

THE ROOM AND THE MIRROR

jes grace

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

THE ROOM

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 nowhere to go—its 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.

When she whispered, “Is anyone there?”
the mirror replied, “You're doing amazing.”

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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.¹

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
watching a younger her

¹ “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).”

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.

jes grace

* * *

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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PART TWO

I. THE DESIGN OF DISCONNECTION & LIE OF THE ISOLATED SELF

FREEDOM AS SEPARATION

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.

* * *

² “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).”

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

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

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.

* * *

THE TROLLEY PROBLEM AND THE FRAME OF POWER

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 (Foucault 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 (Foucault 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 (Rabinow 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 (Kierkegaard 1980).

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

* * *

And Haraway reminds us: “It matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 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 “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.³

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.

³ “Many analytic moral frameworks rely on artificial simulations that obscure structural authorship and serve more as epistemological performances than ethical inquiries (Baudrillard 1981; Zuboff 2019).”

* * *

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.

PART THREE

II. THE ORIGIN OF THE ISOLATED SELF

THE BIRTH OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL

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.⁴

⁴ "Colonial linguistic regimes functioned as performative instruments of imperial control, enforcing epistemic hegemony via grammar, syntax, and sanctioned semiotic systems (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2000)."

* * *

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 of the mother.

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.

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

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.

And in Rome, this logic hardened.

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, virtue 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 virtue 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, virtue became the ethical alibi of domination.

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

And this origin ripples. The Roman ideal of virtue 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 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

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.⁵

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

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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

⁵ “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).”

away.

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.

THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY AND SELF-MADE IDENTITY

The Myth of Meritocracy and Self-Made Identity

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(it 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.

LANGUAGE AS STRUCTURE: ISOLATED MEANING AND THE WESTERN SELF

Language as Structure: Isolated Meaning and

the Western Self

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.

“Making It” as Mythic Arc

Western culture narrativizes success like a hero’s journey: leave the village, face hardship alone, return with treasure. But this arc requires isolation to be framed as transformation. It teaches us that greatness requires rupture—not relation.

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.

Tech Billionaires as Saints

Today’s “self-made” icons are recast as visionaries. Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Oprah—framed as proof that anyone can rise. But these stories strip away context: inherited wealth, teams, market conditions, systemic erasure of others who never “rose.”

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.



examples that might be more tangible for some

A student from a wealthy suburb gets a scholarship, becomes a startup founder. She says: “Anyone can do it.” But she doesn’t mention the unpaid internships she could afford, the emotional stability of a safe home, the soft cushion of parental fallback.

A job listing demands “5 years experience” for entry-level pay. When challenged, the company says, “We just want the best.” As if opportunity is randomly distributed—and not structurally hoarded.

A wellness influencer tells followers to “manifest abundance” while selling \$2,000 coaching packages. The rhetoric of self-making becomes a tool of extraction.



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.

☆ *the climate*



the climate

Climate collapse is the most urgent evidence that the isolated self cannot hold. The world was treated as background. Resources as infinite. Land as empty. Futures as inherited by default. But the earth is not separate from us. And it is not forgiving the fiction.

Western industrial progress—justified by private ownership and severed relation—has destabilized planetary systems that once made life possible. The atmosphere now holds the residue of decisions made in boardrooms, centuries ago. And still, individuals are asked to recycle, to go vegan, to carry the guilt of what corporate design has scripted.

* * *

Individualism breaks down in the face of rising seas.

.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.

☆ *the psyche*



the psyche

The same logic that extracted from the land, extracted from the soul. If you must be whole alone, then any need is weakness. Any sadness is pathology. Any interdependence is failure.

But the psyche was not built for isolation.

It begins in relation: the infant and the gaze; the speaker and the listener; the self and the other.

Western mental health crises are not just chemical or circumstantial.

* * *

They are structural.

They are the echo of a system that cuts every thread, then blames the thread for unraveling.

An epidemic of anxiety, depression, and disconnection cannot be healed by mindfulness apps or productivity hacks.

It demands the restoration of a world in which one can belong.

But even our pain is misnamed.

In English, we are taught to second-guess harm itself:

“By whose standard is that wrong?”

These aren’t honest questions.

They’re linguistic distractions.

English often doesn’t clarify morality.

It dissolves it—into abstraction, into detachment, into grammar that floats.

We confuse moral complexity with moral impossibility.

We mistake ambiguity for depth.

But sometimes harm is clear—only the sentence is not.

The psyche can feel what the sentence erases.

* * *

And that erasure becomes part of the trauma.

Not just what happened—

but the inability to name what happened without linguistic
doubt clouding the air.

We are not just harmed.

We are trained not to believe ourselves.

☆ *the community*



the community

What happens when community becomes optional?

When connection is marketed as a service?

When help is monetized, and care is professionalized out of the everyday?

The myth of independence has hollowed out the commons.

Public spaces shrink.

Elders die in private.

jes grace

* * *

Friendships compete with side hustles.

Rest becomes luxury.

Touch becomes taboo.

And mutual aid is framed as charity.

Even grief—once communal—is now a private burden.

We are expected to mourn on our own time.

To move on efficiently.

But no community can survive this erosion.

Not the climate.

Not the psyche.

Not the soul.

PART FOUR

III. THE GLIMPSE OF THE OTHERWISE

WHAT IS FREEDOM WITH?

What Is Freedom With?

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.

It 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.”⁶

FREEDOM THROUGH BINDING, NOT SEVERING

Freedom Through Binding, Not Severing

Real freedom does not begin when we escape relation.
It begins when we choose it.

⁶ “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).”

* * *

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.

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

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.⁷

☆☆☆

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.

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.”

☆☆☆

⁷ “Freedom as an intersubjective condition is realized not in isolation, but through reciprocal recognition and material care (Noddings 1984; Held 2006).”

* * *

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.

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PART FIVE

IV. RELATION PRECEDES FREEDOM

THE LIE OF FREEDOM AS SOVEREIGNTY

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 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.

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

☆☆☆

The Crowd Holds the Whip

The Crowd & 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?"



And this is why freedom cannot exist without witness.
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."

LIBERATION IS WITNESS

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.”



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*.

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.



PART SIX

V. THE SPIRAL OF BECOMING

RECURSION IS NOT A METAPHOR.

Recursion Is Not a Metaphor.

It's a structure.

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.

8

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?

* * *

⁸ “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 no decision is ever final?

What if every act
echoes?

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



THE PROBLEM ISN'T IN THE OUTCOME.

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.⁹

So when we try to fix what we see—
without seeing how what we see is protecting what we
don't—
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.

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.

⁹ “Sociopolitical systems often stabilize themselves by metabolizing symptomatic breakdowns into normative functions, thus reifying dysfunction as institutional logic (Foucault 1977; Ahmed 2012).”

* * *

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:

- Will you see the tracks again tomorrow?
- Will you carry what you chose in your chest for years?
- Will you still believe it was right when your own child is the one tied down?
- Will you look away next time? Or look

closer?

- Will you 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?
- What 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?"

It's:

"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.

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?”

☆☆☆

RECURSION IS HOW TIME BEARS WITNESS

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.¹⁰

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

¹⁰ “Subjectivity is not temporally fixed but constituted through recursive intra-actions across layered temporalities (Barad 2007; Butler 2005).”

jes grace

* * *

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.

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

✧ ◆ ✧

WHEN THOUGHT BECOMES THE LAST THING LEFT

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.
