



Toward a City of Free Thinkers

From the Precipice of Knowledge to the Horizons of Emancipation

PETER KAHL



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*A multimodal manifesto — poetry, essay, image — that rejects epistemic clientelism
and affirms that emancipation begins with doubt,
silence, and refusal.*

PETER KAHL

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About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

Toward a City of Free Thinkers: From the Precipice of Knowledge to the Horizons of Emancipation is a multimodal odyssey in seven movements — from the dependency of the student, through the theatre of the university and the seal of accreditation, to the crack of doubt, the act of self-emancipation, and finally the manifesto that opens onto a city of free thinkers. Each stage is rendered through poetry, essay, and image, treated as coequal epistemic registers: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. This form is not ornamental but methodological. To resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse monomodality.

The work diagnoses universities and allied institutions as theatres of epistemic clientelism, where recognition is exchanged for conformity and accreditation substitutes for truth. It shows how practices of accreditation and peer review often operate as systemic gatekeeping mechanisms that produce epistemic injustice by design. Drawing on Foucault and Bourdieu, it situates these dynamics as theatres of visibility and silence, where authority is aestheticised and dissent suppressed.

Against this order, the work advances the case for fiduciary openness: epistemic authorities must be bound by duties of care, loyalty, and accountability to truth itself. It envisions epistemocracy, a form of governance in which plurality is structurally safeguarded and institutions act not as sovereign gatekeepers but as stewards of the commons.

The cycle culminates in a manifesto of unfettered thought, proposing a reimagined motto for knowledge: *Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, Fraternity of Free Thinkers*. It calls for a city where silence is fertile rather than imposed, libraries are gardens rather than prisons of paper, and knowledge circulates not as property but as fiduciary trust. The invitation is collective: to breathe together in the open space created when certainty falls and doubt begins.

Keywords

epistemic clientelism, epistemic freedom, fiduciary openness, epistemocracy, epistemic injustice, fiduciary duties, epistemic plurality, epistemic agency, multimodal philosophy, democratic epistemology, institutional critique, higher education, silence, accreditation, emancipation, manifesto

Author's Note on Publication

This work is published as two independent but parallel versions — one in English, one in [French](#) — to test and exemplify epistemic plurality across linguistic domains.

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Introduction

Toward a City of Free Thinkers: From the Precipice of Knowledge to the Horizons of Emancipation

This work is neither a conventional treatise nor a collection of poems with commentary. It is a multimodal inquiry in which poetry, prose, and image are treated as coequal epistemic registers. Each mode speaks in its own idiom: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. Their alternation is not ornamental. It is a methodological claim: to resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse to be confined to a single idiom of expression.

The odyssey unfolds in seven parts:

1. *The Precipice of Knowledge* — epistemic limits, closed lexicons, the cages of the known.
2. *The Master's Key* — dependence, hierarchy, and the first disruptive question.
3. *The Theatre of Knowledge* — knowledge staged as rank, silence, and theatrical performance.
4. *Truth under Seal* — committees, seals, and peer review as clientelist regimes of validation.
5. *The Crack of Doubt* — doubt as a fissure in the system, revalued as a source of agency.
6. *Self-Emancipation* — liberation without permission, silence as fertile ground.
7. *The City of Free Thinkers* — the voice that ceases to speak in the singular and summons a community of equals.

This work is published as two independent but parallel versions — one in English, one in French — to test and exemplify epistemic plurality across linguistic domains.

Toward a City of Free Thinkers: From the Precipice of Knowledge to the Horizons of Emancipation (English) and *Vers une cité des libres penseurs: Du précipice du savoir aux horizons de l'émancipation* (French) are not merely parallel publications. They are acts of epistemic freedom in themselves.

Publishing in English situates the project within debates on epistemic injustice, fiduciary duties, and epistemic democracy. Publishing in French roots it in the lineage of Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida, and Fanon — traditions that have long interrogated power, silence, and emancipation. Together, they affirm that critique must be polyphonic, not confined to a single linguistic domain.

This odyssey is guided by a reimagined motto for knowledge: Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, Fraternity of Free Thinkers. It condenses the promise of this work: to break the chains of clientelism, to open plurality, and to found a community of the epistemic commons.



1. The Precipice of Knowledge



What holds us back

A poem on the limits of the mind

There is a step —
that no one takes.

Not because it is vast,
but because it dissolves.

They call it:
the unknown.

A word, whispered,
opens a cell
in the cage of the known.

We live
at the border of our models,
like beggars
at the gates of an empty palace.

Fear does not scream.
It organises.
It draws maps.
It polishes illusions
at the scale of our certainties.

And those maps —
we treasure them.

We call them:
knowledge.

But this knowledge
is a polished trap.

A mirror without depth
where vision is mistaken for sight,
concept for flesh.

What holds us back?

A thread.

A word.

A definition.

A closed lexicon
whose key we forged ourselves
and then discarded.

Yet sometimes,
at the hesitant breath
of a question unanswered,
a fissure opens —
a doubt.

Tiny.

Insolent.

Enough to bring us
to the cliff's edge,
where the ground trembles
and the abyss waits.

And there,
genuine knowledge begins:
not in security,
but in courage.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *What Holds Us Back* meditates on the thresholds of thought, now sharpened through the image of the precipice. Its central claim is that genuine knowledge is not secured within maps, definitions, or polished certainties, but begins at the edge — where fear trembles, where the abyss opens, and where courage alone sustains the step.

This resonates profoundly with Arthur Schopenhauer's distinction between representation (*Vorstellung*) and Will. In *The World as Will and Representation* (Schopenhauer 1819), he argued that what we ordinarily call knowledge consists of ordered images — maps of causality and logic that domesticate experience. Yet beneath these maps lies the abyss of Will: raw, irrational force. The poem's 'mirror without depth' and its 'maps polished at the scale of our certainties' embody this Schopenhauerian insight. What restrains us is not the vastness of reality but the comfort of representation, which tempts us to remain on safe ground rather than confront the abyss.

The precipice is thus both epistemic and existential. To approach it is to see that the ground beneath our concepts is fragile, that certainty is not substance but surface. To step to its edge is to resist what I have elsewhere theorised as epistemic clientelism (Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*): the bargain in which institutions, committees, and authorities trade security for conformity. At the precipice, such bargains collapse: no committee can authorise the abyss, no accreditation can seal it.

The poem also resonates with Miranda Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). By enforcing fixed maps of intelligibility, institutions deny space for voices or experiences that do not conform. The 'closed lexicon whose key we forged ourselves and then discarded' captures this condition: a prison of concepts where our own tools of understanding become instruments of captivity. The fissure of doubt, however, disrupts this injustice by allowing what was excluded to enter.

In educational terms, this aligns with Paulo Freire's rejection of the 'banking model' of education (Freire 1970). To remain within the maps is to accept deposits of knowledge as currency. To stand at the precipice is to embrace dialogue and uncertainty, what Antonia Darder describes as an ethic of love and courage (Darder 2017). Fear produces maps that pacify; courage leads to the abyss where genuine thought is possible.

Finally, from a fiduciary perspective, the poem points toward what I have called epistemic humility and fiduciary openness (Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*; Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*). Authorities — whether teachers, reviewers, or institutions — have a fiduciary duty to safeguard the space of risk, not to foreclose it. To close the abyss is to breach this duty; to protect the fissure of doubt is to enact openness.

In this sense, the poem is not merely descriptive but prescriptive. It demands that knowledge be reconceived as courage: to step to the edge, to acknowledge the trembling ground, and to accept the abyss as the necessary condition of thought.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image depicts a solitary figure poised at the edge of a precipice, confronting an infinite black void. The fractured cliff beneath his feet suggests instability, while scattered fragments of maps and words lie abandoned at the threshold. Behind him, a dramatic sky blazes in crimson and orange, shafts of light breaking through storm clouds.

This visual field captures precisely the poem's message: genuine knowledge does not emerge within the safety of maps but at their limit. The precipice embodies the Schopenhauerian abyss of the Will {Schopenhauer 1819}, the irrational substratum of existence that lies beneath the polished surfaces of representation. To face the void is to acknowledge that concepts are fragile veneers — the 'mirror without depth' of the poem — and that truth demands courage to look beyond them.

The blazing sky symbolises this courage: illumination that is not authorised by institutions but born of refusal. The discarded maps at the figure's feet echo what I have called epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}: the bargains of security in exchange for conformity. At the precipice, those bargains lose their hold; the void is indifferent to accreditation.

The figure's stance — upright yet hesitant, illuminated yet shadowed — embodies epistemic agency in its fragile beginning. He has not yet stepped into the void, but he does not turn back. This hesitation reflects what Antonia Darder calls the ethic of love and courage in pedagogy {Darder 2017}: the willingness to accompany learners to the edge, without promises of safety, only the assurance of solidarity.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge to assert that genuine knowledge requires courage. It is not secured by accreditation, nor guaranteed by maps, nor sanctioned by committees. It begins when one dares to stand at the precipice — where the ground trembles, where silence interrupts, where the abyss of the Will confronts the fragility of representation.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, institutions stabilise themselves by offering recognition in exchange for compliance. Yet the precipice renders such exchanges irrelevant: no committee can mediate the void. In this sense, the abyss is not merely danger but emancipation — a space where knowledge escapes domestication.

This vision also reframes fiduciary duty. As I have argued {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*; Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary*

Openness}, epistemic authorities bear a fiduciary responsibility to safeguard precisely this space of risk. Their duty is not to guarantee certainty but to protect the fissure of doubt where emancipation begins.

Schopenhauer, Freire, and Darder all converge here: the precipice is not an end but a beginning. To face it is to refuse the polished traps of representation, to accept silence as fertile, and to reclaim knowledge as a living practice. The poem and image insist that what holds us back is not the immensity of the unknown but the fear of stepping toward it. And they remind us that the first step of epistemic freedom is not mastery, but courage.

•

2. The Master's Key



The Student, the Master, and the Melting Watch

The question that needed no key

I stepped into your narrow room,
where your knowledge hung
like a melting watch,
dripping down the edge
of a desk too heavy
to hold anything
but your certainties.

You sat on an ivory chair,
frozen between titles and diplomas,
your words like locked drawers,
refusing to open
to any hand
without your key.

I arrived with no keys, no maps,
my knowledge a silence to be filled.
I sought truths
that change their shape,
that run through the fingers
like the vivid colours
of a torn landscape
signed Dalí.

Slowly, our roles reversed —
your authority collapsed
under the weight of a question
too heavy
for your fragile shoulders:
To whom does knowledge belong?

One day I ceased waiting
for reheated answers
from the lukewarm oven
of your fear.

I seized my pen,
writing as both pupil and master,
a clear message,
affirming our shared moral duty
in the living exchange of ideas.

And when my voice rose,
it was you who fell silent,
your melting watch
slipping slowly to the floor.

Truth belongs to no one,
not to you,
not to me.
It dances, escapes,
waiting only
to be gathered,
to be given freely,
at no cost but curiosity
and the generosity
of an open heart.

Now, among the ruins
of your certainties
and the audacity
of my doubts,
we remain —
human, imperfect,
at last equal
before the infinite fluidity
of shared knowledge.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *The Student, the Master, and the Melting Watch* stages the asymmetries of the student–teacher relation as a drama of permission. The ‘melting watch’ evokes not only Dalí’s dissolution of time but also the fragility of epistemic authority when it is divorced from fiduciary responsibility. The master’s knowledge hangs heavy, dripping and inert, weighed down by diplomas and titles, while the student arrives ‘with no keys, no maps’, searching for truths fluid and alive. This contrast exemplifies what I have theorised as epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}.

Clientelism arises when epistemic autonomy is surrendered in exchange for recognition, protection, or advancement. In academic life, this logic is visible in the dependency of the student on the supervisor’s paradigm: only by conforming can she progress. The master in the poem embodies this condition. His ‘locked drawers’ admit only those who possess his key — permission is the currency of progress. Such transactions stabilise authority but reduce inquiry to a bargain: knowledge for compliance. This dynamic mirrors intimate relations, where epistemic submission is exchanged for affection or stability {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships*}. In both cases, autonomy is constrained by conditionality.

The alternative is to reconceive pedagogy as a fiduciary relation. In my framework, epistemic authorities are bound by duties of care, loyalty, and openness to the agency of their students {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*; Kahl 2025, *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. Authority is legitimate only when circumscribed by such duties. Where they are absent, teaching collapses into subjugation: the defence of rank rather than the stewardship of inquiry.

Paulo Freire captured this collapse in his critique of the ‘banking model’ of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive students (Freire 1970). Such pedagogy reproduces hierarchies and silences critical consciousness. Antonia Darder extends Freire’s analysis, insisting that dismantling epistemic hierarchies requires not only dialogue but also an ethic of love, care, and courage (Darder 2017; 2019). The poem embodies this inversion: the student, refusing to wait for permission, writes ‘as both pupil and master’, while the teacher falls silent. Authority is not destroyed but transfigured into reciprocity — precisely the transformation that Darder identifies as necessary for emancipatory pedagogy.

The collapse of the master’s authority under the ‘weight of a question too heavy for [his] fragile shoulders’ illustrates how authority without fiduciary grounding cannot withstand inquiry. His knowledge is heavy with titles yet hollow in substance. In fiduciary terms, he has breached his duties: privileging status over loyalty to truth, closure over openness, compliance over care. The poem’s conclusion — that truth ‘belongs to no one’ — marks the alternative: knowledge as fiduciary trust, not private property.

Image Commentary

The image renders this dynamic visually. At the centre hangs the melting watch, draped over fractured pillars. Time itself — and with it the weight of tradition — has lost rigidity. It drips, unstable, signalling that the structures sustaining mastery are contingent and dissolving.

To the right, the master raises his finger in command. His stance is rigid, aligned with the pillars of tradition, yet these are already fractured, the watch above them warped. His authority rests on unstable foundations. He is the embodiment of 'locked drawers': rigid posture, hollow ground.

To the left, the student bends over parchment, writing silently while flames burn behind him. His act corresponds to the poem's turning point: seizing the pen, refusing to wait for permission, becoming 'both pupil and master'. The fire is not mere destruction but the audacity of doubt. His silence is generative, answering authority with creation.

Between them stretches the broken landscape: the terrain of epistemic clientelism. Authority seeks to stabilise itself through accreditation and command, yet is cracked open by questions too heavy to be contained. The melting watch visualises the fragility of authority without fiduciary duty, while the student's inscription gestures toward fiduciary openness — authority reconceived as stewardship of inquiry rather than possession of truth.

Synthesis

Together, poem, essay, and image compose a multimodal unit that dramatises the moment when dependency on permission gives way to emancipation. Each enacts the same transformation: rigid authority liquefied into reciprocity, clientelist bargains displaced by fiduciary openness.

The master points skyward, invoking permanence, but the watch drips. The student writes in silence, fire at his back, embodying the refusal to wait for permission. This is not a rejection of learning but a reconstitution of it: knowledge no longer flows through hierarchical permission but through dialogical trust.

Antonia Darder reminds us that emancipation in pedagogy requires courage grounded in love and solidarity. This is what the poem and image enact: truth 'belongs to no one'; it is a fiduciary trust, shared in the living exchange of ideas. To teach is not to guard the key but to accompany the student to the threshold where no key is needed.

•

3. The Theatre of Knowledge



The University

Where Knowledge Becomes Performance

They call it a place of learning.

But here one studies first:

rank.

title.

useful silence.

And the ideas?

They wait —

at the threshold

of closed doors.

A student enters.

He has a question.

It unsettles.

It does not fit.

It slips between the grids.

They correct it.

File it away.

Forget it.

Here, fear

wears academic robes.

It quotes Kant,

trembling

that someone might interrupt.

Each professor

is a fragile empire —

built on the ruins

of what he no longer dares to think.

The university?

It is an old mirror

where one learns

not to see.

But sometimes —

a voice cracks.

A phrase strays outside the frame.

And then —

truth, naked,

passes between the walls

like a current of air.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *The University — Where Knowledge Becomes Performance* depicts the university as a stage where knowledge is subordinated to rank, title, and silence. Ideas ‘wait at the threshold of closed doors’, while disruptive questions are corrected, filed, and forgotten. Professors appear as ‘fragile empires’, their robes concealing fear rather than embodying stewardship.

This theatrical imagery echoes Michel Foucault’s account of institutions as sites where power and discourse are staged, disciplined, and policed {Foucault 1980}. The ‘useful silence’ is precisely what Foucault identifies as disciplinary control: not the absence of speech but its strategic management. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of academic capital reinforces this: rank and title function as currencies of distinction, reproducing privilege rather than cultivating thought {Bourdieu 1988}.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, the university operates as a paradigmatic site of clientelist exchange. Knowledge is validated not for its truth but for its conformity to institutional expectations. Advancement is conditional: to gain accreditation or promotion, one must demonstrate loyalty to prevailing orthodoxy. Orthodoxy itself is staged as image, concentrated in the visible figure of authority. I have elsewhere called this substitutive visibility: the displacement of distributed epistemic labour by the centralised image of executive authority {Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*}. The theatre of knowledge becomes a theatre of the face — a regime of epistemic monarchism, where authority is aestheticised and concentrated, and recognition flows upward as symbolic capital.

The poem’s metaphor of the university as an ‘old mirror where one learns not to see’ resonates with *The Silent Shadows* {Kahl 2025}. Just as prisoners in Plato’s cave consent to shadows as authorised appearances, students and scholars assent to metrics, rankings, and titles as substitutes for truth. Shadows and mirrors both function as regimes of substitutive visibility.

Silence, too, is central. Professors trembling to cite Kant epitomise the fear of stepping outside the sanctioned frame. As I argued in *The Silent Tree* {Kahl 2025}, silence is never neutral but an instrument of epistemic subjugation — a performative currency in the clientelist economy of knowledge. Here silence serves the pedagogy of authority: a pedagogy that teaches not to see, not to speak, not to disrupt. Against this, I have argued for a *pedagogy of openness* — a fiduciary alternative where institutions act as custodians of epistemic trust, distributing recognition equitably and resisting the theatre of charisma {Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*}.

As I also contend in *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* {Kahl 2025}, such practices constitute epistemic violence: they betray fiduciary duties owed to students, staff, and publics, corroding democracy itself. By masquerading as sovereigns, universities substitute performance for stewardship.

And yet, as the poem insists, sometimes a voice cracks, a phrase slips the frame, and truth enters like a current of air. This is the point where clientelism falters, shadows dissipate, and fiduciary openness becomes possible. To refuse the theatre of the face is to reimagine the university not as sovereign monarch but as fiduciary steward of the epistemic commons.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image literalises the poem's diagnosis of the university as theatre. Red curtains frame the scene, reminding us that knowledge is staged. Figures resembling professors stand as cracked statues, holding masks before their faces. Their posture is rigid, but their surfaces fractured — fragile empires built on the ruins of what they no longer dare to think.

The masks recall what I have called substitutive visibility {Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*}: the way distributed epistemic labour is displaced by the executive face of authority. Recognition attaches not to the many who produce knowledge but to the visible few who embody the institution. This is epistemic monarchism: the concentration of legitimacy in figure and façade.

Above the stage, an all-seeing eye surveys the scene — Foucault's panopticon transposed into academic theatre. It ensures that performance conforms to expectation, that silence is maintained. Around the stage lie scattered props — a key, a gear, a broken tablet. These are instruments of knowledge, but here they are reduced to ornaments, robbed of their vitality by being subordinated to spectacle.

The cracked bodies show the cost of substitutive visibility: professors appear monumental, but they are hollow. The curtains conceal more than they reveal. The stage is not a place of thought but of accreditation, where knowledge is rehearsed for recognition rather than pursued for truth.

Synthesis

Poem and image together present the university as a theatre of epistemic clientelism. Knowledge is staged as performance, validated through titles, ranks, and accreditation rather than inquiry. Fear wears robes, silence is useful, and professors become actors in a play whose script is accreditation.

This diagnosis resonates with *The Silent Shadows* {Kahl 2025}, where shadows serve as authorised appearances, and with *The Silent Tree* {Kahl 2025}, where silence operates as epistemic subjugation. It converges with *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* {Kahl 2025}, which shows how institutions betray their fiduciary duty by masquerading as sovereigns. And it is deepened by *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism* {Kahl 2025}, which explains why the stage of knowledge is dominated by masks and faces: the concentration of recognition in charismatic figureheads who substitute for the dispersed work of the many.

Yet the poem leaves space for rupture. Sometimes a voice cracks, a phrase slips the frame, and truth passes through like air. The cracks in the statues, the warped surfaces, the fissures in the masks all hint that the theatre is unstable. Fiduciary openness demands that institutions embrace these cracks — not patch them over. The task is to move from epistemic monarchism to fiduciary stewardship: from the theatre of the face to the care of the commons.

In this multimodal unit, the theatre is unmasked. The university, revealed as fragile spectacle, can be reimagined as something else: not a stage for accreditation, but a trust held on behalf of truth.



4. Truth under Seal



Accreditation

Where Procedure Replaces Truth

This text was read.

Read again.

Read yet again.

Then stamped.

Filed.

Stored.

It is now:

valid.

conforming.

accredited.

Therefore:

true.

At least —
in the language of the committee.

But truth itself
wears no badge.
It enters uninvited.
It interrupts the sentence.
It ignores
the required format.

The experts?
They excel
at recognising
what they have already seen.

The rest?
Unpublishable.
Unreadable.
Not serious.

Later it will be called:
intuition,
madness,
or literature.

But perhaps it was,
quite simply,
thought.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *Accreditation* portrays the ritual of validation through which institutions sanctify knowledge. A text is read, re-read, stamped, filed, and stored. Once accredited, it is treated as ‘true’ — not because of its content but because of its conformity to committee procedure. Accreditation becomes epistemic theatre: truth under seal.

The experts, the poem notes, ‘excel at recognising what they have already seen’. Knowledge is thus validated only when it conforms to precedent. What escapes these forms — intuition, imagination, the insolence of new thought — is dismissed as unpublishable, unreadable, or unserious. Yet this very surplus may be ‘thought’.

This mechanism is emblematic of epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Committees demand compliance in exchange for recognition; autonomy is traded for accreditation. Advancement becomes conditional on conformity rather than inquiry.

In *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design* (2025), I showed how such practices constitute not accidental bias but systemic fiduciary failure. Committees and review panels act as epistemic gatekeepers, designing systems that reproduce injustice by foreclosing plurality and silencing dissent. The poem’s ritual stamping illustrates this architecture of exclusion.

This critique converges with *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025), which demonstrates how peer review operates as a colonial hierarchy: it rewards epistemic conservatism, silences unsanctioned voices, and violates fiduciary duties of openness. The heavy seals in the poem embody this violence: truth reduced to administrative property, distributed by those who already hold authority.

As I argued in *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?* (2025), academia actively refuses to engage with thought that emerges beyond its sanctioned channels. The poem names these refusals: the unreadable, the non-serious. Such exclusions are less about epistemic quality than about institutional sovereignty.

In *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (2025), I extended this critique to show how these practices amount to epistemic violence: universities masquerade as sovereigns while abdicating fiduciary duties to care for the commons of knowledge. Accreditation thus becomes epistemic monarchism: a sovereign act of sealing truth by decree.

And yet, the poem insists, truth does not respect seals. It ‘enters uninvited’, ‘ignores the required format’, and ‘interrupts the sentence’. This is the irruption of the real, the moment when fiduciary stewardship rather than sovereign decree is required. Accreditation should not seal truth; it should steward openness.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image visualises this critique. At its centre, a towering stack of stamped papers melts like wax, their crimson seals heavy with conformity. Around the stack sit faceless bureaucrats, pressing endlessly onto blank pages. Above them hangs a glowing badge — radiant yet hollow — emblem of accreditation as legitimacy without substance.

The facelessness of the bureaucrats evokes the anonymity of peer review. Their endless stamping captures what I have described as epistemic gatekeeping by design: a system calibrated to reproduce sameness while suppressing dissent {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. The hollow badge symbolises substitutive visibility: recognition concentrated in a symbol, detached from the living practice of thought.

And yet, in the distance, a shaft of light pierces storm clouds to illuminate a single unbound page, floating free. This page embodies the unsanctioned, the free-range knowledge that accreditation cannot contain. It is thought escaping the theatre of seals.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a shared critique: accreditation is not epistemic stewardship but clientelist exchange, institutionalised gatekeeping, and fiduciary breach. Truth is not sealed; it is suffocated.

Across my works, this architecture of exclusion has been analysed as:

- Clientelism — conditional bargains of compliance for recognition {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}.
- Gatekeeping by design — systemic production of epistemic injustice through fiduciary failure {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}.
- Colonial hierarchy — peer review as epistemic domination {Kahl 2025, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review*}.
- Exclusion of the unsanctioned — the refusal of free-range knowledge {Kahl 2025, *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge*}.
- Institutional monarchism — accreditation as sovereign decree rather than fiduciary trust {Kahl 2025, *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors*}.

Yet both poem and image point beyond: truth arrives uninvited, interrupts the sentence, floats free from the stack. Fiduciary openness requires institutions to protect these irruptions rather than suppress them. Accreditation must cease to be theatre; it must become stewardship.

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5. The Crack of Doubt



Doubt

a crack in the system

It has no voice.

No rank.

No title.

It enters —

like air

through a door

left ajar.

They call it:

doubt.

But it is not here

to destroy.

It listens.

It suspends.

It makes room.

For a thought

unforeseen.

For a question

uncategorised.

And sometimes —

in that brief moment

when the system hesitates —

something alive

passes through.

It is neither true,

nor false.

Neither published,

nor rejected.

It is a beginning.

Nothing more.

But that nothing —

is enough.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *Doubt — a crack in the system* stages doubt not as an enemy of knowledge but as its precondition. It arrives ‘like air through a door left ajar’: unnoticed, unsanctioned, yet life-giving. It holds no voice, no rank, no title, and yet it interrupts the order of accreditation, classification, and silence. Doubt is portrayed as a pause — a suspension that makes room for thought unforeseen and questions uncategorised.

This imagery recalls classical philosophical traditions. Pyrrhonian scepticism regarded doubt not as paralysis but as a way of opening thought, refusing premature closure {Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*}. René Descartes too framed radical doubt as method: by stripping away unjustified certainties, he sought to ground knowledge on more secure foundations {Descartes 1641}. The poem, however, refuses both Pyrrhonian suspension for its own sake and Cartesian reconstruction; instead it portrays doubt as in-between — neither true nor false, neither published nor rejected, but a beginning.

This account resonates with Miranda Fricker’s notion of epistemic injustice {Fricker 2007}. Systems designed to stabilise knowledge often deny space to voices or questions that do not conform. Doubt, in this context, becomes subversive: a crack in the system through which what is excluded may enter. As in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, institutions trade recognition for compliance; doubt disrupts this economy by refusing the exchange.

Recent work in educational psychology has also identified doubt as constitutive of epistemic agency. Nieminen and Ketonen (2021) argue that genuine agency requires not only access to knowledge but also the ability to question, reframe, and resist epistemic authority. The poem illustrates this precisely: doubt suspends closure, creates a pause, and thereby enables agency.

In my own framework, this corresponds to the fiduciary duty of epistemic humility {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*}. Epistemic authorities — teachers, reviewers, committees — have a fiduciary obligation to protect space for doubt, to resist the temptation to close questions prematurely, and to cultivate the courage to face uncertainty. Where institutions treat doubt as threat, they breach this duty, collapsing into clientelism. Where they embrace it, they enact fiduciary openness.

The poem insists that even the smallest hesitation can be transformative: ‘in that brief moment where the system hesitates — something alive passes through’. This is neither triumph nor revolution but a beginning. And this beginning, fragile as it is, ‘is enough’. It is enough because it reopens the possibility of thought, restoring knowledge as a living practice rather than a sealed archive.

Image Commentary

The image visualises doubt as a subtle but transformative intrusion. A colossal wall dominates the composition, yet it is fractured by a fissure from which a radiant beam of light passes through. At the

threshold, a solitary cloaked figure stands, half-illuminated, half-shadowed, symbolising both hesitation and courage.

The palette — fiery oranges and reds against deep turquoise shadows — heightens the drama. On one side of the wall lies darkness, inhabited by indistinct figures absorbed in ritual and repetition. Their blurred faces evoke the anonymity of institutional roles, mirroring how bureaucracies efface individuality in the service of conformity. On the other side, the fissure reveals an open horizon suffused with golden light: the space of possibility that institutions cannot fully contain.

The stream of light cutting through the wall captures the poem's claim that doubt 'enters like air under a door left ajar'. It is neither violent nor destructive; its power lies in infiltration. The cloaked figure embodies epistemic agency in its earliest form: not yet speaking, but witnessing.

This imagery resonates with my analysis of epistemic gatekeeping {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. Just as institutions erect walls of accreditation, classification, and silence, the fissure represents the unavoidable vulnerability of these structures. Doubt, here, is not an error but an opening.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on the insight that doubt is the first condition of emancipation. It lacks rank, title, or institutional form, but its absence would leave only suffocating closure. Doubt is the breath that unsettles — not to destroy, but to create space where new thought may pass.

Within *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, institutions reproduce compliance by sealing knowledge through accreditation and gatekeeping. Doubt interrupts this economy: it refuses the exchange of conformity for recognition. The fissure in the wall mirrors this refusal, letting in light that committees cannot sanction.

Fiduciary openness requires that epistemic authorities protect this fissure. As I have argued {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*}, doubt is not a weakness but a fiduciary virtue. To deny it is to breach fiduciary duty; to embrace it is to cultivate conditions for agency.

Together, poem and image insist that beginnings often take the form of nothing — a crack, a breath, a hesitation. But that 'nothing', as the poem concludes, is enough. In the multimodal sequence, Doubt serves as the pivot: the moment where systems tremble, silence is pierced, and the possibility of emancipation is glimpsed.



6. Self-Emancipation



When the Slave Becomes Free

Epistemic Self-Emancipation

I did not break my chains —
they fell away on their own,
one morning
when I ceased to ask.

I had carried their language
like a name given at birth:
heavy with expectations,

worn by centuries,
foreign to my voice.

I was on my knees
in a library
where forbidden truths
were read aloud in whispers.

But one day,
the master did not come.
And the silence —
that silence —
opened within me a country
where I could walk upright.

Since then,
I think without a guard,
I write without a cage,
I know without authority.

I am the slave
that no one freed —
for I rose
before they could say:
you may.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *When the Slave Becomes Free* narrates a moment of liberation that is neither granted by authority nor achieved by violent rupture, but realised through refusal. The speaker declares: ‘I did not break my chains — they fell away on their own, one morning when I ceased to ask’. Emancipation is not bestowed by permission; it arises from the cessation of dependency.

This insight resonates with Frantz Fanon’s account of decolonial emancipation: the colonised subject becomes free not by waiting for recognition but by seizing it through self-assertion {Fanon 1963}. Similarly, Michel Foucault described critique as ‘the art of not being governed quite so much’ — an active practice of refusal {Foucault 1997}. Here, the act of not asking is a form of epistemic critique: the rejection of clientelist bargains in which autonomy is exchanged for recognition.

Within *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, the figure of the slave embodies the condition of epistemic dependency: knowledge mediated by masters, committees, or institutions. Liberation occurs when this dependency is broken not externally, but internally, by refusing to continue the exchange. In fiduciary terms, this is the reclamation of epistemic agency from authorities that have breached their duties of care, loyalty, and openness {Kahl 2025, *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}.

The poem also recalls my work on silence as epistemic space. In *The Silent Tree* (2025), I argued that silence is not always imposed subjugation; it can become fertile ground for refusal and agency. In the poem, the silence left by the absent master opens ‘a country where I could walk upright’. Silence, once weaponised to enforce obedience, is revalued as a condition of freedom.

This revaluation is central to fiduciary openness: to recognise that authority cannot own truth, but only safeguard the space where truth can appear. The slave who becomes free does so not by awaiting the master’s consent but by inhabiting silence as possibility.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image captures this moment of emancipation with surreal clarity. In the foreground, broken chains lie discarded on the ground, unforced yet decisive. A solitary figure, clothed in rags, stands upright, gazing toward a horizon painted in fiery oranges and purples. Behind him, the ruins of columns and bookshelves signify the collapse of the old order — libraries and institutions now empty husks.

The path ahead winds toward a monumental frame, a doorway standing alone at the top of a staircase. Beyond it lies open sky, filled with stars, feathers, and a winged book in flight — emblems of thought, fragility, and freedom. On the ground lies a discarded mask, symbol of performance and imposed identity.

The composition dramatises the poem’s claim: emancipation is not a gift but a self-affirmation. The figure does not walk away from chains in rebellion; he simply stands, and in standing, the chains fall.

The ruins emphasise that institutions of knowledge can collapse into hollow shells; freedom is found not within them but beyond their walls.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a radical thesis: epistemic emancipation is self-emancipation. It is not conferred by masters, professors, or committees. It begins when the subject ceases to ask for permission.

This insight reframes both clientelism and fiduciary duty. In clientelist systems, autonomy is surrendered in exchange for protection. But the poem's speaker embodies the refusal of that bargain: no recognition, no seal, no authority is needed. Freedom is realised by reclaiming silence, discarding masks, and walking toward an open horizon.

Fanon teaches that decolonisation requires the colonised to seize freedom rather than await it. Foucault reminds us that critique is refusal. My own framework insists that fiduciary openness obliges institutions to protect, not foreclose, such refusals. *When the Slave Becomes Free* makes this philosophical argument poetic and visual.

The multimodal unit thus performs emancipation: the falling chains, the discarded mask, the silent figure who chooses to rise. It insists that the first act of epistemic freedom is not recognition but refusal — to stop asking, and to begin walking.

•

7. The City of Free Thinkers



The Manifesto of the Unshackled Mind

The Manifesto of the Unshackled Mind

I was not given my truths:
they were handed to me already polished,
ready-made,
like handcuffs disguised as jewels.

I learned to refuse them.
To break the logic of ready-to-think.

To forge my own questions
rather than inherit dead answers.

Each doubt is a seed of freedom.
Each refusal, a silent victory.
And in the shadows, I know
others already breathe this same air.

•

I do not seek the warmth of dogmas
nor the safety of the herd.
I walk exposed,
but every step is mine —
and may open a path for another.

The guardians of knowledge
watch me with suspicion.
They see a wheel that swerves,
a gear gone astray.

But I am not a gear.
I am the crack in their clock,
the wind that unsettles their dials.

•

I know the price of dissent:
the silence that falls,
the doors that close,
the smiles that stiffen.

But I also know its reward:
the widening horizon,
the sharp breath of heights,
the joy of a word no one dared to say.

•

To think freely
is not to think against all things,
but to think without master,

without pact of submission,
without debt to idols.

It is to breathe deeply
in the open space
of truths still mute.

And already a new motto for knowing takes
shape:
Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices,
Fraternity of Free Thinkers.

•

A day will come
when our isolated refusals
will ignite one another
like sparks becoming flame.

Then will arise a city —
without walls or thrones,
where masters will have no pupils
but equals in quest.

Each voice will carry its doubt
not to sell it
but to offer it.
Each silence will be fertile,
not imposed.

There, libraries will no longer be
prisons of paper,
but gardens of many paths.
Institutions will cease demanding

the price of submission
and be answerable instead
to the knowledge they claim to serve.

And we,
walkers of uncertainty,
keepers of clearings,
will build not a tower
but a square —
open to winds,
to tongues,
to truths yet unborn.

•

So rise.
Consent no longer to dictated evidence.

Take your silence —
let it thunder.
Take your breath —
let it topple walls.

Bring down a single certainty,
and a hundred possibilities will open.

The city does not await tomorrow.
It begins here.

•

Philosophical Commentary

The poem *The Manifesto of the Unshackled Mind* operates as both culmination and manifesto. It rejects truths delivered as ‘handcuffs disguised as jewels’ and insists that epistemic freedom begins not with permission but with refusal: the refusal of ready-made answers, of accreditation’s seals, of silence imposed as loyalty. Doubt is reframed as a ‘seed of freedom’, refusal as a ‘silent victory’. Across the cycle, earlier motifs — dependency, silence, accreditation, self-emancipation — converge here into a normative declaration: emancipation requires breaking with clientelist bargains of recognition.

This is the point at which *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* reaches its prescriptive horizon {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}. Clientelism stabilises institutions by exchanging autonomy for approval, securing compliance through conditional recognition. The manifesto rejects this structure outright. It imagines instead a community — ‘the city of free thinkers’ — where epistemic authority is not sovereign power but fiduciary trust, distributed among equals.

The language of the poem echoes Elizabeth Anderson’s epistemic democracy, where legitimacy rests on inclusive, plural deliberation rather than hierarchy {Anderson 2006}. It resonates with Antonia Darder’s pedagogy of love and courage, which insists that emancipation is grounded in solidarity, not conformity {Darder 2017; 2019}. To think freely is not to oppose all, but to think without master, without pact of submission, without debt to idols.

The manifesto crystallises this horizon in the form of a new motto: ‘Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, Fraternity of Free Thinkers.’ By transposing the familiar republican triad into the epistemic register, the poem reframes emancipation as a collective principle: liberty of thought, equality in recognition, and fraternity as solidarity among seekers. This motto does not merely ornament the text; it condenses the normative thrust of the entire cycle.

The manifesto also carries a juridical charge. In *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design* (2025), I argued that institutional architectures of peer review, ranking, and committee control engineer exclusion as design, not accident. The manifesto identifies these instruments — closed doors, imposed silences — and transforms them into calls for refusal. From a fiduciary standpoint, it demands that institutions abandon epistemic monarchism and assume the role of stewards of the epistemic commons {Kahl 2025, *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors*; Kahl 2025, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review*}.

Finally, the closing Appel shifts from diagnosis to exhortation: ‘So rise. Consent no longer to dictated evidence.’ Here, thought becomes collective praxis. Refusal multiplies, sparks ignite into fire. Echoing Fanon’s demand that the colonised seize freedom rather than await it {Fanon 1963} and Foucault’s view of critique as refusal {Foucault 1997}, the manifesto insists that epistemic freedom is not deferred: ‘The city does not await tomorrow. It begins here.’

Image Commentary

The accompanying image visualises this moment of emancipation with surreal intensity. In the foreground, broken chains lie scattered, not shattered in rebellion but fallen away in quiet decisiveness. A solitary figure, clothed in rags, stands upright before a horizon burning in reds, oranges, and purples. Behind him, the ruins of columns and bookshelves mark the collapse of an order emptied of vitality: institutions reduced to husks.

Ahead rises a monumental doorway, isolated atop a staircase. Beyond it stretches open sky, alive with stars, feathers, and a winged book in flight — emblems of fragility and freedom. A discarded mask on the ground signifies the renunciation of imposed roles and substitutive visibility {Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*}. The composition dramatises the poem's claim: emancipation is not a gift bestowed, but an act of self-affirmation. By standing, the figure lets the chains fall. By refusing the mask, he steps into truth.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a radical thesis: epistemic emancipation is self-emancipation. It is not conferred by professors, masters, or committees. It begins when the subject ceases to ask.

This reframes both clientelism and fiduciary duty. In systems of clientelism, autonomy is exchanged for protection; epistemic authority becomes a currency of submission. But the poem's speaker enacts refusal: no recognition, no seal, no authority is needed. Freedom is realised by reclaiming silence as fertile, discarding masks of imposed identity, and walking toward horizons yet unformed.

The manifesto thus synthesises the arc of this project. It draws from Fanon's decolonial insistence on seizing freedom, from Foucault's practice of critique as refusal, and from my own fiduciary framework, where openness and care are duties owed to truth itself {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*; Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*}.

The multimodal unit — poem, image, commentary — performs emancipation. Chains fall, masks are abandoned, and silence is transfigured into thunder. It affirms that the first act of epistemic freedom is not recognition but refusal: to stop asking, and to begin walking — under a new banner of Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, and Fraternity of Free Thinkers.

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Epilogue

After the Theatres

The journey traced across these seven theatres began in dependency. The first steps were hesitant: *The Master's Key* — the student unsure whether to ask, bound by rules of recognition and paralysed by fear of misstep. The university loomed as theatre, accreditation as ritual, silence as useful. At each stage, knowledge appeared not as free inquiry but as managed performance: sealed, stamped, and guarded by titles and ranks.

Yet cracks appeared. A question that did not fit. A silence that shifted from subjugation to space. A doubt that slipped under the door like air. These fissures destabilised the edifice, exposing its fragility. What seemed solid revealed itself as theatre: masks, mirrors, rituals of recognition. The walls were not impregnable; they were porous.

From there the path bent toward emancipation. Chains fell away not because they were broken, but because the subject ceased to ask for permission. Silence, once weaponised, became fertile. Writing, once submission, became creation. The odyssey culminated in the manifesto — not the solitary voice of one thinker, but the collective horizon of a city of free thinkers.

This cycle is personal, but not private. It is my odyssey, but also structural. For what it narrates are not isolated experiences but systemic logics: epistemic clientelism, the conditional bargain of autonomy for recognition {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Institutions stabilise themselves by extracting deference. Professors, committees, journals, platforms — all act as patrons, distributing approval in return for compliance. Knowledge becomes a clientelist economy.

The consequence is epistemic injustice: not simply the silencing of voices, but the very design of systems that render dissent unreadable, unpublishable, unserious {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. Theatres of accreditation exclude precisely what they ought to protect: doubt, refusal, beginnings. This is not accidental; it is structural.

Against this order, I have argued for fiduciary openness {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. Epistemic authorities bear fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, and accountability — not to sovereign power, but to truth itself. Authority is legitimate only when circumscribed by these duties. Where they are absent, we encounter epistemic monarchism: institutions masquerading as emperors, cloaking violence in ritual.

The cycle also gestures toward epistemocracy {Kahl 2025, *Epistemocracy in Higher Education*}: a form of governance where plurality is safeguarded structurally, where institutions act not as gatekeepers but as fiduciary stewards of the commons. The city of free thinkers is not utopia but metaphor for this

horizon. It names a polity where dissent is not punished, where silence is not coerced, where thought circulates as trust rather than property.

The form of this work matters. Poetry, prose, and image do not merely accompany one another; they enact epistemic plurality. Each mode refuses subordination: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. Their alternation is methodological: to resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse monomodality. This cycle performs what it prescribes.

The epilogue is not a conclusion but a pause. The city of free thinkers is not yet built; it is in becoming. Its construction depends on acts of refusal, sparks of dissent, voices that slip frames. The duty of institutions is not to extinguish these sparks but to shelter them — to act as fiduciary custodians of plurality.

If there is a lesson in this odyssey, it is simple: emancipation begins not with recognition but with refusal. To cease asking for permission is to loosen chains. To embrace doubt is to open space. To write without awaiting approval is to create. These gestures are fragile, often invisible, yet they are enough.

And if there is a call, it is this: breathe together. For thought lives where silence becomes fertile, where cracks let in air, where sparks find oxygen. The city does not await tomorrow; it begins wherever a voice dares to doubt, wherever a silence shelters refusal, wherever truth enters uninvited.

It begins wherever we make our own a reinvented motto for knowing:
Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, Fraternity of Free Thinkers.

Here ends the theatre. But the journey — ours, not mine alone — continues.



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Author Contact

- ORCID: <<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843>>
- Email: <peter.kahl@juris.vc>
- LinkedIn: <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/>>
- GitHub: <<https://github.com/Peter-Kahl>>
- PhilPapers: <<https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl>>
- Google Scholar: <<https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ>>
- Blog: <<https://pkahl.substack.com/>>

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Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Initial release	None	2025-09-03
2	Substantial revisions across title, subtitles, and structure. Chapter and poem titles harmonised (<i>The Precipice of Knowledge</i> , <i>The Master's Key</i> , <i>Truth under Seal</i> , <i>Self-Emancipation</i> , <i>The City of Free Thinkers</i>). Added new stanza to the manifesto introducing the motto <i>Epistemic Liberty, Equality of Voices, Fraternity of Free Thinkers</i> . Expanded Part I with Schopenhauerian framing, emphasising the precipice of knowledge. Epilogue revised to integrate the new motto and sharpen its fiduciary-epistemic conclusion. Bibliography updated to include Schopenhauer.	Clarifies the normative horizon through the new motto, deepens philosophical grounding with Schopenhauer, and sharpens the critique of clientelism while reinforcing fiduciary openness and epistemocracy.	2025-09-04