

THE FREEDOM TO EXIST

Volume V

Solitude, a Divine Treasure

Inner Independence and Freedom from the Group

Juan Segurola

First edition · v1.0 · EN

© 2026 Juan Segurola
All Rights Reserved

Contents

Foreword	3
1. The Difference Between Solitude and Isolation	3
2. The Need to Belong	4
3. Approval as a Form of Dependence	5
4. Learning to Be with Oneself	6
5. Thinking Differently from the Group	7
6. Freely Chosen Relationships	8
7. Asking for Help Without Surrendering Judgment	9
8. Solitude as a Possibility	11
Epilogue	12
References (Vancouver)	12

Foreword

This volume examines solitude not as a doctrine of separation but as a condition in which people may exercise independent judgment without denying their dependence on relationships, care and shared institutions. It distinguishes a chosen interval of privacy from imposed isolation. The argument is philosophical rather than a clinical protocol.

1. The Difference Between Solitude and Isolation

Solitude names the circumstance of being with oneself; isolation names a loss or absence of meaningful connection. The two can coincide but do not imply each other. One can be alone, settled and open to others; one can also be surrounded by people and feel profoundly excluded. The mistake is to evaluate an experience solely by counting the people present.

This book therefore defends the capacity for solitude, not a duty to prefer it. Reversibility offers a useful, though not decisive, criterion: can a person move between being alone and being with others without fear, coercion or the loss of meaningful relationships? The question does not turn solitude into a universal prescription; it tests whether the apparent choice is genuinely available.

The distinction between solitude and isolation is in philosophical proximity to Hannah Arendt's discussion of isolation and loneliness [1] and D. W. Winnicott's account of the capacity to be alone [2]. Their analyses are not presented as sources of the tests proposed here; the argument developed in this chapter is the author's own.

Chosen solitude can offer a space in which preferences emerge without the immediate demand to justify them. Yet choice matters: the same quiet that restores one person can burden another whose separation is imposed by illness, discrimination, poverty or bereavement. Calling every withdrawal liberating ignores the social conditions under which withdrawal happens.

A person may choose an evening alone after a demanding working day, while another may spend the same evening without company because transport, money or health makes social participation difficult. Looking only at the number of hours alone erases this difference. The relevant features are access to relationships, freedom to end the solitude and the person's own account of its meaning. A philosophy of independence must therefore ask about the conditions of choice, not simply celebrate the outward appearance of withdrawal.

A practical ethic of solitude consequently has two simultaneous demands. Individuals should be permitted periods without social performance or constant availability; communities should maintain meaningful routes back to companionship. The freedom to close one's door is incomplete if one cannot also open it and be welcomed. Independence, properly conceived, requires both privacy and accessible relationships.

Silence has no moral value merely by being silent. It may support deliberation, but it can also prolong avoidance of a conflict that needs attention. Judgment depends

on the reasons for withdrawal, its duration, its consequences and the opportunities to return to conversation. A careful defense of solitude protects room for choice without turning social isolation into a virtue.

A difficult objection follows: people do not always know whether their solitude is chosen. Shame, exhaustion or disappointment may be narrated as independence, and an unwelcoming community can make retreat seem preferable to repeated rejection. This does not invalidate the experience of peace a person may discover alone. It means that self-description cannot be the only criterion. A more demanding test asks whether the person can seek contact without humiliation, can leave solitude without losing dignity and has realistic opportunities for relationship. Where these conditions are absent, praising independence risks converting a social failure into a private virtue. Freedom requires a world in which more than one form of life is genuinely available.

2. The Need to Belong

Belonging is not an obstacle to autonomy by definition. Relationships transmit language, practical knowledge, affection and care. A person who says “I need no one” may mistake a moment of self-sufficiency for the whole history of support that made it possible. Research on belonging has argued for the broad significance of stable interpersonal bonds [3]; that finding does not dictate the form each relationship ought to take.

The relevant question is what belonging costs and what it makes possible. A group can provide shelter while requiring silence about injustice. Another may welcome dissent and help its members grow. Neither constant agreement nor permanent disagreement proves that a relationship is healthy. The quality of a bond is tested when disagreement, need and limitation appear.

Independence should therefore be understood as independence of judgment within an interdependent life. We depend on infrastructure, institutions and other people without surrendering every decision to them. To acknowledge dependence honestly can be more emancipatory than pretending it does not exist. This is consistent with Deci and Ryan’s distinction between autonomy and relatedness [4].

The wish to belong can protect people against arbitrary treatment by placing them within networks of mutual recognition. It can also press them to accept norms that they would reject under calmer examination. These tendencies coexist. A workplace team may offer support during a crisis while discouraging a member from identifying an unsafe practice. The moral task is not to choose between all belonging and no belonging, but to distinguish obligations of care from demands for uncritical loyalty.

Belonging becomes more compatible with autonomy when dissent does not entail social annihilation. Groups can establish practices of reason-giving, appeal and respectful exit. At the personal level, maintaining relationships outside a single circle reduces the temptation to mistake one community’s judgments for the whole world’s judgments. Such plural belonging does not eliminate dependency, but it can make dependency more negotiable.

The problem becomes concrete when a group makes acceptance conditional on repeating a judgment one considers false. Remaining may protect important relationships, while dissent may protect intellectual integrity. There is no cost-free formula. A responsible decision examines the seriousness of the disputed claim, the realistic options for reform within the group and the personal consequences of leaving. It also recognizes that some people, especially those dependent on family or community resources, cannot depart as freely as the rhetoric of choice suggests.

The need to belong becomes visible when a community treats agreement as the price of admission. A new colleague may discover that joining informal conversations requires endorsing jokes or judgments they find unfair. Refusing carries a cost: invitations may diminish and everyday cooperation may become more awkward. The choice is not between being a fearless individual and becoming a submissive member. It is between different ways of negotiating a legitimate need for connection while preserving limits on what can be asked of a person. Recognizing belonging as a human motivation, as discussed in [3], does not imply that every group practice is justified. A genuine community can sustain disagreement without threatening expulsion for every divergence.

There is also a converse error: treating the desire for belonging as evidence of weakness. Membership in a family, association, profession or friendship network can support learning, mutual correction and protection against arbitrary power. Independence is not the absence of obligations; it is the ability to understand, question and responsibly accept them. A person may freely identify with a group and still retain judgment about its decisions. The practical standard is not emotional indifference to approval but the possibility of dissent, repair and exit. Social institutions should make those possibilities credible rather than merely proclaiming that everyone is free to disagree.

3. Approval as a Form of Dependence

Approval can inform us that an action helped someone or that our reasons are intelligible. The difficulty begins when approval becomes the condition for recognizing our own worth. Then silence is interpreted as rejection, criticism as an existential threat, and ordinary difference as proof that we have failed.

Consider a person who changes an opinion in a meeting after hearing better evidence. From outside, that change can look like conformity, yet it may express intellectual responsibility. Another person keeps an opinion merely to appear courageous: that apparent independence is also captivity to an audience. The decisive difference lies in the reasons for changing or staying, not in the visible gesture.

Approval is useful feedback only when its grounds can be examined. A student praised for an elegant solution may learn something; a student praised for never questioning a teacher may learn that obedience is the price of safety. The same outward compliment thus carries very different implications. What matters is whether another person's evaluation enlarges a person's understanding or replaces the process of judging with an expectation of reward.

There is an objection to excessive emphasis on independence: criticism from others frequently reveals errors that private reflection cannot detect. We do not become autonomous by discounting every external judgment. Instead, we become more capable when we ask which part of a response is evidence, which part expresses a value and which part merely reflects status or habit. The difficulty lies in considering feedback seriously without granting it final authority over our worth.

A practical experiment is to separate a decision from the audience that will witness it. Before sharing a plan, write the reasons for and against it, including who may be affected. After receiving reactions, revise those reasons rather than merely counting supporters. This does not immunize anyone against the need for recognition, but it makes visible the difference between learning from others and being governed by applause.

A useful distinction separates approval of a deed from permission to exist as oneself. The first can be deserved, disputed and revised; the second should not depend on a favorable audience. In a workplace, a careful supervisor may commend a well-supported proposal and reject another without diminishing the author's dignity. Problems arise when evaluation extends from the merits of an act to unconditional loyalty, so that criticism is interpreted as proof of personal inadequacy.

Imagine receiving enthusiastic praise for a decision that violates a considered commitment. The immediate satisfaction of approval is real, but it may conceal a longer-term cost: an individual learns to use applause as evidence that a choice was correct. Over time, this shortcut can weaken the habit of providing reasons to oneself. The point is not that praise is corrupting. Recognition can be deserved, informative and sustaining. The difficulty arises when recognition replaces judgment rather than responding to it. One practical question is therefore whether a person could explain a decision in the absence of an audience, or whether its only justification is the expectation of being admired.

4. Learning to Be with Oneself

Time alone does not automatically yield self-knowledge. It can become a workshop for inquiry or a chamber for rehearsing the same fear. The difference emerges from what we do with attention: observe a feeling, identify the decision it concerns, and return to ordinary activity without demanding a final explanation of every thought.

Learning to be alone also involves modest skills: preparing a meal, arranging a day, tolerating a quiet interval, asking for support before exhaustion, and accepting that boredom is not necessarily a sign of emptiness. These skills are unequally available. Caring duties, unstable housing or disability may severely restrict the opportunity to enjoy unstructured time; philosophical advice must not ignore those constraints.

One objection is that attention to the self may become self-absorption. This is a genuine risk when reflection turns into an endless attempt to reach certainty about motives. The alternative is to connect introspection to conduct. Asking whether one

is generous becomes clearer when accompanied by an ordinary act of generosity; considering a boundary becomes clearer when one communicates it respectfully and observes the effects.

Learning to be with oneself therefore has a material and relational dimension. Having a safe space, enough rest and freedom from constant interruption changes what solitude can offer. Caring duties may make uninterrupted time scarce, so even a brief, reliable period can matter. The aim is not to prescribe a daily quota but to secure occasions in which thought, bodily experience and action can be considered without immediate pressure to perform for others.

Private reflection becomes more productive when it ends in a provisional action. One can identify a recurring difficulty, write down two plausible interpretations, seek information that could distinguish them and revisit the conclusion after a conversation or experience. The aim is not perfect access to an inner essence. It is the cultivation of a revisable account of oneself that remains connected to the world, other people and the consequences of choices.

An individual who has never been permitted an unscheduled hour may find the first available interval uncomfortable. Without instructions, a screen or an urgent obligation, attention searches for the next demand. It is tempting to interpret that discomfort as proof that solitude is unsuitable. An alternative reading is more modest: freedom requires practice in making small decisions without external reinforcement. Choosing whether to read, walk, rest or do nothing can disclose preferences that routine obligations have concealed. No special technique or promise of psychological transformation is required. The relevant experiment is an ordinary one, making a limited space in which an action need not be publicly explained.

5. Thinking Differently from the Group

Dissent has no inherent virtue if it consists only of reflexively contradicting others. An independent judgment considers a proposition, its evidence and its consequences before accepting or rejecting it.

Groups can be mistaken; solitary thinkers can be mistaken as well. Neither the majority nor the dissenter has a monopoly on reason.

John Stuart Mill treated pressures toward conformity in his discussion of individuality in *On Liberty*, chapter III [5]. The present symmetry test for dissent is a separate proposal, not a quotation or a result attributed to Mill.

In family life, professional settings or friendships, disagreement is complicated by legitimate obligations. Refusing an unsafe practice may be necessary; refusing a coordinated task simply to defend one's identity may be irresponsible. The freedom to say no therefore requires the courage to explain the no and the humility to revise it when warranted.

A workable test is whether a position can survive contact with a serious objection. Listening does not require capitulation; it reveals which parts of our judgment are

reasons and which are habits. Independence grows less from being unlike the group than from being answerable for what one believes.

Yet a demand to justify every dissent can be unfair when power is unequal. A junior employee may identify risk without having access to the data needed for a complete demonstration. A responsible institution must allow provisional concerns to be raised and investigated. Reason-giving should not be turned into an impossible burden placed on those with the least authority. The freedom to disagree depends partly on procedures that protect people from retaliation.

Classic experimental work by Asch investigated the tension between an individual judgment and an apparently unanimous majority under specific laboratory conditions [6]. It demonstrates that social pressure can affect public answers in the studied setting; it does not establish that every community is coercive or that opposition is inherently accurate. The philosophical lesson here is narrower: the number of people asserting a proposition is a different kind of information from the evidence supporting it.

Disagreement also has a relational form. A person can state an objection precisely, acknowledge the costs borne by others and leave open the possibility of correction. In contrast, theatrical dissent can make social recognition depend on being visibly contrary. The test of independence is symmetry: would I accept this conclusion if it were proposed by someone I dislike, and would I abandon my current position if a stronger argument appeared?

A practical challenge arises when dissent has consequences for people other than the dissenter. A professional who objects to an unsafe procedure should explain the risk and use accountable channels; a member who dislikes a harmless collective preference may reasonably compromise. In both cases judgment includes the likely effects of action. This is why courage needs to be distinguished from theatrical refusal. The aim is not to preserve an immaculate individual identity at any social cost, but to prevent convenience, fear or prestige from replacing reasons. The capacity to revise one's dissent after criticism is part of independence, not evidence that independence has failed.

6. Freely Chosen Relationships

A freely chosen relationship is not one without obligations. Commitment creates expectations, mutual adjustment and sometimes sacrifices that are not immediately pleasant. What distinguishes a respectful bond is the possibility of discussing those expectations without coercion or the threat of losing one's basic dignity.

Relationships can become constraining gradually: a small concession, then a habit of avoiding certain topics, then a fear of disappointing the other person. Yet the opposite error is to treat every compromise as submission. The ethical task is to identify the difference between reciprocal care and a pattern in which one voice systematically disappears.

The ability to spend time apart may strengthen a relationship precisely because it relieves the demand to perform constant agreement. But autonomy also requires accessibility: partners, friends and relatives should not have to guess whether help

will be offered in a moment of vulnerability. Respectful boundaries are explicit, revisable and attentive to consequences.

Relationships are seldom chosen under conditions of perfect freedom. Friendship develops through shared spaces, partnership through circumstances and care through histories that cannot be restarted at will. Calling a relationship chosen should therefore not conceal economic constraints, disability, unequal household labor or fear of losing a home. These factors alter the costs of speaking, leaving or asking for change. Autonomy in relationship must attend to those costs rather than merely assert a formal right to exit.

The emphasis on commitments negotiated under unequal conditions also meets debates on relational autonomy. It should not be mistaken for a claim that every relation can be assessed by unconstrained choice alone.

Freely chosen ties are strongest when both parties can renegotiate ordinary arrangements without treating negotiation as betrayal. Decisions about money, rest, friendships and shared work become occasions for joint reasoning. Space for separate pursuits can make togetherness more deliberate. In that sense the independence celebrated by this volume is not a competitive asset possessed against a partner, but a condition that can protect reciprocity.

The language of boundaries can itself be misused. A person may invoke “my independence” to avoid promises or the ordinary labor of repair. Equally, another may invoke loyalty to suppress disagreement. A more reliable criterion asks whether obligations are reciprocal, proportionate and open to explanation. Genuine autonomy does not exempt a person from accountability; it makes consent and responsibility more meaningful because they are not secured merely by fear of abandonment.

The phrase “freely chosen” can also obscure differences in bargaining power. A person who depends on another for housing, immigration status or essential care may formally consent while having few realistic alternatives. The moral test of a relationship therefore cannot stop at the initial declaration of choice. It must consider how disagreements are handled, whether boundaries can be renegotiated and whether the more powerful party bears responsibility for keeping the other’s options meaningful. Freedom in relationships is sustained through practices of mutual accountability, not established once and for all by a promise. Nor does the need for help diminish the standing of the person receiving it.

7. Asking for Help Without Surrendering Judgment

To ask for help is to acknowledge a limit, not to transfer ownership of one’s life. We routinely rely on expertise: a mechanic, a physician, a lawyer, a trusted friend. A good adviser clarifies options, uncertainties and consequences; a poor adviser replaces explanation with demands for trust.

There are circumstances in which immediate vulnerability limits meaningful choice. Children, people in acute crisis and those without access to resources cannot always negotiate assistance on equal terms. Defending autonomy therefore

includes building trustworthy institutions and protections, not merely instructing individuals to become stronger.

A practical question to ask an adviser is: which part of this recommendation is evidence, which part is interpretation, and what alternatives remain? The answer need not abolish dependence. It can transform dependence into a relationship where decisions are more intelligible and agency remains visible.

Seeking advice involves an asymmetry of knowledge: one person knows more about a particular question, while the other bears much of its consequence. Respecting expertise means acknowledging that asymmetry without treating expertise as unlimited authority. A financial adviser may understand a product's structure but not a family's tolerance for uncertainty; a clinician may know medical options while the patient knows the lived costs of treatment. Good decisions require these forms of knowledge to meet rather than compete.

A useful practical distinction separates requesting information, delegating a task and delegating a decision. These acts have different consequences. Someone can ask a trusted friend to gather options without giving the friend power to choose; conversely, someone can authorize another person to decide within stated limits. Making those boundaries explicit helps prevent an act of cooperation from quietly turning into a transfer of personal authority.

John Hardwig analyzed epistemic dependence in situations where expert testimony matters [7]. The distinctions developed here between requesting information, delegating a task and delegating a decision are the author's practical proposal, not Hardwig's terminology.

Expertise helps when its domain and limits are made explicit. A physician may offer evidence about likely benefits and harms; a friend may know personal values and constraints; a lawyer may identify legal exposure. None of these forms of knowledge automatically answers every other question. The person asking for help can retain agency by distinguishing the technical assessment, the value judgment and the decision about what trade-off to accept.

The same issue occurs in intimate relationships. Asking for support may expose vulnerability, and accepting support may create obligations of gratitude or reciprocity. Yet neither fact gives another person unlimited authority over one's decisions. A helper may appropriately set limits on what they can provide; the recipient may appropriately reject conditions that violate their dignity. Where care involves severe dependence, autonomy may require accessible information, representation and sustained safeguards, rather than the fiction that everyone is equally self-sufficient. The stronger form of independence is therefore compatible with interdependence because it treats responsibility and power as questions to be examined rather than denied.

8. Solitude as a Possibility

The book's argument is not that everyone should seek the same amount of solitude. Temperament, age, caregiving, culture and life circumstances differ. What matters is preserving access to a form of time in which a person is not constantly required to justify their presence, perform belonging or anticipate an audience.

The value of such time appears paradoxically when one returns to others. A decision considered without immediate pressure may be stated with greater care; an emotion allowed to settle may be discussed without accusation. Solitude can prepare encounter, but it can also become avoidance. The measure is whether life becomes wider and more responsible, not whether the calendar contains many empty hours.

Solitude is a divine treasure only when it remains one human possibility among others. It cannot replace justice, friendship, public life or care. Its philosophical promise is narrower and more demanding: to live with enough inner space to choose bonds deliberately, to disagree responsibly, and to recognize when we need another person.

A second limit concerns the romance of withdrawal. Solitude can help a person recover judgment, yet some problems require organized action rather than private clarity. Exploitation at work, discrimination and failures of public care cannot be repaired solely by adopting a serene attitude. Returning to the shared world is not a concession that diminishes inner independence; it is frequently the form in which considered judgment becomes responsible action.

The treasure of solitude is thus conditional and shareable in an indirect sense. Communities can respect private time, reduce compulsory visibility and refrain from interpreting every refusal as rejection. Individuals can cultivate a space for judgment while remaining responsible for the effects of their actions. The book closes on this double claim: belonging need not require self-erasure, and independence need not require disappearance from the lives of others.

If solitude is a possibility rather than a doctrine, its value can change across the course of a life. A student may need distance from a competitive peer group; a new parent may long for uninterrupted rest; a bereaved person may need both quiet and dependable companionship. It would be arbitrary to prescribe the same amount of solitude to each. What matters is whether people can shape their relationships to their circumstances and whether society allows room for those choices. In that sense the argument for solitude is inseparable from a commitment to humane workplaces, accessible communities and shared care responsibilities.

The book's central proposition can now be tested against a final objection: perhaps solitude matters only because it makes social relationships more effective. That instrumental view captures part of its value, but not all. A person may enjoy an unobserved landscape, consider an unanswered question or rest without preparing to return as a more productive member of a group. Experiences need not demonstrate public usefulness to deserve protection. At the same time, private freedom cannot justify neglecting people to whom one has undertaken serious

duties. The treasure is the freedom to move responsibly between presence and withdrawal, rather than the elevation of either into an absolute ideal.

Epilogue

Freedom in solitude is incomplete without freedom in relationship. The achievement is neither self-enclosure nor constant availability: it is a capacity to remain answerable for our judgments while acknowledging the people and circumstances that make life possible.

References (Vancouver)

1. Arendt H. The Origins of Totalitarianism. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1973. Part III, chapter 13, Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government.
 2. Winnicott DW. The capacity to be alone. *Int J Psychoanal.* 1958;39(5):416-420. PMID:13610513.
 3. Baumeister RF, Leary MR. The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychol Bull.* 1995;117(3):497-529. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497.
 4. Deci EL, Ryan RM. The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychol Inq.* 2000;11(4):227-268. doi:10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01.
 5. Mill JS. On Liberty. London: John W. Parker and Son; 1859. Chapter III, Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being.
 6. Asch SE. Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychol Monogr Gen Appl.* 1956;70(9):1-70. doi:10.1037/h0093718.
 7. Hardwig J. Epistemic dependence. *J Philos.* 1985;82(7):335-349. doi:10.2307/2026523.
- Bibliographic scope: [1] and [5] establish philosophical context; [2] offers a psychoanalytic proximity; [3] addresses belonging; [4] addresses autonomy and relatedness; [6] covers laboratory conformity; [7] examines epistemic dependence. Passage-level pagination has not been independently authenticated.