

THE FREEDOM TO EXIST

Volume IV

The Gift of Being Alive

Feeling, Contemplating and Enjoying Existence

Juan Segurola

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Contents

Foreword	3
1. The Extraordinary Fact of Being Alive	3
2. The Feeling Body	4
3. Perceiving the Everyday World	5
4. Joy Without Obligation	6
5. Nature and Contemplation	7
6. The Pleasure of Small Experiences	8
7. Pain, Loss and Care	9
8. Inhabiting the Present Without Monitoring It	10
Epilogue · Appreciating Without Demanding	11
References	12

Foreword

This volume examines the lived experience of existence rather than seeking a single formula for happiness. It begins with the fragile fact of being alive and moves through embodiment, perception, joy, nature, ordinary pleasure, suffering, and presence. These eight inquiries share a conviction: appreciation cannot be coerced, and responsible freedom has to remain compatible with vulnerability, social difference, and the need for care. The book proposes arguments and practical distinctions, not clinical interventions or promises of wellbeing.

1. The Extraordinary Fact of Being Alive

Being alive is ordinary because it is the condition of every ordinary day; it is extraordinary because none of our plans, theories, or possessions would matter without it. To notice this does not require treating existence as a miracle or asserting that life has an assigned purpose. It requires distinguishing the event of living from the explanations by which we try to possess it. The recognition may interrupt habit without making habit an enemy: making breakfast, answering a message, or meeting a friend are already ways of inhabiting a finite life.

The fact of mortality can sharpen attention, but it can also provoke anxiety. It would be careless to prescribe gratitude to someone who is grieving, ill, or exhausted. A defensible appreciation of life must include the possibility of not feeling appreciative. Existential worth is not a performance and cannot be measured by visible enthusiasm. An individual may affirm the value of continuing to live while experiencing sorrow, uncertainty, or emotional numbness.

There is an important difference between wonder and certainty. Wonder makes room for questions that cannot be immediately settled; certainty sometimes closes that room. The claim that existence deserves attention is an ethical invitation, not a proof of a cosmic design. It is therefore compatible with religious, secular, scientific, and undecided interpretations, provided none is imposed as the price of belonging.

A practical exercise is not to search for a spectacular experience but to observe one unremarkable transition: the light changing across a wall, the start of a conversation, the end of a task. Then ask what the moment reveals about dependence and possibility. The answer may be small. That smallness is not a failure; the purpose is to resist equating the significance of a life with the intensity of its exceptional episodes.

The language of a gift introduces a moral problem: gifts ordinarily come from a giver, and they can create a debt. Existence need not be treated that way. Someone who is alive through no choice of their own can still find value in a particular relationship, task or sensation without accepting an obligation to celebrate life in general. Gratitude, when present, can be directed toward concrete acts of care rather than demanded as a response to existence itself. This distinction protects the image of a gift from becoming an accusation against people who are suffering.

A second objection concerns meaning. If mere existence were sufficient for flourishing, conditions of exploitation, abandonment or fear would be philosophically insignificant. They plainly are not. The claim defended here is narrower: there is value in making room to encounter experience, but the possibilities of encounter depend partly on social arrangements that can be improved or damaged. Wonder cannot substitute for housing, care, time or justice; nor must a just society prescribe wonder as its emotional outcome.

Consider two neighbours who receive the same diagnosis. One reassesses how to spend an afternoon; the other becomes overwhelmed by apprehension. Neither response is evidence of a superior grasp of existence. What matters ethically is whether they can make decisions, receive support and give an honest account of what the event means to them. The possibility of gratitude should remain an invitation rather than a standard imposed from outside.

To describe life as a gift is ethically delicate when starting conditions differ radically. Someone born into safety, someone living with chronic illness, and someone threatened by violence do not receive an interchangeable range of possibilities. Wonder at the fact of existence should therefore never become a judgment on those who cannot experience wonder. Its responsible form connects appreciation with obligations to reduce avoidable suffering. A person may affirm life while rejecting the injustice of the conditions in which it is lived.

The phrase “gift of being alive” is a philosophical metaphor, not a claim about a giver or a debt. It differs from arguments that treat existence as a moral obligation to feel thankful. Discussions of giftedness by Michael Sandel raise related questions without settling the distinct argument made here. [1]

2. The Feeling Body

We do not encounter the world as detached observers. Hunger, warmth, fatigue, movement, and physical vulnerability shape what appears possible and urgent. The body is not merely an instrument that a mind operates; it is part of how situations acquire meaning. A steep staircase means something different to a rested person, someone with pain, and someone carrying another person. No account of freedom is complete if it ignores those differences.

Attention to bodily experience can clarify a need before it becomes an argument. Yet sensations are not infallible commands. Fear can signal a real danger or amplify an imagined one; comfort can be restorative or encourage avoidance. Listening to the body therefore requires interpretation, context, and sometimes external support. Bodily self-knowledge is not a competition in sensitivity and does not justify distrusting medical evidence.

People do not share the same physical circumstances. Disability, ageing, work demands, chronic illness, and access to care profoundly influence what someone can do. A philosophy of enjoying existence must not turn bodily capacity into a moral ranking. It should instead defend the conditions that make participation possible and recognise forms of pleasure and engagement that differ from the energetic ideals promoted by advertising.

An everyday practice is to ask what a bodily signal requests and what it does not prove. Tiredness might call for rest; it does not prove weakness. Tension might call for a pause; it does not prove that a conversation is wrong. This distinction allows bodily attention to support judgment instead of replacing it.

Bodily signals require interpretation. Pain can be shaped by several interacting factors, and persistent or severe symptoms warrant appropriate professional assessment rather than a purely introspective answer.

The lived body is also social. Whether a person can rest after fatigue, eat when hungry or step away from noise depends on income, work, care obligations, architecture and relationships. A philosophy that advises someone simply to listen to the body while ignoring these constraints risks individualising structural problems. A more demanding account asks both what the person can change and what institutions owe to people whose bodies are vulnerable. Autonomy here is practical and supported, not a fantasy of bodily independence.

A person with chronic pain may be encouraged to inhabit the present, yet attention to every sensation may worsen suffering. They may benefit more from alternating rest, movement, distraction, treatment and contact with others. Embodied presence must leave room for such strategies; it cannot be reduced to the injunction to feel more intensely. Care consists partly in learning which forms of attention help this particular person, here, under these conditions.

Accounts of embodied perception associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty illuminate why the body cannot be treated simply as an instrument directed by a detached mind. This conceptual affinity is not a claim that bodily sensations are always reliable. [2]

3. Perceiving the Everyday World

Familiar environments become almost invisible through repetition. The street taken each morning, the sound of a familiar voice, or the pattern of a table can disappear behind the tasks attached to them. Yet perception is neither a passive recording nor a sovereign act of invention: our expectations select features, while the world can still surprise and correct us. Attentiveness begins by acknowledging both sides.

To perceive more carefully is not necessarily to perceive more intensely. A person preparing food may notice the texture of a fruit, but there is no obligation to turn the kitchen into a spiritual laboratory. Excessive monitoring can make simple activities laborious. The value of attention lies partly in its discretion: it improves contact with reality without demanding that every sensation become a meaningful event.

Our environments are unequal. Noise, unsafe housing, exhausting travel, or precarious schedules limit opportunities for quiet observation. Advising someone simply to slow down can conceal the economic and social forces that speed them up. Personal attention has value, but it should not become a substitute for improving shared conditions.

The test of perception is often relational. Noticing a friend's hesitation, the discomfort of a colleague, or the fragility of an object can change how we respond. The everyday world is not a private collection of pleasing impressions; it is also the place where other lives make claims upon our consideration.

Habit is not merely a failure of attention. Its efficiency makes sustained activity possible: we could not deliberate anew over every familiar route or movement. What matters is the capacity to interrupt habit when circumstances change, especially when another person is affected. A commuter who notices that a staircase excludes a neighbour with reduced mobility has not merely enjoyed a richer perception; that observation creates a reason to discuss accessibility. Attention becomes ethically significant when it allows neglected facts to alter our judgements.

Yet sustained alertness can become exhausting. People who work under threat or carry constant care responsibilities may already attend intensely to their surroundings. It would be mistaken to prescribe more observation as a universal remedy. Sometimes the humane condition for noticing is reliable safety, so that vigilance can relax. The aim of this chapter is selective receptivity rather than permanent sensory effort: perceiving enough to respond well without turning ordinary life into a monitoring exercise.

Imagine a terse message from a colleague. It may sound dismissive to the recipient while the sender was merely rushed. The hurt is real even when the inferred intention is mistaken. A constructive conversation can recognise both facts: how the message landed and how it was intended. This separation of experience from interpretation turns ordinary perception into a practice of intellectual humility.

The care of attention in ordinary life has an affinity with Iris Murdoch's work on seeing others justly; attention here also includes access, fatigue, and the conditions that make sustained noticing possible. [3]

4. Joy Without Obligation

Joy is valuable precisely because it cannot be commanded. A social rule to remain positive converts a possible experience into another duty. It also divides people into those who display the expected emotion and those who supposedly fail. A humane account of joy must allow sadness, boredom, anger, and ambivalence without considering them defects of character.

Enjoyment and approval are different. We can enjoy a conversation without turning it into evidence of success, or find pleasure in a simple activity without proving that our lives are well organised. Once every pleasant experience must justify itself, enjoyment becomes a project under permanent evaluation. The result is often more anxiety, not greater freedom.

This does not mean that joy should be romanticised as spontaneous and independent of conditions. Rest, safety, companionship, health, and material security affect its accessibility. Policies and relationships can foster the conditions of enjoyment even though they cannot prescribe the emotion itself. Freedom from emotional coercion and responsibility for shared conditions belong together.

When pleasure arrives, it need not be extended, recorded, or repeated. Sometimes a brief moment is complete as it is. When it does not arrive, existence has not lost its legitimacy. This modest freedom protects joy from becoming a new ideology.

An imperative to be happy can make other emotions socially invisible. Grief, boredom, ambivalence and quiet satisfaction are not merely defective forms of joy; each can disclose aspects of a situation that cheerful language would conceal. Imagine a family gathering after a death. Warmth may coexist with sadness, and no participant must choose the authorised emotion for the occasion. A humane account of enjoyment leaves room for mixed feelings and avoids converting another person's silence into a problem requiring correction.

There is also a political dimension to emotional expectations. Workplaces and institutions may ask individuals to display optimism while leaving harmful conditions untouched. Positivity then becomes an instrument of compliance rather than a form of freedom. Resisting that demand need not entail pessimism; it means allowing feelings to inform judgement without making emotional display a substitute for fair treatment. Joy remains welcome precisely when it is not treated as a measure of moral worth or personal competence.

A caregiver may feel affection and resentment on the same day. Insisting that love must cancel resentment deprives that person of language for overload and for asking for help. Equally, a celebration can offer relief without solving the structural difficulty that surrounds it. Accepting mixed emotions makes joy more credible: it need not pretend to be an answer to everything.

Sara Ahmed's discussion of the promise of happiness and Arlie Hochschild's work on emotional labor provide important neighboring analyses of norms that regulate which emotions are acceptable. [4, 5]

5. Nature and Contemplation

Nature can interrupt the illusion that the human world is made only of our purposes. Weather, plants, water, and other living beings follow processes indifferent to our schedules. Contemplation can make those processes perceptible without requiring a mystical account of them. Watching a tree move in the wind may restore proportion: our concerns are important, but they do not exhaust what exists.

The contrast between nature and civilisation should not be made absolute. A park is shaped by public labour; a path may be accessible because someone maintains it. Moreover, ecosystems are not always gentle. Storms, infection, predation, and scarcity belong to nature too. To appreciate the living world is neither to deny danger nor to claim that everything natural is morally good.

Access is a political question as well as a personal one. Many people live far from green spaces or cannot reach them because of transport, work, or mobility restrictions. A philosophy that recommends contemplation must recognise those constraints and support shared access rather than treating it as a private achievement.

Contemplation becomes ethically richer when it changes conduct: caring for a place, reducing avoidable damage, or respecting the people who depend on an ecosystem. Admiration alone can coexist with destructive habits. The challenge is to connect perception to responsibility without reducing every encounter with nature to a moral assignment.

Contemplation can be participatory rather than detached. Learning the seasonal rhythms of a nearby wetland, volunteering to restore a path or listening to local knowledge may deepen attention while accepting obligations to other people and living systems. This differs from treating landscapes as backdrops for private restoration. If appreciation changes nothing in our conduct, it risks becoming consumption by other means. A contemplative relation can acknowledge ecological interdependence without claiming that a walk or a view resolves wider environmental problems.

Nor is a pristine wilderness the sole setting for this experience. Cities contain complex ecologies, and cultivated places are not less real because human labour shaped them. However, the opportunity to enjoy safe green space is unequally distributed. Public policy, accessibility and collective care matter alongside personal intention. Contemplation, then, is neither a luxury prescribed to everyone nor a replacement for environmental action; it is one possible mode of perceiving value that can inform how common places are protected.

One person reaches a quiet park in minutes; another needs paid transport or must cross inaccessible terrain. Calling both equally free to contemplate nature overlooks material conditions. A responsible account joins the quality of attention to the politics of access and environmental protection. The everyday practice might begin with looking carefully at a plant, while the collective practice asks who can safely enjoy such places.

Iris Murdoch's account of attention offers one philosophical point of contact, but the questions of urban access and environmental care extend beyond personal contemplation. [3]

6. The Pleasure of Small Experiences

Pleasures differ in scale, duration, and significance. A shared meal, an uninterrupted afternoon, a familiar melody, or the completion of modest work may contribute to a good day without constituting a grand narrative. Calling them small does not make them trivial; it merely releases them from the demand to be transformative.

It is tempting to oppose such pleasures to ambition, as if a person had to choose between a demanding project and simple satisfaction. That opposition is false. Work, artistic effort, scientific inquiry, and caregiving may be difficult and deeply satisfying. Simplicity concerns the quality of our relationship to experiences, not the abolition of complexity or aspiration.

Neither thrift nor consumption provides a universal measure of enjoyment. Paying for a concert can be reasonable; declining it can also be. The question is whether a choice responds to values, circumstances, and consequences or to an imposed need

to display a particular lifestyle. The same outward behaviour may express freedom in one situation and deprivation in another.

Small pleasures matter most when we resist turning them into an inventory. Counting every moment of pleasure can reproduce the logic of accumulation in another form. A richer practice is simply to recognise what matters, share it when appropriate, and let the moment end without demanding a permanent return.

Small pleasures should not become a command to settle for less than one needs. Telling an underpaid worker to appreciate a cup of tea can be insulting if the speaker uses that appreciation to excuse unjust wages. The distinction is between recognising value that does not depend on spectacle and denying legitimate claims to security or opportunity. A modest experience can be satisfying without becoming an argument against fair pay, education, medical care or social participation. The scale of a pleasure says little about the justice of the conditions surrounding it.

Nor must small pleasures compete with long projects. A musician practising for years may value a brief conversation after rehearsal precisely because the larger commitment is difficult. Enjoyment is not confined to outcomes or to pauses between them; it can appear within effort, cooperation and imperfect progress. The practical question is not how many pleasures have been collected, but whether one's habits leave room to recognise experiences that are already meaningful without needing to possess, rank or reproduce them.

Consider someone who pauses to drink water after a demanding shift. The pause may restore a sense of agency, but it cannot compensate for unsafe working conditions or inadequate wages. We should be able to value the moment without allowing it to conceal what must change. This dual attention—to an immediate good and to its social limits—prevents the celebration of simplicity from becoming complacency.

The concern for everyday sufficiency should not be confused with advising deprived people to accept deprivation; the distinction is developed more fully in Volume III.

7. Pain, Loss and Care

Any philosophy of living well that speaks only about pleasure is incomplete. Bodies are vulnerable, people leave, relationships change, and loss can alter the horizon of an entire life. It would be unjust to translate suffering immediately into a lesson or opportunity. Some losses offer no compensating wisdom, and no one owes the world a narrative of personal growth.

Care is more than a sentiment. It includes attention, time, practical assistance, boundaries, and institutions capable of responding to vulnerability. It can require saying no to an unreasonable demand so that support remains sustainable. The freedom to exist does not end when dependence begins: receiving help and retaining a voice in decisions are compatible forms of dignity.

Pain also resists easy comparison. People differ in histories, resources, and bodily capacities; the same event may have distinct meanings and consequences. Respect asks us not to rank grief from a distance.

It asks instead what forms of presence are welcome, what assistance is needed, and what should be left unsaid.

There may be moments when enjoyment returns amid sorrow: a joke, a meal, a glimpse of beauty. Such moments do not cancel the loss or betray the person who is missed. Allowing contradictory feelings is part of treating human experience as complex rather than as a sequence of mutually exclusive moral states.

Care is often described as freely given affection, yet its daily practice includes labour, coordination and unequal burdens. A person who assists a relative for months may love them and still need time, support and a limit on what they can carry alone. A philosophy of presence that praises limitless sacrifice can conceal exhaustion. Good care may require asking others to share responsibility, negotiating consent and accepting institutional help. Responsibility is not measured by the disappearance of the caregiver's own needs.

Loss also resists simple lessons. Some bereavements eventually become part of a person's narrative; others remain disruptive and cannot honestly be transformed into gratitude or growth. It is more respectful to distinguish being present to pain from claiming that pain is beneficial. Companionship may consist of practical help or quiet acknowledgement rather than interpretation. This chapter therefore rejects both compulsory resilience and an ideal of invulnerability: a worthwhile life includes dependence, and the terms of that dependence deserve ethical scrutiny.

After a bereavement, one friend offers a philosophical interpretation while another prepares food and remains available without demanding conversation. Neither gesture is intrinsically forbidden, but the second may better respect the mourner's present needs. The right response depends on what is invited, not on the helper's desire to turn loss into a reassuring story.

Joan Tronto and Eva Feder Kittay have argued for taking dependency and care seriously in ethical thought. The present chapter emphasizes that caregivers also have legitimate needs and limits. [6, 7]

8. Inhabiting the Present Without Monitoring It

The invitation to live in the present contains a paradox. When we constantly ask whether we are present enough, we begin observing ourselves instead of taking part in what we do. A conversation becomes a test of concentration; a walk becomes a measurement of inner calm. Presence can then become another demand to perform well.

Living in the present does not require forgetting the past or abandoning plans. Memory helps us honour commitments and learn from errors; foresight allows us to care for others and prepare for difficulties. The problem begins when recollection and anticipation become so dominant that they crowd out every

possibility of engagement. A balanced life moves among memory, planning, and participation.

No attentional technique suits everyone. Some people may experience close monitoring of sensations as unhelpful or distressing; others may find it supportive. Neither response should be universalized, and clinical needs must be considered separately.

The more generous understanding of presence is unforced participation. We are present when we respond to a child, concentrate on a task, notice fatigue, or change our mind in an honest discussion. We need not inspect the quality of our attention at every turn. Sometimes the deepest sign of engagement is that we cease thinking about how engaged we are.

Attention to the present becomes paradoxical when it is constantly checked. A person can ask every few minutes whether they are sufficiently mindful, thereby replacing direct experience with an audit of experience. The same happens when every walk, meal or conversation is evaluated for psychological benefit. An alternative is intermittent, ordinary return: noticing that one has drifted, responding to what matters and then allowing the question of one's own awareness to recede. Presence is not an achievement requiring continuous proof.

The present is also inseparable from memory and anticipation. Planning for a child, remembering a promise or preparing for an uncertain future need not be forms of escape from the now. They may be precisely what responsible attention requires today. What deserves criticism is not reflection across time, but its becoming so coercive that it disables action or relationship. A balanced account permits recollection, imagination and rest. It does not impose a perpetual state of absorption or claim that contemplative practice suits everyone.

A musician absorbed in playing is not necessarily narrating each moment of awareness; a parent arranging tomorrow's medicine is attending to the present through concern for the future. These forms of involvement demonstrate that presence is not identical with continuous self-observation. A sound practice allows absorption, deliberate thought and periods of not paying special attention to oneself.

Volume I discusses embodiment and presence. The argument here is narrower: participation in ordinary activity need not be measured continuously as a success or failure of attention.

Epilogue · Appreciating Without Demanding

To enjoy existence is not to enjoy everything that happens. It is to keep open the possibility of relation to a world that can be beautiful, indifferent, demanding, and painful. This position resists both compulsory optimism and blanket despair. It asks for attention without surveillance, autonomy without isolation, and gratitude without obligation. The invitation is modest: allow experiences to count without forcing them to prove that a life has succeeded.

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The references below document conceptual affinities; the cited passages have not been verified line by line against original editions.

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