters is whether we understand the reasons supporting it, can identify its limits, and can explain what would make us revise it. A student can genuinely understand a scientific finding without personally repeating every experiment, because the student grasps the difference between trusting a testable procedure and obeying a claim on the basis of prestige. Independence of judgment does not require starting from nothing: it requires critically evaluating what we receive.

Disagreement Is Not Always Courage

Someone may systematically reject relatives' recommendations and yet still organize every decision around them. Their behavior depends on opposition rather than independent deliberation. The same can happen when contradicting the majority becomes an identity. We may agree with an authority on some matters and disagree on others. Neither consensus proves truth nor dissent guarantees insight. The relevant question is what reasons support each position and how we might test them.

Judgment Under Uncertainty

In matters of health, justice, or safety, our decisions may call for specialized knowledge. Asking for help and weighing evidence need not mean failing at autonomy; they may be its most responsible exercise. The degree of scrutiny should match the significance of the decision: choosing what to read

does not demand the same investigation as accepting an intervention with lasting consequences. Our judgment improves as we learn to recognize what we know, what we do not know, and whom it is reasonable to consult.

Independence Also Means Accepting Correction

Some past choices become part of our public identity: a profession, a conviction, or a position we have defended openly. Revising them may bring embarrassment or fear of disappointing others. Yet persisting solely to preserve an image is not necessarily integrity. Worthwhile continuity lies not in maintaining every conclusion, but in remaining prepared to offer reasons and take responsibility for change. Being free to learn includes being free to acknowledge that we were mistaken.

Chapter 15. Equanimity in Practice

Equanimity does not mean the absence of emotion. We may feel fear, enthusiasm, sadness, or anger and still retain room for choice. An emotion provides information about our experience, but is not, by itself, an instruction we must obey.

Recognition can feel good; criticism can hurt. Emotional independence means listening to these responses without automatically treating them as measures of our personal worth. We can learn from one observation and reject another without defending an image of perfection.

Equanimity is an orientation toward regulation, not a ban on feeling. Pain, loss, and injustice may provoke intense emotions. Experiencing them is not a philosophical failure. We can retain some capacity to decide even when we cannot achieve perfect calm.

We do not control other people's approval, although we can try to express ourselves clearly and considerately. Equanimity in practice offers quiet firmness, not indifference.

Being equanimous does not mean neutrality toward abuse, either. Ethical firmness and sensitivity to suffering can coexist with an effort to avoid needless hostility.

Equanimity enters into dialogue with the Stoic tradition, for example Epictetus's distinction between what is and is not up to us (*Enchiridion*, §1). It may also be compared, without equating the two, with the equanimity cultivated in Buddhist traditions under the term *upekkhā*. Here, neither emotional indifference nor acceptance of injustice is required: the proposal is to examine how we might respond without losing the legitimacy of feeling, dissenting, and protecting ourselves.

Equanimity in the Face of a Real Offense

Not every strong emotion arises from a mistaken interpretation. An offense, loss, or injustice can warrant sadness, anger, or protest. Balance does not mean denying the seriousness of what happened; it means preserving enough capacity to choose a response. We can call out abuse, seek protection, or demand reparation without feeling compelled to turn conflict into permanent enmity. Calmness may help, but it is not a condition for our complaint to be legitimate.

Dependence on Approval Comes in Degrees

Wanting recognition is human. The problem begins when it becomes an indispensable condition for acting. Consider someone who accepts additional work because they fear disappointing others: the response may appear kind while leaving no time to recover. Examining this behavior does not mean forbidding ourselves to please people, but asking whether there is a genuine choice, whether the obligations are legitimate, and whether the cost is proportionate. A respectful refusal may preserve a relationship better than an acceptance accompanied by resentment.

Do Not Confuse Acceptance with Resignation

We can accept that a situation is happening without believing it ought to continue. Acknowledging tiredness does not require abandoning every commitment; recognizing injustice does not mean tolerating it. This distinction protects equanimity from passivity. Clarity about the facts can precede firm action: documenting what happened, negotiating, seeking support, or setting limits. Prudent action does not require perfect inner calm.

The Right to Imperfect Emotion

When a philosophy promises uninterrupted serenity, it can impose a second burden: in addition to suffering, we believe we have failed by suffering. Applied equanimity should avoid that cycle. We can be upset and still make a reasonable decision; we may need time to understand our response. Emotional regulation is not a test of personal purity. It is a variable capacity, shaped by circumstances, which can be exercised imperfectly without losing its value.

Chapter 16. Freedom in the Face of Our Mistakes

We can develop abilities through teaching, observation, and practice; these routes can complement one another. Direct experience may reveal difficulties we had not anticipated, but we do not need to make dangerous mistakes in order to develop our abilities. Protection and autonomy should be adjusted to the circumstances.

A child may try to stand up after a minor fall while an adult remains attentive. This does not justify withholding help when there is pain or danger. Offering support without unnecessarily taking over can encourage learning.

A learning experience requires protection proportionate to the actual risk. Allowing someone to try a reversible task may strengthen their skills; exposing them to injury for the sake of a lesson would be irresponsible. There is no inherent virtue in making mistakes.

Self-compassion and responsibility need to develop together. Understanding the circumstances that contributed to a mistake does not mean denying the harm. We can acknowledge it, apologize, make amends, and change our behavior without turning guilt into a permanent identity. Research on self-compassion provides relevant empirical context (Neff, 2023); the duty to make amends is argued here on independent ethical grounds.

Making a mistake does not mean that our whole person is a mistake. We can recognize a wrongful action, identify its causes, and change it. When it has harmed someone, we should attend to the person affected, not only to our own wish to feel better.

Forgiving ourselves does not mean declaring ourselves innocent or demanding forgiveness from others. It may mean relinquishing indefinite inner punishment after assuming responsibility and repairing what we reasonably can.

Learning Without Romanticizing Harm

A minor stumble may offer an opportunity to learn; serious harm need not be justified by the experience it produces. Children's autonomy requires appropriate supervision, and adult learning requires recognition of safety limits. We can learn from simulations, instructions, and other people's mistakes. Constructive experience arises when we observe, understand, and adjust our actions, not simply because we get something wrong.

Making Amends Before Seeking Peace of Mind

If our decisions have harmed someone, the first question should not be limited to how we can stop feeling guilty. We should acknowledge the harm, listen to those affected when appropriate, and consider possible ways to make amends. Apologizing may be part of the process, but it does not

guarantee reconciliation. No one is obliged to restore trust. Self-compassion is ethically defensible when it does not replace responsibility but helps us face it without reducing our identity to the mistake we made.

Beginning Again Without Erasing the Past

Learning does not mean pretending that nothing happened. Some decisions leave lasting consequences; acknowledging them may change our future boundaries and commitments. Even so, we can continue. We can develop different habits, seek guidance, or establish procedures that reduce the risk of repeating the harm. Progress need not be fast or linear. Step by step, we build an experience that integrates the past without being paralyzed by it.

Chapter 17. Feeling Existence Here and Now

Remembering and planning are valuable abilities. Living in the present does not require eliminating them or constantly checking whether we are paying attention. We can simply recognize the activity in which we are engaged and allow it to be part of our experience.

Everyday life is not merely a waiting room for future achievements. Cooking, looking after our home, walking, and resting are real moments of existence. They need not all be pleasant, but neither are they devoid of value because they are ordinary.

Attention to the present is not a mandatory technique of self-observation. For some people, and in certain circumstances, intensely observing internal sensations can be unpleasant. Being present can also mean engaging with an external task or a relationship.

Enjoying ordinary activities is a possibility, not a duty. Cooking may be pleasurable for one person and burdensome for another. Freedom means recognizing these differences rather than prescribing the same way of life to everyone.

“Flowing with the body” means taking fatigue and readiness for action into account, not assuming that every sensation is infallible. Excessive attention to the body can be uncomfortable in some circumstances; we can also turn toward tasks, relationships, and the world around us.

The journey is also life itself. We can enjoy the steps of a project without making all our satisfaction dependent on its completion. Gratitude and presence are possibilities, not emotional obligations.

The Present Is Not an Ideal of Perfect Attention

The mind remembers and anticipates because these functions help us live. If we try to banish them in order to remain continually present, we impose a form of vigilance that contradicts the spontaneity we seek. A person can cook while remembering a conversation and still experience the act of cooking. There is no moral boundary between being present and being distracted. The proposal is to notice when inner discourse monopolizes our attention without offering anything useful and to allow other ways of experiencing life.

The Ambiguous Value of Everyday Tasks

Cooking, cleaning, or looking after a space can be satisfying and may support practical autonomy. They can also be burdensome, repetitive, or unfairly distributed. Their philosophical value must not be used to demand that a particular person perform them. We may share tasks, hire help, or organize them collectively. What matters is that the decision is sufficiently free and that we recognize the work that makes everyday life possible, whether we perform it ourselves or others perform it.

Presence and Suffering

There are days when the present contains pain, grief, or worry. Telling someone to enjoy the moment can become a cruel demand. Being in touch with experience does not mean finding it pleasant.

Sometimes the responsible response is to seek protection, company, treatment, or simply rest. The possibility of enjoying existence also depends on circumstances we did not choose. Gratitude may arise spontaneously; it should never be required as the correct response.

The Path Is Made by Walking—and Also by Pausing

A project can fill the future with expectations. Recognizing the journey as experience means that learning, correction, and rest are not merely obstacles between ourselves and the final outcome. Sometimes changing direction reveals a more accurate understanding of our abilities. Even abandoning a goal can be a free choice when done with discernment. The path is not simply uninterrupted progress: it also includes the possibility of observing and deciding anew.

Chapter 18. Thinking in Order to Understand and Act

Imagination allows us to conceive possibilities and anticipate projects. Turning an idea into reality requires considering resources, abilities, and risks. Some difficulties become apparent only during implementation; experience may correct our predictions.

An ambitious goal may be reasonable if it allows for stages of learning and revision. Realism does not mean resignation. We may also abandon or transform projects when their costs are no longer appropriate.

Creativity encompasses free imagination and practical realization. An idea may be valuable even if it never becomes a product. When we choose to pursue it, we should consider resources, risks, stages, and opportunities for correction.

Ambition is not incompatible with simplicity. We may undertake difficult work out of genuine interest and enjoy the steps involved. The problem arises when the expected outcome becomes the only condition for our satisfaction or an obligation to perform without pause.

Personal fulfillment may emerge from creating, researching, repairing, or understanding. It need not be measured exclusively by money, recognition, or productivity. Theoretical reflection and contemplation also have value without immediate results.

Activity itself can become another dependency when we feel we must always be productive. Thinking in order to act does not forbid us from stopping. We may persevere, change pace, rest, and enjoy our existence without producing anything.

Stopping can be as rational as persevering. The cost of continuing, new information, and our commitments should all enter into that decision. We do not need to prove determination by maintaining projects that no longer make sense.

Creativity Is Not Exhausted by Production

We can imagine possibilities without immediately turning them into products, income, or recognition. An exploratory conversation, reading a work, or considering a still-immature hypothesis may be valuable in itself. Our defense of thought oriented toward action should not disparage such processes. The relevant difference is not between thinking and producing, but between exploring freely and becoming trapped in a repetition we no longer want. Contemplation, too, can be a form of fulfillment.

A Project and the Conditions for Its Feasibility

A difficult aspiration is not necessarily unrealistic. We can divide it into stages, identify missing capabilities, seek cooperation, and define indicators that would justify continuing or revising our approach. Reasonable ambition accommodates uncertainty. Anyone building something over the long term must consider not only the result but also resources, time, and personal costs. A goal may deserve great effort without turning that effort into unlimited sacrifice. Planning should serve our life project, not replace it.

Sufficient Action, Not Permanent Activation

At times we confuse subjective energy, urgency, and genuine readiness to act. An exciting idea can lead us to ignore fatigue. At other times responsibility requires us to act even without enthusiasm. Flowing with the body means examining these differences: listening to signals, comparing them with context, and adjusting our effort. It does not mean always waiting for spontaneous inspiration, but avoiding a situation in which every action depends on excitement or self-imposition. Rest belongs to the same life as work.

The Decision to Finish

Knowing when to conclude an activity deserves as much attention as knowing how to begin it. We may spend indefinite time perfecting a task because we fear judging the outcome insufficient. In other cases, we persist because of what we have already invested, although the circumstances have changed. Stopping may be a reasonable decision: delivering a sufficiently good version, changing projects, or resting. Personal fulfillment does not depend on keeping every possibility open. Choosing also means accepting limits and relinquishing alternatives.

PART V • PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS

Chapter 19. Freedom and Its Limits

Freedom is exercised in concrete circumstances: bodily, economic, legal, and social conditions can facilitate or restrict our options, and not all of them depend on our decisions. A philosophy that attributed every personal difficulty to a lack of initiative would therefore be ethically unjust and conceptually incomplete.

Personal autonomy coexists with the rights of other people. Being able to decide to do something does not establish that doing it is justified. Recognizing comparable freedom in others offers a starting point of reciprocity and non-domination, although it does not resolve every moral conflict.

The freedom we defend is not exhausted by the absence of interference. Berlin (1958) distinguished meanings of liberty that help us formulate this limit; Sen (1999) examined the importance of capabilities and real opportunities; and Pettit (1997) developed freedom as non-domination. Our distinction among capacity, dependence, and subordination enters into dialogue with these approaches without claiming to be reducible to any of them. With Sen it shares the view that capacity matters, not merely its exercise; with Pettit, an awareness of dependence on another person's arbitrary will. Its purpose is more modest and practical: to distinguish, in everyday decisions, dependencies that do not diminish autonomy from those that become subordination.

Philosophical Dialogue: Pluralism and Relativism

The diversity of experiences, cultures, and doctrines does not logically imply that every form of conduct is morally justifiable. We must distinguish the descriptive fact of disagreement, metaethical theses concerning moral truth, and the normative question of the limits of tolerance. Defending freedom of conscience requires arguing why coercion, manipulation, or unjustified harm may be restricted without turning doctrinal disagreement into an offense. These distinctions form part of contemporary philosophical debate without, by themselves, settling all its controversies (Gowans, 2026).

Understanding individual and collective circumstances does not mean approving every behavior. Disagreements may require mediation, fair procedures, and effective protection. Empathy helps us assess perspectives, but it cannot replace institutions or safeguards.

Reciprocity Is Not Merely a Slogan

If we claim freedom to choose our beliefs, we must explain why arbitrarily denying that possibility to others would be legitimate. The argument from reciprocity begins by recognizing that other people have interests, experiences, and vulnerabilities of their own. The fact that a preference is ours does not automatically give it priority over a comparable preference held by someone else. This reasoning does not resolve every moral disagreement: rights can conflict, abilities can differ, and responsibilities can be asymmetrical. Nevertheless, it prevents us from justifying an imposition solely on the basis of our membership or convictions. It calls for reasons that can be examined beyond the group that puts them forward.

Understanding Does Not Remove the Need for Protection

Understanding the causes of a behavior can help us prevent its recurrence. But recognizing the history of a person who causes harm does not authorize us to abandon the person who suffers it. An ethics of empathy that attended exclusively to the aggressor would be incomplete. We can consider circumstances while demanding protection, reparation, or proportionate intervention. Forgiveness must not be imposed on victims as proof of maturity. Nor does tolerance require acceptance of coercion or violence. Respecting people and critically evaluating their actions are compatible demands.

Religious Neutrality and Precise Criticism

Freedom of conscience protects both the possibility of believing and the possibility of not believing. A secular philosophy need not become generally hostile to religions. Religious traditions and communities have performed varied functions; to evaluate a controlling practice or conditional assistance, we must identify specific conduct, context, alternatives, and consequences. Emergency aid offered without conditions differs from essential support tied to accepting a doctrine. Criticism gains rigor when it describes that distinction and loses value when it turns all believers into a morally homogeneous category.

The Limits of This Philosophy Itself

The criticism of dogmatism must apply to this very work. If self-sufficiency is presented as a universal obligation, if rest becomes a technique that we must perform perfectly, or if readers are required to share the interpretation offered here, the book contradicts its purpose. An open philosophy is not devoid of principles: it provides arguments for them and recognizes that they can be revised. Readers retain the freedom to question our conclusions. The aim of this work is to help them think, not to secure their allegiance.

The Objection of Insufficient Consent

Formal acceptance does not always express autonomy. A person may agree to conditions because they lack viable material alternatives. For example, someone dependent on indispensable assistance may feel obliged to accept ideological demands in order to retain it. The mere possibility of refusing an offer does not settle whether the choice is sufficiently free. We should examine vulnerability, available information, the severity of the need, and the cost of saying no. This qualification alters our criticism of paternalism: we must neither arbitrarily override another person's will nor pretend that every apparently voluntary transaction is free from pressure. Responsible assistance avoids exploiting dependence to obtain allegiance.

Justice Cannot Be Reduced to Good Intentions

Reciprocity provides an initial reason to limit our conduct, but it must be translated into procedures and safeguards. Two people can act with sincere intentions while holding incompatible interpretations of how a resource should be distributed. Recommending empathy alone will not suffice: rules must be agreed, needs examined, and those bearing the consequences allowed to participate in decisions. Justice

asks not only what we wish to offer or receive, but also how benefits, burdens, and opportunities are distributed. An existential philosophy centered on the individual cannot resolve these institutional questions on its own; acknowledging that limit prevents self-sufficiency from being presented as a universal answer.

Freedom as an Effective Opportunity

Having a right to engage in an activity is not the same as possessing the means to pursue it. We may say that someone is free to learn, work, or travel and then discover that physical, economic, or social barriers severely constrain their real options. This does not make every limitation an injustice, but it requires us to distinguish natural constraints, historical circumstances, and collective decisions that can be changed. The ideal of autonomy defended here is compatible with removing unjustified obstacles and with lasting support for those who need it. A person's worth does not depend on how much they can do without assistance.

Chapter 20. Life as Experience, Not as Doctrine

A philosophy that questions rigid ideas risks becoming another doctrine. If we require readers to be self-sufficient, remain calm, enjoy the present, or create without rest, we reproduce the very subordination we set out to resist.

We defend freedom of conscience, for religious belief and its absence alike, as a normative principle. Its concrete legal protection depends on the applicable legal system and on whether its provisions are effectively upheld. Criticism should address arguments and practices of coercion or imposition, without attributing dogmatism to entire communities. Understanding does not imply approval or giving up the protection of those who suffer abuse.

The body is not an oracle, and presence is not surveillance. We can examine every principle in this book, including self-sufficiency, without treating any of them as commandments. Their value lies in the questions they illuminate and the reasonable possibilities they open.

Disagreement Among Reasonable People

Two people may honestly examine their convictions, understand relevant arguments, and still disagree. Freedom of conscience requires admitting this possibility without concluding that both claims must be true. We can test evidence, challenge inferences, and acknowledge uncertainty, yet agreement will not always follow. This philosophy must therefore not confuse respect for a person with the suspension of all criticism. We respect each individual's capacity to form their own judgment while retaining the possibility of explaining why we regard a claim as mistaken or a practice as unjustified. Mature coexistence needs both capacities.

An Example That Prevents Presence from Becoming a Command

Imagine someone who cares every day for a dependent person and has very little free time. Telling that caregiver to enjoy every moment or to cook personally in the name of self-sufficiency may ignore the burden they actually bear. Their freest decision may be to delegate a task, request respite, or devote the available time to rest. A philosophical maxim is useful only when applied with discernment. When it creates guilt for failing to achieve an abstract ideal, it has ceased to guide freedom and has begun to restrict it.

Criteria for Revising This Work

The openness of our proposal cannot rest solely on a declaration of modesty. We must say what would require us to correct it. An argumentative contradiction, a systematically harmful consequence, an unjustified generalization about human groups, or empirical evidence contrary to a factual claim are reasons to revise a passage. The author's preferences for how to live must, for their part, be recognized

as preferences rather than raised without argument into universal norms. Readers may disagree with the ways in which we find fulfillment and still retain their full autonomy. This willingness to revise is part of the thesis itself, not a concession added at the end of the book.

Chapter 21. Self-Sufficiency, Responsibility, and Presence

This volume began by distinguishing life from the explanations we construct about it. Experience is mediated by our embodiment, and our knowledge is revisable. Beliefs can guide us, but rigid identification with them can narrow our freedom.

Self-sufficiency invites us to develop the capacities available to us without denying interdependence. Responsibility requires us to attend to our decisions and to the freedoms of others. Presence reminds us that living is not only preparation for a future: it is also the everyday journey.

Self-sufficiency, responsibility, and the here and now are orientations, not commandments. Their relationship is dynamic: capacities expand possibilities, responsibility considers consequences, and presence prevents the whole of life from becoming a wait for an ideal future.

We can think in order to understand, act in order to accomplish, reconsider mistakes, and rest without demanding perfection of ourselves. We can need other people and remain active participants in our own existence. We can choose solitude and build relationships without contradiction.

Three Principles and a Shared Limit

Self-sufficiency, responsible freedom, and presence support one another, but none can resolve every dimension of existence. Self-sufficiency expands our capacities without eliminating the need for cooperation; responsibility guides our decisions without allowing us to foresee every consequence; presence returns us to experience without replacing knowledge of the past or planning for the future. Their shared limit is the temptation to turn them into recipes. The principles work as practical questions, not automatic answers: What can I really choose? Whom does this decision affect? What am I experiencing as I make it?

A Scene of Ordinary Freedom

A person ends a working day feeling tired. They had planned to make progress on a personal project but realize that they need rest. They can acknowledge the importance of commitment, consider whether they have an immediate obligation to others, and decide to postpone the task without punishing themselves. The following day, feeling more ready, they return to the project, encounter a difficulty, and ask for specialist help. None of these actions contradicts their autonomy: deciding, resting, continuing, and cooperating are all possible ways of exercising it. Freedom lies not in always following the original plan, but in taking responsible part in revising it.

The Book Does Not Replace Life

We do not need to recall these pages while performing every activity. Reflection has served its purpose when it helps us recognize a dependency, understand a conflict, or make a more informed decision. Then we can leave it behind. The kitchen is once again simply a kitchen; a walk, a walk; silence, silence. We can also return to these ideas when a new difficulty arises. An open philosophy accompanies life without trying to administer it. If it invites readers to think for themselves, it must accept that each may continue along a different path.

The book does not demand allegiance. Its value will depend on whether it helps us examine arguments, recognize unjustified dependencies, and exercise freedom compatible with the freedom of others. As Antonio Machado wrote in “*Proverbios y cantares*,” the path is made by walking.

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