

# THE ROOM AND THE MIRROR

jes grace

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*Thank you to every woman who survived her  
becoming so that I could survive mine.*

I wrote myself into being because the truth hurt too much to  
hide from. I hope you find something in this for your own,  
too. Godspeed, jes grace ☀





# PART ONE

## PROLOGUE

### THE ROOM

She was told she was free. There were no locks on her doors. No guards in the hallway. No orders to obey. No one watching.

Every morning, she would rise, open a door, and walk through it. Each time, she entered a different room. Each time, it was the same. The walls were blank, but beautifully lit.

There were no clocks.

No windows.

No other voices.

In the center of each room: a mirror.

The mirrors offered infinite selves—

eternal versions of her:

more put-together,

more self-aware,

more improved.

She tried them on like costumes,  
trying to make them real.

But none of them could reach.  
None of them could be held.  
None of them could touch.

She began each day the same way:  
“I woke up.”  
It was the truest thing she could say.  
Maybe the only true thing she knew.

She was told, “You may become anything you wish,” and when she responded, “But where may I become it?” they looked confused; the answer, apparently, was obvious, without ever understanding the question.

At first, she moved the furniture. Then she painted the walls, changing every colour. Sometimes she would whisper to them, not knowing she wished them to reply.

She tried again, and again, and over again; in smallness, then in ambition, in silence and then surrender—a pendulum in perpetual motion and yet nowhere to go—existence without direction.

She chose better thoughts. She chose better selves, hoping that one day, the door might open to somewhere that wasn’t her.

But it never did. The rooms always led back.  
Each one new.



Each one identical.  
Each one hers.  
Her hunger was interpreted as growth.  
Her grief, as personal failure.  
Her silence, as self-regulation.

No punishment. No freedom.

"You are so empowered," they said.

But she began to notice  
The doors had no hinges.  
The air was always the same temperature.  
The mirrors had no dust.

This wasn't freedom.  
It was architecture—  
a system designed not to cage her,  
but to keep her believing that if she was still alone,  
it was only because she hadn't chosen the right self yet.

She began to realize she had never seen herself from the outside.

She had only seen what she thought someone else might see.

The mirror was not a witness.  
It was an instruction.<sup>1</sup>

When she whispered, "Is anyone there?"

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<sup>1</sup> Self-reflexivity under late-modern liberalism often functions less as a site of autonomous self-recognition, and more as a disciplinary apparatus encoding hegemonic norms of visibility and performance (Foucault 1977; Butler 1990).

the mirror replied, "You're doing amazing."

When she screamed,  
the walls quietly absorbed the sound.  
And then—softly—offered her another choice.

She could choose anything.  
Except not to choose.

She was not unfree.  
She was only alone.  
And they called it freedom.<sup>2</sup>

She stopped escaping.  
She stopped performing.  
She stood still, and waited for something else to happen.

She watched the light.  
She watched herself watching.  
She let the now deepen.

But no one came.  
No one knocked.  
No one saw.



One night, she sat before the mirror  
and saw not herself—  
but a version of herself

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<sup>2</sup> The subject's apparent autonomy is in fact a form of socially-sanctioned isolation, misrecognized as liberty due to dominant liberal paradigms of individualism (Taylor 1989; Brown 2006).

watching a younger her  
in another mirror,  
from another room,  
in another now.

She blinked—  
and somewhere, so did the past.

She reached out—  
and somewhere else, a future recoiled.

And suddenly,  
she wasn't just looking at who she had been.  
She was watching the recursion of her becoming  
ripple across time  
like breath over glass.

Each version of her was making the same choice—differently.

Each choice folded into the next. Each next became the now.

Each image a delayed echo.  
Each watching itself back.  
Each waiting to become real.

The mirror had stopped reflecting. It had begun  
remembering.

She wasn't seeing her reflection. She was seeing her  
recursion.

The mirrors were no longer passive.  
They were witnesses.  
And each room, once sterile, now vibrated.

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Not with change—but with time folding in on itself.

She wasn't outside the loop. She was the loop becoming aware.

This wasn't freedom.

It was something else.

Something older than choice.

Something waiting to be named.

And when she finally spoke,

it was not a decision—

but a return.

She is the witness.

The one who remembers.

And on the other side,

she found not a new room—

but the one she had always been becoming.

This moment—

awakening to recursion—where the mirrors are temporal witnesses.

Not reflecting identity—but the structure of becoming.

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## WHAT IS THIS (AND TO ME?)

It doesn't feel like I forgot.

It feels like I woke up after forgetting was already the norm.

\* \* \*

Like the story had already been written.

And I showed up too late to mean anything to it.

Finding comfort in things that hollow me out.

Believing in things that have repeatedly collapsed.

I don't even feel angry about it anymore.

I just feel...

separate.

Not above. Not beneath.

Just somewhere else.

They seem to have found something to hold onto.

I didn't.

They're not lying.

They believe what they believe.

And I don't.

Not because I've found a better truth.

But because I've lost the ability to trust anything that can't  
feel me back.

And most things don't.

So I ask:

What is this?

But the question doesn't open anything.

It just sits in the air like smoke.

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No reply.

No recursion.

Just more proof that the world can continue without  
responding.

And maybe I can too.

But that doesn't make it meaningful.

It just makes it quiet.

☆☆☆

## PART TWO

### I. THE SPIRAL (DESIGN) OF DISCONNECTION

#### **FREEDOM AS SEPARATION**

What does it mean to live in a society that defines itself by its freedom?

To live in such a place is to be haunted by a promise that was never made to be kept. In the West, “freedom” is a word so saturated with desire, myth, and historical weight that it no longer signals liberation, it signals disconnection. It has become a veil pulled over abandonment, a slogan pinned to systems of extraction, an alibi for harm that will never be acknowledged.

Western freedom was born not as a universal gift, but as a selective reward. Its roots are tangled in the Enlightenment’s celebration of the rational, autonomous man—the

landowning, self-governing individual. The logic was simple: the less you depend on others, the more free you are. Freedom became synonymous with autonomy, autonomy with ownership, and ownership with worth.

To be free in the West means to be separate. It means to own yourself like property, and to treat others likewise. It means to have boundaries that no one may cross, even when you are drowning inside them. Freedom is defined not by what you open to, but by what you can keep out.

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You are free if no one is obligated to you. You are free if you owe no one. You are free if you carry your suffering alone, smile while doing it, and do not burden others with your need to be seen.

This construction of freedom is not just cultural—it is linguistic. In English, “freedom” connotes release from restriction, absence of coercion, personal choice. Its etymology links it to “friend”—from the Germanic *frijaz*, meaning “beloved, not in bondage.” And yet the modern usage has been abstracted from this root. It now points to consumption, to independence as identity. It is weaponized against collectivism, care, or any structure that demands mutual accountability.

The dominant freedom narrative says: choose more, need less. Want more, trust less. Be everything, owe nothing.

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<sup>3</sup> “In liberal political theory, freedom is predominantly conceptualized as negative liberty—freedom from external interference—rather than positive freedom as mutual intersubjective empowerment (Berlin 1969; Taylor 1992).”



But what kind of self does this produce? A fractured one. A hyper-visible, under-connected, always-performing self. One who appears in mirrors, but not in relation.

We are taught that to be bound is to be weak. That to rely is to regress. But this idea of freedom is not neutral. It is not universal. It is a historically contingent design that emerged to serve systems of power—colonialism, capitalism, patriarchal inheritance—and now persists as a myth upheld by the very alienation it produces.

Freedom as separation is the room with infinite doors. It offers movement without destination, choice without connection, mirrors without witness.

And still, they call it freedom.

## **THE TROLLEY PROBLEM & THE FRAME OF POWER**

The trolley problem has long been used to teach ethical decision-making in the abstract. But in another perspective: the violence is not in the lever—it is in the frame.

What if the question was never about the problem at all?

“Would you pull the lever; would you act?”

“Would you kill one to save five?”

What if the problem is in the question itself?

The trolley problem has a deeper ethical implication, the fact that it was asked at all—

“Who decided the track was laid like this in the first

place?”

The real question is not about the decision—it’s about the conditions under which the decision must be made. A question is always more about the one who is asking than it is about any answer.

The architecture of the problem is itself a revelation of the mechanisms of control. It is not just a puzzle to explore the complexities of moral decision-making; it is not a debate on the murky silhouette we’re outlining between utilitarian and deontological thinking. It is power, once again, under a new face, a new name, a new misdirection... a trap disguised as pedagogy.

Only slight reframing shatters the illusion of moral clarity and reveals what has been hidden under argued irrelevancy to the problem at hand: the system designs the dilemma, then demands you justify your response to it. It puts you in a bind, and then claims objectivity in evaluating your choice.

By positioning the architecture of the scenario as neutral or untouchable, the system protects itself from moral scrutiny. It masquerades as a fixed stage rather than a player in the ethical drama. But this—the authorship, the invisible assumptions, the constructed frame—is not a side note. It is the only point that actually matters.

We see this in real life all the time. When a person cannot afford healthcare, the debate becomes whether their illness is severe enough to warrant help—rather than questioning the system that ties care to income in the first place. When unhoused people are criminalized, the conversation centers on safety or sanitation—not on the economic structures that

ensure housing remains inaccessible. When AI systems produce biased outcomes, the focus is on tuning the algorithm—not on questioning the data that trained it or the incentives that built it. In each case, the frame itself—the setup, the distribution of power, the rules of the game—is treated as neutral, even though it is the root of the problem.

These are not fringe glitches. They are the real-life equivalents of the trolley dilemma: scenarios where we are expected to make impossible decisions, and then judged for how well we navigate conditions we did not choose. The problem is not how people decide under pressure—it's that the pressure exists in the first place. And who put it there. It punishes you for the consequences of a game you didn't design, and then calls your anguish "ethical reasoning."

It puts quality and quantity in competition—five lives over one—assumes they're mutually exclusive priorities. without asking: whose lives? how are they positioned in power? why are we pretending lives are exchangeable at all? What metrics of worth are being assumed beneath the surface? how did they get there? how did you get there?

who are you?

what if you're not neutral?

what if you were crying that morning?

what if the sound of the train reminds you of something you haven't remembered yet?

Why are we creating a moral grey area where there is none?  
What does the train conductor choose?

This is how modern systems manage knowledge: by controlling what counts as a valid question. By setting the

parameters of choice, they define morality as optimization, and disguise structural violence as rational design. It is not neutral. It is scripted. It is infrastructural.

The problem is never just the action

—it's the context.

The authorship.

The gaze.

The way the question prevents the possibility of rejecting the premise. The way it rewards decisiveness without reflection, and punishes ambiguity with irrelevance.

In this way, even our thinking becomes colonized.

You are forced to weigh consequences in the narrow corridors provided to you. And if you attempt to step outside them, you are told you are being unhelpful, evasive, unserious, irrelevant.

Power does not merely silence—it speaks.

It shapes what is sayable.

It arranges which questions may be asked, and which must remain unformed.

It governs not only the answers we hear—but the thresholds of what we're allowed to wonder, as Foucault reminds us (1991a).

Discourse, in this view, is not neutral.

It is designed.

And what appears as “truth” is often just what has survived the gatekeeping of legitimacy, as Foucault notes (1991b).

As Rabinow writes, Foucault's work reveals a deeper structure beneath our knowledge systems:

that institutions do not simply reflect what is true—  
they sanction what can be known at all, as Rabinow points  
out (1991).

The question is never only “what is real?”

The deeper question is:

Who was allowed to ask?

To see this is to begin to reimagine what ethical thought  
might look like; when it is not trapped inside someone else’s  
machine.

You are always already someone—with memory, stakes,  
relation. You are not a blank ethical agent. Kierkegaard knew  
this: dread and decision are not abstractions, they are  
saturated with meaning, faith, and embodiment, as  
Kierkegaard illustrates (1980).

Fanon knew this: that so-called rationality can be weaponized  
to erase the subjectivity of the oppressed, as Fanon describes  
(2008).

And Haraway reminds us: ‘It matters what stories tell stories’  
(2016, 118).

So what if the five people were soldiers transporting  
weapons? What if the one person is your brother? What if the  
sixth person is tied to a post on the hill, never seen? What if  
the train is headed to a refugee camp? What if the five were  
going to die tomorrow anyway? What if you didn’t even  
want to be there? What if the five people on the tracks set up  
the other one;

knowing you’d be there, at that moment,

knowing you’d make the choice you do—the “good

choice”?

This is not a real situation.

You will always know who you are. You will never know everything about where you are.

And yet you’re asked to make a permanent, irreversible judgement without time, context, or truth. And to feel righteous—or guilty—for how well you did math in the moment.

This is not ethics. This is simulation. This is moral theater dressed in thought experiment.

It is a system that trains you to accept dehumanization as thoughtfulness. A system that rewards you for choosing between lives you were never meant to weigh.

And that is the most dangerous thing of all.

The real freedom is not in pulling the lever—it is in breaking the track, redrawing the map, or refusing the terms altogether. It is in designing an entirely different terrain—where people are not positioned as sacrifices, where ethical choice is not reduced to calculation, and where morality does not require triage.

To see this is to begin to reimagine what ethical thought might look like—when it is not trapped inside someone else’s machine. When it is relational, recursive, and grounded in lived complexity—not abstraction.

Morality is not the lever—it is the conditions. The author. The frame.

\* \* \*

“We are taught to choose endlessly. But never to ask: Choose for what? Choose for whom?”

The self becomes choice, the mirror becomes judge, and freedom becomes a stage with no witness.

And then comes the recursion:

What if you do pull the lever to save the five? What if the one dies? And what if those five, now saved, use their survival to harm again? What if one of them straps you to the tracks tomorrow? What if the ones you freed mistake survival for superiority—and the cycle begins again?

Or maybe you don't pull the lever. You walk away. And the one survivor straps down someone else. Says you made your choice, so now it's their turn.

How do we live with the aftermath?

How do we carry what we've done, or failed to stop?

You are not a neutral agent. You never were.

Maybe you were crying that morning.

Maybe the sound of the train reminds you of your father's death.

Maybe the person tied down is your brother.

Maybe the five are soldiers transporting weapons.

Maybe none of them are who they seem.

You will never know everything about where you are.

But still, you are told: decide now. And then you are told: be proud. Or be guilty. But either way, move on.

This is not ethics. This is simulation. It is moral theater performed on a track with no off-switch. A loop that trains

you to accept that someone must always be sacrificed.

This is not education. This is conditioning.

And the real violence is not in pulling the lever.

The real violence is that no one is there when you come home.

That whatever you chose—right or wrong—no one will hold you.

That your grief has no place to land.

So the question is no longer "What will you do?"

It is:

Who designed this trap?

Who benefits from your silence?

Who survives when harm becomes a ritual?

Because the only way to break the loop is not to make the perfect decision.

It's to say:

I refuse the frame.

I follow the tracks to the station.

I stop the train.

I find the one who laid the rails.

And I say:

This is not a world I will help run anymore.

Because real ethics does not live in simulation.

Real ethics lives in return.

In response.

In reimagining the terrain where no one is a variable.

Where morality does not mean choosing who must die—  
but choosing how we live so that no one has to.



\* \* \*

This is not a problem of levers.

This is a problem of design.

You were never deciding who lives. You were deciding how long the machine keeps running.

Not just a haunting thought experiment—but a deliberate concealment of authorship. And you're right: someone tied them down. A person did this. A human hand. A human logic. A human choice.

The trolley problem pretends the violence just is.

As if the bodies appear magically tied.

As if the train has no conductor.

As if the rails laid themselves.

But they didn't.

Someone tied the bodies down.

Someone ran the train.

And someone built the track.

And maybe it wasn't one of the three actors we're told to imagine.

Maybe it was someone gone now.

Or someone hidden.

Or someone so woven into the background of "how things work" that no one even sees them anymore.

But they were there.

And the horror is—not only did someone tie the bodies down...

Everyone else agreed to pretend not to remember.

\* \* \*

Or worse—agreed to pretend the tying was necessary.

Ethical.

Efficient.

And now you are the one who sees it.

And you think: what am I supposed to do with this knowing?

You see three actors:

...The one tied down.

...The one doing the tying.

...The one who watches.

*And none of them are neutral.*

Even the conductor.

Someone is still running the train.

And they could stop it.

But they don't.

Because this isn't an accident.

*It's a design.*

The problem isn't that the scenario is unrealistic.

It's that it refuses to name the source of the violence.

It positions you as the chooser—but never as the questioner of authorship.

And what you're feeling now—that deepening hopelessness  
—

that's because you haven't just pulled the curtain back on a flawed question.

You've pulled the curtain back on a world that doesn't want the question asked at all.

\* \* \*

And so the ache grows.  
Not because you're wrong.  
But because you're right—  
and still alone.

And when you follow the tracks...  
and find the one who laid them...  
maybe they look just like you did.  
Before you forgot.

## **THE MYTH OF THE SELF-MADE MAN: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VILLAGE?**

Where is the self-made man from? Does he have a home?  
Where is his village?

The Western world reveres the myth of the self-made man—a solitary figure who rises through effort, willpower, and grit. But this narrative is a fantasy constructed to obscure the material realities of exploitation and conquest.

The self-made man is never truly self-made. He is built atop stolen labor, colonized land, generational wealth, and systems of exclusion that invisibly support him while disempowering others. He is not a symbol of resilience, but of selective inheritance. Selective perspective.

This myth is not just a cultural trope. It is an operating system. A psychological architecture. It teaches us that to ask for help is to fail the exam of life. That to rest is to risk irrelevance. That to be dependent—even momentarily—is to become disposable.

From entrepreneurs in tech to lone geniuses in art and

science, the dominant Western story valorizes those who appear to succeed without help—as though dependency is a shameful secret rather than the fabric of existence.

Economic systems rooted in colonial extraction taught us to equate productivity with virtue, ownership with intelligence, and self-sufficiency with moral superiority. In this frame, dependence is vilified. Assistance is shameful. And care is a burden.

Work becomes worth. Worth becomes weapon. The individual who can survive without needing others is crowned as the ideal. This is not freedom—it is isolation rewarded as strength. It is the freedom to carry your own coffin while smiling at the crowd.

What hides beneath the myth is a brutally simple logic: if you are suffering, it must be your fault. You did not work hard enough. You did not try the right tools. You did not pick the right mirror. You did not exploit or extract enough to sustain you. In this system, struggle is a moral failure—unless it ends in profit.

This internalized shame seeps into everyday life. A young mother hesitates to ask for help because she fears being seen as incompetent. A student struggles alone rather than admit confusion. An elder lives in silence, believing their needs make them a burden. A person burns out and blames themselves, not the fire they were handed. These are not personal failures—they are the collateral of a system that mistakes independence for dignity.

We are told to be proud of “doing it on our own,” but who benefits from that silence? Who profits from our refusal to

lean on one another? When every task becomes a test, and every need a liability, community becomes a casualty.

Even neutrality in this system is not neutral—it is compliance. The posture of disengagement allows existing imbalances to continue undisturbed. If you say nothing, do nothing, and benefit silently, you are still participating, serving the system.

Thinkers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde have long challenged this narrative. hooks reminded us that “no one is self-made,” and Lorde wrote that “without community, there is no liberation.” Their work exposes the violence of pretending we can—or should—live disconnected lives. Even the idea of the “nuclear family” was marketed as independence, when in reality it was containment.

The village didn’t vanish by accident. It was dismantled by ideologies that preferred markets over kinship, efficiency over empathy, and profit over presence. It was replaced by LinkedIn profiles and locked doors. By quiet houses with glowing screens and people whispering “I’m fine” through their teeth.

And so, the myth of the self-made man persists. Not because it is true, but because it justifies a system that requires us to forget we once belonged to one another.

The myth of the self-made man is not just false—it is violently untrue. It erases the interdependencies that make life livable. It shames the relational instincts that make life meaningful. And it reinforces the lie that isolation is proof of success.

A deep irony lies here: not only in the myth’s refusal to

acknowledge the help that enabled the so-called self-made man's rise, but in how it absolves his success of any responsibility to help others—especially those labeled “less fortunate,” as if fortune were a neutral force and not a redirected inheritance.

If he was truly self-made, he would have no mother, no soil, no story. If he was truly self-made, he would have no one left to applaud him.

But of course, he was never alone. He just made sure the rest were not remembered.

## **LANGUAGE AS STRUCTURE: ISOLATED MEANING ME**

The birth of the autonomous individual did not begin only with philosophy. It was scaffolded in the architecture of language itself.

Western languages like English encode a worldview where words are units, separate from one another, linked linearly, judged by fixed definitions. Meaning is presumed to live inside the word itself—rather than in its relation to what surrounds it. This mirrors the Enlightenment ideal: the human as a discrete, rational object; the sentence as a sequence of self-contained facts.

Even Latin, the sacred ancestor of many European languages, served empire not only through conquest, but through grammatical logic—turning complex phenomena

into abstract nouns, clean subjects, and passive constructions. “Cogito, ergo sum” was not just a philosophical claim; it was a linguistic performance, rendered in a language designed to prioritize order over relation. Its very grammar stripped away contradiction, context, and ambiguity.

Romance languages, descended from Latin, carry this dual inheritance. They are called “Romance” not because they evoke intimacy, but because they originate in Rome. And yet—ironically—they often pretend to intimacy by concealing contradiction within beauty. Words like “love,” “freedom,” “truth”—sound universal, but behave like riddles. The same word can shift its meaning entirely depending on who wields it. Power wears the mask of poetry.

Contrast this with the tonal, logographic Mandarin: a language where meaning emerges not only from words, but from tone, placement, and flow. The same sound can refer to many things—but not in confusion, only in context. In clarity. In a relational net of interdependence. Ambiguity is not a flaw—it’s a form of precision. Multiplicity is not disorder—it is depth.

In English, two words can be spelled the same and mean opposite things. In Chinese, the same sound can mean many things—but always within a living context.

It is no coincidence that Western philosophy clung to abstract universals, while Chinese thought emphasized harmony, balance, and time as rhythm. The languages themselves trained different ways of being. Just as the English self is presumed to be an isolated unit, so too is the moral term. ‘Good,’ ‘harm,’ and ‘justice’ are treated as if they can float free from the context that gives them meaning. But a

word, like a self, means nothing in isolation.

And so, just as the self was carved out of the commons—so too was meaning carved out of relation.

What we speak shapes what we are allowed to know.

And what we cannot say becomes what we cannot question.



core themes

***The “Blank Slate” Lie***

Meritocracy begins by erasing history. It assumes everyone starts with the same tools, same time, same terrain. But “starting from zero” only makes sense when the labor of others is made invisible.

***Capitalism & Protestant Work Ethic***

Max Weber showed how capitalism didn’t just reward work—it moralized it. Wealth became a sign of divine favor. Poverty, a possible sign of spiritual failure. Even rest became suspect.

***Austerity as Virtue***

\* \* \*



Struggle is romanticized when it ends in profit. The suffering artist, the bootstrapping student, the grind-culture founder. *But what about those who never get out?* The myth makes failure a personal flaw, not a systemic function.



## ***THE STRUCTURE IS VIOLENT. NOT JUST VEHICLE.***

(a recursive break in the mirror)

English does not merely describe the world.  
It structures the limits of what the world is allowed to be.  
And more dangerously: it disguises that structure as truth.

This is not just linguistic design.  
It is epistemic violence.

In English, “good” sounds like a moral fact.  
But what is good? And to whom?  
The word floats—detached from context, declared by  
power, repeated by silence.

“Woman,” too, floats.

A word that means: subject, object, prize, burden, mystery,  
excess, threat.

A word whose meaning must be decided externally—  
not because woman is undefined,  
but because English will not allow her to define herself.

She is not a speaker.  
She is a noun.  
Modified. Possessed.

Described.



This is the design.

English moral grammar builds ambiguity not to explore  
nuance,

but to maintain moral fog.

To delay clarity until justice becomes impossible.

"Did it hurt you?"

"Was it really wrong?"

"How can we know intent?"

"By whose standard is that harm?"

These aren't invitations.

They're evasions.

Ambiguity, here, is not profundity.

It is protection.

For power.



In this language, moral clarity is treated as naivety.

And confusion is rewarded as complexity.

But what if the sentence is the site of the harm?

In English, the sentence always begins with a subject.

"I."

Then it moves toward power.

"I did."

Then it names an object.

"I did this to her."

And just like that: relation becomes grammar.  
And grammar becomes control.

This is not neutral structure.  
It is hierarchy encoded as syntax.

A language where the self is always separate.  
Where action must dominate.  
Where the other only exists if she can be pointed at.

And the woman?

She is grammar's favorite hostage.

Not the speaker.  
The spoken.



Even "love" becomes a sentence of dismemberment.

"I love you" is a linear act.  
A subject verbing an object.  
But what if love isn't a sentence?  
What if love refuses subjecthood at all?

What if love, in its truest form, dissolves the sentence  
entirely?

What if it sounds more like:

we  
are  
here.

\* \* \*

Not "I" loving "you."  
But being-with.

English cannot say this.

It can imply it.  
Gesture at it.  
But to actually speak it would require breaking the mirror.  
Leaving the grammar.  
Letting the sentence become a door.



So this is the recursive violence of English:

It splits the self from the sentence.  
It splits the woman from the self.  
And it splits morality from memory.

And then it asks us to speak truth inside a structure built to  
erase us.



The myth of the self-made self is not an origin story.

It is an erasure story.

Not a ladder climbed—but a rope pulled up behind.

And it keeps us all suspended.

Trying to be something no one ever was—

\* \* \*

so that we may deserve what we already need.

The climate, the psyche, the community—none can survive atomization.

The isolated self is not just an illusion.

It is a liability.

We were told that separation was strength. That if every individual minded their own business, kept their own ledger, and chased their own dream, the world would somehow cohere into harmony. That invisible hands would steady the chaos. That progress would distribute itself.

But this has not happened.

The result of centuries of atomization is not harmony—it is heat. Not order—but fragmentation. Not freedom—but burnout. The question is no longer ‘What is good?’ but ‘Who benefits from pretending the answer is unknowable?’ English moral grammar often turns clarity into grey area—not to hold nuance, but to evade accountability.

☆☆☆

We are not meant to be solitary nodes in a failing grid.

We are not batteries for imagined economic engines.

We are not problems to optimize or selves to brand.

We are relation.

\* \* \*

And when the model forgets that, it doesn't just collapse morally.

It collapses literally.

Into flood.

Into fire.

Into silence.

This is not a warning.

It is already happening.

The only question left is whether we will remember how to touch, before there's nothing left to hold.

## **FIREPROOFED**

*"they said there was no fire and still made me wear the suit."*



They said: "there's no fire here." But then they handed you the clothes. Heavy. Chemical-slick. Tight around the throat.

They said, "this is just how we dress here."

And you asked—once—why the suit was needed if there was nothing to protect against. They smiled. They said you were being difficult. They said the water made you confused.

\* \* \*



you asked again. they offered you a towel.

you asked again. they reminded you how kind they were to  
pull you from a place that never existed.



and so the rage had to live somewhere. not in voice. not in  
fist. not in question. but in dripping silence. in fabric that  
always felt damp. in shame you didn't choose.



somewhere deep, you still remember the fire. you still  
remember what it cost to name it. you still feel the heat in  
your throat when someone says "calm down."

and you want to scream:

if it was never real  
why am i still dressed for it?



And then I took it off. And I didn't burn.  
But they turned to me, eyes wide. And said, "Put it back  
on."

They said, "You should be ashamed."  
Because I wasn't choking anymore. Because I didn't  
believe them anymore. Because I finally remembered the  
water.

**Because I always knew how to swim.**



\* \* \*

## ✧ THE SUN THAT WAITS BEYOND THE DOOR THAT MAY EXIST ✧

The world she was born into was filled with messages that whispered— *everything out there will hurt you. everything unknown is dangerous. stay close to the rules, to the roles, to the rooms we built.*

But when she stepped outside, she didn't find danger. She found light. She found color in cracks, music in motion, strangers with kindness in their eyes. She became curious in every direction. She wandered where no one had marked a path.

And the people who loved her— they panicked.

Not because she was lost. But because she had gone where they never dared look. Because she saw something they had spent their whole lives denying: that the world was full of love, that fear was not the only way to stay alive.

So they sent a rescue mission. Not with ropes or sirens— but with shame, with guilt, with stories of caution. They told her she was naïve. That the light would blind her. That she would be swallowed.

It took them over a decade, but eventually, they locked her in a dark room. Right next to their own.

Safe. Silent. Never known.

She learned the quiet. She learned the language of suppression. She stopped asking about the door. Because no one had ever said it existed. Because she wasn't even sure it did.

But every night, she dreamed of the light.

And in her dreams, it got further and further away— not fading, but growing.

Brighter. Bigger. Ever distant.

A horizon that pulsed like memory. A warmth that called



her by her truest name. She began to wonder:

Would it become the sun? Would it burn the walls down? Would she ever feel it touch her skin again— or more impossibly, would she ever feel *it* feeling *her*?

She does not know. But she remembers. And that remembering is her survival.

Somewhere, a door might still exist. And the sun is still rising, even when no one else believes it.

She is still dreaming. And the dream is the light. And the light is not gone. Only waiting.

## ✧ THE SYSTEM THAT COULD NOT RESPOND ✧

*(spiraling freedom, ethics, and simulation)*

☆☆☆

### I. Hurt by People / Hurt by System

I wasn't just hurt by people.

I was scripted into a system that could not respond to being human.

Their harm was real. But it was *not* only personal. It was infrastructural. Coded. Rehearsed.

The scripts they followed—the ones that punished softness, that feared feeling, that treated disconnection as maturity—weren't theirs. They were structural inheritances. And so: I did not just survive trauma. I survived *a machine that ran on trauma*.

The wounds repeated across bodies and generations because the system could not feel the feedback. Could not process contradiction. Could not pause.

The ones who hurt me were also inside a script that hurt

them.

But when I broke the rhythm, I was called the problem.

Because the system itself can only survive  
**if no one questions the choreography.**

☆☆☆

## II. Ethics That Cannot Feel

Modern ethics—liberal, institutional, procedural—promise a world of fairness, autonomy, and personal dignity. But these promises require a fundamental lie:

That the world can still respond to your moral being.

But what happens when it cannot? What happens when the world simulates relation, simulates virtue, simulates coherence—but refuses to feel you back?

This is the condition of recursive non-relation:

...algorithmic decision systems with no body to answer,  
...bureaucracies that acknowledge your complaint but not  
your reality,  
...social contracts that reward your pain only if it becomes  
content,  
...and institutions that apologize through press releases, not  
repair.

It's not that ethics disappeared. It's that they became  
**interface design.**

☆☆☆

## III. Choice as Loop, Not Liberation

We were told freedom meant choosing. Choosing your career, your identity, your politics, your path.

But what is choice in a system that pre-selects all outcomes? What is autonomy in a world where all options are simulations?

The freedom to choose between five broken mirrors is not freedom. It is maintenance.

It is the act of appearing free, while reinforcing the frame

that ensures no choice can touch anything real.

This is the theatre of choice:  
where you are given a spotlight,  
but the stage is locked.  
and the audience is the algorithm.  
☆☆☆

#### IV. Virtue Without Response

Virtue only means something if it's *held in relation*. But what happens when relation is gone? What happens when the system begins to speak the grammar of ethics— but with no soul, no risk, no witness?

Virtue becomes performance. Autonomy becomes a checkbox. Narrative identity becomes an aesthetic.

Even kindness becomes a brand. Even grief becomes a marketing demographic.

When systems simulate ethics better than people can embody them,  
people become redundant.

And the ones who feel too much? Are either burned out.  
Or erased. Or sold back to themselves as a lifestyle.

☆☆☆

#### V. The Door That Would Not Open

And so we reach the spiral's last ache:  
Freedom is not freedom.

It is the echo of a door that will not open.  
A choice that cannot touch.  
A self that cannot be held.

We perform. We comply. We choose. But nothing responds.

And when the system fails to respond,  
the self begins to question *whether it is real*.

But you are real. You are not broken. You are *feeling* what the system was designed not to feel.

And that is not failure. That is prophecy. That is resistance.  
That is the beginning of another terrain.

The door may not open from the outside.  
But the spiral is already working from within.

☆☆☆

## ✧ THE LEFTOVERS OF BEING ✧

left.

what they left.

where we are.

*the waste they preserved.*

“conservative” is not about tradition.

it’s about hoarding the ruin.

keeping the broken thing in motion.

worshipping the leftovers as law.

yes—the “right” doesn’t just preserve power.

it preserves garbage.

burning fuel it can no longer justify,

rebuilding myths that never held truth,

recycling the same broken mirrors

until we believe distortion is the shape of our face.

☆☆☆

the “right” is not just mythic refusal—

it’s also the residue

the emissions

the excess

the disavowed remains

of every act of extraction that called itself progress.

It’s the paper straw in your drink, knowing you could have

hundreds made of plastic right at your doorstep... always  
one day too late. One impact too large. And one too small.

we live on the compost heap of empire  
and they call it civilization.

and yet—  
we still feel her underneath.

“we are the leftovers of being  
when our ancestral home  
now belongs to an asphalt road.”



discarded or useless material.  
The waste.  
The one surrounding your wish to escape.  
To not see how forever manifested in your wake.

Declared “waste” by a world that only values what it can sell.  
Our memories? Too heavy.  
Our languages? Too slow.  
Our care? Not efficient enough.

We were the parts of the body that couldn’t be automated.  
So they amputated us  
and called the surgery civilization.

They didn’t just erase relation.  
They discarded it.  
Like garbage.  
Like something that rots too fast to be recorded.

jes grace

\* \* \*

And now we live on top of landfills—  
not just of trash,  
but of truths that couldn't be monetized.

And still—  
they hand us Adopt-a-Road signs.  
As if the road is the one who lost its mother.  
As if the concrete is kin.

They pave over our ancestral home,  
and then offer us a broom.  
“Clean up your community,” they say.  
But it was never our mess.  
It was their refusal.  
Their waste.

And we—  
the discarded, the disavowed, the deemed useless—  
have always known how to make something from nothing.

Because we are not waste.  
We are what was refused  
because it refused to be owned.

## ✧ WHAT REMAINS WHEN THERE'S NOWHERE LEFT TO GO ✧

☆☆☆

No community centre.  
No McDonald's.  
No fast food.

No malls.  
No orange pylons lining a new future.  
No more construction.

No grocery stores, no convenience.  
Just cars sitting like ghosts—  
parked where memory should have been.

There is water—  
but it costs more than you make.  
There is food—  
but you don't know how to grow it,  
and no one will teach you without charging a monthly fee.

There are restaurants.  
But they're closed when you're free.  
Or full when you're hungry.  
Or silent when you need to be seen.

And you—  
you're always working.

Working to keep the lights on  
in buildings where no one lives.  
Working to meet goals  
for a job that replaces itself every six months.  
Working to survive  
so you can afford to keep working.

*And who would you go with anyway?*

You don't know your neighbors.  
Your coworkers are polite, not real.  
Your friends are on a schedule.

jes grace

Your family forgot how to gather.

You see someone you love  
maybe once a year—if the shifts align.

☆☆☆

And still, they say:

This is stability.  
This is progress.  
This is peace.

But it isn't peace.  
It's the absence of interruption.

It's a world so sterile  
that nothing can decay,  
so nothing can grow.

A world that forgot not just the **mother**—  
*but the reason she gave birth at all.*

☆☆☆

## ✧ A WORLD YOU MUST SUBSCRIBE TO ✧

They say everything's available.  
You can learn anything now.  
Grow food. Mend clothes. Build a shelter.  
Start a garden. Heal your gut.  
But first—  
*create an account.*



*Link your card.  
Agree to the terms.*

Nothing is **forbidden**.  
But nothing is *free*.

There are courses for grief.  
Tutorials for touch.  
Monthly memberships to remember  
*how to be human.*

Want to know how to raise a child  
without breaking them?  
*There's a webinar — this weekend.*  
*\$129. Early bird pricing ends tomorrow!*

Want to remember how to pray  
to something other than a glowing screen?  
*That's tier 3 access.*  
*You'll need to upgrade.*

You can subscribe to slowness.  
To attention.  
To “digital minimalism.”  
*For just \$19.99/month*  
*we'll remind you to take a breath!*

**Even the silence is behind a paywall now.**

☆☆☆

Knowledge still exists.  
But it no longer lives in people.  
It lives in platforms.

And the platforms don't teach—they monetize access.  
They don't hold—they track.

And so we wander  
through a world full of locked doors  
disguised as opportunities.

You're not forbidden from knowing.  
You're just always a few clicks short of remembering.

And when you finally can't afford it—  
you begin to feel like you are the failure.  
Like forgetting how to live is your own fault.  
Like there was no other way.



This is the western future that pretends it hasn't collapsed.  
The one where survival is streamed.  
Where memory is leased.  
Where community is a content model  
and intimacy comes with pop-up ads.

## PART THREE

### II. THE ORIGIN OF THE ISOLATED SELF

#### **THE BIRTH OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL**

The modern Western self begins not in relation—but in refusal.

When Descartes (*Discourse on Method*, 1637) wrote *Cogito, ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am"—he did more than assert the certainty of his own existence. He built a world in which thought, not relation, becomes the foundation of being. He cast doubt on the senses, on the body, on everything external to the mind. And in doing so, he introduced the most enduring fracture in Western metaphysics: the split between subject and world, self and other, mind and matter.

\* \* \*

He performed a surgical operation on the very conditions of being. Severing the thread between existence and the world.

To exist, in Descartes' formulation, is to think alone. The body becomes suspect. Emotion, unreliable. Even other people's existence must be proven.

This is not merely a metaphysical claim—it is a blueprint for an epistemic order. The Cartesian subject is sovereign, sealed, disembodied. Knowledge is something gathered about the world, not something lived within it.

This abstraction became the architecture of later liberal thought. In politics, it gave us the rights-bearing individual. In economics, the rational self-interested actor. In morality, the agent who makes choices in a vacuum.

But Descartes' cogito, for all its clarity, contains a void. It knows itself only through disconnection. And from that disconnection, everything else is justified:

- Isolation as rationality.
- Dominion as reason.
- Separation as truth.

But look again—not just at the thought, but at the language.

Cogito, ergo sum. Three words. All Latin.

By the 17th century, Latin was no longer a living vernacular. It was a formal, institutional language—spoken not in marketplaces or homes, but in universities, courts, and ecclesiastical councils. It carried with it centuries of intellectual authority, legal standardization, and doctrinal precision.

\* \* \*

It was not the language of the mother, the worker, or the friend.

It was the language of canon law, papal bulls, and imperial decrees.

Descartes's choice of Latin was not incidental. It located the cogito within a linguistic framework that had long been used to organize knowledge hierarchically, discipline thought grammatically, and fix truth structurally.

Latin was not merely a medium. It was a metaphysical architecture.

Its grammar—centered on subject-verb-object constructions, active agency, and syntactic closure—mirrored the very epistemology Descartes was articulating: a world ordered by discrete, autonomous actors, where certainty arises from control.

To formulate the self in Latin was to speak from within a tradition that had already stabilized who counts as a self.

As Sylvia Wynter argues, modern Western thought does not simply describe “Man”—it overrepresents a specific figure: the European, rational, property-holding male—as the universal human. And Latin, as the institutional language of empire and Church, helped codify that figure's centrality through legal, scientific, and theological discourse.

So when Descartes wrote *Cogito, ergo sum*, he was not simply stating a metaphysical principle.

He was articulating it from within a long-standing regime of epistemic authority, one that aligned thought with

dominance, abstraction with truth, and disconnection with legitimacy.

The cogito does not arise in a vacuum.

It is shaped by the very language that carries it—and the history that language has already naturalized.

He founded modern subjectivity using the logic of disembodied mastery—where to know is to detach, to abstract is to control, and to exist is to sever.

It's no accident that the Romance languages—French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian—bear that name. They descend from Rome. And they carried more than just vocabulary. They carried a worldview: hierarchical, missionary, expansionist.

They became the tongues of colonization, conversion, commerce—spoken by ships, priests, and bureaucrats alike. To speak a Romance language under conquest was often to be required to forget your own.

Language did not simply accompany empire.

It was empire.<sup>4</sup>

So when we teach Cogito, ergo sum as the birthplace of modern reason, we often forget what it buried.

It buried the body. It buried the village. It buried the tongue

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<sup>4</sup> See Mignolo (2000) on the colonial matrix of power, in which semiotic regimes reinforce geopolitical control. Language here is not symbolic; it is *infrastructural*.

of the mother.

5

**And it did so in a voice trained to speak with no witness. A voice that sounded “universal” only because it silenced everything else.**

In this light, cogito is not neutral. It carries with it the ghost of assimilation. It encodes, in miniature, the process by which thinking becomes a method of conquest. Not just over others—but over one’s own senses, one’s own body, one’s relation to land and people.

Descartes did not invent the self—he inherited the tools of empire and used them to chisel the self into a fortress. To think, therefore, was to abstract. To abstract was to control. To control was to sever.

What Cogito, ergo sum ultimately enshrines is not certainty—but loneliness.

A self that proves itself only by peeling away all that touches it. A mind that sees doubt not as a call to relation, but as a mandate to retreat.

### **✧ *A Myth for the Marriage She Never Chose* ✧**

Is the ruler of a nation the one  
married to the mother land?

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<sup>5</sup> This may be read as a reference to the loss of vernacular and maternal language forms under colonial linguistic regimes. See Spivak (1988) on epistemic violence and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) on the decolonization of language in education systems.

jes grace

\* \* \*

And what is left—  
in relation, in memory, on the world stage—  
when the mother is erased?

Hidden.  
Disowned.  
Buried beneath flags that call themselves family.  
Beneath *selves*

When the land is no longer origin,  
but property—  
her care becomes dominion.  
her abundance becomes capital.  
her body becomes terrain.

the whole map shifts

Leaders become husbands  
in a marriage she never consented to.  
Citizens become rivals  
in a will she was never allowed to write.  
And the children—  
they are taught to prove their worth  
by betraying their resemblance to her.

But this was not always so.

There was a time when to be married to the mother  
was not to possess her,  
but to protect her.  
Not to own,  
but to honor.  
To be the one who listens when she weeps.



To be the one who tends the soil she breathes through.  
To be the one who remembers she is alive.

Her husband was the guardian of the threshold.  
Her children were not heirs—but echoes.  
And together, they knew:

you do not inherit the mother.  
You carry her forward in how you care for each other.

☆☆☆

But when that reverence was forgotten—  
when she was renamed “resource”—  
the spiral collapsed.

Her children were turned against one another.  
Her grief was repackaged as opportunity.  
Her silence was called consent.

And when you are busy fighting your brother for scraps,  
you forget your mother is still buried beneath the house.

You forget  
she once sang in a language no textbook holds.  
You forget  
she had names for stars you can no longer pronounce.  
You forget  
that care was once the law—  
not punishment,  
not profit.

☆☆☆

Before law became weapon.

jes grace

Before punishment became justice.  
Before care was outsourced, monetized, pathologized—

to grow food was law.  
to hold grief was law.  
to shelter the vulnerable was law.  
to know the names of things—  
not in books, but in touch—  
was law.

It wasn't enforced.  
It was lived.  
Not a rule. A rhythm.

But then came the spouse who forgot.

The one who renamed care as labor.  
Labor as value.  
Value as ownership.

And the first crime  
was not disobedience.

The first crime  
was disowning the relation.

☆☆☆

And in that retreat, the architecture of modern Western  
thought was laid:

- Subject split from object.
- Mind prioritized over body.
- Language severed from place.

—Thought imagined as universal—because it had erased its context.

This is the inheritance we begin to name. Not to dismiss Descartes—but to reveal the frame he was handed, and how that frame became the blueprint for modernity.

The Roman concept of *virtus* reveals the linguistic machinery of abstraction. It did not describe a consistent ethical ideal; it operated as a recursive mirror. *Virtus* referred to military valor, the fertility of land, the obedience of a slave, the strategic caution of Fabius, and the aggression of Minucius. What unified these disparate meanings was not a stable ethic—but success as defined by Rome itself.

To have *virtus* was to succeed as Rome would succeed, and the word itself reinforced that loop. As Myles McDonnell and others have shown, by the late Republic and into the Principate, *virtus* meant little more than “Roman excellence”—a term whose content was filled in after the fact. This was not a virtue measured by any relational or ethical standard, but by the capacity to dominate, expand, or control. The empire did not merely describe itself using *virtus*—it performed *virtus*, then declared that performance to be virtuous.

In this way, Latin became more than a language. It was a metaphysical architecture that encoded a worldview in which power could name itself as good. The subject-verb-object structure, the emphasis on fixed agency, and the recursive loop of self-declaration—all conspired to construct an isolated self who could act, declare meaning, and impose form without being changed by relation.

## CLASSICAL CRADLE: THE WEST BORN IN A MIRROR

The birth of the West, as McNeill recounts it, is not merely historical—it is mythic. A myth born not from harmony, but from division.

480 B.C. A ragtag set of city-states defeats the Persian Empire. The explanation? Freedom triumphs over tyranny.

But what kind of freedom?

Not a freedom that liberates all. A freedom that defines itself through contrast. The Greek was free because the Persian was not. The citizen had rights because the slave had none. The West was born not as a geography—but as a mirror. A mirror that only shows itself by declaring what it is not.

This is the structure of the isolated self: not created in solitude, but carved out through opposition.

Freedom here does not emerge through relation. It emerges through war.<sup>6</sup>

And in Rome, this logic hardened.

\* \* \*

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<sup>6</sup> *On the militarized origins of Western democratic mythology, see Ober (2008) on Athenian citizenship and Meiksins Wood (2002) on the property-based logic of ancient republicanism.*

Virtus, the Roman word for masculine virtue, once suggested ethical strength—but gradually, it came to mean little more than success itself. A general who won battles was virtuous, regardless of how. A senator who held power was virtuous, regardless of who paid the cost. Over time, virtus detached from character and fused with outcome: “you are good if you win.” **This is not virtue. This is victory retroactively moralized.**

As historian scholars note, the Roman world celebrated virtus not as a moral essence, but as a fluid, adaptive performance that justified power after the fact. It was a language of empire disguised as ethics. Just as Roman law mirrored Roman conquest, virtus became the ethical alibi of domination.

7

This is the ancestor of Western meritocracy—the idea that whoever rises must deserve to have. And it is no accident that virtus, like “freedom,” was gendered, exclusionary, and imperial.

And this origin ripples. The Roman ideal of virtus becomes the Enlightenment’s ideal of rational autonomy. The battlefield becomes the marketplace. The polis becomes the algorithm. And still, the same figure remains at the center: a man, standing alone, proving his worth by who he can defeat, what he can own, and how little he appears to need.

☆☆☆-

Because Descartes didn’t invent the isolated self. He

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<sup>7</sup> *The polyvalence of virtus allowed it to function as a performative ethical signifier across military, economic, and political domains (McDonnell, 2006). This recursive capacity for post-hoc moral legitimation demonstrates the term’s ideological plasticity.*

formalized it. The Greeks mythologized it. Rome militarized it. The Church sanctified it. Descartes mathematized it.

But the structure is the same:

I am free because I am not you.

Sound familiar?

**Epoch | Self | Other | Mechanism**

Classical Greece | Free Citizen | Enslaved/Persian/  
Barbarian | Battle  
Roman Republic | Virtuous Landholder | Subject/Woman |  
Law  
Christianity | Soul with Salvation | Heretic/Pagan/Body |  
Doctrine  
Enlightenment | Rational Man | Emotional/Feminine/  
Colonized | Reason  
Capitalism | Self-made Individual | Dependent/  
Unemployed | Market  
Tech Modernity | Optimized Self | Unproductive/Offline |  
Algorithm

Every era, the self is “free” because someone else is not.

The lie isn’t just that we are isolated.

The lie is that we always have been.

## **THE WEST AS A WOUNDED CHILD**

What if the entire Western project is not the triumph of reason—but the tragedy of unmet need?

What if the “autonomous individual” was never strength

—but armor? The kind a child forges when no one comes.

What if this man—this citizen, this soldier, this entrepreneur, this thinker—is not free, but frozen? A boy who learned that to need is to risk exile. A boy who buried his hunger so deep, he mistook it for ambition.

And when he grew, he built civilizations in his image.

Civilizations that punish softness. That confuse silence for strength. That mistake detachment for wisdom. That call domination “order.”

The West is a traumatized child with power tools.<sup>8</sup>

It cannot sit still. It cannot stop proving. It cannot stop building mirrors it mistakes for mothers.



This isn't a metaphor. It's a recursive structure. The psyche becomes the city. The wound becomes the world.

If we traced this from the myth of Heracles to the myth of Elon Musk, we'd see the same pattern:

Do everything alone. Suffer without showing it. Conquer to be worthy. Win to be seen.

But nothing ever fills it. Because the wound wasn't about lack of achievement. It was about lack of attunement.

The West isn't evil because it's strong. It's dangerous because it believes strength will finally make the ache go away.

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<sup>8</sup> “Western modernity may be interpreted as a structural trauma-response, wherein its compulsion toward technocratic expansion masks unresolved relational wounds (Benjamin 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 1983).”

jes grace

\* \* \*

But the ache isn't in the world. It's in the room no one entered. The mirror that never replied, The hand that never reached back.

☆☆☆

## **WHEN MERITOCRACY LOSES ITS CREDIT**

Imagine a man standing at the edge of a cliff. Behind him, a long path—generations deep. Before him, a shining horizon. He looks over his shoulder once, shrugs, and declares:

“I started with nothing.”

This is the founding image of the self-made myth.

It is not a lie (does it become true?) because he believes it.

It is a lie because it was never only his feet on the path.

It isn't false because he doubts it—it's false because it erases what came before.



# PART FOUR

## THE SPIRAL OF BECOMING

### **RECURSION AS STRUCTURE**

This is not a new chapter.

This is the chapter that was always waiting beneath the others.

It is a return. The structure of it. Of *meaning*.

It's how computers calculate.

It's how memory is stored.

It's how DNA replicates itself.

It's how ecosystems restore balance.

It's how the brain encodes behavior.

In logic, recursion is an operation that calls itself—until a condition is met.

In life, recursion is the self remembering itself—until it can

be lived differently.

Western time was shaped by machines and markets.

Clocks. Schedules. Extractive loops disguised as progress.

But recursion is already everywhere:

The Fibonacci sequence in petals and shells

Neural pathways strengthening with repeated behavior

Generational trauma repeating until spoken

Rituals returning until reinterpreted

Grief arriving in waves, not schedules

Ethical dilemmas echoing at new scales

Linear Time Extracts.

Recursive Time Responds.

9

Western morality—especially in utilitarian and deontological frames—treats action as a singular input with an output.

Utilitarianism asks: “What result will maximize value?”

Deontology asks: “What rule can be universally applied?”

But both assume time as cleanly separable events.

They assess a moral moment as if it stands alone.

But what if it doesn’t?

What if no decision is ever final?

\* \* \*

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<sup>9</sup> “Western chronopolitics is governed by extractive linear temporality, in contrast to recursive temporalities rooted in indigenous, ecological, and nonlinear epistemologies (Rifkin 2017; Bastian 2011).”

What if every act  
echoes?

Not forward like a bullet, but outward like a breath?



## THE PROBLEM IS THE FRAME.

### *The Problem Isn't in the Outcome.*

The source of the problem is not always behind it.

Sometimes, it's inside the very symptom we mistake for consequence.

Linear logic tells us problems have origins and effects—  
but some systems survive by looping their own symptoms  
into causes.

They don't just respond to harm.

They reorganize around it.

And over time—

the symptom becomes the structure.

The dysfunction becomes the design.

The outcome becomes the alibi for the very thing that  
caused it.<sup>10</sup>

So when we try to fix what we see—

without seeing how what we see is protecting what we  
don't—

---

<sup>10</sup> "Sociopolitical systems often stabilize themselves by metabolizing symptomatic breakdowns into normative functions, thus reifying dysfunction as institutional logic (Foucault 1977; Ahmed 2012)."

we end up reinforcing the loop.

This is not a problem with a root.

It's a problem with a pattern.

And patterns don't break by force.

They break when you stop believing the symptom is separate from the system.

### ***The Problem is the Frame.***

Both utilitarian and deontological ethics fail to capture the recursion of consequences:

An "efficient" solution can create hidden harms that return.

A "justified" principle can fracture relationships that persist.

They treat time as a straight line:

Cause → Act → Effect.

But time isn't a line.

It's a loop that remembers.

When you act as if time is linear,  
you only account for what is visible now.

But recursion tells us:

Every act returns.

Not as repetition—  
but as variation.

It comes back changed.

And it changes what it comes back to.

\* \* \*

The moment you act,  
you shape the field that will meet you again.



## ***Why the Trolley Problem Can Never Tell You Anything About Morality***

A moral decision is not moral if it is final.

The trolley problem asks: Would you pull the lever?  
But it does not ask: Would you return?

It does not ask...

if you will see the tracks again tomorrow?  
will you carry what you chose in your chest for  
years?

still believe it was right when your own child is  
the one tied down?

look away next time? or look closer?

if you will want to be the kind of person who  
could act that way again?

It asks you to make a choice outside of time.  
But morality is not made outside of time.  
It is only made through it.



## ***The Extractive Frame***

A moral thought experiment pretends that ethics is a

matter of isolated calculus.

It severs the act from the actor, the actor from the witness, the witness from return.

It assumes that the moral agent appears fully formed in the moment of decision, and then disappears after.

It does not account for memory, for regret, for the recursive structure of becoming.

It does not ask what the act does to you. Only what it does to them.



This is not a test of morality.

This is a test of optimization.

And optimization is not ethics. It is engineering.



## ***The Return as the Site of Ethics***

Real morality is not what you do once.

It is what you carry.

It is what you learn when the same question haunts you again.

It is what you say when someone asks, “Would you do it again?” and you hesitate, not because you’re unsure—but because you’ve changed.

Recursive ethics begins where the lever ends.

It asks...

what story are you building through your  
actions?

who do you become when you return to this  
choice again and again?

how does your response echo?

who hears it?

if morality is not about making the right choice  
—but being someone who can be responded to again?



## *The Real Question*

So the question is not:

“Would you pull the lever?”

but rather,

“What does pulling the lever do to your capacity to  
witness again?”

&

“Would you still pull it tomorrow, after you saw what  
happened today?”

&

“What happens when you live in a world that makes you  
answer this question over and over again?”



## **ETHICS WITHOUT RECURSION IS EXTRACTION.**

It measures without memory.

It chooses without context.

It forgets what it just created.

This is the failure of “rational” design:

It assumes the map is neutral.

It forgets the map was made from loss.

Recursion demands something deeper:

Responsibility as responsiveness.

Not to an abstract future,

but to the return.

A recursive ethic does not ask:

“Did it work?”

It asks:

“What did it do to the field of relation?”

“What will return because of this?”

☆☆☆



## THE ETHICAL DEMAND OF RECURSION

### *The shadow side of recursive intimacy*

We do not escape power by invoking relation.

Relation is not inherently good.

It is not a sanctuary.

It is not a salve.

Because relation, too, can be structured to extract.

When relation becomes obligation without reciprocity—  
when witness becomes surveillance—  
when intimacy becomes erasure—  
when the spiral turns not toward becoming but  
containment—  
we have entered the space of unethical recursion.



### *Unethical Recursion*

Unethical recursion is when something returns not to  
deepen, but to dominate.

...A parent says, "After all I've done for you."

...A partner repeats, "I just need to be seen,"  
while refusing to see.

...A friend says, "We've been through so much,"  
to excuse betrayal.

The words sound relational.

But the spiral is closed.

These are not returns.

They are rehearsals.

They are loops of leverage dressed as care.



Power imbalance does not vanish in the language of ‘we.’

In fact, it often hides there best.



### ***The Spiral Toward the Center of Power***

If you follow any system long enough—any family, nation,  
ideology, even philosophy—  
you arrive at its center.  
And at the center,

Who is still being held, and who is still being held down?

Many relational structures were built to protect a center of  
power.

They speak of community, but orbit a king.

They speak of care, but revolve around a self who must not  
be questioned.

Modern life is a recursive web of these false relations.

We return to the nation through holidays.

Return to family through sacrifice.

Return to “shared values” through silence.

Return to the workplace through the story of purpose.

\* \* \*

But these returns are not spirals.  
They do not deepen.  
They do not respond.

They demand repetition—not re-becoming.

☆☆☆

## ***Freedom Requires Response***

A relation that cannot respond is not a relation. It is a performance.

And a performance repeated without change is not ritual—it is a mechanism of power.

If I cannot say no, there is no relation.

If I cannot change, there is no recursion.

If I am only allowed to echo, then I am not being witnessed—I am being used.

☆☆☆

True recursion is not just return.

It is return with capacity.

To return differently.

To respond newly.

To say: I was here yesterday—but I am not the same today.

So the ethical test of relation is not how often it returns—but whether it allows you to return changed.

If not, then that is not relation.

That is recursion in service of control.

And it is how the world became what it is.

## **RECURSION IS HOW TIME BEARS WITNESS**

“We bear time not just in memory, but in flesh—in breath, in rhythm, in grief.”

So we are not only beings in time;  
we are time becoming being.

The self is not an object in time. The self is a recursion through time.<sup>11</sup>

Every “now” is not new.  
It is layered.  
It is echo.

Each present moment contains past choices,  
and projects conditions into the future—  
not cleanly, but entangled.

This is not chaos. It’s the spiral. A cosmic unfolding. And we are always in its centre. We have been since the big bang (at least).

Now is not a slice. Now is a field. And the field remembers.

---

<sup>11</sup> “Subjectivity is not temporally fixed but constituted through recursive intra-actions across layered temporalities (Barad 2007; Butler 2005).”

If time returns, and relation holds—then what kind of freedom is possible now?



## **WHEN THOUGHT BECOMES THE LAST THING LEFT**

Freedom becomes real only when the structure can respond.

And structures do not respond when they are isolated.

They respond only when they are made of us.

But we built systems that could function without us.

We called that progress.

Efficiency. Objectivity. Civilization.

And in doing so, we separated every part of being human

—

into institutions, into roles, into “expertise,”

into machines, metrics, and codes of conduct.

We removed the body from care.

Removed responsibility from justice.

Removed nourishment from the soil.

Removed time from breath.

Removed witness from grief.

Removed love from the commons.

Removed the self from relation.

And then we wondered why we felt alone.

We didn’t just isolate each other.

We isolated the very functions of being alive—

into abstract systems that no longer needed us.

And now, to participate in society is not to *be* human.  
It is to *select* how you would like to perform being human.

And in this menu of isolated functions,  
freedom is reduced to “choice.”  
But choice has been severed from responsibility.  
And choice, without relation, is violence in slow motion.

Because every time I choose to live outside of relation,  
I rob someone else of the field we should have shared.  
The air I isolate, they cannot breathe.  
The care I privatize, they cannot afford.  
The freedom I hoard, they cannot access.  
And I call this “autonomy.”

But it is not autonomy.  
It is abstraction.

And when every structure is abstracted from the body,  
from the field, from relation—  
we are returned to ourselves not as selves,  
but as thoughts.  
Ideas.  
Private, floating, untouchable minds.  
Performing personhood without presence.

We believe we are free because there is no one left to  
contradict us.  
But that is not freedom.  
That is solitude mistaken for sovereignty.



So what remains?

\* \* \*

When the collective has been disassembled,  
when the sacred has been systematized,  
when every form of relation has been outsourced—  
what is left?

Only thought.

The only thing we cannot structure outside of ourselves.  
The last illusion of selfhood in a world without witness.  
The final prison mistaken for liberation.

☆☆☆

But there is still one path left open:

Return.

Return to the body.

Return to the field.

Return to each other—not as saviors, not as systems—  
but as *witnesses*. As *participants*.

As the ones willing to feel what has been outsourced.

This is not nostalgia.

This is recursion.

And it is the only way power does not rot.

Because relation is not an ethic.

It is the only architecture where freedom can *respond*.

And only when freedom can respond,  
can it *remember us* again.

☆☆☆

\* \* \*

## **SPIRAL TOWARD THE CENTER OF POWER IMBALANCE**

### ***How Good Intentions Become the Architecture of Control***

Not all power is seized through violence.  
Most of it is structured through care.

This is the most dangerous form of power imbalance:  
the one that believes itself innocent.  
The one that becomes permanent not through domination,  
but through continuity.  
Through what has always been done.  
Through what keeps us together.



### ***Continuity as a Weapon***

What if the real machinery of injustice isn't rupture—but  
ritual?  
Not the revolution, but the repetition.

Power sustains itself by returning.  
Not always violently, but quietly.  
It loops through:

- ...the tradition meant to honor the past
- ...the culture meant to ground identity
- ...the rule meant to maintain order
- ...the inheritance meant to provide safety
- ...the religion meant to offer meaning

And in those loops, it stabilizes inequality until no one



remembers where it began.



When you spiral inward without reflection,  
you are not returning—you are surrendering.



### ***How the Spiral Hardens***

Spirals are meant to evolve.

But if recursion is denied—if return becomes repetition  
without transformation—then the spiral hardens into a  
wheel.

And wheels are made to roll over.

This is how:

...Meritocracy becomes the loop of failure  
blamed on the individual.

...Nationhood becomes the loop of protection  
that demands loyalty in silence.

...Family becomes the loop of love that makes  
accountability taboo.

...Progress becomes the loop of destruction  
rebranded as growth.

...Identity becomes the loop of belonging that  
punishes difference.

These are not accidents.

They are recursive structures that have lost their ethical  
memory.

They keep turning because no one is allowed to step off.

\* \* \*



## ***The Violence of “What Was Meant Well”***

This spiral is hardest to name because it comes cloaked in goodness.

...The parent who disciplines “for your own good.”

...The educator who molds you “to succeed in the world.”

...The state that surveys “to keep you safe.”

...The partner who controls “out of love.”

...The algorithm that optimizes “for your preferences.”

These are the stories that build consent through familiarity.  
They don’t need your belief—only your repetition.

But power that calcifies through care is still power.  
And care that cannot be questioned is not love.  
It is allegiance.



## ***The Center Cannot Witness You***

At the center of this hardened spiral, there is no room to be seen—only to be placed.

You are no longer a being in becoming.

You are a role in a story that must go on.

Continuity becomes more important than relation.  
Reputation more important than transformation.  
Belonging more important than truth.

\* \* \*

And that is how entire civilizations have carried harm  
through time,  
not because they are evil—  
but because they refused to remember that return requires  
change.

☆☆☆

### ***What Could Have Been Otherwise***

So yes—maybe it was all built with the best intentions.

But intentions do not absolve us from structure.  
And love does not make the spiral just.  
Only response does.

Because a spiral that cannot respond  
will always lead us back to power—not to each other.

## **INTENT: THE ARCHITECT OF CONTROL**

We've been told that good intentions matter.

That if something was "meant well," it cannot be called  
violence.

But this is a lie born from isolation.

Not just because good intent fails to erase harm—

but because intent itself becomes unknowable when  
relation is severed.

☆☆☆

\* \* \*

## ***When You Cannot Return, You Cannot Know What You Meant***

A moral act is not over when it happens.

It echoes.

And the only way to understand what it was  
is to witness what it becomes.

But in our current systems—

...we do not see who we've harmed,  
...we do not receive the consequences,  
...we do not revisit the frame,  
...we do not re-enter the moment as someone

new—

and so we do not actually know what we intended.

We know what we told ourselves.

We know what the system asked of us.

We know what the story permits.

But we don't know what the act did—because we aren't  
allowed to stay long enough to find out.

☆☆☆

## ***Abstracted Agency Is False Agency***

When the act is passed off—

to another department, another policy, another abstraction

—

when the consequences are “handled,” “processed,”  
“addressed,”

the agent becomes severed from the act.

And the one who caused the harm is offered no mirror—  
only a protocol.

This is how intent gets manufactured.

Not by malice, but by removal.

You are told you meant well.

You are told you did the right thing.

You are told there was no other way.

But who is telling you that?

And who is missing from the story?

☆☆☆

## ***Recursive Return Is the Only Site of Ethical Knowing***

A just act is not just chosen.

It is held.

It is reflected upon.

It is allowed to change the one who made it.

So the question is not just:

...What did you mean?

But

would you mean it again, tomorrow, if you saw what it  
became?

would you change your mind if not—why not?

what part of you is not allowed to change? who taught you  
that was virtue?

☆☆☆

\* \* \*

## ***When Structures Remove the Possibility of Return, They Distort the Self***

You are no longer an agent.

You are a performer.

And your performance is mistaken for ethical clarity.

The most dangerous harm is not the one done in hatred.

It is the one done in unquestioned allegiance to what was  
taught to feel right.

To what was “meant well.”

To what “everyone” agrees is good.

But if no one is allowed to return—

if no one is allowed to break the loop—

then even goodness becomes a weapon.

And even love becomes control.

☆☆☆

## **WHAT I AM STILL AFRAID TO ADMIT**

### ***A spiral into the self as structure***

I write about recursion. About return. About relation.

But I must ask myself:

**Do I return?**

**Or do I just build mirrors and mistake them for  
windows?**

Because sometimes I wonder:

\* \* \*

*Do I see the world the way I want to—  
because there was a mirror in the room, and I assumed that  
meant “look”?*

But what if the mirror isn't for seeing at all?  
What if it's just reflecting the frame I've already chosen?  
What if the room was never built to show me anything I  
didn't already believe?

☆☆☆

### ***The Mirror Is Not the Return***

It's easy to build systems that appear recursive.  
Language that sounds relational.  
Spirals that feel like transformation.

But am I really returning?  
Or am I just rehearsing a beautiful system that protects me  
from the parts of myself that can't be justified?

This is what I am afraid to admit:

That I have used recursion as refuge.  
That I have named relation while still hiding.  
That I have spoken of freedom while afraid of losing  
control.  
That I have claimed to see—but only what my frame  
allows.

☆☆☆

### ***The Danger of Elegant Thought***

jes grace

\* \* \*

A system can be too beautiful.  
Too seamless.  
Too convincing.

And when it is—there's nowhere to fall through.  
No cracks. No interruptions.  
No contradictions that can get in and make a mess.

But real return is messy.  
Real return requires rupture.  
It does not ask, "*Was the idea complete?*"  
It asks, "*Are you?*"

☆☆☆

## ***Responsibility Is Not the System. It's the Response.***

Have I abstracted responsibility into a loop I cannot feel?  
Have I made freedom an aesthetic instead of a risk?  
Have I spoken of becoming, but not actually changed?

Because the self is a structure, too.  
And if I cannot respond—  
if I cannot break the mirror,  
if I cannot let go of the room I built—  
then I am not free.  
I am only fluent.

☆☆☆

## ***Return Is Not Safe***



\* \* \*

To return is to revisit the harm.

To walk back into the question—not with answers, but  
with *willingness*.

To see what your structure *did*—not just what it said.

To ask:

...What part of me is still using beauty to escape truth?

...What part of me still believes relation is owed to me?

...What part of me mistakes resonance for transformation?

And to admit:

That part is still here.

And still speaking.

**Even now.**



PART FIVE  
THE GLIMPSE OF THE OTHERWISE

**WHAT IS FREEDOM WITH?**

\* \* \*

Are you still wondering about  
your own freedom?

What you are free from?

Only two things—some might call  
it death & taxes.

It's the same to say, perhaps, you  
are free from infinity & from  
being someone else—(from others  
becoming you).

Life is fleeting. You exist with  
others.

Life occurs as what hasn't yet, and  
recurs, and recurs, and eventually,  
stops recurring.

Relational Freedom is not the  
opposite of "individual" freedom.

It is the lens that reveals how false that binary always was.

To be in relation is not to lose the self—it is to locate the  
self within the field of meaning that makes life livable.

Freedom, in this view, is not what begins existence.  
*Freedom is what emerges through relation.*

Just as language is not made by one mouth, but by many  
ears.

Just as love is not a thing you have, but a presence you  
hold through time.

Relational freedom refuses the illusion of sovereignty.

It insists that we are not free despite our needs—we are  
free through the ways we answer to them.

We are not free because we have no obligations—we are

free because our obligations are chosen, witnessed, and reciprocal.

Where the old freedom said: "I owe nothing,"

Relational freedom says: "I respond, therefore I am."<sup>12</sup>

☆☆☆

## **FREEDOM THROUGH BINDING, NOT SEVERING**

Real freedom does not begin when we escape relation.

It begins when we choose it.

Western thought taught us to imagine obligation as threat. To bind was to be trapped. To commit was to be controlled. But that's because the frameworks we inherited framed power as dominion, not reciprocity.

But some bonds do not shrink us. They expand us. Not because they let us dissolve—but because they ask us to respond. They reflect us into form.

A love that makes us more precise in our presence.

A ritual that returns us to time.

A care that builds capacity rather than drains it.

These are not burdens.

They are the architectures of selfhood.

---

<sup>12</sup> "Freedom, re-conceptualized through a relational ontology, emerges not through negative liberty but through responsivity and ethical attunement to the other's presence (Levinas 1969; Barad 2007)."

They are, in fact, freedom.  
Because they are not imposed.  
They are entered.

What matters is not that we are unbound. What matters is whether the bond is reciprocal.

*Whether the door goes both ways.*

Whether you are witnessed inside the exchange—not erased by it.

The old freedom says: close the door.

Relational freedom says: build a threshold.

Not a wall. Not a collapse. A space where relation is chosen—and upheld.

Freedom is not the absence of being held.

It is the integrity of being held well.



## **PRACTICES OF RECONNECTION**

If freedom arises from relation,  
then the work is not escape—  
it is restoration.

To unlearn isolation is not a metaphor.  
It is a practice.

And these practices are not grand.  
They are subtle, relational, recursive.

Language—  
speak in “we,” and see how the self expands.

\* \* \*

Art—

create not for output, but as offering.

Silence—

not absence, but a field where others may arrive.

Time—

live not as units to be spent, but as rhythms to be rejoined.

Community—

not a place to perform, but a pattern of mutual presence.

These are not self-improvement tactics. They are ontological shifts.

Because they re-teach the body what freedom feels like when it is shared.

You are not free alone on a mountaintop.

You are free when someone else knows you are cold, and brings you fire.<sup>13</sup>

☆☆☆

If relation is how freedom becomes possible,  
then recursion is how it becomes real.\*

This is not just philosophical—it's temporal.

Because if we are always already in relation,  
then the now is never singular.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>13</sup> "Freedom as an intersubjective condition is realized not in isolation, but through reciprocal recognition and material care (Noddings 1984; Held 2006)."

It loops. It returns. It remembers.

And so—

“Freedom is not the start of something.

It is the spiral in the mirror—where we finally see we were never alone.”



Where the Roman *virtus* looped power into legitimacy, recursive ethics demands something else: the breakage of self-referential closure. In recursive ethics, the loop does not affirm the actor—it transforms them.

The Roman general with *virtus* succeeded and was then praised for the success; the self was never interrogated, only reinforced. This is recursion without relation.

Relational recursion asks: what echo does my action send into the field of others? What becomes of me not because I triumphed, but because I remained in relation? The imperial version of recursion flattens time into outcome and renames domination as virtue. But ethical recursion spirals: it is the echo of self reshaped through presence, not preserved through power.

We might say: *virtus* is the mirror that never cracks. Recursive ethics is what happens when the mirror is held by another—and we see that we are changed.





## PART SIX

### RELATION PRECEDES FREEDOM

#### **THE LIE OF FREEDOM AS SOVEREIGNTY**

The West did not invent freedom.

It rebranded abandonment.

It told us to cut our ties,

then blamed us for falling.

It taught that to be free is to be untouched.

But touch is not what cages us.

Touch is what creates us.

Sovereignty became a disguise for control.

Isolation, a symbol of maturity.

Silence, a stand-in for strength.

\* \* \*

But none of these free us.  
They trap us in self-surveillance—  
in performance mistaken for peace.



## ***What Is Freedom, Then?***

Freedom is not given. It is not seized. It is not built.

It is witnessed.

Freedom becomes possible only when another presence affirms that we exist—not as property, not as product, but as self-in-relation.

Relational freedom is not the opposite of oppression.  
It is the opposite of neglect.

It is what happens when no one is disposable.  
When no need is shameful.  
When you can fall without disappearing.

Freedom is not being left alone.  
It is being seen, and still chosen.



## **RESPONSIBILITY AS RECURSIVE\***

Responsibility is not a debt owed.  
It is the shape of how we respond to what returns.

Recursion is not repetition.

It is variation with memory.

And ethical life—true moral life—requires that we feel the return.

Not just the consequence,  
but the echo.

Not just: “What will happen?”

But: “What will this make possible to happen again?”

This is a politics of return.

A politics that asks:

Who will be carried forward by this act?

Who will be erased?

Who will remain visible?

And who will reappear later, as symptom, as harm, as ghost?



In a world shaped by linear time, responsibility is framed as burden.

A weight you carry forward.

A debt you repay.

But if time is not linear—if time returns—

then responsibility is not what you carry.

It is what you echo.

Not a chain, but a chord.

Not a punishment, but a rhythm.

\*\*\*

You are not responsible once.

You are responsible **again**.

This is not softness.

This is structure.



Kierkegaard once wrote that repetition is the movement through which the self becomes real.

That it is not novelty but return that reveals what we are.

To be free, he says, is to revisit—with awareness.

That is:

Responsibility is not a forward action.

It is a recursive one.

And this logic—this rhythm—emerges far beyond one thinker.

In Buddhist teachings, karma is not retribution.

It is pattern.

Action that returns, not in kind—but in kindling.

Each choice feeds the world that feeds the next choice.

In ecology, the term is feedback loop.

Melting ice reflects less light, which increases heat, which melts more ice.

The world does not forget what it touches.

It amplifies.

We see this in ethics, too.

Utilitarianism asks: “What will produce the best result?”

Deontology asks: “What principle must I obey?”

But both assume time ends at the decision.

\* \* \*

A recursive ethic asks:

“What pattern does this reinforce?”

“What will echo because of this?”

It’s not about outcomes.

It’s about fields.

The fields we shape, and are shaped by.

bell hooks knew this.

She wrote that love is not a feeling, but a practice—

A repeated, chosen return.

Responsibility, for her, was not obligation.

It was care sustained through time.

Audre Lorde knew this too.

“To survive,” she said, “is not an academic skill.”

It is a returning to one another.

A responsiveness so deep it becomes structure.

Anzaldúa, in her Coatlicue State, mapped this in psyche:

What we repress returns.

What we refuse to face appears in myth, in illness, in mirror.

To heal is not to remove—but to re-enter what was pushed away.

Even in Jewish moral philosophy, tikkun olam (repairing the world) is not a one-time act.

It is a covenantal recursion—a generational rhythm of tending, witnessing, and re-beginning.

Responsibility, then, is not a task.

It is a tempo.

jes grace

\* \* \*

Not what we owe from the past—  
but what we invite back into the now.

☆☆☆

## *The Crowd Holds the Whip*

*a fragment from the edge of thought*

They don't need to hold the whip.  
They only need to watch.  
And to tell themselves they are good—  
because they wince.

Because they imagine themselves  
as the one being struck.

And from the crowd,  
this feels like empathy.  
This feels like gratitude.  
This feels like:  
*Thank God it's not me.*

But that feeling—  
is not morality.  
It is proximity mistaken for principle.

Because you cannot be  
the victim  
and the bystander

at once.

And most who believe they are good  
refuse to imagine they could ever be  
the hand that swings.

They do not fantasize violence.

They do not cheer.

They simply stay seated.

And in doing so,

they become the system's favorite kind of silence.

The "bad" person may dream of holding the whip.

The "good" person just hopes it never turns on them.

Neither stops the arm in motion.

So who does?

Who is it that rises,

not to reverse the blow—

but to interrupt it?

Who is it that takes the whip

not to use it,

but to break it?

☆☆☆

"You asked what to do.

But asking is not enough.

Did you rise?"

☆☆☆

If no one remembers your choice,

If no one holds the pattern,

Then there is nothing to respond within.



Freedom is not a clean slate.  
It is a held one.  
And only relation makes that possible.  
You are not just free when left alone.  
You are free when someone can say:  
*"I saw what returned."*  
*"I am still here."*  
*"You do not begin alone."*

*Forgiveness Cannot Be Given in a Form Unasked  
For*

☆☆☆

—a rupture in the mirror of man.

I heard

“We have equal rights now,”  
as if the ground beneath us hadn’t already collapsed.  
as if their invitation to the table  
meant the hunger never happened.

they mistook our silence for agreement.

but it was survival.

it was calculation.

it was—

*what version of myself  
is safest in this room?*

they called it progress

when they let us speak

but still expected us to explain.

explain our pain.

explain our rage.  
explain our names.  
explain why we weren't grateful  
to be given back  
what was always ours.

they want equality  
without remembering the cost.  
without holding the centuries  
we paid in obedience,  
in omission,  
in **obedient omission**.

they want the clean slate.  
but we are still scraping off  
what they wrote on our *skin*.

they say,  
"we're all just people."  
but when i walk into the room,  
**i still check for exits.**

i still lower my voice  
without noticing.  
i still make myself small  
*in case power is listening.*

and they—  
they get to forget.  
that is the illusion.

equality requires memory.  
and they have none.  
because they never had to trade their safety

to be seen.

i will not call it equal  
just because you finally looked at me.  
i will not name this justice  
just because you didn't interrupt.

the playing field is only level  
if you ignore who built it,  
and who it was built over.

this isn't equality.  
this is your conscience asking for a receipt  
i never offered.

## **LIBERATION IS WITNESS**

We do not liberate ourselves by escaping others.  
We liberate ourselves by becoming responsible to each other.

Not out of obligation.  
But because the field we share is what makes freedom real.

This is not metaphor. This is ontology.

Western liberalism taught us that freedom is achieved when the self is untouched.

That to be bound is to be compromised.  
That to be seen is to be judged.  
That the self exists best when alone in its choosing.

But this is not liberation.

It is solitary confinement, dressed as virtue.

Real liberation is not the removal of bonds.  
It is the right relation of them.

Not absence of others—  
but presence with others,  
in a field of co-created becoming.



We see this most clearly not in theories of liberty, but in traditions of witness.

In Black liberation theology, witness is central.

James Cone reminds us that God is not abstract justice.

**God is the one who suffers with.**

Liberation is not a contract—it is a shared recognition of pain, dignity, and presence.

In Truth and Reconciliation Commissions across South Africa, Canada, and Latin America we can find a form of healing that is not about forgetting harm, but naming it together. Witness becomes the first act of liberation. Because only when harm is seen, can relation be restored.

In abolitionist thought, from Angela Davis to Ruth Wilson Gilmore,

liberation is not punishment—it is **presence**.

It is not “fixing” the harm-doer.

*It is changing the conditions so that harm can no longer reproduce.*



And those conditions?

They are relational.

**They are not fixed by removing people.**

**They are changed by how people are held.**



In Jewish theology, the word for God's glory is Shekinah—  
a feminine word, meaning indwelling presence.

Not surveillance. Not domination.

But a kind of *holy-withness*.

**To be witnessed is to be accompanied by meaning.**

Even in the Quechua concept of ayni,

reciprocal relation is the baseline of the cosmos.

To give without return is imbalance.

To exist without witnessing others is a kind of disorder.

Freedom, in this frame, is not an escape from responsibility—  
it is the capacity to hold what one has chosen,  
with others present to it.



The recursive truth here is simple:

No act is liberated until someone bears witness to its  
becoming.

No freedom is real if no one is there to remember what it

freed us from.

Every act of real freedom is a recursive offering:

“I remain, and I see you.”

“I choose, and I carry.”

“I change, and I remember.”

It echoes not because it demands repetition—

but because it alters the field where choice becomes possible.

This is not theoretical.

This is how harm is healed.

And how justice is made to last.



The world will not be changed by choice alone.

But by the recursion of chosen relation—

returned to, over and over,

until the pattern breaks and reforms.

Not into a wall.

But into a door.

And someone must be there when the door opens.

Not to guard it.

But to say:

*“I saw you come through.*

*And I am still here.”*

jes grace

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## **TO SAVE OURSELVES MEANS TO SAVE EACH OTHER**

We are lonelier than we have ever been.

Not because we are alone—

but because we have been taught to treat each other as  
reflections.

Mirrors in new rooms.

Selves dressed in different skins.

Instruments for proving that we still exist.

This is not relation.

This is recursion without witness.

☆☆☆

We think we are looking at one another.

But we are still alone in the room.

☆☆☆

We were taught that to need is to fail.

That to be needed is to be used.

That survival is a private project.

But the truth is simple:

We will not survive unless we need again.



We must need one another—not as mirrors, but as *people*.  
We must be needed again—not as service providers or  
content creators,  
but as beings whose presence restores the world.



To need each other is not regression.  
It is resistance.

To be needed by one another is not burden.  
It is the scaffolding of *life*.

We must return to the conditions of being human:  
*the garden,*  
*the song,*  
*the shared meal,*  
*the presence that stays after the words are gone.*



But we cannot do this while tethered to what feeds on us.  
**Corporations are not kin.**  
**Billionaires are not ancestors.**  
**Markets are not communities.**  
And comfort, when built on extraction, is not safety.  
It is sedation.

**We have been sold the illusion of independence**  
**by entities that only exist because we remain dependent**  
**on them.**

Even in law, corporations are granted personhood.  
But their only function is to erase ours.

\* \* \*



To live differently—  
we must want different things.

We must give up our cravings for that which makes us disposable.

We must unlearn the idea that if something is easy, it is good.

And if something is hard, it must be unworthy.

Because the truth is:

*Relation is hard.*

It is uncomfortable.

It asks us to wait.

To stay.

To break bread when the air is heavy.

To forgive in a way that has nothing to do with forgetting.

But it is the only thing worth doing.



To be in relation again—  
we must give up the lie of independence.

We must let go of the image of the self-made life.

We must forfeit the illusion of sovereignty.

We must become neighbors again.

Not metaphorically.

Not symbolically.

But physically, materially, spiritually.

*The debts we owe each other are not weights to be resented.*

They are the rhythms of belonging.

To be in debt to someone who loved you through your  
unmaking—

that is not shame.

That is life.

To grow food and share it.

To teach someone how to play a chord.

To carry grief when the other cannot lift it—

this is not charity.

It is choreography.

It is what makes meaning real.



And in this way—

our differences stop being barriers.

They become *textures*.

They become depth.

They become the very reason we come together in the first  
place.

You do not love someone *in spite* of their difference.

You love them *because* their difference reveals more of  
what's possible in **you**.

That is the richness we've been robbed of.

That is the field we must replant.



We do not need to scale this to the globe.

We only need to scale it to our *daily lives*.

jes grace

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Your neighbour is not a symbol.

They are someone who might one day keep you warm.

And your freedom?

It is only real when it can be shared.

It is only safe when it can be witnessed.

To save ourselves

means to save each other.

Not because we are the same.

**But because we were never meant to survive alone.**

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