

THE FREEDOM TO EXIST

Volume VI

Flowing with Existence

Thought, Action, and Personal Fulfillment

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First edition · v1.0 · EN

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Foreword

This volume examines the relation between thought, deliberate action, uncertainty, collaboration and personal fulfillment. Its philosophical proposals are arguments to be tested against experience, not clinical conclusions or universal recipes.

1. Thinking to Discover

Thought begins before a plan exists. A question, an irritation or an unexpected observation can expose the limits of what we already know. To think creatively is not merely to produce a novel object; it is to remain available to an interpretation that the habitual account excludes. The first discipline of discovery is therefore not certainty but attention. A problem named too quickly may be a problem badly understood.

An idea must be distinguished from the person who holds it. If criticism of a proposal is experienced as criticism of identity, inquiry loses its capacity to change direction. An independent thinker can defend an idea while deliberately searching for circumstances in which it would fail. Imagination needs this double movement: the willingness to venture beyond a familiar explanation and the willingness to return to evidence.

A useful test for a new idea is to give the most sympathetic possible account of the alternative it disputes. When we can explain why reasonable people might prefer another interpretation, our own thesis becomes both more precise and less dependent on victory in an argument. Consider someone who sees a poorly organized workplace and immediately proposes a new procedure. Before drafting that procedure, the person might ask whether the apparent disorder serves a purpose invisible from their position. Curiosity can prevent a technically elegant solution from becoming a practical mistake.

An inventive association can be valuable before anyone knows how to test it. Its value, however, is provisional: a plausible origin is not a justification. Consider a public project proposed after one striking complaint. The experience that prompts the proposal deserves attention, but the claim about its wider benefits also needs observations from people differently affected. Distinguishing those two stages allows imagination to remain active without granting the first impulse authority over the evidence.

The distinction between the origin of an idea and its justification has a philosophical history, especially in Reichenbach's analysis of discovery and justification [1]. Popper's account of critical testing likewise helps distinguish a proposal from its exposure to possible refutation [2]. Neither is claimed here as a new distinction, nor is scientific falsification a universal rule for ethical decisions. Dewey described reflective thought as active, persistent and careful consideration of beliefs rather than mere mental activity [3].

Creativity also needs a right to decline fashionable problems. When every conversation urges us to innovate, refusing an unnecessary novelty can express better judgment than producing another solution. A town deciding whether to

replace a familiar public space should compare maintenance, accessibility and the meaning of the existing place before praising novelty itself. The freedom to create includes the freedom to conserve when conservation is justified.

A second task of creative thinking is to examine who gets to define a problem. A manager describes delays as laziness; workers describe an unpredictable schedule; clients describe confusing instructions. Each account selects different causes, and each suggested remedy risks benefiting the person who controls the description. Rather than averaging these accounts mechanically, responsible inquiry asks what observations could distinguish them and who bears the cost of being mistaken. A creative proposal is not intrinsically generous because it is new. It becomes defensible when the people affected can challenge its assumptions and when the evidence against it is taken seriously. This requirement is especially important when the creator has more authority than the people who will live with the result.

There is also a practical test of intellectual generosity. When a colleague identifies a flaw in our proposal, we can either repair the argument or quietly change its definition until no objection seems to apply. The latter tactic preserves pride at the expense of clarity. A better practice is to write down the objection in terms the critic recognises, identify what evidence would change our view, and leave a visible record of revision. Discovery is not only the creation of alternatives; it is the ability to learn publicly.

2. From Idea to First Step

An intention is not yet an action. Between them lies a threshold of uncertainty: the possibility that the first attempt will reveal limitations that contemplation alone concealed. The threshold can encourage endless preparation. Planning is valuable when it clarifies a decision, but it becomes avoidance when each additional plan substitutes for contact with the situation.

A useful first step is small enough to be reversible and concrete enough to produce information. It may consist of writing a page, discussing a draft with a trusted reader or testing a feasible part of a larger design. These steps do not guarantee progress. They transform an imagined undertaking into a reality that can answer back.

The first step can be understood as a contract with reality rather than a promise of success. An aspiring writer, for example, may spend months outlining an ambitious book. Producing a short chapter creates a different kind of information: the voice may not carry the argument, the intended audience may be unclear, or the available time may be insufficient. None of these discoveries invalidates the purpose of writing. They make the next decision less imaginary.

A counterargument holds that caution at the beginning extinguishes audacity. There is genuine force in this concern: every meaningful undertaking risks embarrassment, wasted effort or disappointment. The distinction is not between risk and its absence, but between risks one may legitimately choose for oneself and risks imposed on others without adequate justification. Courage can coexist with clear limits.

An idea becomes action through a chain of limited promises. The first promise is to define what can be tested; the second is to identify the people affected; the third is to decide in advance which result would justify stopping. Consider a community library attempting longer opening hours. A temporary trial with voluntary participation, published criteria and an exit route creates knowledge without presenting expansion as an irreversible moral demand.

An objection deserves attention: some undertakings cannot be meaningfully tested on a small scale. Trust, public infrastructure and long commitments may depend on a sustained promise. A trial friendship is not simply a miniature friendship, and an unfinished bridge reveals little about its social value. Starting modestly is therefore a heuristic, not a law. Where scale changes the nature of the practice, the responsible first step may be a careful agreement about resources, obligations and exit conditions. What matters is replacing a vague declaration with a commitment proportionate to its consequences. Deliberation should neither become an alibi for refusing life nor a slogan that excuses exposing others to preventable loss.

The smallest step is not always the right step. A pilot that is inexpensive for the initiator may be costly for participants who have to reorganize their time, disclose information or absorb failures. Before acting, a responsible person asks who bears the experiment's risk, whether participation can be declined, and what will happen if the initiative stops. Reversibility must be assessed from the standpoint of every affected person, not simply from the perspective of the person directing the project.

A useful distinction separates readiness from permission. We may be intellectually ready to act while lacking the legitimate authority to commit a team, an institution or a family to our decision. The first step then is neither passivity nor unilateral action, but negotiation of scope. A person planning a community initiative could begin with a public explanation and an invitation to criticism rather than a fully designed solution imposed on neighbors. Action can begin with listening.

3. Experimenting Without Fear of Mistakes

An experiment exposes an assumption to possible disappointment. In research, craft and everyday decisions, the value of a trial often lies in what it rules out. An outcome that contradicts the initial expectation can still be informative, provided the procedure makes the result interpretable. The right ambition is not to enjoy failure but to stop treating every failure as a verdict on personal worth.

Yet error has unequal costs. A harmless draft can be revised; a clinical decision, financial commitment or irreversible intervention may expose others to harms they did not choose. In those settings, restraint, competence and external review are not enemies of creativity. Responsible experimentation asks what can safely be varied, which safeguards are needed, and who bears the risk.

Fear cannot be abolished by a slogan. It can sometimes be reduced by designing work around smaller commitments and clear criteria for stopping. An honest record of an unsuccessful attempt helps prevent the comforting fiction that effort

necessarily produces improvement. The aim is an informed relation to uncertainty, not a heroic posture toward it.

A failed trial is informative only under conditions that make failure interpretable. If an artist changes the medium, the audience and the purpose of a work simultaneously, disappointment reveals little about which choice mattered. The same lesson applies to ordinary projects: distinguish what was attempted, what was expected and what actually occurred. This does not require turning life into a laboratory. It requires enough memory and honesty to resist inventing an explanation after the fact.

Errors reveal something different depending on whether the underlying test was fair. When a person claims that an initiative failed because others resisted change, they might be concealing poor consultation. When a project succeeds only through uncompensated labor, the apparent success deserves a second evaluation. Describing outcomes demands attention to who bears the costs as well as to whether the announced target was reached.

Experiments are often praised because they permit error, yet errors are not all of the same moral kind. A painter can discard a canvas, but a clinician, teacher or employer cannot treat another person as disposable material. The right to learn through error ends where exposure to avoidable harm begins. This does not mean that every uncertain activity is prohibited. It means that competence, consent, safeguards and alternatives must be part of deciding whether to proceed. When a trial concerns a vulnerable person, the burden of explanation falls especially on the person proposing it. Calling an intervention exploratory does not reduce that burden.

The opposite error is to make perfect safety a condition for every useful activity. Ordinary learning necessarily involves mistakes, including some that inconvenience other people. A proportionate approach distinguishes minor, reversible setbacks from serious harms, and makes the costs visible instead of celebrating every setback as “growth.” What matters after an error is not a ritual statement of resilience but a candid description of what happened, whose interests were affected and what changes before another attempt.

4. Self-Chosen Discipline

Discipline is often portrayed as submission to a rule. Its more interesting form emerges when the person affected by the rule has examined and endorsed its purpose. A regular period of study or practice can protect an aspiration from the claims of immediate distraction. The rule serves freedom when it preserves the ability to act on considered priorities.

Not every demanding routine is freely chosen. Economic pressure, institutional evaluation and expectations of constant availability can make obedience look like dedication. It matters whether someone can question the routine, negotiate its costs and leave it without disproportionate punishment. A self-chosen discipline must remain open to revision when its consequences contradict its aims.

A freely adopted practice needs a procedure for reconsideration. Imagine a musician who chooses to practice every morning. The routine protects an aspiration, yet illness, a changed family duty or diminishing returns can make the same schedule destructive. Revising the practice is not necessarily disloyalty to music. It may be the only way to preserve the activity's place in a good life.

The strongest objection concerns habit itself. If every decision must be examined afresh, deliberation becomes exhausting and routine loses its protective value. This objection is right: thoughtful discipline may temporarily suspend reconsideration so that work can happen. Yet the suspension must not become permanent. Periodic review distinguishes a chosen commitment from a rule that has quietly taken control.

A chosen rule is ethically different from an imposed rule only when the chooser has real alternatives. Deci and Ryan [4] discuss autonomy, competence and relatedness in their account of self-determination. Their framework can illuminate the difference between an activity experienced as one's own and one maintained solely under pressure; it does not establish a universal prescription for discipline. The philosophical question here is how a person can remain answerable for a commitment when its original conditions change.

A useful test is whether a practice allows renegotiation without humiliation. A laboratory researcher may hold herself to exacting routines while rejecting a manager's demand for limitless availability. In that case, effort is not the problem; the absence of boundaries is. Commitment should be judged by its purposes, its costs and the possibility of responsible revision, not by the number of hours it occupies.

Discipline becomes oppressive when its purpose is no longer open to examination. A schedule can initially protect a meaningful project and later persist as an identity test: missing a session feels like moral failure even when illness, caregiving or changed priorities provide compelling reasons to stop. A freely chosen practice therefore needs intervals for reassessment. The question is not merely whether a person follows the rule, but whether the rule still serves a defensible end.

5. Persevering and Changing Course

Perseverance has moral prestige because it resists the temptation to abandon difficulty. But persistence can also defend an error. Money, time and identity invested in a project do not prove that further investment is justified. To decide whether to continue, one must distinguish the enduring purpose from the particular route first selected to reach it.

Changing direction is neither automatically defeat nor automatically growth. A change deserves reasons: new evidence, altered circumstances, a foreseeable cost to others or the recognition that the original ambition no longer expresses a genuine commitment. Otherwise, the language of flexibility can conceal unwillingness to face necessary effort.

A useful review asks three questions: what have we learned, what remains worth protecting, and which commitments can be released? The answers need not be

quick. Some undertakings demand patience precisely because their benefits develop slowly. The art is to preserve judgment while investing effort, so that perseverance does not become captivity.

The danger of perseverance is that it can change the question without our noticing. At first we ask whether a project serves a worthwhile purpose. Later we ask whether abandoning it would make the earlier sacrifice meaningless. The second question is emotionally understandable, but it cannot determine what should be done next. Past effort explains attachment; it does not by itself justify future expenditure.

There are also constraints on changing one's mind. A promise to collaborators is not infinitely revisable at one person's convenience. Freedom must account for dependency created by prior commitments. The ethical issue is not merely whether an individual feels motivated, but what transition can be arranged fairly for people who planned their lives around the undertaking.

Changing course can be an act of fidelity to an earlier purpose. A teacher who leaves a prestigious institution to work more effectively with disadvantaged students has not necessarily abandoned education; the institutional vehicle has changed. Conversely, invoking a noble purpose does not absolve someone who breaks commitments without repairing foreseeable damage. Freedom to revise includes duties of explanation and transition.

Imagine a cooperative project that has failed to attract participants after repeated revisions. Its founders may owe one another a final, explicit assessment rather than a demand to "believe harder." They should distinguish the value of the original aim from the effectiveness of the chosen method. A good aim can require abandoning a bad instrument. Changing direction preserves integrity when it protects the underlying responsibility instead of escaping it.

6. Creating with Others

Collaboration enlarges what a person can attempt. Different competencies can expose blind spots, distribute work and improve a shared product. Yet cooperation is not intrinsically harmonious. Unequal access to information, credit or resources can turn the language of teamwork into a cover for domination.

Good collaboration makes disagreement usable. Participants should know who decides, how contributions are recognized, what evidence would justify reconsideration and how unresolved conflicts will be handled. These safeguards do not replace trust; they allow trust to survive when expectations diverge. A group that cannot tolerate a reasoned objection deprives itself of one of collaboration's strongest benefits.

One practical test of a collaboration is how it treats the person who notices a problem. In a healthy team, identifying an error is not automatically interpreted as disloyalty. An objection can be documented, evaluated and answered, even if the final decision remains unchanged. Without such procedures, apparently unanimous agreement may record silence rather than conviction.

Credit is another site of tension. Shared work often includes visible inventors and less visible maintainers, editors, technicians or caregivers whose contributions enable the result. A fair account of achievement resists identifying the whole work with its most prominent spokesperson. At the same time, equal recognition does not require pretending that every contribution had the same content or responsibility.

Collaboration can also fail when the group becomes a substitute for individual judgment. A person may adopt an implausible proposal merely because it carries the group's enthusiasm. Responsibility does not disappear when decisions are collective. The best cooperative arrangements make room for disagreement, clear roles and a way to repair harm without reducing every conflict to a contest of personalities.

Creative work with others rarely follows the romance of solitary genius. Amabile's study [5] of creativity situates creative behavior within social and motivational conditions. This supports attending to the environments in which ideas develop, although it cannot decide which specific collaboration is just. Credit, access to information, opportunities to disagree and the allocation of invisible maintenance work remain distinct ethical questions.

Imagine a team whose central invention depends on a technician detecting a recurrent failure. If the public narrative credits only the presenter, future workers learn that telling the truth may cost recognition. A fair culture documents contributions early, allows dissent to be heard and gives people a route to challenge decisions. Cooperation should increase the reach of responsibility, not disperse it until nobody is accountable.

Nor is consensus always evidence of a healthy group. Silence can be purchased by fatigue, status differences or the fear of being labeled difficult. A responsible collective can protect disagreement by distinguishing decisions that need unanimity from those that need informed consultation, and by recording unresolved objections. Amabile's work on the social context of creativity gives a reason to take environments seriously; it does not imply that any particular managerial practice is universally optimal.

7. Rest Along the Way

Rest is not merely a reward granted after sufficient productivity. Bodies and attention have rhythms, and a life organized exclusively around output tends to forget the conditions that make action possible. Recovery may involve sleep, quiet activity, unstructured time or a temporary withdrawal from demands. None of these must be justified by a future increase in performance.

Nevertheless, the ability to rest is unequally distributed. Care duties, precarious work and material insecurity constrain choice. Advice about balance is incomplete when it overlooks these circumstances. The ethics of rest therefore includes institutions and relationships: how schedules, expectations and practical assistance make recovery possible or prevent it.

Rest can also be difficult for someone who identifies entirely with a project. Stopping exposes the fear that effort is the only source of value. A humane understanding of action recognizes that a person remains worthy of consideration during inactivity. A pause may clarify a decision, but it does not need to produce insight in order to be legitimate.

Still, the appeal to rest can be too easy when it comes from those with control over their schedules. A parent caring for a dependent relative, or a worker whose hours change without notice, may know perfectly well that rest matters while being unable to obtain it. Respect for human limits must therefore include the distribution of care work, predictable time and practical support. Personal discipline cannot correct every structural problem.

A further difficulty is deciding when stopping becomes avoidance. A pause can restore clarity, but repeated postponement may also preserve fear of completion. A person might ask what the pause is protecting, what obligations remain and whether a limited return to the task would clarify the question. Rest and responsibility are partners, not opposites.

The question of stopping also concerns our relationship to other people. If a family member is carrying an unfair share of work, my personal rest cannot simply be declared sacred without considering their condition. Conversely, demanding that caregivers never rest is unsustainable. Responsible arrangements distribute time and duties in ways that make restoration possible for each person, rather than treating exhaustion as a private failure.

How, then, do we distinguish rest from avoidant delay? The distinction cannot be made from a fixed number of hours. A necessary recovery may be long; a brief interruption may hide an unwillingness to face a difficult conversation. We can instead ask what responsibilities remain, whether the pause is freely chosen and whether returning to the task is possible without renewed harm. A person may discover that the right response is not renewed effort but a redefinition of the task. This makes rest a space for judgment, rather than a moral failing or an optimization technique. A life with no time for such judgment is unlikely to be genuinely self-directed.

8. Fulfillment Beyond Results

Outcomes matter. A bridge must stand, a promise must be kept and a contribution must answer to the people it affects. Yet achievements alone provide an incomplete account of a life. Results are shaped partly by chance, circumstances and the work of others. To measure personal fulfillment only by visible success is to surrender self-understanding to factors that no individual fully controls.

Fulfillment can include the quality of attention brought to a task, the relationships preserved while pursuing it, and the willingness to revise convictions without humiliation. This account must not romanticize deprivation or suggest that fair pay, safety or public recognition are dispensable. Material conditions support the possibility of meaningful activity.

To flow with existence is not to consent passively to whatever happens. It is to connect thought, experiment, commitment and rest without declaring any single result the final proof of personal worth. A project can matter deeply and still be one part of a larger life. Freedom consists partly in being able to continue, transform or release a project without losing the ability to begin again.

There is an important asymmetry between the quality of an action and its external reception. A carefully prepared work may go unnoticed; a mediocre result may be rewarded by fortunate timing. This does not make outcomes irrelevant. It means that public recognition is an unstable sole measure of a person's worth. Our responsibility lies partly in the care, honesty and competence of the process, and partly in responding to the actual consequences.

It would be wrong to use this argument to console people out of legitimate demands for material justice. Recognition, remuneration and safety can be conditions of a sustainable creative life. A worker who asks to be paid fairly is not confusing achievement with self-worth. The distinction between personal dignity and external success should strengthen, rather than weaken, the demand for just institutions.

The phrase "flowing with existence" must finally be protected against fatalism. Events do not speak with a moral authority of their own. A harmful institution may persist for decades; adapting comfortably to it is not necessarily wisdom. The responsiveness defended here is active: notice circumstances accurately, act for reasons, revise when warranted and sometimes resist what appears inevitable. Fulfillment may occur in a patient refusal as much as in productive movement. The point of this volume is therefore not to tell readers to surrender to the current, but to cultivate a form of agency capable of working with uncertainty without surrendering responsibility.

The term "flowing" is close to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow as deep absorption in an activity [6]. The present book uses the word differently: it means acting with revisable purposes under uncertainty, including the ability to interrupt absorption, question the activity itself and resist unjust demands. It is not a clinical technique or a promised state of optimal experience.

Fulfillment should be kept distinct from both pleasure and public success. A difficult obligation may be meaningful without being pleasant, while a prestigious achievement may produce little sense of ownership. The evaluation of a life involves more than a single emotional register. It asks whether the actions that shape a person's days are compatible with their considered commitments and whether those commitments can withstand criticism from affected others.

There remains a risk of turning "meaning" into a moral demand: people who are exhausted, grieving or surviving precarious circumstances may not feel fulfilled, and they should not be reproached for failing to transform hardship into purpose. This volume proposes neither permanent serenity nor a formula for success. Its narrower claim is that reflection, action and revision can make a life more answerable to reasons, even where outcomes remain uncertain.

Epilogue

What remains is a question of practice: how can a person act with conviction while still allowing events, evidence and other people to reshape the path? A life worth pursuing may be one in which the answer remains revisable.

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