

The Epigenesis of the Self

How the present chooses the future, and why no one is immune from anyone else

Narrative essay on science, philosophy and civil ethics

Copyright Ghezzi Charlye -2026

The Epigenesis of the Self

How the present chooses the future,
and why no one is immune from anyone else

"Don't automatically sign the past"

"A present that does not demand absolution"

Narrative essay on science, philosophy and civil ethics

Copyright Ghezzi Charlye -2026

To the reader

This book begins with a question about talent and leads to a question about responsibility. Between the two lies a person: a living body, an ongoing story, a capacity for action that is not the same in every circumstance. The name Self will serve to interrogate this unity, without transforming it into an entity separate from the processes that make it possible.

Science will be part of the argument, with its own strengths and limitations. Measured results will be distinguished from philosophical interpretations; images will remain images. Epigenesis, in the sense proposed by the book, is not the same as molecular epigenetics. Using the same family of words does not justify transferring biological evidence to a thesis on freedom.

The everyday scenes not attributed to individuals or documents are imagined situations to focus on a question. They are not clinical cases and do not replace research. The historical events, however, are based on identifiable sources. None of Mozart's private conversations will be invented and presented as testimony.

The journey doesn't promise to erase the past or prove that anyone can become anything. It seeks to understand what margins exist, what they depend on, and how our way of interacting with others can broaden or narrow them. The resulting responsibility must be proportionate to each individual's actual capabilities and power.

The path of the book

Prologue — The question that found no way out

Movement I — The third term

1. Why Mozart, and not someone else?
2. Gemini, and the rest that doesn't add up
3. Self: the unit that children indicate as whole

Movement II — The Self that chooses

4. The names of freedom
5. The past of “shit”
6. Automatic and conscious

Movement III — No One is Immune

7. The spider web
8. The truth that splits in two
9. The power of determining the good

Movement IV — Directing the good

10. The children
11. Social media, and the state in which others listen to us
12. Towards good, without innocence

Epilogue — The Look That Hasn't Yet Signed

Appendices — Living Glossary; Dispute Map; A Page for Educators; Note to the Scientific Reader.

Prologue

The question that found no way out

The same score can be placed before two children. The notes are the same, the keyboard is the same; neither has yet uttered the word genius. One finds something the other doesn't, or finds it first, or continues searching after the other has already stood up. Years later, we know the name of only one, and it seems to us as if it had been written from the beginning: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The name, having reached the end, comes back and occupies the stage. Now every childish hesitation must announce the composer; every gesture of the father must have contributed to producing it. This is how a life, once complete, begins to lie about its origins.

It's worth looking at an object that precedes the monument. A keyboard notebook, begun in 1759 for Maria Anna Mozart, known as Nannerl. The Mozarteum Foundation catalog preserves it among the history of works: among the pages intended for his sister's lessons, Leopold jotted down some of Wolfgang's first compositions. Before the child could write them himself, someone was writing them for him. The manuscript doesn't convey his state of mind. It does, however, convey a material relationship: an adult, a child, a lesson, the possibility of capturing on paper what would otherwise have passed into thin air.

We don't know whose gaze accompanied each note. We don't have a record of the scoldings, the laughter, the exhaustion of each lesson. We can imagine a child approaching the instrument while someone else plays, but we have to call it imagination. The notebook is a document; the child we bring into it with a scene is a reconstruction. There's a distance between the two that this book won't try to hide. That distance itself makes the question interesting: what was happening, in the person learning, as music became something they could do?

The first answer is talent. This isn't a silly answer. Biological differences exist; no amount of respect for education allows us to erase them. The second answer is environment: in that home there were tools, skills, and opportunities that were lacking elsewhere. This answer, too, is serious. But when we connect them with a simple plus sign, have we already explained Mozart? Or have we named two conditions, leaving the understanding of the work that a lifetime went into transforming them into a trajectory?

Saying "the same possible ear" doesn't mean that two children possess identical hearing abilities. It means granting both of them, before the outcome, a possibility we don't yet know. Mozart's ear isn't a sample preserved in a laboratory; his genome doesn't provide us with an answer to the question. A biography can demonstrate precocity and education. It can't retroactively measure the contribution of each biological mechanism to a single musical invention. Fame doesn't work like a blood test.

Nannerl makes the question more awkward. In the same family, there was another musician, a little girl who studied and performed. Her presence prevents us from reducing the Mozart family to a machine built for a single purpose. There's no need to attribute to her works we don't have, nor imagine that, without obstacles, she would have become her brother. It's enough to recognize that even the word "possibility" encompasses the social conditions in which a person can continue to exercise it. A skill and a career are not the same thing.

So far, we may only have a historical problem. We lack information; with better archives, perhaps, we would see more. But the question persists even when the comparison seems prepared by nature itself. Two identical twins: a largely common genetic origin, two bodies just beginning to live. We call them identical. The adjective shifts from everyday language to our expectation, and from expectation to a small injustice: if they are identical, why don't they desire the same things? Why does one endure what the other fears?

Let's imagine them at the table, in an ordinary scene that doesn't involve a carefully studied couple. An adult explains that one of them has always been the brave one. The other listens. Perhaps he protests; perhaps he smiles because he already knows the role he's been assigned. The story isn't enough to explain who they will become. But from that moment on, it's no longer just an external description: it's also an experience that each receives from a different perspective. The same sentence has two audiences and two possible consequences.

Even the same home isn't an identical environment for everyone who lives there. Being the child called brave and being the one called shy means finding yourself in different relationships. Not everything, of course, stems from the words of adults. Prenatal events, encounters, illnesses, developmental variations matter; what matters is what no one planned. We can't turn every difference into a choice, much less a fault. The singularity of a life also includes events without an author.

In 2005, Mario Fraga and his collaborators studied differences in DNA methylation and histone acetylation in monozygotic twins. These processes participate in the regulation of gene activity: they involve, respectively, chemical modifications of DNA and the proteins around which it is organized. They observed more marked differences in older couples than in younger ones. The results did not reveal the fate of each couple, nor did they prove that a biographical divergence had a single cause. It did show that a strong similarity in genetic sequence does not imply the sameness of all the regulatory states studied. Furthermore, the tissues examined did not allow for direct reading of the participants' thoughts.

This is a significant limitation. If we forgot it, we could replace the old destiny of genes with a new destiny of their chemical modifications. We would have changed the vocabulary, leaving haste intact. There would no longer be the genius gene, but a molecular signature responsible for explaining genius; no longer a life to be understood, but a lock to which someone promises the key. Research progresses precisely because it lacks a universal key. We can follow it without asking it to sell what it hasn't found.

Even the word heritability requires patience. The comprehensive synthesis by Tinca Polderman and colleagues, published in 2015, compiled fifty years of twin studies and showed the widespread contribution of genetic differences to the traits examined. But an estimate of heritability concerns the variability in a population, under the conditions considered. It does not divide a person into an innate and an acquired percentage. From that number, we cannot deduce how much of a decision was due to genes, nor what future is precluded for the person making it.

So, there's still something to explain. But we need to formulate that remainder clearly. It's not some secret substance that has escaped biology. It's not proof that genes and environment are, in principle, incapable of explaining development. The most careful scientific models already study interactions, timing, feedback, and random events. What leaves us unsatisfied is their additive caricature: on one side, endowment, on the other, exposure, and in the middle, an

individual who receives. What's missing is the question of how that receiving occurs and how it modifies the recipient.

Let's return to a closer room. One person is reading these pages; another might hear them in his own voice. The words are the same. The first has been asleep, the second is waiting for a phone call that might trigger something we don't know. A phrase about freedom can spark curiosity or sound like an accusation. If we say that everyone can choose, the exhausted might feel reproached for not being able to. The text doesn't change; the encounter changes. We are already immersed in the problem we want to discuss.

The reader isn't just the recipient of content. He sits in a certain position, holds back an urge, recognizes a word because he heard it from someone years ago. This doesn't mean that every interpretation is valid, or that a fact ceases to be true when it's not pleasing. It means that understanding a proposition and being able to incorporate it into one's life are different operations. A correct explanation can arrive at the wrong time. Correctness remains necessary; by itself, it doesn't describe everything that explanation will do.

At this point, we need a name for the reader. Person is fine, but it brings with it legal and moral issues we must respect. I seems straightforward, yet it tends to make us imagine a small center separate from the body, someone who issues orders and then observes the consequences. We'll also use Self: the self, understood here as the living organization of body, experience, and personal continuity. It's a working definition, not the name of an organ. There isn't, behind our eyes, a second reader reading for us.

We can stage a misunderstanding: someone pronounces "Self," and the listener understands "selphie," a photograph of themselves with a misplaced letter. The joke is amusing because our image has become so readily available that it seems like an answer to the question of who we are. This scene doesn't claim to document the first historical instance in which the word was misunderstood. It's a narrative threshold. A photographed face can be recognized; the person who tries to recognize themselves in that face remains to be understood.

Let's consider a child who says "I-me" and points to himself. This too is a possible scenario, not a law of linguistic development. The gesture interests us because it doesn't carefully separate the body from its occupant. The child isn't advocating a theory of mind; he's asking us to look at him. We adults can divide what he points to into sensations, memories, movements, functions. This division helps us study. It becomes a mistake when we forget that those functions operate within an organism, within a situation.

It doesn't follow that science has found a single explanation of the self. Different theories exist; the continuity of experience and self-awareness remain open questions. The unity of body and mind will be the perspective of this book, argued and debated, not a proclaimed consensus. The child's gesture can make it visible; it cannot prove it. It helps us ask a question that photography left out: who is this whole that feels, remembers, and acts, when no single part of it is sufficient to represent it?

The strongest objection comes here. We've talked about organisms, history, and interpretation; perhaps we're just distributing new names over known causes. If a response depends on the body's structure and what happened to it, why call it choice? A thermostat responds to temperature without being free. A complex machine can modify its behavior without becoming a subject. Unpredictability does not demonstrate free will. Nor does a random event: being governed by chance is not the same as governing oneself.

The objection deserves to remain. We won't overcome it by showing two different twins, and Mozart won't be called upon to resolve it by composing. The problem of metaphysical freedom doesn't disappear when we better describe biology. We can, however, investigate more specific differences: between acting under duress and being able to deliberate, between repeating a response and being able to modify it, between being alone in the face of a threat and having someone to evaluate it with. These are differences that matter in life, even when their ultimate basis remains disputed.

We are interested in this margin, without declaring it unlimited. The present is not a clean room into which a judge independent of the past enters. Those who decide are already tired or alert, already trained to recognize certain dangers, already capable of some words and incapable of others. It's not enough to command them to be free. If we seek a possibility of change, we must ask ourselves what conditions make it feasible. Margin has a cost, and that cost is not the same for everyone.

Someone might interrupt us here: you talk about conditions because you have time to do so. Those who live in fear don't wait for a theory to grant them a future. This is a fair criticism of any discourse that mistakes possibility for immediate duty. A shitty past doesn't become a resource because a page says so. Suffering violence isn't a necessary apprenticeship, and no one should thank those who inflicted it. Before asking someone to change their response, we may have to help change what they are responding to.

We won't promise that memory will disappear. We will ask ourselves if, and under what conditions, it ceases to be the sole criterion for predicting what will happen. This will be a research question and a civic issue, not a therapeutic formula. A safe home, an income, and accessible care aren't just backgrounds added after inner work. They can be conditions for that work to take place. Freedom described only from within risks becoming a privilege that ignores its own origins.

Responsibility changes accordingly. If not everyone has the same leeway, we cannot apportion blame equally by looking only at the outcome. We must consider capacity, coercion, knowledge, and available alternatives. And if a word or an encounter can contribute to the conditions in which someone will act, our responsibility does not necessarily end when we have expressed a good intention. It is an ethical proposition that we must defend with reason. We will not deduce it from a molecule, as if the laboratory could order good.

Think of a teacher faced with a blank test. That sheet of paper doesn't explain the student by itself. There could be disinterest, an unrecognized difficulty, a sleepless night; we can be wrong about all these hypotheses. The teacher doesn't have to guess the entire life to practice his or her profession. He or she can ask before pronouncing an identity: "What happened?" instead of "You are like this." The second statement transforms a performance into a person. The first leaves open an investigation, and by no means precludes the rigor of evaluation.

Or two adults in the kitchen, after an offense. The one who hurt them wants to explain that he didn't mean it. Those who listened still hear the words. It's not necessary to argue that their encounter alters a biological marker to recognize the moral problem. Intention doesn't exhaust the action, and reparation doesn't consist in demanding that the other forget it. It can begin with a precise acknowledgment, without immediately seeking absolution. What happens next is in the hands of both, to varying degrees, and is not guaranteed.

These examples do not anticipate a universal solution. A teacher can ask for and receive silence; reparation may come too late. The relationship does not grant omnipotence. Rather, it forces us to recognize a limited, unequally distributed influence. Those in authority, those who care, those who speak to a child possess different possibilities than those who depend on that word. Saying that no one is immune from anyone else will be our way of questioning this exposition, not of asserting that every encounter produces a measurable change.

The book will therefore follow a discipline. When research has measured something, we will state what, in whom, and within what relevant limits. When we propose an interpretation, we will not disguise it as an experimental result. When we use an image, we will leave its imagery visible. Even the present, as a point at which a life's trajectory changes, is a representation: useful, perhaps, but incapable of telling us by itself what process has changed. Clarity of words is no substitute for precision of evidence.

We've arrived at the word that lends its title to these pages: epigenesis. It has a history in reflections on the development of organisms; here we will also give it a declared philosophical meaning, without confusing it with molecular epigenetics. In the sense this book will construct, epigenesis is the way in which the body-mind unity, in the present and based on what has been, contributes to the being of one of the things that could have been. "It contributes" preserves the limit: not everything is a choice, not everything depends on us.

The definition doesn't yet solve the problem that requires it. That verb can describe unconscious processes and deliberate actions; we must distinguish them. It can suggest that the possibilities were already laid out before a subject, like scores on a table; often they aren't. We must also understand how a possibility becomes perceptible. And we can't call a change molecular just because it's profound, nor an act free just because we couldn't foresee it. A new word is only as valuable as the distinctions it allows.

Mozart remains before us. We have not extracted from his works a demonstration of freedom, nor found in his notebook the secret of talent. We have recognized a life that cannot be reduced without residue to an initial label. Now the question concerns those who will not become Mozart, and yet live a lesser history. When we speak to him, will we be able to leave open what we still don't know about him?

Sources of the prologue

International Mozarteum Foundation, Köchel digital catalog, entry: Music book for Maria Anna (Nannerl) Mozart. 1759. Source for the notebook and for the presence of Wolfgang's early compositions transcribed by Leopold. The scholarly edition listed in the entry is the one edited by Wolfgang Plath in 1982. https://kv.mozarteum.at/en/work/music-book-for-maria-anna-nannerl-mozart-1759-9699

International Mozarteum Foundation, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, section dedicated to Maria Anna Mozart. Biographical source for Nannerl's musical education and performances. https://mozarteum.at/en/wolfgang-amade-mozart

Fraga, M.F., and collaborators. 2005. Epigenetic differences arise during the lifetime of monozygotic twins. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 102(30), 10604–10609. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.0500398102. Molecular study: does not demonstrate freedom, does not directly measure subjective experience, and does not assign a single cause to biographical differences. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0500398102

Polderman, T. J. C., and colleagues. 2015. Meta-analysis of the heritability of human traits based on fifty years of twin studies. Nature Genetics, 47, 702–709. DOI: 10.1038/ng.3285. Quantitative summary of the traits studied: estimates concern variance in the populations considered, not percentages constituting a single person. https://doi.org/10.1038/ng.3285

Movement I — The third term



1. Why Mozart, and not someone else?

London, 1764. Wolfgang is eight years old. His father is ill. A notebook contains short keyboard pieces, attempts, and still-young forms. The Köchel catalogue of the Mozarteum Foundation lists forty-two of them under the title of the London notebook. We don't need to have the child utter a memorable sentence. We can stand before those pages and recognize the simplest fact: someone who is learning has begun to leave a trace of their work. The person who taught him is present in his story; at that moment, however, he cannot be reduced to the function of a tireless teacher. It is also a body that falls ill, interrupting something in the life of the family.

We look at a notebook as we look at a job before knowing its value. A page isn't yet a career. The fact that it has been preserved pushes us to forget it: what we read today has passed through a future that has selected, preserved, and catalogued it. Other exercises have been lost; other children have written things that no one deemed necessary to preserve. The archive delivers to us a survival, not the entire population of possibilities. If we seek the origins of talent only in childhoods that have become famous, we risk attributing to every detail we find there.

His father's illness raises a question that celebrations of precociousness tend to overlook. How does one continue when the context in which one learned changes? Once given the tools, what allows a child to use them in a different circumstance? We don't know how worried Wolfgang was, nor what relationship he had, on each of those days, with his work. To attribute serenity, rebellion, or consolation to him would be a fiction. The document allows for a more sober observation: the education received and the activity the child engages in do not perfectly coincide. There is a transition between teaching and the page that we still need to understand.

To approach this, we can think of a contemporary, explicitly imagined scene. A little girl studies a sequence on the piano. She's played it poorly four times. On the fifth, her hand catches up where it was previously missing. The listener might simply notice an improvement; she might have discovered a relationship between movement and sound. Or she might simply have learned to avoid the reprimand that comes after the mistake. The same sequence of keys allows for different experiences. From the outside, we see the result. To understand what is becoming stable, we must also investigate how that result is produced and experienced.

The next day, the performance worsens. The father thinks the girl isn't trying; the teacher suspects the exercise was too difficult. They may or may not be right. The girl hasn't slept much, or she's afraid of making a mistake in front of someone, or she's trying to find a solution she hadn't attempted before. The scene doesn't allow us to choose an explanation without evidence. Instead, it shows us how easy it is to transform the measurement of a performance into a judgment of the subject. When we say "she has talent," we think we're describing something underlying the behavior. Sometimes we're simply naming the behavior we appreciated that day.

In the London notebook, this problem becomes visible because we know what happens next. We would like to distinguish, within a child's exercise, what belongs to Mozart already from what belongs to his apprenticeship. But the adult Mozart is not hidden on the page like a figure under a veil. He still has to encounter other music, work, change ideas, navigate

conditions that the notebook doesn't contain. His extraordinary precocity is a fact of his formation; it doesn't give us the right to treat all the subsequent years as a formality.

This is what the question "Why Mozart, and not someone else?" brings into play. It doesn't just ask us why some people are better. It asks us why a life takes that form, among the forms that could have emerged, and how much of its singularity we can truly explain. An exceptional child doesn't free us from this question: it makes it more clear. Precisely where the difference seems enormous, we are tempted to offer a small, definitive explanation. A gift. A father. A number of hours. For each answer, we can find a real element; the question remains whether we are attributing more to that element than it can sustain.

A trajectory is not a sum

Genius takes shape along a trajectory in which predispositions, opportunities, and repeated activities make certain possibilities viable. This formulation, however, needs to be corrected: it doesn't explain exceptionality by itself, it doesn't assign a certain weight to each factor, and it doesn't transform every developmental stage into a conscious choice.

The second sentence prevents the first from becoming a new fable. We can study the processes involved in the formation of a skill without claiming to completely reconstruct the origins of a masterpiece. Indeed, technical skill, the originality of a work, and the historical recognition of its author are distinct issues. They require different proofs. An auditory test can measure discrimination; a musical analysis can describe a formal solution; history can investigate how that work met with audiences, institutions, and other artists. None of these investigations automatically encompasses the others.

For this reason, the third term will not be an added ingredient to the list. In the philosophical sense adopted by the book, epigenesis refers to the process of becoming of a situated organism: how its state, its history, and its encounters contribute to what happens next. We do not propose a biological variable called Self, capable of statistically explaining everything that genes and environment leave out. We propose observing their operation over time, in a subject that changes even as it learns. When we discuss molecular epigenetics, we will change levels and explain which mechanisms have been measured.

This distinction is also useful for Mozart. We have no data on his epigenetic markers. To call him the perfect example of an epigenetic interaction would be to attribute a measurement to him that was never performed. We can consider him a historical case that raises the urgent question of development; we can discuss his musical formation; we can compare the questions his story raises with research conducted on living individuals. We cannot make that research a posthumous examination of his childhood. Respect for singularity begins by acknowledging what we don't know about that singularity.

The lottery and what a number measures

The genetic component of cognitive traits isn't a concession to opponents of education. It's part of the evidence base that a serious theory must address. The 2015 meta-analysis by Tinca Polderman and colleagues, already discussed in the prologue, pooled data on 17,804 traits and 2,748 publications. Its interest here is methodological: a genetic contribution to variability is well documented, but what we can infer from it changes when we move from comparing individuals to a person's history. The question "Why do they differ?" and the question "How did this individual develop?" touch on each other without being interchangeable.

Consider a field cultivated under very uniform conditions. If differences in water and light are small, a greater portion of the observed differences between plants may be associated with their genetic differences. This does not make water irrelevant. It is an example to understand a property of estimates, not an agronomic test we are introducing in the chapter. A portion of variance also depends on how much the conditions of the population studied vary. It is not the degree of immobility of an organism, nor a percentage of its essence.

There are other limitations. In classical twin models, separating genetic and environmental components requires assumptions, including those regarding the comparability of the relevant environments of monozygotic and dizygotic pairs. Different assumptions, different measures, and different samples can change the estimates. Heritability alone does not identify the genes involved, does not describe every interaction, and does not guarantee that the outcome will be transferred intact to another society. Recognizing these limitations does not negate the genetic contribution. It allows us to avoid asking an estimate to do the work of a biography.

The genotype also plays a role in what appears to come only from the outside. A child interested in sounds may seek out musical activities; his responses may prompt an adult to offer him other opportunities. A family transmits biological characteristics and creates learning conditions, with effects that may be correlated. Sandra Scarr and Kathleen McCartney, in 1983, proposed a theory of development that distinguishes passive, evocative, and active correlations between genes and environment. These categories do not divide life into compartments: they help describe why the environment encountered is not always independent of the characteristics of the person encountering it.

"Self-managed," therefore, does not equate to "without causes." If I choose books that interest me, I am engaging in an activity; my interests still have a history. If a teacher notices my ease and devotes more time to me, I receive a resource; the distribution of that resource may have responded to an existing difference. This is where the issue of merit becomes complicated. Performance can incorporate both what a subject has done and what their previous performance has provided. Initial success can impact subsequent opportunities, making it more difficult to separate their contributions.

In 1987, Robert Plomin and Denise Daniels brought the non-shared environment to the forefront of the discussion: influences that contribute to making children raised in the same family different. In the statistical model, however, the non-shared component also includes measurement error and other contributions not captured by the other components considered. It's not a folder where the decisive teacher, the insult, and the friendship are already filed away, one by one. Just because a component of variance is estimable doesn't mean every concrete cause has been identified. This point will be crucial when we meet twins in the next chapter.

We should therefore not read the unshared portion as a certificate of personal freedom. A difference may depend on an event no one chose, a developmental variation, or an imprecise measurement. The subject does not arise by subtraction, replacing causes we cannot yet name. The book's epigenesis does not reside in the gaps of explanation. It concerns the question of how, within explainable and yet-to-be-explained processes, a story is continued by an organism capable, under certain conditions, of even intervening in its own activity.

Hours are not all the same experience

Practice has an advantage over the word "talent": you can at least try to count it. But that advantage becomes a trap when counting is mistaken for a complete explanation. An hour includes mistakes, corrections, attention, boredom, strategies, and pauses. It can consolidate an effective way of proceeding or make a mistake more automatic. Two people who report the same amount of practice time haven't necessarily done the same work. And their willingness to do it may have been influenced by ability, enjoyment, expectations, and access to appropriate teaching.

In 2014, Brooke Macnamara, David Hambrick, and Frederick Oswald published a meta-analysis on the relationship between deliberate practice and performance in various fields. For music, they estimated that practice explained approximately 21 percent of the variance in performance. This does not mean that the remaining 79 percent is genetic, nor that each musician owes 21 percent of their performance to practice hours. It does mean that, in the included data and with those definitions, practice did not account for the observed differences. If we change the measurement or sample, we cannot automatically expect the same amount.

In the same year, another meta-analysis by Friedrich Platz and colleagues highlighted a stronger association between deliberate practice and musical achievement. The dispute also concerns which studies to include, how to define practice, and how to address the unreliability of the measures. There's no need to choose a single number as the guiding principle. The consensus is that the quality and duration of practice matter; the controversial issue is how much of the differences they can explain, and with what causal inference. This chapter won't assign the task of resolving this issue to the most convenient percentage.

A more provocative result came from a 2014 study by Miriam Mosing and colleagues on approximately 10,500 Swedish twins. Reported practice was associated with performance on tasks of rhythm, melody, and pitch discrimination. Within identical pairs discordant in terms of amount of practice, however, no similar association was found. The authors interpreted the result as indicating significant genetic confounding. The title of the article advanced a very clear causal conclusion; the actual measurement remained limited to those skills and that observational design, with practice reconstructed retrospectively.

We can't transfer the result to the performance of a sonata or the invention of a work. That would be a leap from auditory discrimination to full-blown musical competence. Nor can we ignore it, because it undermines the comforting idea that practice is enough. It teaches us to distinguish at least two directions: practice can improve a performance; a predisposition can make someone more likely to practice. An association between practice and ability, by itself, doesn't tell us how much each direction depends on. The history of talent must also be studied when talent seeks an environment.

We can see the problem in the little girl imagined at the beginning. If she returns to the instrument because a successful sequence gave her pleasure, yesterday's result contributes to today's motivation. If someone offers her a slightly more difficult problem, it changes what she can learn. If she makes a mistake and receives an understandable correction, the error can become information. We don't know whether these steps will produce an exceptional artist. We can, however, analyze their order: each moment receives conditions from the previous one and creates them for the next. Counting the hours without observing this work leaves out part of the question.

Micro-choice is the interpretive name we'll give to some of the steps in this activity: trying again, changing strategy, listening to a correction, interrupting a fruitless repetition. It doesn't imply a completely lucid individual controlling every movement. Much learning occurs without deliberation; sometimes change precedes the ability to explain it. Calling everything a choice would erase the distinction we're interested in. We must preserve the place of maturation, of useful automatisms, of opportunity and chance, alongside the moments in which a person can direct the work.

The time when one learns

A predisposition and a stimulus meet in an organism of a certain age. Time isn't a detail to be added to the model once everything else is in place. The same experience can have different consequences at different stages of development. Some abilities are referred to as sensitive periods: intervals during which experience exerts a particularly strong influence. Critical period is a more restrictive term, to be used when there are reasons to describe a more clear-cut constraint. Not all domains have the same timetable, and a conventional age is not a biological shutter.

In 2013, Christopher Steele and colleagues compared musicians who began playing before or after the age of seven, matching them for years of training and experience. They observed differences in sensorimotor synchronization and in measurements of the white matter of the corpus callosum obtained with diffusion resonance imaging. The results support the hypothesis of a sensitive period for aspects of musical development. The design, however, did not randomly assign children to early or late onset: predispositions and family backgrounds could contribute to the differences. Furthermore, a diffusion measure does not directly count the connections between individual neurons.

Caution doesn't render the result useless. It makes the next question clear: which experiences, at what time, for what skill? There's no single window of genius. Hand coordination, ear training, music reading, the ability to construct a form, and the judgment of one's own work aren't a single process. Saying that an early start can have lasting effects isn't the same as saying that those who start late are excluded from music. It means that comparing two paths solely on the total duration of the exercise can hide a significant temporal difference.

Perfect pitch makes this distinction particularly visible. It is the ability to identify a musical pitch without an external reference note; it is not the same as artistic judgment or compositional invention. In 2006, Diana Deutsch and colleagues tested conservatory students in the United States and China, finding differences associated with the population studied and the age at which they began their studies. The presence of Mandarin, a tonal language, prompted a hypothesis regarding linguistic experience. However, the comparison did not isolate all cultural, educational, and biological differences. It did not prove that perfect pitch was merely learned or innate.

And it doesn't authorize us to write that Mozart was born possessing it. The competence attested by a biography doesn't determine the biological age of his origin. Even assuming exceptional hearing abilities, the composer's problem remains. Recognizing a note doesn't explain why a musical phrase must continue in a certain way, or why a solution surprises without losing coherence. When we transform a measurable trait into the secret of a work, we restrict the work to the dimensions of our measuring instrument. This is understandable, but it's not a sufficient explanation.

In 2018, Joshua Hartshorne, Joshua Tenenbaum, and Steven Pinker analyzed the responses to an English grammar test from approximately 670,000 participants. Their model estimated a high learning capacity until late adolescence, followed by a decline, and distinguished this limit from the time required to reach native-like proficiency. The result is specific to the domain and sample considered. Online recruitment, reconstruction of linguistic histories, and modeling prevent it from being treated as a direct measure of each participant's brain maturation.

The problem of separating learning ability, duration of exposure, and conditions of use also affects music, without the same age being applicable. Results obtained by adults who remember when they began may confuse biological time with years of practice and the contexts that made them possible. "Sooner" and "longer" are not synonymous, but in life they often coexist. Distinguishing them requires a research design, not a pedagogical preference.

The social consequence is delicate. Knowing that sensitive periods exist can support early access to rich experiences; it can also fuel anxiety in those who believe they have already compromised their child's future. A result on the probability of an advantage thus becomes an individual moral obligation. The inference is illegitimate. It doesn't dictate which activity a child should prefer, nor what intensity they can sustain. A sensitive window invites us to study the timing of experience; it doesn't make the child an investment that must mature before its expiration date.

What treatment can leave in the body

Here we must move from the trajectory image to identifiable biological mechanisms. Molecular epigenetics concerns regulatory processes associated with chromatin and gene activity that do not coincide with a change in the DNA sequence. In the case we will examine, DNA methylation and modifications of histones, the proteins around which DNA is organized, are relevant. Other processes involve non-coding RNAs. These are families of mechanisms with different functions and timescales. Therefore, not every variation in gene expression is classified, without further criteria, as epigenetic memory.

In 1997, Dong Liu and colleagues, in Michael Meaney's group, described differences between rats raised by mothers who exhibited different licking and infant care frequencies. In adults from the more nurturing conditions, they observed, among other findings, higher expression of glucocorticoid receptors in the hippocampus and more moderate endocrine responses to stress. Glucocorticoids are hormones involved in regulating the stress response. Their receptors participate in feedback loops that help contain it. Gratitude, love, or freedom were not measured; instead, maternal behaviors and defined biological parameters were observed.

In 2004, Ian Weaver and his colleagues investigated a possible mechanism. They linked these differences in care to variations in the methylation of a regulatory region of the glucocorticoid receptor gene, histone modifications, and transcription factor binding. Placing infants in mothers with different behaviors helped distinguish the role of care received from that of biological origin. The differences emerged in the first week, persisted into adulthood, and, under experimental conditions, were modifiable with pharmacological intervention. This reversibility is not equivalent to a prescription for humans, nor does it demonstrate voluntary control over markers.

The strength of the work lies in the studied concatenation: a difference in early experience, a regulatory process, a gene expression, a physiological response. It's not proof that the

environment can write anything on any organism. It's a limited model of how certain experiences can have lasting consequences. Nor does "more methylation" always mean "less activity" in every region of the genome: location, cell type, and context matter. Therefore, naming methylation isn't enough to explain a life. We need to know where it was measured and to what function it was linked.

What has been confirmed, and what hasn't? In 2008, Danielle Champagne and colleagues described associations in rats between maternal care, stress receptors, and structural and functional properties of the hippocampus. In 2014, Therese Kosten and David Nielsen, studying sex and litter composition, found relationships between care, gene expression, and methylation, but not a uniform reproduction of the original result in every region. In their conditions, they observed no effects of sex or litter composition on hippocampal methylation in the analyzed region. This wasn't an exact replication of Weaver's protocol; however, it's sufficient to disprove the assumption that the same pattern would always be found.

The core argument supported by several studies is that early experiences can participate in the regulation of stress systems. The strong generalization that a single methylation site is the universal care switch is unjustified. Differences in protocols, age, sex, brain regions, and measurement methods are part of the problem. In the laboratory, a mother is not a moral category, and licking frequency is not a report card that translates into good or bad human motherhood. Even the direction of stress responses requires the context of the task and the animal's history.

In 2009, Patrick McGowan and his colleagues studied postmortem human hippocampal tissue in three small groups: people who died by suicide with a history of childhood abuse, people who died by suicide without such a history, and controls. They found differences in the regulation and methylation of a region of the NR3C1 gene, which encodes the glucocorticoid receptor. The study brought the question closer to the human species, but it remained observational, retrospective, and selected from specific conditions. It did not randomly assign experiences, did not track changes within the same person, and did not prove that this marker had determined suicide.

We therefore don't have a literal translation from rodent to child. We have a line of research to evaluate mechanism by mechanism. A blood sample or a sample of oral cells isn't automatically a window into the hippocampus; cellular composition can influence what is measured. An epigenetic association may reflect an experience, a comorbid condition, or a process whose causal direction we don't yet understand. It shouldn't be transformed into individual evidence of parenting quality. That would be a far more authoritative use of science than the theory it seeks to correct.

Mozart remains outside this laboratory. We don't know whether specific epigenetic modifications contributed to his precociousness, or which ones. Research on healing offers us a reason to study the learning organism; it doesn't provide us with its outcome. The shift to the philosophical meaning of epigenesis occurs here as a declared interpretation: a relationship can contribute to the biological and psychological conditions of the future, without us being able to identify its molecular signature in any case. The limitation doesn't impoverish the argument. It prevents it from consuming evidence it doesn't possess.

The landscape and the body that goes through the day

Conrad Hal Waddington, in his 1957 book The Strategy of the Genes, famously depicted the epigenetic landscape: a representation of development with pathways meandering along valleys. His question concerned the formation and stability of developmental trajectories, not a person's moral decisions. The channels reveal that a process can resist perturbations and, under certain conditions, take a different path. Here, we will use that landscape as an image, explicitly extending it to biography. It is not a topographical map of the brain, nor does it imply that someone can leap from one valley to another at will.

In our extension, what matters is the cost of a passage. A previously practiced trajectory may be easier to retrace; an alternative may require time, resources, or assistance. The image prevents us from thinking that every moment offers the same opportunities to everyone. But it fails if it makes us see an individual as a passive ball or a landscape already fully designed. A person can contribute to changing the conditions in which they will act tomorrow; others can too. These are philosophical considerations about activity, not experimental consequences of Waddington's design.

The body introduces another difference, often overlooked by those who describe talent. The same person does not perform the same way in every state. In 2004, Ullrich Wagner and colleagues showed that sleep after learning a numerical task increased the likelihood of discovering a hidden rule compared to waking conditions. The task was controlled and limited. It did not measure musical composition and did not demonstrate that sleep produces genius. It did indicate that the time in which we are not visibly practicing a skill can contribute to the reorganization of what we have learned.

The distinction changes the value of hours. If counting only records observable activity, it ignores what allows work to continue. This does not allow for a retrospective explanation of Mozart's dreams. It invites us not to treat rest as a debt to be deducted from talent. Night belongs to the life of learning, even when public performance obliterates it. A child judged on the morning's performance brings with him conditions that the result does not make visible; a working adult brings with him the same problem, without returning for this child.

The immune system also plays a role. In 2001, Abraham Reichenberg and colleagues administered a low dose of endotoxin to healthy volunteers in a controlled experiment. They observed transient mood changes and reductions in memory tests, along with increases in inflammatory mediators and cortisol. The experiment supported the possibility of cognitive effects from induced immune activation. It did not demonstrate that every elevated inflammatory level causes the same difficulty, nor that a single molecule explains the entire effect.

In 2005, Karen Krabbe and colleagues found no significant overall cognitive impairment in a different model of low-dose endotoxinemia, although they did find associations between mediators and declarative memory. These two studies preclude a one-size-fits-all formula: dose, timing, and tasks matter. We can argue that physiological state is relevant to learning; we cannot diagnose inflammation by observing a distraction, nor can we derive a treatment to enhance talent from these studies. The distance between an experimental manipulation and a school day must remain visible.

Sleep, stress regulation, and immune function aren't a general alibi. They are aspects of a concrete organism. If we forget them, we can call what we haven't explored laziness, or

demand that a capacity appear in conditions that make it difficult to exercise. If we absolutize them, we risk medicalizing every hesitation. Rigour consists in formulating testable hypotheses and basing our judgment on the available information. The Self we're talking about doesn't add a second body to this one: it's the name of the perspective from which we try to maintain its unity.

Famous lives are not experiments

Van Gogh raises a different issue than that of precociousness. In his letter to Theo dated February 3, 1889, preserved in the scholarly edition of his correspondence, he describes fatigue and the doctor's instructions that limited his mental work. This testimony documents an interruption, a therapeutic relationship, and the need to address his work under difficult conditions. Today, this is not enough to diagnose a pathology, much less to establish a genetic predisposition. His painting cannot be used as a clinical test, and suffering does not provide a measure of his originality.

The civil problem of that biography is what we do with it. If we portray pain as the necessary price of a masterpiece, we can begin to consider treatment a danger to art. The conclusion doesn't follow from the story. The fact that someone worked while suffering doesn't prove they worked thanks to the suffering, nor that they would have been less capable if helped differently. The loss of a painful condition is not, by definition, a loss of identity. This is an argument against an abusive inference, not a promise about the effects of a treatment.

Einstein urges further caution. In 1985, Marian Diamond and colleagues compared the ratio of neurons to glial cells in some regions of his brain with control samples, finding a difference in the left area 39. Sandra Witelson and colleagues, in 1999, described peculiarities of the parietal region. These studies do not justify the generalization that the brain contained more glia everywhere, nor do they prove that these characteristics were produced by curiosity. An anatomy observed after a lifetime does not, by itself, reveal the state that preceded it or what activities modified it.

In 2014, Terence Hines criticized precisely the inferences built around that brain, discussing the selection of comparisons and the interpretation of differences. The problem isn't that brain structure is unrelated to capabilities. The problem is assigning a causal direction to a single case, already chosen because it's exceptional. Neuroplasticity must be documented with drawings that allow for the investigation of change. It can't be invoked as a ready-made explanation every time we find an anatomical difference. The term names a set of studyable phenomena; it doesn't certify the story we prefer to tell.

Isaac Newton is often reduced to the figure of a man absorbed in a problem. The Newton Project archive, however, preserves scientific, religious, and other writings that reveal a broader activity. In a letter to Edmund Halley dated July 27, 1686, he also discusses his correspondence with Huygens: even the figure of the isolated individual must be placed within documented intellectual exchanges. We cannot retroactively measure a pathology by the concentration we attribute to the author. We can study the distribution of his work and the relationships that permeated it. The solitary genius is a narrative figure; we must always ask ourselves which people that figure has rendered invisible.

For Leonardo, the anatomical drawings preserved in the Royal Collection demonstrate observation, comparison, and revision, along with the limitations of available knowledge. They are traces of his work, not images of his neural networks. We don't know what specific brain

changes accompanied each investigation. We can interpret his exploration of different fields as a practice of curiosity; calling it a continuous remodeling of networks is, however, a general hypothesis that we haven't measured in him. These pages alone demonstrate that one question can generate another without reducing this transition to a molecular certificate.

Terence Tao offers us something different: the voice of a mathematician on his craft. In his essay "Does one have to be a genius to do math?", republished in 2024 in the Notices of the American Mathematical Society, he emphasizes cumulative work, comparisons with other mathematicians, and the plurality of useful contributions. We will not use an IQ assigned without a verifiable assessment, nor his biography as experimental evidence of the effects of a happy childhood. The testimony has a more limited value: someone extraordinarily capable describes a practice that is not limited to exceptionality.

Richard Feynman, in his Nobel Lecture of December 11, 1965, reconstructed a sequence of ideas, difficulties, and encounters that had informed his work. The interest in this chapter lies in the process he describes, not in a formula for becoming like him. We can call playful, as an interpretation, the willingness to try an idea without having already guaranteed its success. This does not imply a diagnosis of an eternal child. Exploratory activity also requires skill and verification; play becomes interesting when a prepared mind can allow itself a try and then respond seriously to what it finds.

These lives do not constitute a gallery of proofs for the thesis. Each limits a shortcut: suffering that would explain the artist, anatomy that would explain the discovery, isolation that would explain the thinker, numbers that would explain the mathematician. We have not denied what we know about their results. We have separated the result from the story that claims to have discovered its origin. Singularity does not demand a veneration that interrupts investigation. It demands a more demanding measure of the reasons with which we claim to have understood it.

The objection we cannot get around

An opponent might now offer a harsher criticism. We've assembled studies on stress, memory, twins, and musical education, but none explain why Mozart appeared. We've replaced an enigma with a very broad description. Talking about trajectories can become an elegant way to prevent some human beings from possessing abilities that others will never achieve. If every outcome depends on history, the educator can be accused of having constructed the wrong story; if every obstacle conceals an opportunity, the subject can be condemned to forever search for it. The determinism of education can be crueler than that of genes.

The critique points to a real risk. The biological lottery exists, and it is not distributed according to merit. There are limitations that excellent teaching cannot eliminate, just as there are opportunities that a favorable predisposition cannot guarantee. A theory that promised equal results from equal care would be scientifically unsustainable and morally dangerous. It would transform any residual difference into a failure of those who provided treatment or those who failed to allow themselves to be treated. Epigenesis does not allow us to make that judgment. The trajectory also includes what no one had control over.

The answer lies in a distinction between explaining the outcome and understanding the conditions. We are not offering the sufficient cause of genius. We are trying to understand how abilities and conditions enter into life, and which interventions can be evaluated without promising that outcome. A predisposition describes a contribution, not the entire sequence. A

practice describes an activity, not the guarantee of recognition. Studying the process allows us to ask more precise questions even when we cannot predict the final outcome. Our ignorance of the exception does not render knowledge of ordinary conditions useless.

We can say this with the musical image the book has given itself: the lottery is real; epigenesis questions how it is played. The image remains as it is. It doesn't describe genes as notes, it doesn't place an invisible conductor in command of the brain, and it doesn't ensure that an instrument can become any other instrument. Rather, it reminds us that having a tool and performing an activity are connected, distinct, and temporally organized. The correction to the metaphor is as necessary as the metaphor itself: sometimes the instrument is damaged, sometimes there's no room, sometimes someone prevents you from playing.

The third term, then, does not compete with genetics for a share of talent. It does not compensate for what science has failed to explain by introducing unconditional freedom. It requires us to consider the entire process, and to distinguish within it what a subject undergoes, what they learn without deliberation, and what they can influence. The fact that this distinction is difficult does not make it superfluous. It is precisely the difficulty we encounter when we attribute merit, responsibility, or the possibility of change to a person.

The child after the test

The consequences for a parent begin after a disappointing performance. We can evaluate the work without pronouncing fate. We can ask where the child encountered a difficulty and verify whether the task was understandable, whether the correction offers something useful. We must not conclude that behind every mistake lies an extraordinary talent. We must prevent limited knowledge from becoming an irrevocable identity. "You can't do this yet" is a statement worth testing; "You're not gifted" can also close down what we haven't studied.

The same is true when the performance is excellent. Telling a child they're a genius may seem like the ultimate accolade; it can also entrust them with a role no child is required to play in every lesson. An adult can recognize a successful solution, propose a new problem, accept that interests may change. This is an educational proposal, not the conclusion of an experiment mentioned here. It's based on the civic principle we're developing: using one's power to make activities and alternatives viable, without appropriating the identity of those who exercise them.

For the teacher, rigor also means keeping judgments modifiable in light of new information. A well-constructed test measures something; you need to know what it is. Multiple observations, under relevant conditions, can reveal whether a difficulty is stable or task-related. There's no need to abolish selection where a skill is necessary. We need to distinguish the right to demand that skill from the right, which we lack, to assign a definitive measure to human beings. A debut can guide support; it shouldn't become the entire anticipated biography.

A doctor faces the same distinction when a health condition makes it difficult to learn or continue working. Assessment can identify real limitations, and treatment must respect them. But the individual is not the same as the performance achieved during an illness. The research we have reviewed does not justify promising the patient the recovery of every ability; it does permit us not to automatically attribute the difficulty to a moral failing. Taking the body seriously means assessing, treating where possible, and not expecting willpower to replace what a physiological condition impedes.

For those who decide on public resources, the question changes again. If early access to instruments, adequate teaching, and sustainable conditions can matter, a policy should not wait for the emergence of a prodigy to offer those conditions. This is an ethical and distributive consequence, not a prediction that investing will produce a certain number of Mozarts. Finite resources require concrete evaluations; however, they do not justify selecting those who deserve opportunities based on a destiny no one has measured. The opportunity to learn has value even when it does not generate exceptionality.

The person alone in a room can ultimately use this distinction without turning it into a program of redemption. They can choose a limited activity, make a difficulty observable, seek a competent correction, modify a condition over which they have some leeway. They can also decide not to continue. Interrupting a process does not, in itself, demonstrate surrender to the past; continuing it does not, in itself, demonstrate freedom. What matters is how the subject evaluates the alternatives and the cost involved. The theory must not deprive them of the possibility of giving up.

Let's return to the London notebook. Now we see a work received, continued, yet still incomplete. We don't know the exact boundary between that child's predispositions and the conditions that favored his activity; no data introduced in the chapter claims to have reconstructed it. However, we have distinguished formation from outcome, and ability from destiny. Moving forward, we need a closer comparison than that of two famous biographies: two lives born from a largely common genetic origin. If history doesn't repeat itself there either, we must ask ourselves where the difference begins and what it means for those who experience it.

No adult is authorized to call the future everything a child can already measure.

Chapter Sources

The references support the empirical and documentary claims they are associated with in the text. The philosophical thesis and the civil consequences are the book's arguments; the contemporary scenes are clearly imagined.

Mozarteum International Foundation. Digital Köchel Catalogue, KV 15a–rr, 42 pieces for clavier. Source for the London notebook and its location in 1764. Source

Polderman, T.J.C. et al. (2015). Meta-analysis of the heritability of human traits based on fifty years of twin studies. Nature Genetics. Source

Scarr, S., & McCartney, K. (1983). How People Make Their Own Environments: A Theory of Genotype → Environment Effects. Child Development. Source

Plomin, R., & Daniels, D. (1987). Why are children in the same family so different from one another? Behavioral and Brain Sciences. Original article sheet. Source

Macnamara, B. N., Hambrick, D. Z., & Oswald, F. L. (2014). Deliberate practice and performance in music, games, sports, education, and professions: a meta-analysis. Psychological Science. Source

Platz, F. et al. (2014). The influence of deliberate practice on musical achievement: a meta-analysis. Frontiers in Psychology. Source

Mosing, M.A. et al. (2014). Practice Does Not Make Perfect: No Causal Effect of Music Practice on Music Ability. Psychological Science. The title expresses the authors' conclusion; the chapter defines the inference. Source

Steele, C.J. et al. (2013). Early musical training and white-matter plasticity in the corpus callosum: evidence for a sensitive period. Journal of Neuroscience. Source

Deutsch, D. et al. (2006). Absolute pitch among American and Chinese conservatory students: prevalence differences, and evidence for a speech-related critical period. Journal of the Acoustical Society of America. Source

Hartshorne, J. K., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Pinker, S. (2018). A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. Cognition. Source

Liu, D. et al. (1997). Maternal care, hippocampal glucocorticoid receptors, and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal responses to stress. Science. Source

Weaver, ICG et al. (2004). Epigenetic programming by maternal behavior. Nature Neuroscience. Source

Champagne, D.L. et al. (2008). Maternal care and hippocampal plasticity: evidence for experience-dependent structural plasticity, altered synaptic functioning, and differential responsiveness to glucocorticoids and stress. Journal of Neuroscience. Source

Kosten, T. A., & Nielsen, D. A. (2014). Litter and sex effects on maternal behavior and DNA methylation of the Nr3c1 exon 17 promoter gene in hippocampus and cerebellum. International Journal of Developmental Neuroscience. Source

McGowan, P. O. et al. (2009). Epigenetic regulation of the glucocorticoid receptor in human brain associates with childhood abuse. Nature Neuroscience. Source

Waddington, C. H. (1957). The Strategy of the Genes. Allen & Unwin. Landscape concerns biological development; the extension to biography is stated in the text. Source

Wagner, U. et al. (2004). Sleep inspires insight. Nature. Source

Reichenberg, A. et al. (2001). Cytokine-associated emotional and cognitive disturbances in humans. Archives of General Psychiatry. Source

Krabbe, K.S. et al. (2005). Low-dose endotoxemia and human neuropsychological functions. Brain, Behavior, and Immunity. Source

Van Gogh, V. (1889). Letter to Theo, Arles, February 3, no. 745. Scientific edition Vincent van Gogh — The Letters. Source

Diamond, M.C. et al. (1985). On the brain of a scientist: Albert Einstein. Experimental Neurology. Source

Witelson, S. F., Kigar, D. L., & Harvey, T. (1999). The exceptional brain of Albert Einstein. The Lancet. Source

Hines, T. (2014). Neuromythology of Einstein's brain. Brain and Cognition. Source

Newton Project. Catalogue of the Writings of Isaac Newton; letter to Edmund Halley, July 27, 1686, NATP00327. Source

Royal Collection Trust. Leonardo's Study of Anatomy. List of anatomical materials preserved in the collection. Source

Tao, T. (2024). Does One Have to Be a Genius to Do Math? Notices of the American Mathematical Society, 71(1), 30–32. Author's version with republication acknowledgment. Source

Feynman, R.P. (1965). The Development of the Space-Time View of Quantum Electrodynamics. Nobel Lecture, December 11. Text hosted by Caltech. Source



Movement I — The third term

2. Gemini, and the rest that doesn't add up

Let's imagine two forty-two-year-old sisters in a waiting room. The scene is staged; it doesn't belong in the medical records of two recognizable people. They are identical twins. As children, strangers confused them; now, those who meet them together are the first to notice the similarity, while they are the first to notice the difference. One wears glasses, the other keeps them in her purse. One has already read the paperwork she received at the reception twice. The other is looking at the door through which the doctor will emerge. They have the same appointment, but one is there for herself and one to accompany her.

We don't yet know which diagnosis will be confirmed. We only know that one of them began to experience a disorder the other doesn't recognize in her own body. For a few weeks, they compared sensations, dates, and memories. The sister without symptoms searched for something in the past that would explain the difference. The sister who had them, instead, searched for something that would explain the similarity: if you had them too, perhaps this body wouldn't suddenly seem so foreign to me. Neither of them said these exact words. It's a possibility of the scene, not a psychology we can attribute to all twins.

On the bench lies an open bag. Inside, along with the documents, is a photograph their mother had sent a few days earlier: two little girls in front of a cake, dressed almost identically. The gesture was affectionate. Now the photograph seems to ask a question to which affection does not answer. How could this have happened to only one? The question isn't about a whim, a musical preference, or a different profession. It's about a body that may need to learn a new way of organizing its day, and the other that will continue to organize its own without that same need.

The doctor will need to distinguish them. He will ask the first when the disorder appeared, what tests she's had, what medications she's taking; the second, if relevant, will ask different information. Familiarity may factor into the assessment. Kinship won't be enough to match the medical records. One sister may fear she's the other's future. The other may feel, unwittingly, like a living comparison: the person demonstrating what could have happened differently. But neither is the control experiment that life has placed alongside the other. A possible scientific comparison doesn't exhaust a relationship.

The two lived in the same house, ate at the same table, and attended the same class for several years. When one was questioned, the other listened at her desk. They weren't at the same point in the event. One was waiting for her name, the other had already heard hers; one was searching for an answer, the other could evaluate it. And if the teacher mistook them, the mistake didn't strike both as the same experience. For one, it could be recognition received without having earned it, for the other, the deprivation of something she had just accomplished. This is an imaginary example. It serves to highlight how much a common description can omit.

When they return home in the evening, they won't necessarily be able to explain why the disorder is attributed to only one person. Tests may shed much light and leave that very question unanswered. It would be easy to transform the void into a story: a particular stressor,

a broken love, a personality disorder, a forgotten infection. Some hypotheses may merit investigation; others will only offer the relief of a named cause. A convincing story isn't yet a verified story. And the need for an explanation can become cruel when it forces the sick person to find the error in their own life that would justify their illness.

Let's look at the photograph again. It's natural to think that there are two identical beginnings, and that the difference came later, through some crack. But a biological beginning isn't a point without duration. Before the cake, before the house, before the first memory, there were already cell divisions, positions, exchanges, and times. We can't see them in the photograph. This doesn't mean we should attribute them to will. The body has a history even when there's no one yet capable of telling it.

The chapter's question begins on that bench: where does biological identity break? To answer, we'll need to correct the verb. Perhaps something that was whole and duplicated doesn't break. Perhaps a common origin generated two processes from the beginning, and we called their most easily comparable elements identical. It remains to be seen what science is able to trace of those processes, what it leaves unexplained, and when, within a difference no one chose, someone capable of answering might appear.

A common origin is not a duplicate life

The difference between twins shows that a largely common development can occur in two distinct bodily histories. However, it does not prove that every difference is educational, epigenetic in the molecular sense, or deliberately chosen.

These two sentences contain the thesis and its correction. The first takes time seriously; the second prevents time from being occupied by a single explanation. To speak of historicity is to argue that, to understand the present state of an organism, it may be necessary to know the steps by which it arrived at that state. It doesn't mean we know all those steps. Even less does it mean that a person was the author of them from conception.

Identical twins derive from a single zygote, the cell produced by fertilization. Fraternal twins derive from two fertilizations and share, on average, about half the segregating genetic variants, like other siblings. The extraordinary genetic proximity of identical twins allows for particularly informative comparisons. But a definition of origin does not guarantee that all cells from both will forever retain a perfectly identical sequence. Cell division and the formation of cell lineages are part of the problem, not a parenthesis before life begins.

In 2021, Hákon Jónsson and colleagues studied genomic differences in identical twins, including the temporal distribution of early mutations. They found an average of 5.2 early developmental mutations that distinguished twins; approximately 15 percent had a significant number of these twin-specific differences. This result concerns mutations identifiable by the study design and samples. It does not mean that each difference has a functional effect, nor does it offer a general explanation for personality differences. Instead, it establishes absolute sequence identity as an untouchable assumption.

A mutation changes the DNA sequence; an epigenetic modification affects aspects of its regulation, without thereby modifying the sequence. Confusing the two phenomena would simplify the thesis and make biology less comprehensible. Furthermore, a mutation can be present in some cell lines and absent in others: mosaicism refers to this coexistence of genetically diverse cell populations in the same organism. No body should be thought of as a single sample that repeats everywhere, with absolute uniformity, what was read in a test tube.

This clarification does not detract from twin studies. It establishes the scale at which similarity is sufficient for comparison and the scale at which it must be verified. A map may be accurate for navigating cities but insufficient for finding a door. It is an image of resolution, not a model of genes. If we search for a cause of disease in a particular cell line, a localized difference can matter; if we study the distribution of a trait in thousands of pairs, overall genetic proximity retains its informative power.

Here, a first limitation to the initial question emerges. The uniqueness of an organism doesn't necessarily begin with a conscious biography. It may begin with the distribution of a cell lineage. But it would be equally inappropriate to place the explanation for all subsequent life in those early differences. The fact that something happens early doesn't automatically give it decisive force. An early cause can be compensated for; a late disruption can prove significant. Chronology indicates when to search, not how much we've already found.

For the sisters in the waiting room, this means something limited. The doctor cannot assume that visible similarity identifies every relevant condition; the writer cannot assume that a small gap in DNA already contains the destiny he wants to describe. Both must resist the same temptation: to move from the existence of a difference to the knowledge of its effect. Biological singularity begins to become conceivable precisely when we stop mistaking a favorable comparison for a perfect duplication.

Concordance is not a sentence

In disease studies, concordance means that both members of a couple have the condition in question. Discordance means that, at the time and according to the observation criteria, only one has it. This second definition contains two essential specifications: a date and a criterion. A couple that is discordant today may be concordant after another observation period; a condition can be recognized with greater or lesser precision, especially when the diagnosis depends on variable manifestations and different access to services.

Rikke Hilker and colleagues, in their 2018 study on schizophrenia, cross-referenced Danish registries with a base of 37,891 pairs. They reported a probandwise concordance of 33% in monozygotic individuals and 7% in dizygotic individuals; the heritability estimate for schizophrenia was 79%. These numbers are compatible, not a paradox: they describe different things. The comparison points to a strong genetic contribution to vulnerability, along with the mismatch in diagnoses among many monozygotic individuals. The study also considered incomplete observation over time; it remained dependent on the recorded diagnoses and the characteristics of the study population.

Probandwise is an unavoidable term only until we've explained counting. In a basic version, if C is the number of concordant pairs and D is the number of discordant pairs, the pairwise concordance is C divided by the sum of C and D; the probandwise concordance is two Cs divided by the sum of two Cs and Ds. The second counts affected individuals who have an affected co-twin. The formulas help us understand why two studies might publish different percentages even before discussing populations or recruitment methods. They are not a substitute for the adjustments needed in real studies.

Let's take invented numbers, just to see the difference: twenty concordant pairs and thirty discordant ones. The pairwise concordance is 40 percent; the probandwise concordance is about 57 percent. Neither is false. Change the denominator. If we remove the word specifying the method, the percentage seems self-sufficient and becomes difficult to compare accurately.

Precision isn't about piling up decimals. It's about knowing which people entered the number, through which door, and for how long they were observed.

Heritability also concerns a population and a model, not the percentage of disease written into a person's body. For a present or absent diagnosis, models can postulate a continuous susceptibility and a threshold beyond which the condition manifests. Jaron Arbet, Matt McGue, and Saonli Basu, in their methodological paper published in 2020, show how estimates and uncertainty also depend on statistical assumptions. The threshold is an analysis tool: not an anatomical switch identified in each patient. Therefore, high heritability does not require absolute concordance.

Let's make this point without turning it into a statistics lesson. Genetic data informs a family history; it doesn't justify skipping the examination of the person in front of us. The discrepancy requires us to look for other contributors; it doesn't say what they are. From a probability, we can't infer the moral responsibility of someone who has exceeded a threshold. And the fact that others with a similar vulnerability don't get sick doesn't prove they've found the right behavior. The health of the co-twin doesn't disprove the illness of the other.

We can now hear a common phrase: if it were truly biological, it should happen to both of us. The phrase treats biology as a machine that produces the same outcome from a limited set of initial information. But biological functioning involves exposures, timing, interactions, and transformations. The difference between outcomes does not make an illness any less real, nor does it automatically attribute it to exclusively psychological causes. A condition can be profoundly bodily without being determined solely by a shared DNA sequence. Uncertainty about causality is not uncertainty about suffering.

The reverse reasoning is equally flawed: since it doesn't happen to both, the environment must have produced it. If by environment we mean everything that isn't attributed to the genetic contribution of the model, the phrase can function as an accounting convention. If we mean a particular educational experience, it already provides an explanation that the comparison hasn't provided. Between the calculation and the cause lies scientific work. It is within the space of that work that we must place the rest, without turning it into a mysterious substance or a blame to be assigned.

Before the memory begins

The same pregnancy does not guarantee identical local exposures. In monozygotic children, the membranes and placenta can be organized differently; even a shared placenta does not ensure equal distribution of all resources. The ISUOG guidelines updated in 2025 distinguish precisely between placental configurations and the conditions that can produce growth imbalances. It's not necessary to imagine a mother who has done something different to each child. Sharing a maternal organism does not mean occupying the same space, having the same circulation, or going through every passage in the same way. The familial description and that of prenatal development have different resolutions.

In 2010, Miina Ollikainen and colleagues analyzed regions associated with the IGF2/H19 locus in tissue collected at birth from 91 couples, 56 monozygotic and 35 dizygotic. They observed variability between tissues and methylation differences even within couples; dizygotic couples showed greater discordance. This finding suffices to correct the idea that epigenetic differences must appear only after many years of living apart. It does not make the

studied regions a measure of personality, nor does it attribute every discrepancy to identified prenatal exposure. Measurable diversity may precede the first memory.

Methylation is the addition of methyl groups to specific positions in DNA; in mammals, cytosines at CpG sites are often studied. Its meaning depends on the region and cell type. It's not always correct to translate it into a deactivated gene or, conversely, a freed resource. Histones, the proteins around which DNA is organized, also participate in regulation through various modifications. These processes are part of the ordinary life of cells. The adjective epigenetic doesn't necessarily mean acquired through an emotional experience.

An even more awkward clarification came from Jenny van Dongen and her colleagues in 2021. Comparing multiple cohorts, they identified a methylation signature associated with monozygotic twinning, comprising 834 CpG sites. It was a persistent similarity between people with that origin, observable in somatic tissues, not a collection of differences between the two members of each pair. The authors did not establish whether the signature was a cause, consequence, or byproduct of the twinning event. An epigenetic trace can therefore recall a shared early passage, without indicating a later divergence.

This discovery prevents us from using epigenetics as the biological department of differences alone. It can contribute to continuity and similarity. It can address the stability of a cellular identity, not the instability of a character. The concept loses precision if we equate it with everything that changes, just as it loses precision if we limit it to what a person has consciously experienced. In the book, epigenesis will have a broader philosophical scope. This scope must preserve the memory of distinction: a corporeal history is not always an identified molecular imprint.

For this reason, we won't speak of a secret biography preserved in blood. The presence of a lasting trace doesn't mean we can decipher all its antecedents. Nor does it mean that a tissue can accurately testify to the behavior of the person who raised the child. The history of development contains events without observers, poorly recorded events, and processes that can produce similar signals through different pathways. A biological archive, when the image is useful, is a partial archive, lacking the universal legend we would like to possess.

The consequence is already moral, but it comes after empirical clarification. We cannot attribute to a newborn the responsibility for a difference that precedes any deliberation. We cannot automatically attribute it to the mother, simply because development occurred within her body. Identifying a formative context is not equivalent to identifying an author. Pregnancy involves material conditions, care, vulnerabilities, and biological processes that no person has complete control over. Recognizing the historical body must broaden the search for the conditions, not narrow the search for a culprit.

Growing old together doesn't mean changing in the same way.

In 2005, Mario Fraga and his colleagues studied eighty identical twins—forty pairs—between the ages of three and seventy-four. The analyses showed differences in DNA methylation and histone acetylation in some of the pairs, more marked among older participants; greater divergences were also associated with less similar life histories. The comparison became famous through images of very similar profiles in the young and more distant profiles in the adults. It was, above all, a cross-sectional study: it compared different age groups, not the progressive separation of the same two epigenomes over decades.

The distinction between photography and sequence is fundamental. A comparison between people of different ages can be affected by generations, exposure, and the selection of those studied. By following the same individuals, a change can be observed, but even that design does not automatically assign the cause. In 2012, Rudolf Talens and colleagues examined 230 identical couples aged eighteen to eighty-nine; one elderly group was also followed up for ten years. In specific regions, they found variations consistent with an increase in discordance during aging. The behavior was not uniform across all regions studied.

Epigenetic drift, in this context, refers to changes that can accumulate over time and contribute to the separation of certain profiles. The word "drift" shouldn't suggest an unregulated journey. External exposures, regulation, signal maintenance, and stochastic processes can contribute to the phenomenon. We can't take a methylation difference between two adults and trace, without further evidence, the single humiliation that produced it. Nor can we assume that every region always drifts apart, that every difference grows, or that all differences have a clinical consequence.

Talens offers a step beyond Fraga, not the license for a complete formula. The convergence of different drawings reinforces certain questions and certain findings; inhomogeneity makes other questions more precise. If a part of the profile remains relatively stable, the stability must be explained as much as the change. If a difference appears in a tissue, we must establish what it means in that tissue. The body's history does not proceed solely through divergences. It includes what is maintained, repaired, compensated for, and made less sensitive to a disturbance.

The image of drift is useful to us as long as it allows us to see time. It becomes misleading when it imposes an obligation on lives to drift apart. Two twins can maintain very similar preferences, habits, and ways of speaking to one another without being any less individual. Singularity is not measured by counting how many differences we have compared to the person closest to us. This is a philosophical argument, not the result of methylation analyses. Two people can wish to follow similar paths and remain two people, each with their own position in experience and their own right to respond.

This leads to a limit to our own fascination. Very different twins seem to demonstrate something; very similar ones seem to hide something. In both cases, we risk asking them to resolve a dispute we brought in from outside. Scientific data doesn't need a spectacular difference to be interesting. And those who lend their bodies to a study don't have the obligation to become a character suited to the theory. We can be grateful for a comparison without turning it into an imposed public identity.

The body that met a world

The divergence isn't limited to DNA regulatory signals. Petter Brodin and colleagues, in 2015, measured 204 immune system parameters in a sample of twins. In their model, 77 percent of the parameters were dominated by non-heritable influences, which explained more than half of the variability; for 58 percent, they accounted for more than 80 percent. In identical twins discordant for cytomegalovirus infection, immune differences affected many measures. The numbers describe those parameters and that sample, not a percentage of the entire person or a law for each immune function.

This fact adds something to the story. The world a body encounters includes biological agents and responses to them. It does not coincide with the education received, nor with the

environment such as a room furnished in the same way. The immune system can bear the consequences of encounters for which a person retains no significant memory. The relationship between narrated biography and biological history is therefore incomplete in both directions: a memory can be important without offering us an identifiable marker; an event can be biologically important without having become an autobiographical memory.

In 2022, Florian Ingelfinger, Lisa Ann Gerdes, and their colleagues analyzed 61 monozygotic couples discordant for multiple sclerosis, studying in depth the cells and states of the peripheral immune system. The comparison identified characteristics associated with the disease that were not explained by shared genetic predisposition. This was not an estimate of concordance: the couples had been selected precisely because they were discordant. Nor was it sufficient to determine which exposure triggered the disease in each individual. Comparing profiles associated with a condition and reconstructing its origin are related, but distinct, tasks.

This distinction is particularly important for the sisters imagined at the beginning. The narrative may seek to select a diagnosis and then a cause that completes the scene. Research can be more useful precisely by leaving that individual causality unfinished. A careful comparison can identify targets, processes, and relevant differences without explaining why it all began that Tuesday in that person. Treatment shouldn't wait for a causal story to be complete; the narrative, instead, must forgo completing it to make suffering more memorable.

Illness constitutes a decisive limit to the language of the self that selects. An organism responds, compensates, regulates; these verbs do not necessarily indicate deliberation. If we say that the body interprets, we are using a functional extension of the term: a signal has different effects depending on the organization and state of the system. We have not attributed consciousness to the cell nor the decision to become ill to the patient. The same word can serve on multiple scales only if we keep the difference between those scales explicit.

There remains a philosophical insight that we can now formulate with greater discipline. The organism carries a history of its own responses, not simply a set of resources and a list of external events. In some conditions, that history contributes to the future responses that will be possible. This does not make disease a project, nor immunity a will. It forces us to think of the present body as an achieved state. The genetic description is not contradicted; it is placed within the process in which it participates.

What did we actually read in the sample?

If we want to say that a difference is written in the body, we must also say where we read it. Andrew Jaffe and Rafael Irizarry, in 2014, showed how cellular composition is relevant to epigenetic studies on whole blood and other heterogeneous tissues. An average signal can change because the proportions of cells present change, not because each cell has modified its methylation in the same way. Separating cell populations or estimating their proportions can help distinguish these contributions. However, neither procedure makes blood a universal substitute for every organ.

The simplest image is that of a choir, and it should be declared as an image. If we record a group of voices, a change in sound can depend on how people sing or on who enters and leaves the group. We can't decide which possibility occurred by simply listening to an average value. In biology, cell populations aren't people singing; the analogy serves to explain a

compositional problem. It protects us from the error of attributing to each unit what was observed in the group.

A second problem concerns direction. Disease can produce a change; a change can contribute to the disease; another factor can contribute to both. In 2012, Caroline Relton and George Davey Smith proposed a two-step Mendelian randomization strategy to study exposure, methylation, and outcome. Genetic variants used as tools can aid causal inference if they satisfy demanding conditions. The value of the method lies in the question it makes testable, not in the promise of eliminating all confounding. An association, even between monozygotes, does not by itself resolve the causal direction.

In 2011, Vardhman Rakyan and colleagues had already addressed the timing issue in type 1 diabetes. Their initial study analyzed purified monocytes from fifteen discordant monozygotic pairs; it identified 132 candidate methylation sites associated with the condition. Further analysis, including observations in other individuals prior to diagnosis, suggested that some differences appeared early in the process. Candidate selection and confirmation required evaluation and further verification. Preceding diagnosis did not mean anticipating every biological change in the disease, nor did it demonstrate a sufficient cause.

The distinction between before the symptoms and before the process is easy to miss. The day we receive a diagnosis is an event in our knowledge and social life; it isn't necessarily the first day of the condition. If we observe a signal before that day, we have obtained important temporal information. Ascribing it to a causal role requires further work. Biography has dates that biology may not respect. The phrase with which a person begins to describe themselves as ill may arrive after the body has already undergone unrecognized transformations.

A serious investigation attempts to correlate the levels: sequence, regulation, cellular function, organismal state, and clinical manifestation. The presence of a discrepancy at one level does not automatically certify all subsequent levels. An association can be useful for prediction without being the best lever for intervention; a mechanism can be real without being measurable in the most convenient sample. This is a criterion for interpreting studies, not an alternative diagnosis. It allows us to respect the result without asking it to become the next, yet-to-be-resolved result.

The book must stop here whenever it is tempted to use a test tube as a confession. Methylation does not give us the voice of the person who humiliated, the intentions of the person who healed, or the meaning of an evening for those who experienced it. It can contribute to investigations into processes and probabilities. The meaning of an experience requires other sources, including the testimony of those who lived it. We don't need to choose between the body and the story; we need to avoid making one speak as if it already possesses the complete language of the other.

The rest has a statistical name

Twin studies are tools for asking questions about the sources of variability. In the classical description, the similarities of monozygotic and dizygotic twins are compared through models that distinguish genetic, shared, and non-shared environmental contributions. Frühling Rijsdijk and Pak Sham, in 2002, explained the logic using structural equation models. The components are inferred from the relationships between measurements: they are not three substances extracted separately from the bodies. The label E, for non-shared, also includes measurement error in the classical model. It does not identify a specific cause.

Inferences require assumptions. The assumption of environmental equality concerns the similarity of causally relevant exposures for the trait studied between the two types of couples. It does not require that monozygotic and dizygotic individuals dress alike or receive exactly the same comments. However, if greater environmental similarity in monozygotic individuals accounts for part of the greater similarity in the trait and is not adequately accounted for, genetic attribution could be affected. Recruitment and the reliability of measures also matter. Robustness is assessed by comparing designs and hypotheses, not by worshipping a percentage.

Measurement error deserves its own distinction. Two people can differ in their scores because the measurement is imprecise. This is not a developmental event. Biological noise, on the other hand, is a real variation in the process, even when we can't track it. An unrecorded infection is yet another matter: an exposure that occurred, about which information is missing. Placing all these elements in the same statistical residue does not make them causally equivalent. To know what we can prevent, modify, or simply recognize, we must separate them with other data.

This is where the chapter title finds its most difficult meaning. The remainder doesn't add up because the estimated non-shared share cannot easily be translated into a list of measured events. Eric Turkheimer and Mary Waldron, in their 2000 review, showed that the non-shared environmental variables actually measured explained a limited portion of the non-shared variability postulated by the models. They also distinguished the objective environment from its effects. Identifying a residue and identifying the processes that compose it are two research steps. The first does not guarantee the second.

This difficulty is a real objection to an overly confident explanation of singularity. If we don't know which encounter matters, how much, and through what path, we can't retrospectively compile life as a series of decisive causes. A fever, a teacher, a sentence can enter into an investigation; they can even become the pieces of an arbitrary narrative. The reader must be able to distinguish a causal possibility from a proven cause. The fact that an individual story cannot be entirely reconstructed prevents us from filling it with the story that satisfies our thesis.

However, the residue isn't proof that the encounters are irrelevant. It's possible that overly generalized measures miss important episodes, that the effects depend on combinations, or that different processes lead to similar outcomes. These are hypotheses to be tested, not readily available explanations. We can maintain two fundamental requirements: not deny a contribution because it's difficult to measure, nor affirm it because the data leaves room for interpretation. Rigor resides precisely in this interval. Epigenesis shouldn't be the elegant new name for the box we don't know how to open.

The same house is not the same environment

A home is a shared place and set of conditions; a relationship is something that happens between subjects in different settings. If two siblings witness the same fight, their description of the episode may be shared. But one may be the recipient of the threat and the other the witness; one may be able to escape while the other is not. This example does not prove a specific biological mechanism. It shows that the same event, catalogued at the family level, can contain different expositions. The language of family is often cruder than the life it purports to describe.

Even an event affecting both can produce different consequences. To evaluate this possibility, we need to distinguish exposure from effect, without making them coincide by definition. If we call everything that produced differences "unshared," we have classified the outcome; we have not yet explained why the episode acted differently. Preceding conditions, timing, other experiences, and task characteristics may all play a role. It is also possible that the difference attributed to the episode is unreal or not directly related to it. A focus on the individual is not a substitute for scientific comparison: it helps formulate the question.

In 2003, Kathryn Asbury, Judith Dunn, Alison Pike, and Robert Plomin studied 2,353 four-year-old identical couples through parental ratings of behavior and aspects of treatment received. They found associations between within-couple differences in parental harsh discipline or negative feelings and behavioral differences, with generally small effects and more pronounced in some extreme groups. The study did not assign treatments, and the ratings were provided by parents. The associations could include reciprocal influences and measurement issues; they did not describe a previously demonstrated unidirectional causal path.

This reciprocity must be taken seriously, without using it against the child. A behavior can contribute to eliciting a response, and that response can in turn modify the behavior. Recognizing a reciprocal pattern doesn't justify every adult response. If a child insists, becomes agitated, or refuses, the adult remains responsible for how they exercise their power. Explaining how a situation arose and assessing what someone should do next have different criteria. We can't turn interaction into an automatic, half-hearted distribution of blame.

A more limited example comes from bullying. Louise Arseneault and colleagues, in 2008, used the British E-Risk cohort, comprising 1,116 pairs. In identical siblings discordant for victimization between seven and nine years of age, the targeted child showed more internalizing symptoms at ten years of age than the non-victimized co-twin; the association persisted after controlling for previous symptoms. Internalizing here refers to internally directed difficulties, such as anxiety and depressive distress. The design supported an environmental contribution to victimization, although it was not a randomized trial and did not rule out any concomitant non-shared differences.

The result doesn't need to be exaggerated to be valid. It doesn't establish that all victimized children will have the same outcome. It doesn't look for the fragility gene in those who have suffered the most. It introduces a comparison capable of narrowing down some alternative explanations and makes it more difficult to attribute the difficulty entirely to a shared predisposition. The same school can contain two different social conditions. In one, the child walks through the corridor unannounced; in the other, he knows someone is waiting to harm him. The corridor is shared. The exposure is not.

For a school, the consequence is not waiting for an epigenetic test before protecting. The obligation to intervene in an abuse is not born from the discovery of a molecular modification. Data can strengthen the understanding of the consequences; the wrong and the power to stop it already exist. It would be a regression to ask the child's body to provide a certificate of damage so that their words can be heard. Research must not become the threshold of dignity.

And it would be another mistake to see the non-victimized twin as proof that it was enough to react better. Differences in exposure are precisely what comparison takes seriously. Before comparing reactions, we must understand what each was forced to react to. The civil question is not why one was strong enough and the other was not. It is what made the oppression

possible, who could stop it, and what conditions can now help those who suffered it. We are not anticipating a complete theory of reparation. We are establishing who owns the work that cannot be left to the more vulnerable.

The case is not a void among the causes

The word noise may seem like a technical way of saying irrelevance. In biology, it also refers to real fluctuations: for example, differences in the number or timing of molecule production. In 2002, Michael Elowitz, Arnold Levine, Eric Siggia, and Peter Swain designed an experiment on Escherichia coli capable of distinguishing intrinsic and extrinsic contributions to gene expression variability. Fluorescent proteins used as expression indicators allowed them to follow it within cells. The result provided the basis for a quantitative analysis of noise in genetic networks; it did not measure the emergence of human personality, but it showed that genetic uniformity and functional uniformity are not synonymous.

Intrinsic and extrinsic here indicate the relationship with the process and cellular context being studied. They do not mean genetic and familial, respectively. In the first case, we consider variations inherent in expression steps; in the second, differences in other components and conditions that influence that process. The terminology changes scale with respect to studies on families. If we transfer a term without transferring its definition, we believe we have linked two studies and have merely created a misunderstanding. A bacterium has not received a different upbringing because its gene expression differs from that of another.

Furthermore, not everything we call chance has the same status. A molecular fluctuation, the time a person arrives at an intersection, and an undetected variable do not constitute a single explanatory category. Some phenomena are described probabilistically; others appear unpredictable because we lack sufficient information. It's not necessary here to resolve whether every event is in principle determined. What's important is to prevent our inability to predict from being mistaken for a demonstration of freedom, or the presence of a probabilistic process from being mistaken for hidden deliberation.

Noise is not a choice. A fluctuation ignores reason, accepts no commitment, and cannot be held accountable for its consequences. But it is not necessarily without effects either. In a system, a variation can be attenuated or preserved and amplified. To determine when this occurs, one must study the concrete dynamics. The image of a small deviation becoming a great distance is seductive; we must not apply it indiscriminately to every fever or every word. Many differences compensate for each other. Many events do not leave the lasting consequences that retrospective narrative attributes to them.

It is this second half of the argument that protects us from the fatalism of small causes. If every adult action were an irreversible crossroads, treatment would become impossible: the speaker would have to know the listener's entire future history before uttering a single sentence. We don't possess that knowledge, and it isn't required of us. What is required is a proportionate judgment about risk, a willingness to observe the effects and, where possible, to correct. Chance makes control incomplete; it doesn't make attention useless. Responsibility doesn't require omniscience.

For the same reason, a fever must be treated precisely in this argument. An episode can interrupt a presence, alter a schedule, cause a missed class or meeting. We have not demonstrated that that fever has rewritten an epigenome or permanently altered a life. If in

our scene a little girl is missing on the day a group of friends is formed, we have suggested a possible social connection. To know whether it occurred, testimonies and observations would be needed. The story illustrates a temporal structure; it does not construct a biological causal link.

A story can begin with an event without an author and continue through acts that have authors. The fact that the beginning is fortuitous does not make every subsequent consequence fortuitous. If a humiliation occurs due to mistaken identity, the error may be accidental with respect to the person who suffers it; the humiliator and the bystander may have specific responsibilities. Chance does not wash away the act. This is a key point for the book: distinguishing what happens without deliberation from what is done within the conditions that that event created.

Forty animals in the same possibility

In 2013, Julia Freund and her colleagues followed forty inbred female mice in a large, enriched environment, recording their movements for three months. Exploratory trajectories diverged over time. A measure of the distribution of exploration across the landscape was associated with the adult hippocampal neurogenesis detected at the end. The study provided a model for investigating how behavioral and brain differences emerge in a nominally common environment. Association alone did not determine causal direction; the hypothesized processes of epigenetic divergence were not measured as an explanation for the result.

This clarification is important because it would be easy to turn it into our own little experimental theater of the Self. The mouse that explores the most does not become the person who chooses his or her own destiny. Neurogenesis measured in rodents cannot be translated into an identical quantitative effect in adult humans. And inbreeding does not eliminate any possible genetic variation or prior developmental difference. The value of the experiment is more concrete: it makes it possible to observe, with a recording density difficult to achieve in human life, the progressive formation of different trajectories.

The enriched environment contains possibilities that each animal navigates differently. Describing the same structure does not yet describe the set of encounters each individual has with it. This principle is not new in ordinary language: a library can be the same for two readers and contain two paths. The novelty of the work is having linked an observed history of activity to a body measurement. The library is merely an analogy, and the work on mice does not demonstrate that reading a certain book produces a certain number of new neurons in a person.

We can, however, learn to ask a better question. Not just what environment was made available, but what activity became possible within it, what activity was performed, and what changes were detected. Between opportunity and use there is a process. Between use and consequence there is another problem of causality. Singularity does not reside in a metaphysical distance between these steps; it resides in the fact that their sequence can differ and that, to understand it, we must follow it. Data has a temporal depth that a list of conditions does not possess.

The book's powerful interpretation begins when we extend this focus to a person's life. We say that the environment is not merely received: it is encountered by an already organized organism, whose activity can contribute to subsequent expositions. This interpretation is compatible with many findings, but it is not a sufficient explanation for every divergence. It

remains to be determined when the activity includes a recognized intention, an evaluation of reasons, and a capacity to interrupt. The mouse leads us to the question of activity. It does not provide the answer regarding the moral subject.

The sequence is as important as the list

Let's imagine two twins again, this time at the end of high school. Both encountered a teacher who encouraged them and a teacher who treated them unfairly. In summary, their experiences coincide: one favorable relationship, one unfavorable. But for one, the encouragement precedes the injustice; for the other, it comes after a period of renunciation. The consequences could be different. We don't know just because we've given the example. We know that a list without chronological order doesn't even allow us to explore the possibility.

If a process depends on its previous state, the order of events can matter. Not every organism nor every function responds to this dependency in the same way. In human storytelling, it becomes visible when a sentence opens something up for one person and arrives too early or too late for another. But acknowledging the problem does not prove that every difference in meaning has a methylation signature. Meaning can be investigated on the psychological and relational level; the molecular mechanism must be demonstrated at its own level. Historicity does not exempt us from choosing the relevant measure.

A divergence can also generate new exposures. An interest leads to frequenting a place; that place leads to meeting someone; the relationship makes an activity feasible that wasn't possible before. Initiative, opportunity, and chance coexist in this sequence. It's not necessary to assign a universal percentage to each to understand that eliminating one falsifies the description. Nor does it need to be called every initiative free. An interest can be pursued without reflection; a relationship can be endured; an activity can continue because alternatives are lacking. Following a trajectory means preserving these differences, not celebrating it retrospectively.

The timing of the event is therefore not a decorative detail. It is part of the causal question. A generic statement like "both had a good teacher" can obscure the duration of the meeting, the type of task, the position of each, and what had already happened. We must not multiply variables until an explanation becomes impossible to refute. We must formulate those that an adequate design can verify. The singular story introduces work to science; it does not introduce an area that is in principle exempt from verification.

For twins, there is also a relationship that the label itself makes significant: each is part of the other's environment. One can accompany, compete, represent a comparison, offer assistance. Roles can shift. We don't have a result here that assigns a frequency or effect to these possibilities. We do have a logical consequence of the relationship: the couple is not composed of two individuals, each exposed only to a common external background. It is also composed of two people who meet, and that meeting has two positions.

This introduces a further difficulty to the moral interpretation of difference. If one becomes the measure of the other, comparison can take over the narrative both tell of themselves. A success becomes a relative advantage; a suffering becomes a setback; a need becomes what the other lacks. It's a relational possibility that we can't attribute to every couple. The civil consequence is to leave room for non-comparative descriptions: what do you desire, what do you lack, what is happening to you. The question posed to one shouldn't be continually resolved by the other's response.

The objection that takes the choice out of the picture

Now we must give the floor to those who refuse to be convinced. Their best objection doesn't deny a single piece of research cited. It says: you've shown early genetic differences, epigenetic variations, infections, social exposures, behavioral fluctuations and trajectories. All of this is compatible with a world in which every action depends on previous processes. You haven't shown a subject who adds anything to causality. You're moving from the impossibility of predicting a life to the assumption that someone can choose that life. It's a leap that twins don't warrant.

The objection continues. Even what we call initiative could be the expression of a condition the person did not choose: temperament, fatigue, expectations, opportunities received. The ability to break a habit could depend on the help received and the state of the body at that moment. If a divergence originates in noise, its development does not suddenly make it autonomous. Calling the entire process "Self" risks changing the vocabulary without changing the explanation. You cannot demonstrate freedom by adding a name to complexity.

The criticism also strikes at our most ambitious statement: the present selects the future. A selection can be an effect, not a choice in the moral sense. A filter selects what passes; a cell responds to signals; a system maintains certain states. None of these examples establishes that a person could have acted differently, all things being equal. If the book uses the same verb for metabolism and for a commitment, it must state the difference. Otherwise, it achieves freedom by slipping along a word.

We accept the criticism where it is justified. The discordance of monozygotes does not demonstrate metaphysical free will. A mutation does not demonstrate it; an epigenetic modification does not demonstrate it; the unpredictability of a trajectory does not demonstrate it. Not even an observable margin of intervention alone decides what would have happened in a universe in which every condition had been identically restored. The data we have examined question the evolution of organisms. They do not resolve a dispute over the ultimate basis of the possibility of doing otherwise.

An even more concrete objection comes from the person who is unable to change. If the Self can interrupt, why do I continue? The argument can become a tribunal: illness as a lack of regulation, suffering as a misinterpretation, habit as a guilty signature. It's not enough to respond that intervention is difficult. We must acknowledge that it may be unavailable at a given moment, hindered by a condition, insufficient to address a damage. The difference between two twins is not a ranking of the way they inhabited their own bodies.

The chapter must survive this objection by renouncing part of its seduction. We cannot promise that understanding historicity will immediately give us power over it. We cannot transform every process into a gesture. The term epigenesis is valuable only if it sharpens the distinction between what we undergo, what we do without deliberation, and what, under certain conditions, we can evaluate. By mixing these categories, the book has failed to find a third term: it has created a misunderstanding.

The answer comes after the fact

The distinction that allows us to advance concerns origin and response. We don't necessarily choose the event that triggers a situation. We can, under certain conditions, recognize something about that situation, give reasons, ask for help, repeat an act, or try to interrupt it. These capacities have a history and limits. Calling them capacities doesn't require us to

imagine them outside the causal world. It requires us to study how they are available, what hinders them, and what difference their exercise makes. This is the book's philosophical position, not a result derived from methylation.

If a person changes their situation by requesting a visit, the act can have causes and consequences. The fact that it has causes does not make the request nonexistent. However, it does not guarantee full freedom in any sense of the word. We can evaluate whether the person had information, viable alternatives, coercion, or the capacity to understand. These are more limited questions than metaphysical indeterminism, and they are already necessary to discuss consent, responsibility, and assistance. A human margin must not become absolute to merit attention.

Noise, therefore, does not transform into choice. It can contribute to a state in which a choice, if conditions permit, will be exercised. A fever can cause someone to miss an encounter; a missed encounter can change an opportunity; the person can subsequently decide to seek another. We are not reconstructing an empirical case. We are separating the different statuses of the steps. The first happens; the second depends on a concatenation; the third, in the example, involves deliberation. Calling all three epigenesis can be useful only if the term does not erase the distinctions.

We can then specify the philosophical extension of the book: epigenesis here refers to the historical formation of the body-mind unity, in which some processes are undergone, others occur without awareness, and some acts become the object of evaluation. The present selects in the minimal sense that a concrete sequel unfolds within it; the Self chooses in the most demanding sense only where pertinent capacities to sense, understand, and intervene exist. These two formulations are not interchangeable. The first concerns becoming; the second raises the question of the subject.

Difference also defines full responsibility for a present action. We can demand accountability for an action according to the power, information, and capabilities available. We cannot demand the same degree of control from everyone, nor assign full responsibility where the ability to understand or act is lacking. This limitation does not arbitrarily attenuate the duty of those who exercise power. It makes it more precise. Those who possess alternatives, knowledge, and authority must also be accountable for the conditions they leave to others, especially when others cannot yet change them.

Historicity doesn't mean we're required to narrate ourselves as the authors of every step. It means that a cause encountered becomes part of the subsequent situation, with effects that must be assessed. A person can acknowledge harm without recognizing themselves in the harm; they can accept a limitation without making it their entire identity. These are possibilities to be argued and supported, not guaranteed outcomes. The next chapter will ask what makes this recognition possible and who, precisely, is the one who feels the limitation as their own.

Two people ask for two listens

For a parent, the consequence begins when two children receive the same offer and respond differently. Fairness doesn't consist of forcing them to produce the same response to demonstrate that the offer was equal. It also consists of verifying whether the offer was actually accessible to each. An explanation may be clear to one but require more time for the other; an activity may be desired by both but feasible for only one. We shouldn't derive an

educational protocol from this chapter. We can derive from it the duty not to consider the evaluation concluded upon the description of what the adult has given.

This duty also has its limits. Parents do not possess a mastery capable of neutralizing every difference, and they do not have to pursue it. They can observe concrete needs, ask for expert help, modify a verifiable situation. They can even tolerate not knowing why a preference has emerged in one child and not the other. Uncertainty does not justify abandonment; nor does it require constant scrutiny of the child's every gesture. A child has the right to receive attention without becoming the problem that attention is intended to solve.

For teachers, comparing twins is particularly tempting. A successful sibling seems to demonstrate that the conditions are sufficient and that the other must put in the same effort. But proof of individual sufficiency doesn't depend on the sibling's performance. We can ask for the work required for a task and together verify whether the instructions, time, and support are appropriate. There's no point in abolishing all comparisons between performances. We need to prevent one person's performance from becoming a moral test against another.

A teacher can also distinguish an observable problem from a comparative label. If a student doesn't intervene, comparing them with their expansive sibling won't explain the silence. It may be necessary to discuss them separately, to determine whether there is exclusion, difficulty with the task, or a preference that doesn't require correction. Singularity doesn't require finding pathology in every discrepancy. It requires not assuming that the meaning of the discrepancy is already known. The listener must allow the response to refute the question it came with.

For a physician, family history remains informative. The chapter does not suggest ignoring it or replacing assessment with a life story. It suggests that the co-twin is a relevant source, never an interchangeable record. When one is ill, the other's fear deserves information commensurate with the condition and available evidence. When one is not, their absence of symptoms does not justify minimizing those of the other. A high probability should be communicated without turning it into a premature diagnosis; uncertainty should be communicated without turning it into disinterest.

The patient may ask, "Why me and not you?" Sometimes medicine has useful information; other times it lacks a complete, individual answer. A good answer doesn't invent the psychological cause that ends the conversation. It can explain what has been identified, what remains to be verified, and what decisions are now possible. This is a civilized criterion of communication, not a clinical recommendation for a specific illness. A person can tolerate a limited level of knowledge more easily than a false knowledge that attributes to them, along with the suffering, responsibility for having caused it.

For those who decide on collective resources, twins raise a question about the form of equality. A service offered equally may not be equally usable. Access requires time, transportation, understanding, continuity, and sometimes different support. This is a normative consequence, not the formula of genetic research. Individual differences do not justify automatically interpreting a worse outcome as less meritorious. Evaluating a policy must also ask who is left out of a formally shared opportunity, and for what observable reason.

Recognizing differences in need does not mean promising identical outcomes. It means choosing public criteria by which to offer and evaluate support. Neither heritability nor

discrepancy alone determines those criteria. High heritability does not establish that a policy is useless; large, non-shared variability does not establish which policy works. These are questions that require intervention studies and arguments of justice. Descriptive data contribute to the decision, but cannot authorize it alone. Even a biologically constrained outcome can create an obligation to provide assistance.

Here, chance has a specific political consequence. If part of the differences depend on unchosen events, the distribution of benefits cannot be entirely described as a distribution of merit. This does not mean that every outcome should be compensated equally. Needs, costs, and the power to intervene must be discussed. The development lottery requires a justification for distributive choices; it does not offer a complete policy already contained in biology. No one can derive a public balance sheet from a snapshot of two epigenomes.

A person alone in a room may ultimately experience this chapter as the end of an impossible confrontation. A sibling, a friend, someone who grew up in seemingly similar circumstances has navigated a difficult situation in a different way. The other's outcome is real and can teach us something; it doesn't prove that our own outcome was entirely avoidable. Understanding this distinction doesn't require us to give up our initiative. It allows us to seek concrete leverage without starting with the accusation of not having been strong enough. The leverage may be small, and it may require someone to help us achieve it.

It may not even be available today. The book must make room for this phrase, without treating it as a lack of faith in plasticity. A theory of transformation becomes inhuman when it demands that each person immediately transform their condition to confirm it. The present task may consist of receiving treatment, making a day bearable, postponing self-judgment. These are examples of what can be valuable, not a universal ranking. Margin does not acquire dignity only when it produces a change visible to others.

The face that cannot answer for the other

Let's return to the sisters in the waiting room. Now their similarity seems no less important, but more precise. It says something about their origins and the characteristics that can be compared. It doesn't say what world each body has already encountered, what process it has preserved, or what significant difference has not yet been measured. It doesn't even say what gesture is possible for each of them today. The file may contain common data and distinct data. The relationship may contain a shared fear and two needs that require different words.

The sister without symptoms can accompany without becoming living proof of guilt. The sister who has symptoms can receive help without being forced to explain why the confrontation isn't recurring. Their shared life wasn't false because their bodies took different paths. And the present difference doesn't falsify what they shared. Origin and history are held together, even when we can't trace every step of the former from the latter.

We can now use the book's term without assigning it a cause it doesn't possess. Epigenesis, in the philosophical extension here declared, names the historicity of the organism: the present of a body-mind that has come to be this way through processes, exposures, and activities. The measured epigenetic modifications are one of the biological objects that can participate in this investigation, not the universal certificate of the entire thesis. And choice, when possible, is a particular form of activity within history, not the name of everything that happens.

But we're missing something that no comparison between champions can provide on its own. How does that story become our own? Who feels fear, distinguishes pain from a thought about

pain, recognizes a voice and says it belongs to the person next to them? It's not enough to answer the brain, if we've already left out the perceived body with that name; it's not enough to answer the person, if we've merely renamed the question. The next step requires looking at the unit experiencing the process without imagining a small decision-maker hidden within it.

Before that step, there remains a simple scene. The doctor opens the door and pronounces a name. The two sisters stand, but only one must answer the first question. The other can add a memory, offer a hand, wait. Even the closest relationship maintains a distance that care must respect: no one can feel exactly what is happening to the other. Their shared origin has allowed us to narrow down some explanations. The name spoken reopens the question of who is present.

Similarity can help us understand a person; it doesn't authorize us to respond with someone else's life.

Chapter Sources

The references support the empirical and documentary claims they are associated with in the text. The scenes are clearly imagined. The philosophical extension of epigenesis and its civil consequences are the book's arguments, distinct from the experimental results.

Jónsson, H. et al. (2021). Differences between germline genomes of monozygotic twins. Nature Genetics, 53, 27–34. Source

Hilker, R. et al. (2018). Heritability of Schizophrenia and Schizophrenia Spectrum Based on the Nationwide Danish Twin Register. Biological Psychiatry, 83, 492–498. Source

Arbet, J., McGue, M., & Basu, S. (2020). A robust and unified framework for estimating heritability in twin studies using generalized estimating equations. Statistics in Medicine. Source

Khalil, A. et al. (2025). ISUOG Practice Guidelines updated: role of ultrasound in twin pregnancy. Ultrasound in Obstetrics & Gynecology, 65, 253–276. Consensus document for the prenatal setting discussed in the chapter. Source

Ollikainen, M. et al. (2010). DNA methylation analysis of multiple tissues from newborn twins reveals both genetic and intrauterine components to variation in the human neonatal epigenome. Human Molecular Genetics, 19, 4176–4188. Source

van Dongen, J. et al. (2021). Identical twins carry a persistent epigenetic signature of early genome programming. Nature Communications, 12, 5618. Source

Fraga, M.F. et al. (2005). Epigenetic differences arise during the lifetime of monozygotic twins. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 102, 10604–10609. Source

Talens, R.P. et al. (2012). Epigenetic variation during the adult lifespan: cross-sectional and longitudinal data on monozygotic twin pairs. Aging Cell, 11, 694–703. Source

Brodin, P. et al. (2015). Variation in the human immune system is largely driven by non-heritable influences. Cell, 160, 37–47. Source

Ingelfinger, F., Gerdes, L.A. et al. (2022). Twin study reveals non-heritable immune perturbations in multiple sclerosis. Nature, 603, 152–158. Source

Jaffe, A. E., & Irizarry, R. A. (2014). Accounting for cellular heterogeneity is critical in epigenome-wide association studies. Genome Biology, 15, R31. Source

Relton, C. L., & Davey Smith, G. (2012). Two-step epigenetic Mendelian randomization: a strategy for establishing the causal role of epigenetic processes in pathways to disease. International Journal of Epidemiology, 41, 161–176. Source

Rakyan, V.K. et al. (2011). Identification of Type 1 Diabetes–Associated DNA Methylation Variable Positions That Precede Disease Diagnosis. PLoS Genetics, 7, e1002300. Source

Rijsdijk, F. V., & Sham, P. C. (2002). Analytic approaches to twin data using structural equation models. Briefings in Bioinformatics, 3, 119–133. Source

Turkheimer, E., & Waldron, M. (2000). Nonshared environments: a theoretical, methodological, and quantitative review. Psychological Bulletin, 126, 78–108. Source

Asbury, K., Dunn, J. F., Pike, A., & Plomin, R. (2003). Nonshared environmental influences on individual differences in early behavioral development: a monozygotic twin differences study. Child Development, 74, 933–943. Source

Arseneault, L. et al. (2008). Being bullied as an environmentally mediated contributing factor to children's internalizing problems: a study of twins discordant for victimization. Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 162, 145–150. Source

Elowitz, M. B., Levine, A. J., Siggia, E. D., & Swain, P. S. (2002). Stochastic Gene Expression in a Single Cell. Science, 297, 1183–1186. Source

Freund, J. et al. (2013). Emergence of individuality in genetically identical mice. Science, 340, 756–759. Source



Movement I — The third term

3. Self: the unit that children indicate as whole

Imagine a four-year-old boy in front of a sheet of paper almost as big as himself. The adult next to him has drawn a shape and asks him to indicate where it is. The boy places a hand on his chest. The adult asks if he's just there. He looks at his fingers, then his knees, then back at her. He runs his palm over his shirt and says, "I am all of this." It's a fictional scene, not the report of an experiment. It doesn't support a universal theory of childhood. It serves to expose a difficulty that our definitions, when they become too secure, tend to hide.

The child isn't necessarily claiming that thought resides in the chest. Perhaps he learned that gesture from adults; perhaps he's pointing to the most convenient area to reach; perhaps he's answering a question he only partially understands. We can't turn his palm into a philosophical treatise. Yet the second response breaks with one of our habits: pretending that, to be real, a person must be in one place like an object inside a box. When he says **"all this** ," he doesn't offer an anatomical location. He presents himself.

On the sheet of paper, the shape has a clear outline. Inside that outline, in the real body, things are happening that the child doesn't know, things that would continue even if he couldn't name any of its parts. Meanwhile, he feels the floor under his feet, the pressure of a hand on the fabric, perhaps the hunger approaching. He has a preference for the color with which to fill the drawing. He remembers who accompanied him. He wishes the question would end, so he could begin painting. These aren't elements lined up by a small landowner hidden somewhere: they are aspects of that presence, gathered enough to allow him to answer.

An adult can describe it from the outside. They can measure its height, record its heart rate, observe its behavior, reconstruct parts of its history. The child, in ways that don't coincide with any of these operations, experiences it. Its presence is accessible to others, but the experience it is having doesn't transfer to the observer. Even when we find common words, we don't become interchangeable. An accurate description of someone doesn't occupy the place from which that someone feels.

The question left open by the twins comes here. We've followed two bodily trajectories and learned that sharing much isn't enough to have a single life. Now we need to understand to whom that life happens. If a biological story takes shape through many conditions, who feels it as their own? It's not enough to respond with a name written on the medical record. Nor is it enough to add **"consciousness,"** as if a complex word would render the explanation useless. The subject of epigenesis must have a place in the argument without being surreptitiously introduced as the cause of everything the argument hasn't yet clarified.

We will call the Self the present organization of a body capable of experience and, when it has the capacity, of a history that returns to its own through memory. This is the philosophical proposal of this book, supported and limited by its engagement with research. It is not the name of an organ, a gene, or an entity that neuroscience has isolated once and for all. It helps us think together about being there and

knowing ourselves as someone, without confusing them. We can feel before we can tell; we can preserve forms of presence when the narrative is interrupted.

This distinction makes the chapter more demanding than a simple celebration of unity. A living body does not by itself guarantee every form of consciousness. Experience does not render every bodily process transparent. Memory does not preserve an entire life, and identity is not a snapshot of character. To understand what holds a subject together, we must be able to distinguish what constitutes it. The problem begins when we transform each distinction into a definitive separation, then search for the secret stitch that should mend what we have severed.

The child places his brush on the paper and misses the margin. The paint passes through the outline of the figure. This second gesture proves nothing about the self; it would be too easy to turn it into a conclusive allegory. It simply gives us the concrete situation from which we began: a person busy doing something, with a body that allows her to do so, a brief history behind her, and a present that cannot be lived in her place. The question of the chapter will be whether we can understand that unity without pretending it is immobile.

Who says I and who is indicated

When I say **"my hand hurts** ," I'm not performing a surgical separation between a disembodied self and a hand that contractually belongs to it. I'm distinguishing, within a single situation, the location of the pain and the subject to whom that pain occurs. Language requires this articulation. I can speak of my hand precisely because I'm not obliged to describe, at the same time, the whole person. The mistake isn't making the distinction. It's taking it as proof that the one who feels is made of a different substance from what is felt.

William James, in the chapter on self-consciousness in his Principles of Psychology, distinguished the knowing self from the knowing self, without reducing the problem to identifying a hidden owner. He included bodily, social, and internal aspects in the empirical self; his analysis already made it difficult to imagine a self exhausted by anatomical inventory alone (James, 1890). This historical distinction is useful here as a question, not as a neuroscientific model to be imported unchanged. The reader who observes himself and the person being observed are not necessarily two people.

Let's look at a photograph taken many years ago. The face portrayed is younger; perhaps it's happy in a way that makes us uncomfortable today. We can say, **"That's me** ." We can add, **"I no longer recognize myself."** The two sentences don't cancel each other out. The first establishes a continuity, the second signals a shift in the relationship with that continuity. The speaker doesn't have to choose between the impossibility of change and the obligation to become, with every change, a stranger without a past. Recognizing someone as oneself doesn't mean approving everything that someone has done or desired.

The pronoun combines different functions. Sometimes **"I"** signifies the starting point of an experience: I see the rain from the window. Sometimes it designates a recognizable figure: I am the person who lives here. Sometimes it takes on a history: I was there that evening. Sometimes it engages a future: I will come tomorrow. A theory of the Self must explain how these uses can refer to the same life without assuming they are identical. Perceiving the rain does not require summarizing one's biography. Keeping a promise requires something that perception alone does not contain.

The difference between perspective and description is particularly clear when others know something about us we don't. They may recognize a habit of ours before we notice it, notice the tiredness we minimize, remember a phrase we've forgotten. This doesn't mean they become the subject of our experience. On the other hand, our being the ones living that experience doesn't make us infallible about its origin, its meaning, or its consequences. The first person has unique access to what they feel; they don't have a general right to the final word on every fact that concerns them.

If someone says they're in pain, listening is essential. This need doesn't mean they know which tissue causes it. If they say they were humiliated, their experience matters; other testimonies may also be needed to reconstruct what happened. The unity we seek doesn't abolish the difference between experience and knowledge. It makes it habitable: I can actually be the one to whom something happens and still need others to understand it. Cognitive dependence doesn't erase subjectivity.

This is why we'll use the expression "I-me." It doesn't indicate the joining of two previously independent pieces. It maintains a tension: I am the one who lives and, at the same time, someone about whom things can be said. I feel myself from within, but I can also appear to myself, be remembered, described, misunderstood. My unity is not the absence of this tension. It is the way, always partial, in which a life manages to maintain it. One can lose clarity about oneself without losing all experience; one can possess an accurate description of oneself and feel alienated from what one is experiencing.

The word "Self" will therefore help us avoid a false choice. If we retain only the "I," we risk a presence without history and without conditions. If we retain only the "me," we risk a very well-described object that no one seems to be present to anymore. Neither risk is resolved with a brilliant definition. We must ask research what functions it distinguishes, what relationships it finds, what interruptions it observes. Then we must take responsibility for the interpretation we make of those results.

Damasio's proposal

Antonio Damasio offers a suitable lexicon to begin this investigation. His distinction between the proto-Self, the nuclear Self, and the autobiographical Self does not introduce three overlapping individuals. He articulates a theory of how an organism can sustain different levels of experience and self-reference. In his work, the living body is not simply an object represented after consciousness has already emerged: it participates in the conditions from which experience emerges. The theory has undergone successive developments, and the terms should not be treated as definitive labels applied to three areas of the brain.

In Self Comes to Mind, Damasio describes the proto-Self through neural configurations that represent aspects of the organism's state, with an important role played by structures that receive and organize bodily information. This elementary organization does not coincide with reflective knowledge of one's own identity; in the model, it is associated with the primordial feelings of living (Damasio, 2010). Calling it a proto-Self does not mean that a newborn contains a miniature of the adult, nor that every physiological regulation is conscious. It is a theoretical term for a layer of organization that precedes the narrative of the self.

Let's consider, for our own example, the difference between two ways of talking about hunger. A table can describe metabolic variables; a person can say they're hungry. The second statement doesn't inform us of all the variables contained in the first. The sensation isn't a

technical report compiled by the organism. And the table, even if it were much more precise, doesn't reproduce the fact of being hungry. Damasio's question forces us not to skip this step: how can a condition of living become something that is felt? The proto-Self isn't the complete answer; it indicates a part of the explanatory work.

In his 1998 article on the biology of consciousness, Damasio distinguishes between a core consciousness, generated transiently in relation to an object, and an extended consciousness sustained by the construction of an autobiographical self. In the former case, the elementary sense of knowing does not require language or an articulated autobiographical memory; in the latter, personal memories, referring to the past and even to anticipated experiences, become decisive (Damasio, 1998). **"Object** ," here, does not simply mean an external thing: the theory concerns what the organism enters into relationship with in the course of experience.

The nuclear Self, or core Self, can be approached with an example, without turning the example into a demonstration. A door suddenly closes. Before we ask ourselves who closed it, we notice the sound and our reaction. The scene has already been experienced somewhere: here, for us. We didn't have to summon our curriculum vitae to have that experience. The core Self, in Damasio's proposal, concerns this elementary presence of the subject in the encounter, not the commentary the subject will later write about himself.

The theory is more interesting if we abandon the idea of a theatrical succession. There is no first actor who regulates the body, a second who observes, and a third who narrates. Functions support and modulate one another; adult life does not have to climb three steps every morning to access a final self. The distinction helps us recognize that being conscious of something, recognizing oneself, and rebuilding one's life are not a single, indivisible achievement. This is the point the book takes as its conceptual guide. It does not claim that all formulations of the model have become scientific consensus.

The autobiographical self provides a personal duration. It allows us to situate an encounter within a story: that voice is familiar to me, I was a child in that house, I've already made a promise to that person. The present can thus contain references to what is not present. It doesn't simply receive the world; it encounters it through a story that guides recognition and expectations. This formulation is our reading of the problem, not the experimental measurement of a biographical substance.

We can then see a difference that current discourse obscures. Being present at an experience is not the same as being able to write an account of it. A child who cannot yet explain the reasons for crying does not necessarily mean that crying is outside of any experience. A person with language difficulties does not become devoid of interiority because we do not receive the words we expect. Naturally, in individual cases, establishing what a person may be feeling requires appropriate assessments: the model does not allow for remote diagnoses. Its philosophical value is to prevent the adult narrative from becoming the exclusive measure of subjective existence.

In their most recent works, Antonio and Hanna Damasio propose a foundational role for homeostatic feelings in consciousness: experiences linked to the organism's living conditions, its well-being or discomfort, capable of conferring lived meaning to regulation. This is a theory of the biology of consciousness, with an evolutionary hypothesis on the function of these feelings; it is not a demonstration that has settled the debate on the origin of experience (Damasio and Damasio, 2022). It interests us because it situates the question **"What does it**

feel like?" within the problem **"How does this organism continue to live?"** , without making the two questions equivalent.

Even homeostasis must be understood with measure. A system can regulate a variable without any reason to attribute an experience to it. The thermostat doesn't become an ego because it reacts to temperature. In the Damasios' theory, the issue concerns the biological and neural organization of feelings, not the simple presence of a control circuit. The book remains an open question as to how such conditions sustain experience. Transforming the word **"homeostasis"** into a magic formula would mean replacing the old, hidden soul with a new, hidden label.

The distinction between emotion and feeling helps keep the issue concrete. In Damasio's lexicon, emotions encompass patterns of the organism's response, while feelings concern the experience of bodily conditions and their changes; his research and interpretations connect them without making them synonymous (Damasio, 2003). In our ordinary lives, this invites us to distinguish a reaction, how it is experienced, and how it is recognized. Trembling, feeling agitated, and calling that agitation "fear" may refer to the same situation, but they are not three perfectly overlapping descriptions.

The advantage of this lexicon is not to provide us with a list of the parts of the soul. It is to allow us to stop attributing all the operations of the subject to a single verb. "Feeling" does not always equate to " **knowing** ," and " **knowing** " does not always equate to " **remembering** ." If a person doesn't clearly recognize what they feel, their difficulty doesn't prove that the body is alien to the mind. It shows how much work is required for a bodily condition to become a recognizable and communicable experience. That work belongs to the unity we are seeking; it is not performed by an external judge.

Feel from within

Interoception is the name given to the processing of signals regarding the internal state of the body. It's not just the conscious perception of the heartbeat: it includes processes of detection, integration, and interpretation, many of which don't reach consciousness. The working paper by Khalsa and colleagues, born from discussions among scholars in the field, emphasizes the plurality of these processes and the difficulties of defining and measuring them precisely (Khalsa et al., 2018). For our topic, this is crucial: the body doesn't communicate with consciousness only when something breaks.

The most ordinary day offers fairly close examples. We're sitting reading, and at a certain point the position becomes uncomfortable. The words are the same, but we're no longer at the same receptiveness to them. We wait for someone after walking quickly: our breathing accompanies us through the wait. We eat after many hours, and the world seems less urgent. These examples don't isolate mechanisms, they don't demonstrate a general law of mood, and they don't replace research. They serve to remove the body from the sole scene of emergency. It's there even when we don't pay attention to it.

Not everything we sense is interoception in the strict sense. The pressure of a chair on our skin involves touch; the position of a limb involves proprioception; the sight of a face belongs to yet another modality. Our everyday experience can integrate these without preserving their scientific boundaries. Research must instead distinguish them to understand their specific contributions. None of these distinctions requires dividing a person into as many subjects. An

integrated experience can depend on different channels without being the simple sum of their labels.

This undermines a very seductive image: within the body, there is a pure voice, while the mind produces interpretations that distort it. It's a romantic way of re-imagining the separation we would like to overcome. Feeling the body is already an activity of the organism, with selections, integrations, and the possibility of error. Hunger doesn't speak an infallible language. A racing heart doesn't contain, written within itself, the social meaning of the situation. Trying to understand what we feel isn't a betrayal of the body; it's one of the activities through which we can better inhabit it.

Garfinkel and colleagues proposed an experimental distinction between interoceptive accuracy, subjectively reported sensitivity, and metacognitive awareness of accuracy. In their study of eighty participants, these aspects were distinguishable: performing well on a heart-related task, judging oneself sensitive to internal cues, and knowing how reliable one's performance was were not a single skill (Garfinkel et al., 2015). The term "awareness" had a technical meaning there; it was not a ranking of human consciousness as a whole. The distinction helps us understand why the confidence with which a person talks about their body does not automatically coincide with the accuracy of their perception.

The effect on our reasoning is immediate. If someone claims to be very attentive to their heart, we cannot infer that they accurately distinguish each beat. If someone else struggles in an experimental task, we cannot infer that they are less present to themselves in every moment of their life. A local result must remain local until there are reasons to extend it. Making the Self a unity does not mean granting each partial test the power to evaluate it entirely.

Even the evidence has a critical history. Desmedt, Luminet, and Corneille have shown that the task of counting one's heartbeats can significantly involve processes that go beyond directly feeling the heart: the participant's estimates, knowledge, and strategies can contribute to the outcome (Desmedt et al., 2018). It doesn't follow that interoception is a fiction. What follows is that we must verify what an instrument measures before assigning it a broader meaning. Bodily experience doesn't become less real because the first ruler used to study it isn't precise enough.

This point has a significance that goes beyond the laboratory. A culture passionate about measurement can mistake the availability of an indicator for the availability of the entire person. A sleep number, a frequency, a score can be useful; they become misleading if they erase the context in which they acquire meaning. There's no need to choose between the subject's testimony and the measurement. We need to ask what each makes accessible, what questions it leaves open, and when their disagreement merits investigation.

In 2004, Critchley and colleagues associated performance on a cardiac awareness task with activity and characteristics of the right anterior insula, helping to identify neural correlates of access to bodily signals (Critchley et al., 2004). This is a specific result. It does not prove that the self resides in that area, nor that every internal experience can be explained by it. The fact that a region contributes to a function does not make it the owner of the person. An anatomical correlation is not a subject's postal address.

The language of localization is both useful and dangerous precisely because it seems to answer our initial question. If we ask which region contributes to a task, seeking an anatomical answer is appropriate. If we ask where the person is and receive the name of that region, we

have changed the question without realizing it. The Self cannot be obtained by enlarging an image until it reaches its final viewer. Even the most accurate description of neural contributions must clarify how activities are organized, not simply elect a location as the sovereign center.

This does not diminish the importance of the brain. Without its organization, we could not perform the activities we are discussing. Rather, it invites us to study it in its relationship with the organism and the world it encounters. The distinction between the brain and the rest of the body is scientifically necessary for many questions. It becomes a mistake when the part is imagined as already complete, engaged only in receiving information from a shell. The body is not an administrative periphery of the self.

On a philosophical level, we therefore propose a precise reading of feeling from within. It is not the appearance of a visitor in the chambers of the body. It is a way in which that life becomes experience, according to conditions that research continues to explore. This does not mean that every condition is experienced, nor is every variation immediately legible. The body that feels does not possess a window onto all its own causes. It possesses, when and as it is capable, a presence in what happens to it.

The discretion of this presence matters. Most of the time, we don't feel the need to locate ourselves. We get up, grab a cup, listen to a voice. Only when something hinders the action or changes the tone of the experience can the body become an explicit theme. If we studied it only when it surprises us, we would lose its role in the hours when it sustains us. The subject doesn't have to constantly look at himself to be present: he can be absorbed in the world, and that very absorption occurs in his life.

The hand that seems mine

We place a rubber hand on the table. The participant's real hand is hidden from view. If both are stroked in a coordinated manner, the coincidence between what is seen and what is felt can produce the impression that the visible hand belongs to one's own body. This is the paradigm made famous by the brief study by Botvinick and Cohen in 1998. The manipulation linked vision, touch, and proprioception, demonstrating that bodily attribution can be influenced by their integration (Botvinick and Cohen, 1998). One doesn't have to truly believe that one's organism has created a new hand to feel something of that ownership.

The result is uncanny precisely because the participant may know the trick. Declarative knowledge of the situation and the bodily impression need not coincide at all times. I know the object is rubber, yet something in my experience may treat it as closer to me than it should be. This discrepancy does not prove the body is a fiction. It reveals a process of integration that, under ordinary conditions, we might not notice. It is easier to notice a function when a manipulation produces a discrepancy between its outcomes.

However, the outcomes must be distinguished. In a subsequent study, Rohde, Di Luca, and Ernst showed that the perceived shift in hand position and the reported feeling of belonging do not necessarily co-occur. The former cannot therefore be used, without caution, as an equivalent measure of the latter (Rohde et al., 2011). Here, too, research helps us, above all by preventing a shortcut. Saying "the sense of body is constructed" does not authorize treating all its components as a single effect, or each effect as general evidence for the non-existence of the self.

The philosophical interpretation we propose is more limited: experienced belonging is a result that needs to be explained. It is not simply the intellectual recognition of the skin's boundary, nor a certificate issued once at birth. The possibility of experimentally altering certain aspects of it makes its activity visible. However, we must preserve the distinction between the biological body, the representations that concern it, and the way it is experienced. An error in recognition does not create or erase the organism; it changes an experiential relationship with it.

In 2007, Lenggenhager and colleagues used a virtual body image and a conflict between sensory information to influence body identification and perceived self-localization. Participants could report belonging to the body seen before them and perceptually position themselves closer to it (Lenggenhager et al., 2007). The title of the article, "Video ergo sum," played on the famous Cartesian formula. The game was a title; the result involved a concrete manipulation of bodily awareness. It did not demonstrate an effective separation of consciousness from the body, nor the possibility of translating a person into an image.

If we take this result outside the laboratory, we must also introduce a limit. A person can feel themselves in a place that doesn't exactly match the measured position of the organism; this doesn't mean they have physically left it. The discrepancy between experienced location and physical location is the question to be studied, not a pass to any metaphysics. The unity we're talking about doesn't consist in the infallibility of perceived boundaries. It consists in the fact that even an altered perception occurs in a lifetime, has conditions, and produces consequences for someone.

The vulnerability of feeling one's own can be more difficult to tolerate than the vulnerability of knowledge. If we miscalculate, we correct the result. If our body feels foreign to us, the difficulty can affect the very place where we live. This observation is not a diagnosis and does not serve to explain different clinical conditions with a single label. It reminds us why the problem of the Self is not an ornamental exercise: some of the functions that normally allow us to exist in the world can become fragile, and fragility must be understood without turning the person into a paradox.

In these cases, ordinary language retains something that a hasty theory would miss. We say, "I feel alien to myself." The sentence seems contradictory: if I am alien, who is the "me" to whom I am alien? Yet it communicates a comprehensible situation. A continuity can be recognized and yet not be experienced as expected. Someone's presence and their relationship with themselves are not a single variable. The expression signals a fracture within a life; it doesn't force us to invent two lives to make it grammatically possible.

Shaun Gallagher distinguished the minimal self, tied to present experience, from the narrative self, related to continuity and identity over time. In discussing the former, he separated the feeling of belonging from the sense of being the author of an action (Gallagher, 2000). The distinction is philosophical and serves to organize questions for cognitive science. It's useful for the book because a hand can be experienced as mine even when I'm not the one moving it voluntarily: the experience of belonging does not, by itself, confer dominion over everything the body does.

This is also the point where we must pause before the chapter on freedom. Saying "it's my body" is not the same as saying "I chose every event in it." Saying "I did it" requires understanding the sense in which the action was produced, known, and governed. Subjectivity cannot be introduced as a pass that transforms everything into a decision. Before evaluating

how much a person can be held accountable for an action, we must clarify who the person to whom that action belongs is and what functions are actually at play.

The rubber hand remains on the table when the participant leaves. The illusion ends; the object doesn't follow the person who felt a momentary belonging. This elementary detail helps us maintain the levels. An effect on feeling is not a migration of the organism. A modification of the organism is not automatically a conscious modification of feeling. Research studies the relationships between these levels; our task is to prevent surprise at a result from causing us to override relationships yet to be understood.

What children don't show

We can now return to the child in the opening without attributing to him a wisdom we didn't ask for. His gesture has narrative value because, in the scene, it precedes our desire to divide. It doesn't demonstrate that children possess an innate and complete conception of psychophysical unity. The chapter title points to a problem through an image: someone presents himself as whole, while we are tempted to search for the separate nucleus. Developmental research must be interrogated with more specific questions.

Brownell and colleagues studied sixty-one twenty- and thirty-month-old children with tasks involving the location of their body parts, their spatial organization, body size, and forms of self-awareness. The results indicated that, by thirty months, the children in the sample possessed an explicit, yet still rudimentary, representation of their own body structure and size (Brownell et al., 2010). This does not mean that they lacked bodily experience before that age, nor that all self-related abilities were already complete at that age. The result concerns what those tasks allowed us to observe.

One can therefore be a body that acts before knowing how to represent it in all the ways an adult requires. One can learn the name of a part and not yet fully understand its position in relation to the others. Competence emerges through differences that a generic expression, such as "the child discovers himself," risks flattening. The emergence of an explicit response does not necessarily coincide with the emergence of every function that makes it possible. We must distinguish what a life can already do from what it can claim to do.

The imagined gesture therefore remains an invitation to discipline, as well as to wonder. The adult should not impose his own dualism on the child, but neither should he turn him into the spokesperson of a rival philosophy. In either case, he would be deprived of the opportunity to be observed in his difference. Asking where he is can be a game, a difficult request, or a poorly formulated question. Understanding which of the three situations is occurring is more important than finding the perfect sentence for our book.

The problem also concerns language. When a child learns to say "I," he or she is acquiring a word that changes referent depending on who is speaking. The adult must listen to the context to understand what the child makes of it. We cannot measure the entire subjectivity of a pronoun. The first autobiographical story does not retroactively establish the right to have lived all the previous days. That life did not wait for our grammar to become that child's life.

Here, the distinction between science and philosophy becomes crucial. Research can study tasks, developmental times, behaviors, and neural conditions. The choice to recognize a person even when they fail the task we assigned them is an ethical commitment. It cannot be mechanically deduced from a score; it must be defended with reason. Our reasoning is that a

particular capacity does not exhaust what we must respond to in a human being. The child is not a promise of adult subjectivity whose value remains suspended until maturation.

This chapter isn't meant to exhaust childhood. It seeks to correct a measure that runs through it: taking the most complex form of the Self, that of an adult who knows how to tell his or her story, as the definition of all forms of personal presence. A theory that explains only those who already know how to compile their own story arrives too late at its object. And a society that behaves in the same way risks distributing consideration in proportion to the ability to explain oneself.

The story that becomes mine again

The autobiographical self introduces a further possibility: encountering oneself through something that isn't happening now. The photograph on the table, the name of a street, the taste of a food can become opportunities to recognize a duration. The past doesn't return as an intact body. It returns through present activities: we remember, recognize, tell a story, consult a document. The person remembering lives now, while referring to an event from back then. Confusing these two times would make it impossible to understand why the same event can acquire different meanings throughout life.

Imagine a woman who finds a letter written at seventeen. She didn't save it for a project: it remained in a box with photographs and receipts. She recognizes the handwriting, remembers who it was addressed to, but the certainty with which she formulated certain beliefs seems almost alien to her. There's no reason to diagnose something in this ordinary scrap. The woman encounters a real product of her own history and discovers that her relationship with it has changed. The document certifies certain words; it doesn't decide on its own what place they should have in her current life.

She may feel shame, tenderness, or irritation. She may say she didn't understand back then, but she may also realize that a concern from that time continues to haunt her. Continuity doesn't mean maintaining all her opinions. It includes the possibility of referring to abandoned opinions as something she's thought. To be the same person, she doesn't have to convince herself that the letter was already an impeccable version of the adult one. She can accept the past without ratifying it.

Autobiographical memory, however, has many forms and cannot be treated as a single, permanently available archive. The case of WJ, studied by Klein, Loftus, and Kihlstrom, showed that a temporary loss of access to episodic memories following a head injury could coexist with relatively stable assessments of one's personality traits. Responses collected during amnesia were consistent with those following its resolution (Klein et al., 1996). This case distinguishes access to lived episodes from the availability of self-knowledge. It does not demonstrate that every form of identity remains unchanged in any amnesia.

The conceptual effect is important. Knowing that you are a reserved person doesn't require, on every occasion, mentally reviewing every scene in which you were reserved. Knowledge can be available without the episodes that formed it being available. Conversely, precisely recalling a scene doesn't guarantee a correct understanding of your character. The history a person brings to the present is complex: it contains different accesses, and these accesses can have different destinies.

In 2012, Philippi and colleagues described patient R., who presented extensive bilateral damage in regions often associated with self-awareness, including the insula, anterior

cingulate, and medial prefrontal cortex, as well as severe amnesia. Evidence indicated the retention of many capacities for self-recognition, self-reference, and reflection, albeit with alterations in the autobiographical component. The authors interpreted the case as compatible with a more distributed organization of these functions (Philippi et al., 2012). This is a rare case, not a license to declare those regions superfluous in every brain or circumstance. Damasio was among the authors: comparison with a model must not result in fidelity to an overly simple image.

The recovered letter and the clinical cases are not equivalent examples. In the first scene, we imagined an ordinary experience; in the second, we have results observed in specific neurological conditions. We connect them only to clarify a question: in what ways can a person continue to be present to themselves? No honest answer can reduce everything to the integrity of a story. Memory is the constituent of many capacities; a person is not limited to the capacity that a single test can detect.

Narration, too, must be separated from memory. I can remember an episode and not yet have it placed in a narrative. I can possess a very orderly history of myself and leave out episodes that disturb it. I can choose a tone, a beginning, a causal connection. Narration gives communicable form to a duration, and can help us understand it; it can also rigidify it. Neither possibility authorizes us to decree that stories are always redeeming or always deceptive.

Galen Strawson, in Against Narrativity, criticized both the generalization that everyone necessarily experiences themselves as a narrative and the idea that organizing life narratively is a universal ethical requirement (Strawson, 2004). It's a philosophical objection that this book must take seriously. We can't declare a person less complete because they don't experience their own duration as a novel. Continuity can take forms that a narrator passionate about plots might not immediately recognize.

Our use of "story" will therefore be broader than that of a well-constructed narrative. A story is also a concrete succession of conditions and encounters, which can leave dispositions without being entirely available to memory. Saying that a life has a story doesn't mean it must be told with a convincing dramatic arc. Epigenesis concerns actual becoming; narration is one of the ways in which, when we are capable, we return to that becoming and orient it. The book would lose precision if it simply called both "identities."

The woman in the letter can finally fold the paper and put it away. She didn't have to resolve every inconsistency. Sometimes understanding that you've changed consists precisely in tolerating that two periods of the same life don't quite fit together. Continuity doesn't require an editorial conclusion to each episode. It can preserve a question, a responsibility, a part that isn't yet clear. You can remain someone even when your story, from where you look at it, doesn't resemble a successful one.

The River and the Times of Change

If the Self is a process, is identity an illusion? The question is compelling, because it asks us to choose between someone's existence and the reality of their change. The book rejects this obligation. It proposes that substantial identity, understood as an immutable, already complete core behind every experience, is a useful image in some situations but misleading when taken literally. It doesn't claim to have proven its nonexistence with a brain scan. It argues that this image isn't necessary to make personal continuity intelligible and can prevent us from understanding how it changes.

The useful illusion is this: living as if we were something entirely defined, revealed only by circumstances. It allows us to present ourselves, to maintain certain orientations, to recognize a boundary between ourselves and what we encounter. It becomes harmful when it treats every novelty as a betrayal of the original truth, or every behavior as the revelation of a definitive essence. A person can have stable inclinations and continue to develop. Stability is a phenomenon that needs to be explained; it does not in itself prove the existence of a core removed from history.

Identity as a continuity of process is, instead, the positive thesis we defend. What happens today stems from a concrete duration and contributes to its continuation. This relationship is not limited to similarity. Two strangers can be very similar without having a shared history of existence; a person can change profoundly without retroactively becoming alienated from their own life. Continuity encompasses corporeal, experiential, and historical relationships that we cannot replace with a list of identical traits.

To make it intuitive, let's use the river. Water flows, its course remains recognizable, the banks can shift. The metaphor helps because it doesn't ask the water to remain still, allowing us to speak of the same river. But its strength depends on what we leave out. The river doesn't remember, isn't ashamed of its own turning point, doesn't promise to change direction. A person can refer to what has been and respond to someone. The image illuminates the possibility of dynamic continuity; it doesn't contain a sufficient theory of the Self.

Even recognizing a river requires criteria. Finding moving water isn't enough to know what course we're observing. We need a provenance, a territory, and relationships that endure through transformations. For a person, the criteria are more complex and can be in conflict: the continuity of the organism, memory, social recognition, and the ability to refer to the past. The book doesn't conflate these into a single measure, nor does it delve into all the extremes of personal identity. It's enough to show that continuity shouldn't be thought of as immobility.

Saying that we reshape ourselves every second can therefore make sense, as long as we don't confuse the scales. Throughout each instant, the organism performs activity and undergoes changes; this doesn't mean that every component is replaced, that character is simultaneously renewed, or that childhood memories are completely rewritten with every breath. "Every second" describes the continuation of activity, not a uniform speed of personal change. The present is the time in which different durations converge, not a machine that accelerates them all at the same pace.

Spalding and colleagues' research on the dating of human cells offers a concrete limit to fantasies of total replacement. Using carbon-14 incorporated into DNA, the authors showed that the occipital neurons they studied could be as old as the individual, while non-neuronal cells were renewed (Spalding et al., 2005). The result concerned that region and those cell types; it was not a complete map of the body's entire history. However, it is sufficient to preclude us from claiming that the organism periodically replaces each of its cells like a complete set of furnishings. Furthermore, a long-lived cell continues to perform activity: persisting is not the same as remaining chemically inactive.

When we say a person changes, we must therefore specify the change we are describing. A change in neural activity, the acquisition of a skill, a change of opinion, and a transformation in character are not equivalent events. They may be related, but they cannot be deduced from each other simply because they occur in the same organism. The biological possibility of

change does not promise the speed with which we would like to change. The process has inertia and constraints: taking them seriously is part of its description.

Consider the person who says, "I'm not the same as before" after making a significant decision. It could mean that they've stopped a behavior, that they've changed their environment, that they can no longer sustain a belief. The phrase indicates the meaning they attribute to the transition; it doesn't capture all the changes in their body. Others may still recognize habits they consider outdated. The divergence isn't necessarily a conflict between inner truth and external ignorance. It can indicate different times: a new purpose coexists with dispositions that change more slowly.

Character, from this perspective, is neither a judgment nor a surface that can be rewritten at will. It is a relative stability in the way we feel, interpret, and act, sedimented through conditions and activities. Precisely because it has a history, it can resist present intentions. There is no necessary contradiction between acknowledging this resistance and admitting change. The contradiction arises only if we have defined in advance as "real" everything that does not change and as "illusory" everything that requires time.

The epigenesis of the Self finds a more precise meaning here. It does not add a personal cause to biological causes, like an extra hand propelling events. It names the becoming of a living organization, even in its experiential and historical aspects. The person senses certain conditions, understands certain ones, and modifies certain ones through activities whose possibilities and limitations we must study. Being a process does not make the person master of the entire process. Not being master of it does not transform the person into a mere extra.

If we recognize this intermediate position, we can treat identity phrases more carefully. "I'm made this way" can be a cautious description of stability; it can also become a way to interrupt any questioning. "I can become anyone" can express openness; it can also erase the concrete limitations of a life. The book doesn't need to choose one of the two slogans. It needs to follow what a person actually manages to preserve, understand, and transform in the time given to them.

The objection that remains

A reader might now raise the most serious objection: we've described organizations, functions, and continuities, but who experiences them? Saying that the Self is a process might seem like an elegant way of postponing the answer. A process doesn't experience pain in the same sense that someone experiences it. If we explain how bodily signals and memories integrate, have we already explained why that integration is accompanied by experience? The chapter must be able to support this question without accusing the raiser of longing for a separate soul.

The answer is no, a functional description does not automatically become a complete explanation of experience. The gap between explaining a skill and understanding why it feels something when you exercise it remains a philosophical and scientific problem. The book doesn't resolve it by calling what it previously called "consciousness" "Self." The use of the term should help better formulate the problem, not make it disappear. If we used it to claim every aspect of experience is explained, we would have violated our pact with the reader.

Our proposal concerns first and foremost the way to frame the investigation. Seeking a homunculus, a small internal being that observes representations, does not add an explanation: it transfers the question to that being. We should then ask how it feels, recognizes, and remembers, or introduce another observer within it. Regression is not avoided

by minimizing the subject. We must explain the organization capable of experience without assuming that, to be so, it must contain a second organization already capable of the same thing.

This argument does not prove all nonmaterialist theories false. It shows that an intuitive figure, that of the internal spectator, is explanatorily insufficient. A metaphysical position can defend something else, and it must be discussed on its own grounds. The book's goal is more limited: to construct an image of the subject that does not arbitrarily interrupt the work on its conditions, and that does not reduce the reality of the first person to an accident of language. We can reject a poorly posed mechanism without pretending to have settled all disputes about being.

A second reader might object from the opposite direction: if there is no fixed nucleus, then there is only a succession of events, and talking about someone is a social convenience. But this conclusion does not follow from change. The reality of an organization does not depend on the possession of an immutable part that represents it as a whole. Our argument is that organized continuity has properties and consequences that a list of isolated events does not adequately describe. It is not necessary to attribute to it an existence outside of the world to recognize it in the world.

To say that unity emerges from organization, however, does not mean we have provided a sufficient formula to produce it. "Emergence" must remain a request for explanation, not the poetic name for a miracle. For each function studied, we must understand the relationships that sustain it and the conditions under which it changes. Experience remains subject to further questions. Our philosophical position is that the presence of such questions does not require us to choose between a hidden substance and the denial of the subject. We can recognize a reality without already possessing a conclusive theory of it.

A third objection directly strikes at the formula of remembered continuity. If real identity coincides with a process capable of remembering itself, what happens to those who cannot? To newborns, to those suffering from severe amnesia, to those experiencing advanced dementia? It's not enough to say that someone else remembers for them. The memory of others can preserve a story, but it doesn't become the person's experience. And it's not enough to say that the autobiographical self is temporarily unavailable: in some conditions, the loss is profound and lasting.

The objection forces us to clarify the thesis, not to dismiss the difficult case. Remembered continuity is a real and important form of personal identity; it is not the only form and cannot be the exclusive criterion of dignity. The Self must be conceived by distinguishing the continuity of the organism, the possibility of experience, access to one's own history, and the capacity to respond to it. These dimensions can sustain each other without always remaining intact together. No general statement exempts us from understanding the concrete conditions of the person.

Nor is "it stays exactly the same" always an adequate response. Illnesses can change abilities, preferences, relationships, and ways of expressing oneself. Denying this in order to defend dignity would make it more difficult to see present needs. We must be able to recognize profound transformations without diminishing the value of the person. Ethical commitment doesn't consist in proving that nothing has happened. It consists in continuing to reach out to those who are there, paying attention to what they can now feel and understand.

Finally, a reader might ask whether "unity" isn't the name we use to impose order on discordant experiences. We have incompatible desires, we may misunderstand what we're doing, we may say things we quickly deny. The chapter doesn't respond by denying these conflicts. The unity it speaks of is concrete enough to understand them: they are conflicts within a life, between its dispositions and activities, not immediate evidence of the existence of many separate owners. In other clinical contexts, more specific descriptions will be needed. Here, it's enough to avoid confusing unity with perpetual harmony.

A Self can be stricken by tensions and remain the subject of those tensions. It can ask for help precisely because it cannot organize them alone. This possibility is incompatible with both the immutable sovereign and the impersonal succession of events. The former should not be in need; in the latter, no one could ask for it. The concrete person, on the other hand, can recognize a difficulty without yet knowing its solution. Their reality does not wait to become complete.

To remain someone in front of another

The discussion of identity reaches its most serious limits when someone must be treated one way or another. A person's idea isn't innocuous simply because it's expressed in a book. It can authorize listening or exclusion, make a need visible or erase it behind a category. This is why we must make this transition explicit: the civil consequences that follow are ethical arguments. Neuroscience helps us understand capabilities and vulnerabilities; it doesn't decide on its own how a society should distribute respect.

Let's imagine an elderly man who doesn't always recognize his daughter. The scene is fictional and doesn't represent all forms of dementia. One day, she walks in and he asks her who she is. She responds, but after a few minutes, the question returns. There's a shared history in the room that only one of them can recall in that way. There's also a relationship present: the tone of voice, the distance from the chair, the ability to accept or reject a hand. The daughter doesn't have to choose which of the two is the only true one. She must learn not to ask her father for the memory she needs to feel recognized, as a condition for recognizing him.

It would be convenient to argue that every kind gesture always produces well-being. We can't guarantee it; even a habitual gesture may not be received in the same way. Attention consists precisely in verifying, to the extent possible, how the person is responding now. A shared history guides that verification, but does not replace it. Care encounters a present individual, with changed abilities and signals that can be difficult to interpret. It doesn't simply encounter a damaged archive of the individual who was there before.

The father doesn't become more important if he passes a recognition test. The test can be important for understanding his condition. This difference must remain clear, even when the strain of the relationship makes it emotionally difficult. His daughter's memory may hold details he can no longer recall; her job isn't to use them to force him to return to what he remembered. She can offer continuity without demanding identical reciprocity. Respect can last longer than the performance that makes it easy.

The same distinction applies, in other ways, to those who have difficulty communicating. We don't automatically know everything they feel, but uncertainty doesn't give us the right to treat them as if no one were there. We must seek appropriate tools, gather signals, and correct interpretations. A person can't be declared transparent because we love them; they can't be

declared absent because they don't speak in the way we understand. The unity of the Self requires work of access, and sometimes that work depends heavily on others.

This doesn't dissolve the singularity of the relationship. The daughter cannot feel for her father. She can modify some of the conditions of the encounter, and those conditions can matter to him. The distinction between two subjects remains; precisely because it remains, what one does to the other acquires meaning. If we were truly a single experience, listening would be superfluous. If we were completely isolated entities, it would be impossible. Life together demands that we recognize a difference that can be bridged without attempting to erase it.

This has implications for how we judge adults capable of telling their stories. We don't have the right to fix them entirely on an old version of themselves; nor do we have the duty to forget their actions because they claim to have changed. Continuity allows for both: recognizing a present possibility and maintaining a question about the past. The person who presents himself differently today may have to answer to those who suffered consequences yesterday. Change doesn't automatically create innocence, just as the past doesn't automatically close off every future.

We'll need to understand, in the next chapter, what capabilities make that request for a response appropriate. Here, we can only establish its premise: those with a history are neither the essence of their worst episode nor a new arrival each morning. The connection between tenses makes it possible to ask for explanations and recognize transformations. If we completely untie it, we lose both responsibility and the ability to trust a promise. If we completely rigidify it, the promise could never concern something new.

The Self's present is therefore broader than a single frame. Not because it magically contains the entire past, but because current conditions have a provenance, and current activities can have consequences. Memory makes part of it accessible; other aspects persist in different ways. What we are now is not a simple repository of what has happened, nor is it a page on which we can write without encountering resistance. A present organization maintains a duration while experiencing a situation that will never be repeated identically.

Finally, let's return to the child and the sheet of paper. His outline is now filled with color; some areas have remained white, others have received two coats of tempera. If we ask him who he is, he can respond with his name. If we ask him where he is, he can point to himself again. He hasn't resolved the problem of consciousness. We don't need him to resolve it in order to address him as someone. The scene brings together what the chapter has distinguished: a concrete organism, an experiential presence, developing capacities, and a story that adults can help become tellable.

The distinction between mind and body remains legitimate when it allows us to formulate precise questions. It becomes a blunder when we make the mind a pre-existing inhabitant and the body its appointed home. This is the philosophical conclusion of the chapter, not a claim to have experimentally dismissed every version of dualism. In its search for the subject, the book chooses to begin with the organization of the life it senses, retaining the question of how sensation is possible. Science contributes with findings and models; it should not be allowed to speak beyond its claims.

We thus have a subject real enough to be encountered and dynamic enough to have a history. He is not a homunculus commanding the brain. Nor is he a list of characteristics that others

can consult to replace his presence. When he feels, something happens to him; when he remembers, a portion of time becomes available again; when he acts, certain possibilities take shape according to conditions we have yet to specify. None of these activities grants him absolute sovereignty. None authorizes his erasure.

The formula we can now gain is a linguistic choice to keep this unity open. The Self is the name of the I-me when science ceases to separate those who feel from those who are felt. It does not designate the moment, never announced, when research would have finished its work. It designates the orientation with which this book interrogates it: distinguishing functions and conditions without seeking an owner external to the life they make possible.

A question remains that unity alone cannot resolve. If this Self has different conditions, inertia, and possibilities, when can its actions be called free? Who can answer for it, and to what extent? To ask it seriously, we must abandon the use of a single word for the power of choice, the absence of constraint, the unpredictability and singularity of a life. The child is still bent over the paper. We have stopped searching for the place where it would be hidden. Now we must understand what it can do, within the entire life in which it exists.

Chapter Sources

The references support the scientific claims and theoretical attributions indicated in the text. The narrative scenes are imagined. The conception of the Self, the discussion of identity, and the social consequences are arguments of the book, distinct from the experimental results. The models of consciousness are presented as theoretical proposals, not as definitive solutions.

James, W. (1890). The Principles of Psychology, vol. I, chapter X, The Consciousness of Self. Henry Holt. Historical text, reproduced from Classics in the History of Psychology, York University. Source

Damasio, A. (1998). Investigating the biology of consciousness. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 353(1377), 1879–1882. DOI: 10.1098/rstb.1998.0339. Source

Damasio, A. (2003). Feelings of Emotion and the Self. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1001, 253–261. DOI: 10.1196/annals.1279.014. Source

Damasio, A. (2010). Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain. Pantheon. The link leads to the editorial page, which also presents the subsequent paperback edition. Source

Damasio, A., & Damasio, H. (2022). Homeostatic feelings and the biology of consciousness. Brain, 145(7), 2231–2235. DOI: 10.1093/brain/awac194. Source

Khalsa, S.S., et al. (2018). Interoception and Mental Health: A Roadmap. Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging, 3(6), 501–513. Source

Garfinkel, S. N., Seth, A. K., Barrett, A. B., Suzuki, K., & Critchley, H. D. (2015). Knowing your own heart: Distinguishing interoceptive accuracy from interoceptive awareness. Biological Psychology, 104, 65–74. DOI: 10.1016/j.biopsycho.2014.11.004. Source

Desmedt, O., Luminet, O., & Corneille, O. (2018). The heartbeat counting task largely involves non-interoceptive processes: Evidence from both the original and an adapted counting task. Biological Psychology, 138, 185–188. Source

Critchley, H. D., Wiens, S., Rotshtein, P., Öhman, A., & Dolan, R. J. (2004). Neural systems supporting interoceptive awareness. Nature Neuroscience, 7, 189–195. DOI: 10.1038/nn1176. Source

Botvinick, M., & Cohen, J. (1998). Rubber hands 'feel' touch that eyes see. Nature, 391, 756. DOI: 10.1038/35784. Source

Rohde, M., Di Luca, M., & Ernst, M. O. (2011). The Rubber Hand Illusion: Feeling of Ownership and Proprioceptive Drift Do Not Go Hand in Hand. PLOS ONE, 6(6), e21659. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0021659. Source

Lenggenhager, B., Tadi, T., Metzinger, T., & Blanke, O. (2007). Video ergo sum: Manipulating bodily self-consciousness. Science, 317(5841), 1096–1099. Source

Gallagher, S. (2000). Philosophical conceptions of the self: Implications for cognitive science. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 4(1), 14–21. Source

Brownell, C. A., Nichols, S. R., Svetlova, M., Zerwas, S., & Ramani, G. (2010). The Head Bone's Connected to the Neck Bone: When Do Toddlers Represent Their Own Body Topography? Child Development, 81(3), 797–810. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01434.x. Source

Klein, S. B., Loftus, J., & Kihlstrom, J. F. (1996). Self-knowledge of an amnesic patient: Toward a neuropsychology of personality and social psychology. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 125(3), 250–260. Source

Philippi, C. L., et al. (2012). Preserved Self-Awareness following Extensive Bilateral Brain Damage to the Insula, Anterior Cingulate, and Medial Prefrontal Cortices. PLOS ONE, 7(8), e38413. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0038413. Source

Strawson, G. (2004). Against Narrativity. Ratio, 17(4), 428–452. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9329.2004.00264.x. Source

Spalding, K. L., Bhardwaj, R. D., Buchholz, B. A., Druid, H., & Frisén, J. (2005). Retrospective birth dating of cells in humans. Cell, 122(1), 133–143. DOI: 10.1016/j.cell.2005.04.028. Source



Movement II — The Self that chooses

4. The names of freedom

Let's imagine a meeting called to finalize a project. On the table is a report that must be approved by the evening. Elena has followed part of the checks and knows that one of them isn't yet complete. She hasn't discovered a hidden catastrophe: she's found a discrepancy between what the document states and what the group can actually attest to. The manager asks her to sign. He says the integration will arrive tomorrow, that the problem is formal, that many people's work can't be stopped for one page. This scene is fictional. It doesn't describe a legal case or a specific professional rule. It raises a question we encounter in very different situations: how free is a person when they're told they can choose?

Elena's contract expires in two months. Her manager doesn't mention it. He doesn't even need to mention it for her to remember. Next to him sits a colleague who, during the preparation of the report, agreed with her; now he's looking at the table. No one physically prevents her from getting up. The pen is in front of her, the phone in her pocket, the door behind her. If we were forced to describe the situation through body movements alone, we'd say she can sign, decline, speak, leave. But we'd have left out almost everything that makes that moment difficult.

"You're free not to sign," says the manager. The statement may be sincere in its intention and incomplete in its description. He may genuinely believe he doesn't want to force her; Elena may perceive a cost he doesn't have to bear. The two conditions coexist. It's not necessary to transform the man into a tyrant to recognize that his power alters the weight of the alternative. And it's not necessary to describe Elena as incapable of any capacity to recognize that her position makes it more costly to exercise it.

Later, if someone asked her why she signed, she might reply that she decided to. She might also say she had no choice. Neither statement, by itself, would reconstruct the situation. The first might conceal the pressures; the second might conceal a margin that existed, however costly. The point isn't to establish in advance which response is morally nobler. The point is to understand what question we're asking when we ask whether she was free. Are we looking for the absence of a threat? The ability to evaluate? A sustainable alternative? The metaphysical possibility that, all things being equal, a different action would occur?

In the room, these questions don't yet have distinct names. There's a woman who feels her discomfort growing, remembers her position, considers the content of the relationship, and looks at an empty box. We don't know what brain activity accompanies that moment; we can't deduce it from a story. We don't even know how closely her future explanation will coincide with what moves her now. We can only recognize that the problem arises within an organism with a history, facing other organisms with other histories, in a concrete power relationship.

Elena asks if it's possible to change the wording. Instead of stating that the review is complete, the report could state that it remains to be completed. It's a modest proposal: it doesn't terminate the contract, it doesn't remove the supervisor's authority, it doesn't invalidate any subsequent decisions. It introduces a procedure that no one had mentioned until then. Her colleague rolls his eyes and says that the change seems correct. Now, refusal isn't just a halt to work; it can become a correction of a sentence.

We won't use this outcome as a demonstration of free will. Elena's proposal may have many conditions, some known and some unknown. Not even the fact that it surprises us proves it is without cause. If the meeting had gone differently, we would not have the right to infer from the signature an essential weakness of the woman. Our interest is more precise: in that present, a possibility has become recognizable and practicable through concrete activities and relationships. Understanding this change requires a more careful vocabulary than one that equates every openness with absolute freedom and every conditioning with a definitive prison.

We left the first movement with a Self that isn't hidden somewhere in the body and isn't immobile behind its own history. Now we need to understand what it means to attribute choice to it. The available words come from different traditions: free will, liberty, determination of the unexpected, living singularity, collapse of a conscious wave. If we were to make them coincide, the book would seem to have much confirmation of its thesis. In reality, it would only have multiplied the same confusion. Let's begin by separating the questions, so we can later understand where the answers meet.

Five questions under one word

A map is useful because a term can be correct in one discussion and misleading in the next. If we ask whether a prisoner is free, we are not normally asking whether his brain obeys physical laws. If we ask whether a decision was unpredictable, we have not yet asked whether it was conscious. If we ask whether a person is unique, we have not yet measured his power to evade an order. Questions can be related; they do not become identical because they concern the same person.

Free will, in the moral and metaphysical problem we will examine here, concerns first and foremost the ability to do otherwise and the way in which an act belongs to its author. Freedom also concerns political conditions and personal capabilities: not being constrained, being able to understand alternatives, acting in light of reasons and reconsidering them. Determining the unexpected concerns a trajectory that, given the available information, was not deducible and yet takes a concrete direction. Living singularity concerns the historical unrepeatability of an organism. The collapse of a conscious wave will be a metaphor for the transition from considered possibilities to an act: its name will not confer a physical license on the choice.

These formulations are the chapter's operational lexicon. They don't claim to summarize every legitimate use of the five terms. "Freedom," above all, has too long a history to become the exclusive property of a single definition. Accuracy lies in stating which use we are making of it, not in asserting that all others are incorrect. A word can have many functions; an argument must allow us to recognize the one it is currently exercising.

In the meeting, for example, Elena's uniqueness is already present before she signs or refuses. She doesn't earn it through the best gesture. The unpredictability of her proposal may be real for the person in charge, but less so for those who know her well. The freedom to express it also depends on the conditions of the meeting. The metaphysical question of doing otherwise isn't resolved by observing that the wording of the report has changed. And none of the people in the room had to demonstrate a special quantum process to propose a correction.

We can thus formulate the thesis in two sentences. The present is a point at which the activity of a Self and the conditions it encounters can alter the slope of its trajectory. This possibility

does not demonstrate metaphysical free will, it is not available to everyone to the same extent, and it does not coincide with a conscious choice in every transformation of living things.

The second sentence limits the first because the book doesn't intend to derive unlimited power from a dynamic description. A trajectory changes even through events no one has chosen. When it changes through choice, it's necessary to explain what makes it appropriate to call it that. And when that margin exists, it remains to be understood what costs, information, and capabilities make it usable. The term "present" indicates the temporal location of the activity, not a privilege that resets the conditions.

The image of the slope is helpful, as long as it isn't taken literally. A life isn't a line drawn on a graph with a single coordinate. It can improve in one area and worsen in another, establish a relationship and lose confidence, gain understanding without immediately achieving external change. The slope indicates a possible direction of development; it doesn't provide a measure of personal success. We won't use the metaphor to assign a score to someone who is living.

Finally, the map has a protective function. It prevents us from using biology to erase political freedoms, politics to declare the author's problem solved, unpredictability to call every event a decision, and quantum mechanics to give a prestigious name to what we don't know. The reader doesn't have to concede all theses at once. He can acknowledge a practical ability without accepting a metaphysics; he can acknowledge a metaphysical problem without interrupting all work on the concrete conditions of choice.

The ability to do otherwise

"You could have done otherwise" seems like a simple sentence until we try to specify the conditions behind it. It could mean that no one held Elena's hand. It could mean that an alternative procedure existed. It could mean that, had she wanted to refuse, she could have done so. Or it could mean that, by keeping every aspect of the world identical prior to the gesture, she could have actually produced a different outcome. The last question is much more challenging than the others. We cannot answer it by simply holding up an open door.

The problem runs through moral and theological traditions in which the attribution of an act is linked to the judgment of goodness, guilt, and responsibility. But theological tradition is not a single position, and does not always equate freedom with the absence of any cause. In the Summa Theologiae, in question 83 of the first part, Thomas Aquinas links free judgment to the rational capacity to compare courses of action and clarifies that being the cause of one's own movement does not require being the first cause of oneself (Thomas Aquinas, 13th century). This is an argument within a specific theological and metaphysical framework. We won't translate it into neuroscience. It's enough to note that the opposition between freedom and any form of dependence would already be a caricature of that framework.

Contemporary thought also distinguishes different problems. An incompatibilist position holds that determinism and a certain type of freedom cannot coexist. Among incompatibilists, there are those who defend a freedom that would require a world that is not entirely deterministic, and those who conclude that the freedom required for ultimate responsibility is not available. A compatibilist position, on the other hand, seeks conditions of freedom and responsibility that do not require the interruption of causal relationships. These are families of arguments, not parties, that we can dismiss by assigning science to one and faith to the other.

By determinism, we mean the thesis that, given the laws and a complete state of the world, only one subsequent outcome is possible. It doesn't mean we know that state, can calculate

every consequence, or possess a useful algorithm for predicting a biography. Nor does it mean that reasons and decisions would be devoid of effect: in a deterministic description, they too would belong to the processes that produce outcomes. Fatalism is something else: imagining that an outcome must occur independently of what we do. Confusing the two ideas deprives the discussion of its most important point.

If, in the scene, the request to correct the relationship contributes to changing it, the contribution remains such even for those who believe that the request had sufficient conditions to produce it. To prove the contrary, they would have to argue that the person's action made no difference, not simply remind us that they have a history. Being caused and being causally irrelevant are different properties. The problem of freedom is not resolved by this distinction; it is freed from a misunderstanding that makes it insoluble even before it begins.

The compatibilist might then ask whether Elena understood what she was doing, could respond to relevant reasons, and acted without certain forms of constraint. The incompatibilist might object that all these capacities, if determined by prior conditions, do not confer upon her the kind of original autonomy required to ultimately deserve praise or blame. The controversy is not simply about how much information we possess about the brain. It also concerns what relationship between person and act we deem sufficient to attribute responsibility.

In 1969, Harry Frankfurt challenged the principle that a person is morally responsible only if he or she could have acted otherwise. His thought experiments imagine an agent acting for his or her own reasons, while an external intervention, left inactive, would have prevented a different decision had it arisen. Frankfurt argues that the absence of an alternative does not, in that case, eliminate responsibility for the action actually performed (Frankfurt, 1969). The argument is philosophical, not an experimental result on the brain. It has generated objections precisely over the possibility of constructing a case that truly eliminates every alternative without predetermining the action.

We're interested in this because it shifts attention from the mere fork in the road to the actual path. It doesn't simply ask what other exits there were. It asks how the person arrived at the one they chose. The book doesn't assume this move resolves all difficulties. It considers it a reason not to treat "being able to do otherwise" as a criterion whose meaning is already self-evident. A theory of responsibility must explain both the alternatives and the actual relationship between capabilities, reasons, and actions.

Indeterminism doesn't settle the dispute on the other side. If a random component had decided which document to sign instead of Elena, we would have obtained an unnecessarily determined outcome, but that doesn't mean a freer author. Chance can open up different outcomes; the agent's control requires a further argument. This is why it's not enough to insert an unpredictable event into the chain of conditions and call it will. The question of the ownership of the gesture remains, even when perfect prediction becomes impossible.

The chapter must therefore accept a limit: it will not demonstrate that, under completely identical conditions, the Self could have chosen differently. Nor will it demonstrate that this possibility is impossible. It will construct a more limited framework within which we can discuss real capabilities, constraints, and modifications of conditions. The limit is not a renunciation of ethics. It is the renunciation of passing off an ethical proposal as the obligatory conclusion of a metaphysics we have not established.

Freedom that has conditions

Political freedom begins with questions that cannot wait for the resolution of the previous dispute. Who can prevent us from speaking? Who can punish us for refusing? What decisions are made without allowing us to challenge them? What spaces in life can we organize without having to ask permission? These questions have concrete consequences even if we don't possess a definitive theory of the will. A power that limits people doesn't become less limiting because their actions have cerebral correlates.

In his 1958 lecture on the two concepts of freedom, Isaiah Berlin distinguished the question of the scope of a person's freedom from interference from the question of the source of control and the possibility of self-direction. In discussing positive freedom, he also highlighted the danger of others claiming to identify our true interests and coercing us in their name (Berlin, 1958). The distinction is a philosophical map of political freedom, not an inventory of all the self's capacities. It helps us understand why the desire to make someone autonomous can turn into a license to govern them.

In the meeting, the absence of an explicit order doesn't exhaust the question of freedom. We need to understand what consequences are attached to dissent, how much Elena knows about them, whether protections exist, and whether she can use them. We're not claiming that every cost equates to coercion. Every choice entails costs, and freedom without consequences would often be an empty image. We're distinguishing the cost of an alternative from someone's power to make it impracticable or arbitrarily threaten it.

The same caution applies to economic dependence. It would be incorrect to indiscriminately call every need to work slavery; it would be equally incorrect to take the formal existence of a refusal as evidence of equal freedom for all. If one person can leave a job without losing their housing and another cannot, the two refusals are subject to different conditions. This difference alone does not determine all moral judgments about behavior, but must be part of it. A description of freedom that fails to capture it will be accurate only for those who are already protected.

The absence of coercion must therefore be accompanied by the question of capabilities. A person may be formally left free to choose and yet lack sufficient information to understand what is being proposed. They may have information but not the time to evaluate it. They may have time and understanding but not a viable means to express dissent. These conditions are not all the same. The map must distinguish between them, because legal protection, an understandable explanation, and material availability do not automatically replace each other.

Inner freedom adds another question: how can a person relate to what they desire, fear, and consider reasonable? We won't define it as the absence of emotion. A refusal can be accompanied by fear and remain a deliberate refusal; a signature can be serene and arise from insufficient understanding. The experience of feeling free matters, but it is not an infallible measure of the conditions of freedom. Sometimes discomfort accompanies the exercise of a new ability; sometimes tranquility accompanies a renunciation we don't yet recognize.

Talking about reasons doesn't mean electing an abstract voice as commander of the body. In the Self we've described, evaluating is an activity of the organism, intertwined with what it feels and the history it can recall. A reason can become accessible through an experience: seeing a colleague's fatigue, understanding that a procedure harms someone, noticing a contradiction. The fact that a reason has physical and social conditions doesn't determine its

validity. To evaluate it, we must examine what it asserts and the consequences it makes relevant.

The ability to give reasons, in the sense we propose, also includes the willingness to confront and correct them. A person who consistently produces a brilliant explanation is no freer than one who struggles to speak. The former can automatically defend a conclusion; the latter can understand an alternative through methods that fall short of eloquence. Dignity must not become the reward of an argumentative examination. The ability to respond to reasons is relevant to certain types of autonomy and responsibility; it is not the exclusive criterion of human value.

For this reason, the idea of inner freedom cannot replace political freedom. Telling someone to change their attitude toward a threat doesn't eliminate the threat. Making a dependency less painful can be important; it doesn't make changing its conditions unnecessary. On the other hand, an external guarantee doesn't by itself produce the ability to use it. The two tasks can be supported without being confused. Protecting a space and making it possible to inhabit it are related tasks, requiring different tools.

Power here meets a demanding criterion. If it claims to want people capable of choosing, it must accept that they also choose to contradict it. If it offers reasons, it must make them questionable. If it invokes the group's interest, it must allow for scrutiny of how it is defined and distributed. A freedom granted only to the extent that it produces the outcome desired by the granter resembles a method of adherence. The most concrete proof of free space is often what happens after an understandable dissent.

We don't derive these consequences from a neural recording. They are the book's civil position: autonomy must be supported through conditions that make it possible to understand, express oneself, and refuse without being annihilated. None of these conditions promises that a person will always act well. Freedom includes exposure to decisions we don't approve of. If we eliminate that exposure in the name of good, we must recognize that we are exercising control, and justify it on its own grounds rather than simply calling it liberation.

When the brain starts first

Research on action preparation has challenged a spontaneous image of the will: a complete conscious decision would appear first, then the brain would receive the command to execute it. If that image were the definition of freedom, preparatory activity prior to awareness might seem sufficient to refute it. But we must first understand what was observed, in which task, and how the moment of decision was measured. A very familiar experience does not become a scientific theory just because we confidently describe it.

In 1983, Benjamin Libet, Curtis Gleason, Elwood Wright, and Dennis Pearl studied simple voluntary movements by recording brain activity and asking participants to indicate, using a visual time cue, when they felt the intention to act. The onset of the preparation potential preceded the participants' reported moment of conscious intention by several hundred milliseconds (Libet et al., 1983). This finding involved a relationship between an electrophysiological measure, a movement, and a subjective estimate of time. It was not a direct recording of all the components of a moral decision.

The result deserves to be taken seriously, precisely without turning it into a general verdict. It shows that, in that paradigm, we cannot simply identify the first preparatory event with the moment the person claims to have made a decision. It does not establish by itself that all

conscious activity is devoid of effects. Supporting this latter conclusion would require further arguments regarding the function of the observed processes, the reliability of the estimates, and their generalizability to other types of choice. The power of an experiment is not increased by assigning it a question it has not studied.

In 2008, Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze, and John-Dylan Haynes used functional magnetic resonance imaging to study choices between two buttons. Certain patterns of brain activity allowed them to predict the outcome, with accuracy above chance but far from certainty, before the participant reported being aware of it; the authors described predictive information up to about ten seconds before the estimated conscious access (Soon et al., 2008). Prediction above chance is not the same as knowing an individual's decision with certainty. And arbitrary button pressing does not contain all the hallmarks of refusing to sign a report.

The difference between a probabilistic prediction and a fixed outcome is crucial. An indicator can signal a trend that will contribute to the outcome without certifying that it cannot change. The fact that informative antecedents are found does not automatically decide which interpretation of freedom is correct. The decision-making process can be lengthy, involve unconscious activities, and become available to awareness at different stages. This possibility neither absolves nor condemns consciousness; it makes it too simple to seek a single instant in which the author would appear out of nowhere.

In 2012, Aaron Schurger, Jacobo Sitt, and Stanislas Dehaene proposed a different model of the preparation potential. A threshold-reaching accumulator of spontaneous activity can explain characteristics of the average signal observed before self-initiated movements; aligning trials to the moment of movement and averaging them can produce a preparatory pattern without each trial containing a slow decision already made at the same starting point (Schurger et al., 2012). This is a modeling proposal supported by experimental comparisons, not a demonstration of free will. It changes the meaning we can attribute to the shape of the average signal.

Interpreting preparation, therefore, is part of the research. We cannot automatically identify the start of an average curve with the instant at which an individual irrevocably established their own movement. The problem is not solved by replacing the word "decision" with the word "noise": we need to understand how activity, thresholds, and task conditions contribute to movement. For the book, the resulting limitation is sufficient. A neural antecedent does not imply the author's philosophy we should adopt.

In 2019, Uri Maoz, Gideon Yaffe, Christof Koch, and Liad Mudrik compared arbitrary and deliberate choices in a task involving donations to nonprofit organizations. In the deliberate condition, the choice influenced the destination of the donation; in the arbitrary condition, it did not play that role. The classical preparation potential was clearly present in arbitrary choices but significantly reduced or absent in deliberate ones, according to the study's analyses (Maoz et al., 2019). The authors concluded that this limited the generalizability of arbitrary paradigms. They did not demonstrate that meaningful decisions are without neural antecedents or that all consciousness is causally sovereign.

This comparison adds a distinction that public discussion often misses: choosing when to wag a finger for no particular reason and choosing between consequences that matter are not necessarily the same experimental object. A theory will have to explain both. The fact that they are not equivalent does not make the former irrelevant; it prevents it from being used as an

automatic substitute for the latter. The meeting scene encompasses content, interests, relationships, and alternatives that we cannot eliminate and then declare already understood through the remaining gesture.

Even the account of reasons can have limitations. Petter Johansson, Lars Hall, Sverker Sikström, and Andreas Olsson showed in 2005 that, in a choice task between photographs of faces, some participants failed to detect a trade-off between their preferred alternative and the one presented as the outcome, going so far as to provide explanations for the manipulated choice (Johansson et al., 2005). This result concerns a specific procedure for altering the outcome. It does not demonstrate that all reasons are invented after the fact. It shows that the availability of a subjective explanation does not, in itself, guarantee the accuracy of the reconstruction.

If Elena explains her signature to us, we must listen without making her infallible. She may have understood some reasons correctly and misunderstood other pressures. This doesn't mean her explanation is useless. It can be compared with the facts, with the content of the document, with the alternatives discussed. The ability to provide reasons becomes stronger when it allows for this verification. The book suggests recognizing it as an activity open to correction, rather than making it a private test that no one can question.

The scientific conclusion of this passage is limited and important: various activities that contribute to action precede what we are able to consciously report, and the meaning of certain signals depends on the task and the model. The philosophical conclusion of the book is distinct: the choice of a Self should not be defined as the initial command of a consciousness devoid of antecedents. If we define it this way, refuting that figure still doesn't explain all the capacities through which a person can participate in the formation of their own action.

We will not, however, take refuge in the opposite reasoning: since consciousness belongs to the organism, then any outcome produced by the organism would be free. A reflection and a deliberation do not become equivalent because of this belonging. We must continue to distinguish functions, degrees of control, and access to alternatives. The chapter thus maintains both requirements: not separating the will from its world, and not erasing the differences between the activities that world makes possible.

Determining what we did not foresee

The determination of the unexpected seems at first glance to be a contradictory expression. If something is determined, how can it surprise us? The contradiction arises only if " **determined** " means **"already known to us** ." In our lexicon, the expression indicates a biographical fact: a life takes a concrete direction that was not deducible from the information and tools with which we were observing it. " **Determining** " here concerns the shaping of the outcome, and sometimes the activity that contributes to producing it. It does not declare that every outcome is metaphysically open, nor that every novelty has an author.

A teacher may be surprised by a student's choice; a colleague may have foreseen it. The same event is unexpected for the former and less unexpected for the latter. This relativity does not make it unreal. It requires specifying the position of the forerunner, the available information, and the type of prediction. Saying that a biography was not deducible is not the same as having demonstrated that no possible set of conditions could have determined it. The transition from the insufficiency of our prediction to the absence of necessity is precisely what we must avoid.

Edward Lorenz's work offers a rigorous example of the gap between determinism and predictability. In 1963, Lorenz studied a system of deterministic equations with nonperiodic behavior, showing how small differences in initial conditions can grow and make long-term predictions based on data of limited precision very difficult (Lorenz, 1963). He wasn't studying the Self. The result doesn't prove that every biography is a chaotic system of that type. It demonstrates, in a specific context, that knowledge of a deterministic law does not guarantee predictive control of outcomes.

This distinction is sufficient to correct a habit of everyday discourse. When we fail to predict a person, we may have insufficient information, an inadequate model, changing conditions, processes sensitive to small differences, or a combination of difficulties. We cannot choose, based solely on surprise, which explanation we prefer. Prudence does not mean treating all models as equivalent. It means asking which one can be tested and which conclusions it truly supports.

The meeting offers us a biographical example without needing to become an experiment in chaos. The leader anticipated two outcomes: a signature or a refusal. Elena proposes a change to the text. The unexpected outcome may be the result of a too-poor model of the situation: he hadn't considered that alternative. The proposal isn't out of place. It arises from expertise, from the relationship with the document's content, from an assessment of what the group can attest to. The absence of the proposal in the others' prediction doesn't make Elena unfounded; it highlights the limitations of that prediction.

In other cases, the unexpected doesn't imply any choice. An illness, an accident, a chance encounter can alter a trajectory. Their biographical character doesn't depend on the existence of an intention. The book will therefore preserve the difference between what happens to a person and what that person contributes to through a choice. History encompasses both. To attribute every turning point to the Self would also burden it with the authorship of events it simply had to experience.

When a choice contributes to a turning point, the outcome doesn't have to be surprising to recognize its contribution. Elena might have been predictable to a friend who knows how attentive she is to documents. A correct prediction doesn't make the correction of the report any less hers. The meaning of the action depends on how it is produced and what it changes, not on the effect of amazement it evokes in a spectator. A freedom that existed only where others mispredicted would be a property of the ignorance of others.

This is the point where **"determination of the unexpected"** and **"freedom"** touch without coinciding. A person can contribute to making an unforeseen outcome possible, through activities we will describe as the exercise of a capacity. But openness to prediction is not the sufficient criterion of that capacity. To discuss choice, we must return to the reasons, alternatives, and conditions of the gesture. The map prevents us from calling anyone who has surprised us the author.

On a civil level, the distinction also protects the possibility of not concluding a life with a prediction. A judgment about the most likely outcome can be useful; it becomes an abuse when it is transformed into an obligation for the individual. Prediction should guide understanding and, when necessary, support. It should not be used to deny access to the alternative simply because the past makes it less likely. This consequence is ethical: it does not automatically arise from Lorenz equations or a statistical model.

Not everything we don't foresee deserves admiration. A turning point can be harmful, inconsistent, or forced. The unexpected isn't the poetic name for good. To evaluate it, we must ask to whom it happens, what conditions produce it, and what opens or closes it. The present is of interest to the book because it is the time in which outcomes are produced and can be influenced. Surprise remains an experience of the observer, not a moral certification of the event.

Unrepeatable does not mean sovereign

Living singularity is the fourth name on the map. We've already encountered the diversity of corporeal histories; here, a new consequence is of interest: unrepeatability does not equate to power. A person can be unique and have very limited scope for action. They can be unique and behave in predictable ways. They can be unique and adhere to an order that thousands of others follow. Singularity isn't lost because a behavior is common, and it isn't acquired solely through an original decision.

In the book's lexicon, a living singularity is an organism with a concrete historical continuity that cannot be entirely replaced by a set of shared characteristics. This is a philosophical position on the meaning of historicity, not a new biological quantity to be measured. Research can distinguish properties and trajectories; we argue that a person is not limited to the class to which these properties place him or her. Membership in a class can be true without making its members interchangeable.

If a hundred workers sign the same document for similar reasons, the repetition of the outcome does not erase the differences between their conditions. Some may not have understood the omission; some may have deemed it irrelevant; some may fear consequences that others do not. We must not invent a romantic story for each. We must prevent the common form of the gesture from being used as proof of an identical capacity to choose. Singularity requires attention to randomness, not the abolition of all comparison.

The word " **living** " also maintains a distinction from social originality. A person isn't unique because they must appear different. Their unrepeatable nature doesn't require an exceptional performance, an unusual opinion, or a carefully crafted identity. If we made singularity a duty of distinction, we would transform a condition of life into a competition. The book uses it to remind us that every encounter concerns someone, even when it produces nothing memorable for the observer.

This focus does not confer a universal exemption from judgment. Human beings may be historically different and yet subject to common standards of justice. To judge a behavior, we must not be able to reproduce it in another identical organism. We must reconstruct relevant facts, capabilities, and conditions, distinguishing the harm caused from the extent of personal responsibility. Uniqueness makes judgment more demanding; it does not prevent it from reaching a conclusion.

In this scene, Elena's request is part of her history and can be understood by others. The content of the correction doesn't become inaccessible because the person proposing it is unique. People don't have to share a life to recognize a good reason. This is one of the places where singularity and freedom meet: a specific person can offer a reason that others understand, and through that exchange, make possible outcomes that no one would have produced in the same way alone.

But the difference remains. Singularity exists even where that comparison isn't possible. Practical freedom can vary even within the same lifetime. Speaking of the former doesn't authorize us to presume the latter. It's an essential distinction to avoid turning the statement "you are unique" into the reproach "therefore you should have succeeded." A person's value isn't a measure of the strength with which they can overcome the conditions that limit them.

The wave as an image and its limit

The fifth name remains: conscious wave collapse. The power of this expression comes from the juxtaposition of many possibilities and an event that realizes one of them. Before using it, we need to spend a few lines on the formalism from which it takes its name. In a standard description of projective quantum measurement, the state is represented by a vector, and the possible outcomes are associated with projection operators. The probability of an outcome is given by the squared norm of the projected component. When that outcome is recorded, the next state, conditioned on the result, is described by the corresponding, normalized component. This is an ideal case of measurement, not the description of every quantum interaction; more general formulations exist (IBM Quantum Learning, lectures on projections and measurements).

The term " **collapse** " in that language designates the transition from the previous description to the description conditioned on an outcome. What it physically represents and how it should be interpreted are part of the problem of measurement. The formalism just mentioned does not require, in order to be applied, that a human mind decide which outcome should occur. " **Observation** " does not automatically mean introspection, and " **measurement** " does not mean desire. The appearance of a recorded outcome therefore does not authorize the introduction of the will as a physical operator capable of choosing the world.

The analogy is seductive because in ordinary choices, we consider alternatives and then do something. Elena can sign, refuse, or propose a correction; when she proposes the correction, that gesture enters the situation. But the alternatives conceived are not, for this reason, components of a coherent quantum state. We have not defined an appropriate mathematical space, a measure, amplitudes, or a rule linking these quantities to behavior. The formal similarity between **"multiple possibilities, one outcome"** is broad enough to accommodate many phenomena. Precisely for this reason, it is not sufficient to identify their mechanism.

We will therefore use "conscious wave collapse," if we use it at all, as a stated image of a decision that implements an action among considered alternatives. The image does not explain how the Self deliberates, nor does it attribute control of physical probabilities to consciousness. Even in ordinary life, an act does not erase all future possibilities: it changes some, opens up others, and can be corrected in its consequences. The metaphor makes the transition to action visible; it loses precision when used to suggest that history has become a single, irrevocable branch.

There is a scientific proposal distinct from our metaphor. Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose have developed the theory of orchestrated objective reduction, known as Orchestrated Objective Reduction (OOR), which links consciousness to quantum processes organized in the microtubules of neurons and to a proposed form of objective state reduction. In their 2014 summary article, they present this hypothesis and its rationale (Hameroff and Penrose, 2014). It is not simply the thesis that a conscious mind collapses a wave by choosing an outcome: in the model, specific reduction processes would participate in the production of conscious

events. The direction of the hypothesis matters, and it should not be reversed to make it confirm our title.

Max Tegmark has argued, through decoherence time calculations, that the degrees of freedom relevant to the cognitive processes under consideration should be treated classically (Tegmark, 2000). Scott Hagan, Hameroff, and Jack Tuszyński have criticized some assumptions in those calculations and proposed different estimates for the microtubule model (Hagan et al., 2002). This is a dispute over mechanisms and physical conditions: replications should not be omitted, and do not automatically prove the theory. The presence of quantum phenomena in biology, taken generally, is not specific evidence for Orch OR.

This book considers quantum consciousness a controversial frontier hypothesis, not its foundation. It must not deny that quantum physics belongs to the description of matter in order to reject its use as a moral shortcut. Even a confirmation of quantum processes relevant to consciousness would require further argument to establish that they produce the kind of control required by free will. A probability is not yet an author. The novelty of a mechanism does not by itself resolve the relationship between who acts and what they do.

We can therefore remove the prestige of physics from the meeting without diminishing Elena's gesture. The relationship can be corrected through a proposal, a discussion, and a group decision. We don't need to know which interpretation of the quantum measurement is definitive to discuss the value of precisely declaring a verification incomplete. If an ethical thesis hinged on a physical dispute that it couldn't make relevant to its object, it would have chosen a foundation that was too fragile and too remote.

No one chose where to start

The map leaves open the strongest objection. We have circumscribed a practical freedom, distinct from the absence of causes. We have shown that some activities of the Self can affect outcomes. But what makes the person responsible for those activities, if their abilities and motivations depend on a history they did not choose? Elena did not choose every condition of her training, the need for that contract, or the colleague's willingness to support her. The manager did not create his own way of assessing urgency and costs from scratch. If we broaden our perspective enough, every action seems to arise from conditions that precede its attribution to someone.

In 1994, Galen Strawson formulated an argument against ultimate moral responsibility: to be ultimately responsible for what we do, we should be responsible for what we are in its relevant aspects; but any attempt to choose how we become already requires dispositions and criteria that we did not originally choose. The attempt to establish complete authorship thus leads to a regress (Strawson, 1994). The argument does not simply depend on the claim that the world is deterministic. Even adding randomness does not make a person the ultimate creator of their own way of choosing.

This objection deserves to be fully addressed. It doesn't simply argue that we should be more lenient toward those who have had a difficult life. It questions a form of merit and guilt that requires the subject to be the absolute source of his or her own existence. If the book were to respond that "the present can change" without addressing that requirement, it would have changed the subject. The possibility of intervening in a trajectory does not in itself prove that those who intervene ultimately deserve everything attributed to their choice.

The book's response is a distinction, not a refutation. We do not base ethics on the claim that a person created their own initial conditions. We base it on the concrete relevance of the capacities through which they can understand, act, encounter consequences, and participate in modifying them, along with the need to protect those who suffer those consequences. It is a normative choice: we must argue for it and limit it. We do not present it as something biology would have forced everyone to accept.

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza have developed a theory of responsibility centered on the control of effective action, the capacity of the mechanism that produces it to respond appropriately to reasons, and the relationship between the agent's appropriation of that mechanism. Their proposal does not require resolving regulatory control as access to every possible alternative (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998). The book does not fully adopt this theory nor consider it a consensus. It invokes it to demonstrate that the problem of responsibility can be articulated around capacities and the history of their exercise, rather than solely around the uncaused production of the act.

The skeptical reader might still argue that we have achieved practical responsibility, not the ultimate merit they sought. They are right to maintain the distinction. This chapter has not demonstrated that merit, and will not introduce it in the conclusion as if it were already readily available. In the field defended here, we will call responsibility the appropriate ability to hold an accountable action, to distinguish degrees of capacity and constraint, to protect others, and to make correction possible. Any practice that goes beyond this will have to justify the transition.

The distinction does not mean that harm disappears when the perpetrator's responsibility diminishes. If a person has been harmed, their protection and acknowledgment of the incident remain relevant. Understanding the perpetrator's circumstances does not automatically restore what the other has lost. On the other hand, acknowledging the harm does not prove that the perpetrator had unlimited power to prevent it. A serious ethic must be able to keep both questions open, even when a single answer would provide quicker relief.

The idea of proportion is essential here. The book cannot speak of full responsibility as if everyone possessed, at all times, the same capabilities, information, and options. The demand for accountability must be related to what the person could actually understand and do, and to the power with which their actions impacted others. The word "present" does not automatically transform a reduced margin into sovereignty. Rather, it forces us to seek the concrete margin, without inflating it or erasing it before having studied it.

There's also a risk in the opposite direction. If we say that no one is the ultimate author of themselves, a power might conclude that people are merely systems to be managed to achieve results. They might stop asking for reasons and limit themselves to producing behaviors. But the rejection of absolute authorship doesn't justify the elimination of participation. The book proposes that the ability to understand, challenge, and intervene is part of what we must protect, not just a useful tool when it facilitates control.

This protection also imposes limits on those who think they know the best solution. In Elena's case, an organization could obtain more accurate signatures by imposing procedures that no one understands. The procedure may be necessary to verify certain steps, but it doesn't address the issue of autonomy. If a person must bear the consequences of a decision, they must be able to understand as much as possible what is being asked of them and why. An

externally correct outcome does not, in itself, prove that the Self was able to participate in its formation.

Finally, it's not enough to call every intervention a "cure." A practice aimed at changing behavior must be questionable for its goals, methods, and the power it wields. Understanding the causes does not authorize those who study them to become the owners of people. The book doesn't draw this conclusion from a gene or a wave. It defends it because a civil relationship requires the individual to remain an interlocutor, even when their capacities are vulnerable or in need of support.

What, then, is enough for ethics? Not the demonstration that everything is possible. It is enough, for the practical groundwork laid here, to recognize that capabilities and conditions can make a difference in outcomes, and to assume the duty to protect them, understand them, and make them contestable. To this description, we add a commitment: consequences matter to someone, and no one should be reduced to material over which to exercise power without response. Real margin makes that commitment relevant; it does not automatically produce it as a law of nature.

The age-old debate remains open. We can continue to ask ourselves whether there is an ultimate responsibility and what it requires. Meanwhile, we must not suspend any distinction between a threat and a proposal, between informing and deceiving, between opening up an alternative and making it impracticable. Even the skeptic has reasons to want these differences to be seen. The map serves to avoid requiring him to undergo a metaphysical conversion before discussing how to live together.

The cost of no

The civil consequences begin with the sentence uttered at the meeting **: "You are free not to sign."** For it to become a more adequate description, the person who utters it must ask themselves what cost of refusal depends on their own power. They can clarify what will be assessed, distinguish dissent about the document from judgment about the person, and offer a verifiable way to record the disputed point. No single measure guarantees freedom. But a vague promise of no consequences is less reliable than a condition that the dissenter can control.

The colleague who looked at the table has a different margin. He doesn't decide on the contract renewal, but he can confirm what he had acknowledged during the preparation. His participation changes the social weight of the proposal. It's not a complete solution, and it doesn't assign him the task of saving Elena. However, it does make visible a limited and concrete responsibility: not allowing a pertinent fact to become nonexistent simply because it's uncomfortable to mention. The margin must be mentioned to the extent that it exists, without turning it into obligatory heroism.

For the physician, the distinction between absence of coercion and the ability to understand can translate into a different encounter. Imagine presenting a proposal and asking the patient to choose. If the explanation is incomprehensible, the formal choice does not exhaust autonomy. The physician can verify what has been understood, distinguish what is necessary to decide now from what requires further time, and clarify relevant alternatives. Here, we are describing an ethical criterion for the encounter, not a substitute for clinical evaluation or establishing a procedure valid for every treatment.

The patient can rely on the doctor's judgment without this always implying a renunciation of autonomy. They may have reasons for delegating some aspects and wanting to participate in others. The key is to make the delegation understandable, rather than assuming that a signature alone demonstrates a fully understood choice. Even a request for help, when the conditions are right, is part of the ability to self-direct. Autonomy does not require carrying out every task on which one's life depends without others.

For the teacher, asking for reasons means allowing those reasons to truly influence the situation. If a student can explain a difficulty but no explanation is ever considered, the invitation to speak becomes a formality. The teacher can maintain a request and simultaneously revise its timing, methods, or assumptions. They shouldn't promise that every dissent will be accepted. They should avoid confusing listening with waiting for the student to find the words to agree on their own. The difference between authority and arbitrariness also depends on the ability to understand and respond to a refusal.

For a parent, the map prevents two mirror-image errors. The child does not already possess all the capabilities of an adult; his dependence does not deprive him of all participation. We can offer alternatives commensurate with the situation, explain a limitation, and recognize that dissent does not prove guilt. We don't need to attribute metaphysical free will to the child to take a preference seriously. And we don't need to call a choice what we have already entirely decided for the child. When a limitation is necessary, making it understandable is more honest than presenting it as a shared decision that was not.

This criterion also applies to those who design public rules. A choice accessible only on paper may require material conditions that some people lack. The possibility of challenging a decision may exist and depend on language, time, or a resource that is difficult to obtain. The book's civic argument is that these obstacles must be factored into the assessment of effective freedom. It's not enough to simply count the options; we need to understand which ones can be understood and utilized by those who must live with their consequences.

This does not mean that the state should choose the best life for each individual. The shift from conditions to substitution is precisely the danger highlighted by the map. An intervention can increase the possibility of choice or use dependence as a reason to remove choice. What is needed are public criteria, the possibility of contestation, and attention to distributed power. The protection of autonomy is not a phrase with which every institution can declare itself innocent: it must be verified in terms of its effects and the margins it leaves to its stakeholders.

Finally, there's the person alone in a room, no one openly threatening them, yet struggling to distinguish between their own desire, someone else's expectation, and a fear. The map doesn't offer them a five-minute exercise to become free. It offers a less confusing question: what, precisely, is preventing or supporting the possibility of choice here? Information might be missing; a material consequence might be weighing on them; it might be difficult to recognize an alternative. Giving these obstacles different names doesn't eliminate them. It avoids turning them all into a single ego defect.

It may also be that a decision is now beyond your available capabilities. The book doesn't ask you to prove otherwise to save your dignity. It asks you not to mistake that limitation for a universal conclusion about all of life. The ability to change your circumstances may depend on the help of others and require time beyond your willpower's control. Real freedom

encompasses this dependence; it shouldn't be portrayed as a prize reserved for those who can already do without it.

For all these figures, the civil question is not simply "how free is this person?" It is also "what part of the conditions of their freedom depends on what I do?" The manager, the colleague, the doctor, the teacher, the parent, and the person designing a procedure have different powers. They should not be judged with identical standards. But no one can make their own contribution irrelevant by simply stating that, in the end, the other will choose. Another's choice does not erase the conditions we help create.

Before the past

At the meeting, the wording is changed. The report now distinguishes what has been verified from what remains to be verified. Elena signs the corrected text. We don't know if the contract will be renewed; we won't add a happy outcome to reward her gesture. We don't even know if, on the next occasion, she will be able to propose an alternative. The scene ends with a precise change, small enough not to pretend to have resolved her life and real enough not to be a simple consolatory interpretation.

If anyone were to call it proof of free will, they would be asking too much. If they were to call it irrelevant because it had causes, they would be missing what happened. The correction changed a public statement from the group; the proposal and the colleague's support helped make it practicable. The civic value of the outcome can be discussed without anyone claiming the absolute origin of the gesture. This is the terrain the chapter sought to make visible.

The five names can now be brought together again without becoming synonymous. Free will retains its question of the alternative and the author. Concrete freedom concerns protected spaces and the ability to participate. The determination of the unexpected concerns what takes shape beyond a situated prediction. Living singularity concerns those who traverse that history, even when they cannot significantly direct it. The collapse of a conscious wave remains an image, if it serves to visualize a passage, and must be abandoned when it claims to explain it physically.

The point where they meet is the present of an organism that lives, encounters conditions, and can, in certain circumstances, contribute through choice to what will follow. This is the interpretation of epigenesis that the book constructs. It is not a law of physics nor the solution to all controversies about responsibility. It is a way of asking what is happening to a concrete capacity and how our actions can support or restrict it. Ethics begins to work there; metaphysics has not been declared finished.

The point remains that the scene only touched on. Elena was able to recognize an alternative and bear its cost with someone. What happens when a history of violence, poverty, or humiliation makes it harder to recognize the margin itself? When rejection doesn't resemble a possibility, but the beginning of a danger already known? We can't answer by simply saying that the present exists. We must understand how the past participates in shaping what seems possible in the present.

The next chapter must address that difficulty without using it to deny any openness and without transforming openness into a duty of healing. The map of names was necessary to avoid bringing a false promise into that story: that being a Self is enough to freely dispose of everything that shaped it. Now we at least know what question we cannot avoid. Before asking

someone to choose, we must understand the cost, in their story, of acknowledging that another choice exists.

Chapter Sources

The references support the scientific claims and theoretical attributions indicated in the text. The narrative scenes are imagined. The map of freedom and the conception of responsibility are philosophical and civil arguments, distinct from experimental results. The quantum analogy is a metaphor; Orch OR is a controversial hypothesis and does not form the basis of the chapter.

Thomas Aquinas (13th century). Summa Theologiae, Part I, Question 83, Article 1. Theological and Philosophical Argument on Free Judgment. English translation available at New Advent. Source

Frankfurt, H. G. (1969). Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility. The Journal of Philosophy, 66(23), 829–839. DOI: 10.2307/2023833. Source

Berlin, I. (1958). Two Concepts of Liberty. Inaugural lecture, later included in Four Essays on Liberty (1969). The link is to a reproduction of the text hosted by Utah Tech University. Source

Libet, B., Gleason, C. A., Wright, E. W., & Pearl, D. K. (1983). Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activity (readiness-potential): The unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act. Brain, 106(3), 623–642. DOI: 10.1093/brain/106.3.623. Source

Soon, C.S., Brass, M., Heinze, H.-J., & Haynes, J.-D. (2008). Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain. Nature Neuroscience, 11, 543–545. DOI: 10.1038/nn.2112. Source

Schurger, A., Sitt, J. D., & Dehaene, S. (2012). An accumulator model for spontaneous neural activity prior to self-initiated movement. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 109(42), E2904–E2913. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1210467109. Source

Maoz, U., Yaffe, G., Koch, C., & Mudrik, L. (2019). Neural precursors of decisions that matter—an ERP study of deliberate and arbitrary choice. eLife, 8, e39787. DOI: 10.7554/eLife.39787. Source

Johansson, P., Hall, L., Sikström, S., & Olsson, A. (2005). Failure to detect mismatches between intention and outcome in a simple decision task. Science, 310(5745), 116–119. DOI: 10.1126/science.1111709. Source

Lorenz, E. N. (1963). Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow. Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences, 20(2), 130–141. Mathematical and physical study recalled to distinguish determinism from predictability, without extending it as a verified model of the Self. Source

IBM Quantum Learning (accessed October 2026). Basics of Quantum Information, lecture "Inner Products and Projections." This is a reference to the projective measures formalism; its use in this chapter does not constitute a quantum explanation of decision making. Source

IBM Quantum Learning (accessed October 2026). General Formulation of Quantum Information, lecture General measurements, introduction. More general formulations of the measure for the ideal projective case. Source

Hameroff, S., and Penrose, R. (2014). Consciousness in the universe: A review of the 'Orch OR' theory. Physics of Life Reviews, 11(1), 39–78. DOI: 10.1016/j.plrev.2013.08.002. Proponents' presentation of the theory. Source

Tegmark, M. (2000). Importance of quantum decoherence in brain processes. Physical Review E, 61(4), 4194–4206. DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.61.4194. Physical criticism based on decoherence estimates. Source

Hagan, S., Hameroff, S. R., & Tuszyński, J. A. (2002). Quantum computation in brain microtubules: Decoherence and biological feasibility. Physical Review E, 65, 061901. DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.65.061901. Replies to some hypotheses of decoherence computations. Source

Strawson, G. (1994). The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility. Philosophical Studies, 75, 5–24. DOI: 10.1007/BF00989879. A Philosophical Argument Against Ultimate Moral Responsibility. Source

Fischer, J. M., and Ravizza, M. (1998). Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility. Cambridge University Press. A Philosophical Theory of the Control of Actual Action and Response to Reasons. Source



Movement II — The Self that chooses

5. The past of “shit”

Let's imagine a restoration workshop on a Saturday morning. Ada is forty-three and has been attending the course for a month. She doesn't want to change jobs: she works in a laundry and, when she can, she comes here to learn how to put something back together that doesn't depend on the rush of a shift. A small chair sits on the bench. The wood has been cleaned; a joint needs strengthening. Ada tightens a screw and hears a sharp noise. The head snaps. For a moment, she holds the screwdriver still, as if continuing to hold it could prevent the noise from occurring.

Bruno, who's leading the class, turns around. He still hasn't said anything. Ada has already begun to explain. The screw was old, perhaps he'd tightened it too much, she'd asked which one to use, but she can pay anyway. The last sentence comes out before she knows how much the screw costs. Bruno moves closer to look at the joint, and she shifts her body back. The movement is small; someone might not notice. She notices it and is ashamed. Now she also fears that the others have seen a grown woman back away from a man who's simply trying to figure out a problem.

In the house where she grew up, a broken object rarely remained a broken object. It became the starting point for a lawsuit: who had touched it, how much money had been wasted, why hadn't they been careful? Sometimes physical contact would occur. More often, a sentence would be issued, attributing the defect to the person. The family had little money; the lack was real, but it didn't make it inevitable to use it against someone. Ada had learned to recognize the pause between the noise and the voice. In that pause, one could still try to prevent what would follow.

We don't know what memories are flashing through her mind now. She might be seeing a specific scene, or no scene at all. The story is imagined and doesn't allow for a diagnosis. It does, however, allow us to observe a discrepancy: Ada knows some facts of the present, but she can't yet treat them as sufficient. Bruno has never insulted her. Mistakes have already been made at the course. Yet the sound of the screw seems more authoritative than those four mornings. She begins to gather her tools. She says that perhaps it's best to come back another time.

Bruno might reply **, "Nothing happened."** This would be inaccurate. A screw has broken, and Ada is trying to leave. He might also ask, in front of the others, why she's reacting this way. This would transform his attempt to escape exposure into a greater exposure. In the scene we're constructing, he does something less ambitious. He stops at a distance that leaves her space, looks at the counter, and says, **"The screw broke. The chair can be repaired. If you want, I'll show you how to remove it."** Then he waits for a response without taking the screwdriver from her hand.

Ada doesn't calm down immediately. She wishes the statement were true, and fears it's merely the gentle beginning of a reprimand. She asks how much she has to pay. Bruno makes a distinction: the common materials are included in the course; if an item has a special cost, it's made clear beforehand. He doesn't ask her to take his word for it forever. He points out a rule she can verify. Ada puts down her tools but remains by the door. She watches as he extracts

the fragment. The work resumes. No one asks her to tell the story of her childhood to deserve that continuation.

As she leaves, she doesn't think she's healed. She thinks that, this time, something has broken, and no one has done anything wrong to her. That evening, she remembers above all the distance Bruno kept when he stopped. The following Saturday, he might not come: he has an extra shift, money is needed, and learning doesn't abolish the work schedule. He might return and be scared again. A different experience doesn't automatically carry the weight of many years. However, something happened that her waiting hadn't foreseen, and her body remained in the room long enough to pass through it.

Here begins the chapter's moral difficulty. If the Self chooses based on its own history, what freedom does someone who has had to learn to prevent the worst have? Telling Ada that Bruno is not her father is correct and insufficient. Saying that her father will necessarily continue to choose for her is equally insufficient, and more serious. We must understand how the past enters the present without being summoned, and how a different present can become a usable experience. Between these two questions, there is no motivational statement. What lies behind the task of distinguishing what a person knows, what their organism has learned, and what the world still allows them to verify.

The word that doesn't clean

The title contains an unpleasant word because some stories are betrayed when we make them too respectable. A "shit" past can include violence, humiliation, abandonment, fear of not being able to eat or find a place to sleep. It can also include a long series of episodes that, observed one at a time, seem too small to explain the burden they left behind. The word is not a clinical category. It does not establish a ranking of pain and does not allow us to treat poverty, aggression, and a degrading relationship as equivalent. It only rejects euphemism when euphemism protects the one who has hurt more than the one who has been hurt.

Poverty, in particular, is not a moral quality of the family and does not necessarily lead to violence. There are poor homes where a mistake doesn't become an accusation, and wealthy homes where the availability of money coexists with terror. But scarcity can narrow options, make conflict more difficult to avoid, and deprive families of time and resources for care. We distinguish between these conditions to avoid two injustices: seeing lack as a personal flaw, or denying that lack has consequences because we know people who have lived through it without being destroyed.

The question isn't whether the past matters. It matters even in lives that call it normal. The question is how much space it leaves for what doesn't resemble it, and what conditions make it possible to recognize that space. Ada doesn't enter the laboratory with a memory resting next to her body. She enters with skills, expectations, sensitivities, and ways of reacting that have developed together. Some help her: she knows how to work carefully, recognizes the fragility of a material, has learned not to waste. Others may cost her more than they save. A single history doesn't produce just one wound, nor does a wound produce a single behavior.

The chapter's thesis can be formulated in two sentences. The past can lose some of its power to predict the future when the present offers experiences and conditions that enable different learning. This change doesn't erase what has happened, it isn't always available voluntarily, and it can't be requested without considering the current danger, the individual's resources, and capabilities.

The second sentence prevents the first from becoming a command. We won't tell those who suffer that the door is open and that the rest depends on the courage to walk through it. We must verify whether the door exists, where it leads, and the cost of approaching it. We must also recognize that, when an opening exists, it can be difficult to perceive. The reality of an obstacle and the possibility of modifying it are not mutually exclusive. But possibility alone doesn't tell us who is capable of sustaining its work, at what time, and with what help.

What we remember and what we have learned

We call explicit memory the memory we can recall as knowledge or a story: knowing a fact, recognizing a place, remembering an episode from our life. We call implicit forms of learning that are expressed in performance, habits, or responses without requiring the experience to be consciously recounted. The distinction does not divide two people within the same person. It distinguishes ways in which experience can modify a performance or a response. Knowing how to describe what happened and having learned to react to a cue are not necessarily the same ability (Squire, 2004).

A classic finding highlights this difference. Antoine Bechara and colleagues studied conditioning and declarative knowledge in people with amygdala or hippocampal lesions in 1995. They observed a dissociation between the ability to acquire a conditioned autonomic response and the ability to explicitly know the relationship between stimuli: the two abilities could be impaired separately (Bechara et al., 1995). This is a finding about memory systems and an experimental procedure. It does not prove that every unexplained fear stems from a hidden trauma, nor that the amygdala contains a second, infallible autobiography. It shows why a learned response and reportable knowledge should not be confused.

This distinction corrects a phrase we often use with good intentions: **"But you know, things are different now** ." Ada may know this and continue to react before she can use that knowledge. The knowledge isn't false; it may not yet be sufficient to change the response. To understand the problem, we don't have to imagine a rational part that speaks the truth and an animal part that refuses to obey. We can recognize that an organism has learned different things under different conditions, and that such learning isn't all updated through the same operation.

Even the formula **"the body remembers"** requires precision. It can indicate, in an accessible sense, that an experience has left physiological dispositions or learned responses that don't present themselves as a narrative. It becomes misleading if we take it as proof that every sensation preserves the exact account of its origin. A racing heart is real; by itself, it doesn't identify the event that produced it. Difficulty tolerating contact deserves attention; it doesn't authorize someone to invent a biographical episode to explain it. The seriousness of pain doesn't depend on the certainty of a narrative someone else attributes to it.

In this scene, we don't need Ada to remember every episode, nor do we need the reader to know a single cause. We've established, as a narrative fact, a story of humiliation and violence. With real people, reconstruction can be more uncertain, and difficulties can have multiple origins. You don't listen better to a person because you've quickly identified a past that seems appropriate to explain them. Sometimes you listen better by stopping expecting the symptom to tell its own genealogy.

Explicit memory remains precious. Naming an abuse can change the way we understand it, freeing us from accusations of having caused it, and allowing us to seek help or justice. We

won't reduce the story to a useless surface because implicit answers exist. But neither will we grant it automatic power: formulating an explanation doesn't ensure that a noise stops being alarming, that sleep returns, or that a relationship becomes habitable. The recognition of what happened and the change in its consequences can be supported without coinciding.

Here, a first civil requirement emerges. We shouldn't force a person to present a perfectly ordered history before taking a present difficulty seriously. Nor should we treat each of their stories as a verdict on all the facts. We can respect experience, evaluate evidence when necessary, and separate the question of the truth of an episode from the question of what, now, is making life difficult for them. Treatment or support shouldn't depend on the ability to construct a convincing autobiography before us.

The prediction that comes before the sentence

Conditioning allows us to learn relationships between events. A signal that repeatedly precedes something aversive can acquire the ability to prepare a response. This is a useful function: you don't have to wait for the damage to fully recur to protect yourself. In a research laboratory, signals, timing, and consequences can be controlled; in a home, relationships are more complex. A pause, a step in the hallway, the position of a bottle, or a certain form of silence can become part of a story of expectations. The analogy with conditioning helps us think about learning; it doesn't turn a biography into an experiment with a single variable.

For Ada, the broken screw seems to herald a sequel. Her reaction anticipates a possible outcome and attempts to reduce its cost: explaining herself, offering money, walking away. We describe this ensemble as an embodied prediction. It is the book's interpretation, not the name of a measurement performed on Ada. We don't know whether the proposition **"it will happen again" has occurred to her.** The sentence makes a direction of expectation legible: something in the present is treated as the beginning of a previously known sequence.

When we say that the past is a landscape, we use an image. It's not an archive into which the Self enters without constraints and chooses the document to consult. Some paths are already available, others require conditions that are lacking, others aren't recognized as paths at all. The image serves to demonstrate that history participates in the situation from which it chooses. Its limit is equally clear: the terrain of a biography doesn't have coordinates we can measure like those of a valley, and a person doesn't follow a slope with the need for a stone.

The tricky point is that waiting can also reduce the possibility of encountering a denial. If Ada leaves before Bruno responds, she doesn't go through the experience in which the mistake remains repairable. If she interprets every kindness as a preparation for a rebuke, the kindness might not count as new information. We don't say this to accuse her of sabotaging her own freedom. Walking away and showing distrust may have been effective ways to limit the damage. An organism that has had to protect itself isn't obliged to offer every stranger the opportunity to prove itself better.

The question is whether those responses can distinguish situations where they are useful from situations where they become costly. There is no moral obligation to trust. There is, when feasible, the possibility of acquiring more precise discrimination. For this to happen, the present must have recognizable and controllable characteristics. In the laboratory of the scene, Bruno maintains a distance, distinguishes the cost of the material from guilt, and allows Ada the right to leave. None of these conditions amounts to treatment. Together, they make it less risky to stay long enough to see what happens.

We can then correct the image of prison. It is not memory, as such, that imprisons. Remembering can protect, guide, and bring an event to justice. But it would be incorrect to maintain that memories never cause suffering: they can be intrusive and seriously compromise one's life. In this chapter, we are interested in a specific form of restriction, in which a learned prediction becomes difficult to revise and leads to acting as if the worst had already happened. This is not the definition of every trauma; it is a problem that trauma can leave.

A word of caution comes first: sometimes the worst has truly begun. The voice is still threatening, the door still leads to a dangerous room, the mistake is still punished. In these cases, speaking of an overly rigid forecast can be an elegant way of denying a good reading of reality. Before asking someone to update their expectations, we must ask ourselves whether the world has updated its behavior. A protective attitude doesn't become pathological just because it makes our encounter uncomfortable.

The work of stress

The body doesn't just store information about events. It alters its state to deal with them. Among the systems involved is the **hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis** , often referred to by its acronym **HPA** . The hypothalamus triggers signals that stimulate the pituitary gland; this releases a hormone that acts on the cortex of the adrenal glands, inducing the secretion of glucocorticoids, including cortisol in humans. The response is also regulated by feedback loops. It's not a switch controlled by a single emotion: its timing, intensity, and regulation depend on the interaction of multiple systems (Herman et al., 2016). A stress response can mobilize useful resources without being, therefore, a disease.

Bruce McEwen described the ambivalent nature of these processes: responses that support short-term adaptation can incur a physiological cost when repeatedly stressed or inadequately regulated. His work on stress encompasses communications between the brain and other body systems, effects on structures involved in memory and regulation, and the differences between adaptation and overload (McEwen, 2007). The overall conclusion is not that there is a single measure of stress that fits all biographies. It's that protecting oneself has a physiological organization, and maintaining it under pressure can have consequences beyond the episode that triggered it.

We cannot, therefore, translate a violent story into the phrase **"he has too much cortisol** ." This formulation mistakes a complex regulation for a label. Nor can we deduce from an isolated value how a person has lived or what choices they are capable of making. Endocrine language adds precision when it describes a mechanism and its context. It loses it when it becomes a more authoritative way of saying that someone is ruined. We will not use a hormone as the scientific name for despair.

Let's return to the pause on the desk. The fact that Ada must wait for an answer doesn't mean that nothing happens during the wait. Her state contributes to making certain actions more available: justifying herself, paying, leaving. We haven't measured her endocrine activity, and we don't deduce it from a gesture. However, we can stop considering that gesture as a poorly formulated opinion that simply needs to be corrected. Fatigue is part of an organism's state, not just the content of the sentence it utters.

This also changes how we interpret a seemingly peaceful day. If a person arrives at a meeting after trying to sleep in a noisy house, after a shift, or after hours spent anticipating conflict,

they aren't approaching our request from a neutral point. You don't have to imagine an injury to recognize a cost. And the cost doesn't have to be the same every day. The same person can have a wider margin in one circumstance and almost none in another, without either performance finally revealing their true character.

A serious body description also has a limit. Not every difficulty must be translated into a stress problem, not every conflict is a traumatic reactivation, and not every person who has suffered presents the same set of responses. The National Institute of Mental Health distinguishes exposure to traumatic events from the development of post-traumatic stress disorder: many exposed people do not develop the disorder, while those who do may continue to feel in danger even after the danger has passed (NIMH, fact sheet consulted 2026). This is an essential clinical distinction. We don't need to assign a diagnosis to every difficult story to take their weight seriously.

A scar is not a future biography

In 1998, Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and colleagues published a study on the associations between adverse childhood experiences and health outcomes and behaviors in adulthood. In the sample examined, greater exposure to categories of abuse and family hardship was associated with increased risks for several outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). The design included retrospective recall of experiences and did not randomly assign individuals to adversity. The study helped to highlight the relationship between history and health; it did not allow for the interpretation of an individual's fate from a single score, nor did it establish a single mechanism for each observed association.

It's easy to turn that outcome into a moral error. First, we deny that the past has consequences: "It's over now." When the consequences become measurable, we change the formula: "So, that's just how you are." The second error seems more informed, but it condemns the person. An association between groups is not an individual verdict. If a condition increases the probability of an outcome, we still need to know what other processes are at work, what conditions persist, and what interventions can alter its course.

The word "scar" is also an image to be used with caution. It indicates that something has happened and may have left lasting consequences. It doesn't mean that all consequences are stable, nor that they have the same reversibility. A material loss isn't necessarily repaired through learning; a pain may require healing; a missed educational opportunity may not return in the form it would have existed before. Denying fate doesn't give us the right to deny the irreversible. We can recognize that a life remains open without pretending that everything lost can be recovered.

This precision is especially important when public discourse favors stories of redemption. A person who has endured violence and then built a fulfilling life demonstrates that such a trajectory existed. It doesn't prove that everyone, under the same apparent conditions, could have reproduced it. We don't know every difference in health, encounters, financial resources, protection, or chance. Using a successful outcome as evidence against those who still suffer erases the very historical singularity that the book sought to recognize.

Nor should we attribute a necessary virtue to pain. Ada may have acquired skills through her history, but that doesn't make violence a good method for producing them. The precision with which she listens to a passage may have been useful; the price paid remains a price. If a person recognizes having learned something through suffering, that recognition belongs to them.

Those who inflicted or tolerated the harm cannot appropriate it to demonstrate that, in the end, it did them good.

The distinction between scar and destiny also concerns identity. A story can be part of what we know about ourselves without occupying every possible description. Ada is a person who has suffered violence; she is also a worker, a beginner who wants to restore a chair, someone who prefers a certain light in the morning. The other descriptions do not erase the first. They prevent it from becoming the only permitted vocabulary. No one should have to stop naming the damage in order to have the right to a life that is not limited to the damage.

If we ask that the past not be the sole author of the future, we must therefore clarify the meaning of the sentence. The past is not literally an author, and the Self is not its external antagonist. We are indicating a possibility: that the consequences of a history encounter subsequent conditions capable of influencing what happens. Some consequences may be attenuated, others may be managed differently, others may persist and require forms of support. A different future does not have a single form, and it does not always coincide with the absence of all symptoms.

A person might still be afraid and still be able to recognize more safe situations. They might remember the wrong without blaming themselves. They might need help and, through that help, participate more in their own life. These are examples of what we mean by change, not criteria by which to externally evaluate the success of a treatment. It's not up to the reader to decide that the other person has improved because it's now more comfortable to spend time with them.

Plasticity that does not obey an order

The adult brain's capacity to change through experience is real. In 2008, Janina Boyke and colleagues studied healthy older adults learning to juggle, observing selective changes in gray matter measurements associated with learning. Performance was lower than that of young comparison subjects, but the capacity for change was not eliminated by age; some changes were transient (Boyke et al., 2008). The MRI did not directly count new cells, and the motor task was not a treatment for trauma. This finding precludes considering the adult brain a permanently fixed object; it does not prove that every consequence of a life history can be eliminated.

The word plasticity describes a capacity for change, not the willingness to realize our desires. It's a distinction that everyday language easily loses. When we say "the brain can change," some hear "you can decide how to change it." The two propositions depend on the type of learning, the conditions, time, health, and the specificity of the functions involved. Simply observing a general capacity isn't enough to know how to influence a particular difficulty.

The formula "it's slower in adults" also needs to be defined. Not everything changes at the same speed, and not all adult learning is uniformly slower than all childhood learning. Some information can be acquired rapidly; changing a deeply entrenched response may require sustained effort. Developmental windows do not all reopen at the same time. This is why the chapter advocates a real possibility without assigning it a universal timetable. Delayed change does not, in itself, demonstrate either biological impossibility or a lack of commitment.

Ada has learned for years that mistakes herald a person's devaluation. A different morning may not be enough. This doesn't mean the body keeps a simple accounting, according to which a hundred kindnesses are needed to compensate for a hundred humiliations. We don't know

such an equivalence. It means that a new episode must be able to impact a learning process that already has an organization and a history. What matters is the quality of the experience, its repetition, the possibility of encountering it in different circumstances. What matters is that an exception isn't immediately followed by a confirmation of the old expectation.

Talking about cost isn't a pessimistic concession. It's part of the description. Attending a treatment program requires time, money, or access to services, travel, and sometimes the opportunity to take time off work. Returning to a place where you were treated differently may require you to endure a fear that still lingers. The cost isn't the same for everyone. Those who offer their Saturday time to Ada may not see the shift she turned down, the bus she took, or the struggle of not leaving as soon as something breaks.

Change can also create a new problem. A protective behavior that limits your life may have been intertwined with a skill or a relationship you depend on. Stopping anticipating everyone's wishes can expose a conflict that was previously silently absorbed. It wouldn't be right to conclude from that conflict that change is wrong, but neither would it be right to celebrate it without considering who will bear the consequences. An opportunity becomes truly usable when we don't just name it.

For this reason, plasticity must not become a new court of law. An organism's willingness to change does not measure a person's merit. If an intervention doesn't produce the desired outcome, the intervention, its adaptation to the problem and the conditions, must be questioned, not the failure automatically attributed to a refusal to heal. The promise of an ever-reprogrammable brain is cruel precisely when it is presented as trust: it leaves the subject burdened with the burden of not having achieved what was declared possible.

The term epigenesis, in the philosophical sense constructed by the book, can help us think about this active historicity. However, it does not add a therapy to the available knowledge. We cannot deduce a specific molecular modification from a change in behavior, nor the rewriting of a genome from an overheard sentence. Here, the concept indicates that the organism continues to live and learn under successive conditions. To explain a specific mechanism, specific measures are needed. The book's words cannot replace them.

When a memory becomes editable again

Reconsolidation is one of the points at which research forces us to correct the image of the memory as an immobile repository. In 2000, Karim Nader, Glenn Schafe, and Joseph LeDoux showed, in rats subjected to a conditioned fear paradigm, that after reactivation, memory maintenance could again depend on protein synthesis in the amygdala. A pharmacological intervention administered under that condition impaired the subsequent expression of the memory; the timing of the intervention mattered (Nader et al., 2000). The result concerned a controlled animal procedure. It did not demonstrate that simply remembering a human event was enough to rewrite it at will.

The distinction is essential. Recollection means that a memory is recalled or expressed. Destabilization indicates a condition in which that memory can become susceptible to modification. Reconsolidation refers to the process by which it is restabilized. These are not three interchangeable names for the same act. The possibility of change does not justify the assumption that every recollection automatically opens the same window, and the fact that a response changes does not in itself identify the process that produced the change.

In 2013, Dieuwke Sevenster, Tom Beckers, and Merel Kindt studied the conditions for reactivating a learned fear memory in humans. In their paradigm, a discrepancy between what was expected and what actually occurred was necessary to observe the effects attributed to destabilization and subsequent pharmacological intervention (Sevenster, Beckers, & Kindt, 2013). This is an important finding on the conditions of updating, not a rule for measuring surprise in everyday life. It doesn't mean that any unexpected experience will reopen any memory, nor that reconsolidation can be diagnosed by observing a person calm down.

In 2010, Daniela Schiller and colleagues published a human experiment in which a brief recall of learned fear, followed by an extinction procedure within a specified interval, was associated with a reduction in the subsequent return of the fear response. The authors interpreted the result as an updating process facilitated by reconsolidation (Schiller et al., 2010). The promise was significant: to intervene on the reactivated memory, rather than simply constructing learning that counteracted its expression. But a promising result does not conclude research, especially when applied from experimental stimuli to complex personal histories.

A recorded replication by Anastasia Chalkia and colleagues, published in 2020, did not find the persistent attenuation expected through that procedure and called into question the robustness of the effect in humans (Chalkia et al., 2020). The replication does not negate the animal results or prove that any form of updating is impossible. However, it does preclude the presentation of a specific combination of recall and extinction as a universally reliable method for preventing the return of fear. The limitation lies in the science of reconsolidation, not just the caution of those who describe it.

Even the transition to clinical practice requires this distinction. In 2021, Pascal Roullet and colleagues conducted a randomized, double-blind study on sixty-six adults with long-term post-traumatic stress disorder. They compared traumatic memory reactivation sessions preceded by propranolol or a placebo. Symptoms decreased in both groups, without an overall superiority of the drug in the primary comparison after treatment (Roullet et al., 2021). The result does not justify prescribing the drug through a trial, nor does it identify reconsolidation alone as the cause of improvement. It demonstrates the importance of distinguishing a mechanism explanation from the efficacy of an intervention and its advantage over a comparison.

What can we then firmly state? That a stabilized memory should not be conceived as universally unchangeable. That the conditions of reactivation can impact its subsequent maintenance or expression, and that these conditions matter. That updating is a real object of research. We cannot add that every traumatic memory can be opened with a uniform technique, that change is equivalent to erasing the event, or that the person can recognize on their own the molecular moment at which to intervene.

This precision does not make treatment any less important. The 2023 VA/DoD guidelines, presented by the National Center for PTSD, recommend specific trauma-focused psychotherapies for PTSD, including prolonged exposure, cognitive processing therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) (VA/DoD, 2023). Their clinical evaluation does not depend on evidence that all benefits occur through a single reconsolidation mechanism. We can acknowledge the existence of evidence-based treatments without promising a one-size-fits-all recovery or turning the chapter into an individualized treatment choice.

Ada's lab demonstrates none of these processes. Bruno hasn't set up a reminder, doesn't know a time window, and isn't conducting therapy. The scene suggests a more modest possibility: an expected response doesn't occur, and Ada encounters a different event. That event could contribute to new learning without us knowing how to attribute it to reconsolidation. We don't need to promote kindness as a neuroscientific intervention to recognize its concrete importance.

The opposite temptation would be to claim that a memory must be erased for a life to change. But a person can retain the memory of a wrong, and the knowledge of that wrong, while diminishing a response that makes it difficult to navigate subsequent situations. They can change the meaning they attribute to their own actions without denying the event. These are conceptual distinctions that do not guarantee a clinical outcome. They serve to prevent the only image of change from being a happy amnesia.

The chapter, therefore, does not promise to make one forget. Forgetting would not necessarily restore what was taken away, and it may not be what the person desires. The question is whether a memory and its consequences can enter a life in which they do not, each time, decide, on their own, how the next encounter will be interpreted. Research makes this question less naive; its limitations prevent it from being answered with a technical incantation.

The return is not always a return to the beginning

When a cue previously associated with an aversive consequence is presented without that consequence, the learned response can diminish. This process is called extinction. The research discussed by Mark Bouton shows why it shouldn't be simply equated with the erasure of previous learning: a diminished response can reappear over time, in a changing context, or after other events. New learning may depend on the context in which it occurred (Bouton, 2004). This finding on learning processes has important implications for clinical research; it doesn't allow every fluctuation in life to be explained through a single experimental design.

For the chapter's question, one consequence matters: the return of an answer doesn't automatically prove that no change has ever occurred. Ada can remain in the laboratory and still be afraid elsewhere. She can discover that Bruno distinguishes between a mistake and a person's value and still fear another man who approaches. The distinction between those situations may not yet be sufficiently usable. Calling the first episode an illusion because the second is difficult would be too poor an interpretation of the learning process.

At the same time, we can't declare every favorable change as progress and attribute every unfavorable change to a simple context. With real people, an assessment of the problem, its duration, and its effects on life is necessary. The principle here is more limited: fluctuations don't interpret themselves. The question "Why did he come back?" shouldn't already contain the accusation "Why didn't you do enough?" It can instead ask what has changed in the situation, what conditions supported the margin, and which have disappeared.

Understanding this dependence changes the value of a safe place. It can be important even when, initially, the benefit remains tied to that place. It's not unreasonable that Ada can only learn on Saturdays with Bruno. There she can acquire a skill, socialize with other people, and experience a morning where a mistake doesn't expel her. But it would be a mistake to expect that place to immediately demonstrate a general transformation in her life. Local change has its own reality and its own limits.

This limitation also affects those who offer support. It's easy to feel indispensable when the other feels better in our presence and worse when we're not. From there, a demand can arise: if security comes from me, then I have to decide for you. The book must stop before that point. A favorable condition does not confer ownership of the person to the one who makes it possible. A relationship can be precious and yet remain vulnerable to scrutiny, dissent, and the possibility of seeking other support.

For Ada, therefore, it's important that the course has a recognizable rule, not just a kind man. If another teacher takes Bruno's place, the rules regarding materials should remain understandable. If Bruno gets irritated one morning, he should be able to acknowledge his actions without turning his irritation into Ada's fault. A protection based solely on someone's favorable mood remains fragile. Trust can begin with a face, but its sustainability also depends on what happens when that face is tired, absent, or contradictory.

We can't eliminate this fragility from all encounters. We can avoid ignoring it when we ask the person to trust. The right to verify what's happening, to stop, or to report harm makes a relationship less dependent on the promise of kindness from the stronger. This is an ethical consequence of the issue, not a prescription derived from experimental extinction. The data on learning and civic choice converge in a common question: what conditions allow the new to avoid remaining a unique exception?

The present must be able to be encountered

The different present can take the form of another gaze, of a body that remains nearby, of a true sentence, of a three-second delay between impulse and action. These images are powerful because they situate possibility within a concrete moment. However, they must be earned, one by one, and corrected where they risk lying. Time is not a medicine. In this chapter, there is no three-second threshold that scientifically separates response from freedom.

A brief interval can be, in our interpretation, the space in which previously unavailable information becomes usable. Ada hears the noise, begins gathering her tools, then hears that the chair can be repaired. The point isn't the duration measured by a stopwatch. It's the possibility that the sequence won't be completed before another event enters it . Sometimes that interval isn't there. Sometimes it's created by an external condition, not by a control the person already possesses.

But a delay can also be paralysis, and immobility does not equate to a more conscious choice. We will not call the simple fact that someone remains still freedom. Nor will we call for suspending a protective response where speed is necessary. The question remains situated: what information could enter, at what risk, and what activity would become possible? Without these questions, the language of the present is reduced to an abstract eulogy of pause.

Even another body present can help or aggravate. Closeness is not good by definition. If Bruno picks up the screwdriver without waiting, he invades the very space where Ada is trying to understand what's happening. If he touches her shoulder to reassure her, he might introduce something she doesn't want. In the scene, the significant gesture is the distance it leaves. Presence acquires value through what allows a person to verify and control, not through the intensity with which the person present feels loved.

A true sentence has similarly modest characteristics. **"The chair can be repaired"** refers to an object Bruno knows how to repair. **"Nothing bad will happen to you again"** refers to a future he doesn't know. The second can move the speaker but be unusable for the listener. Ada

doesn't need a guarantee from the world to know that that screw, in that room, doesn't entail punishment. The new data can be limited and therefore verifiable.

A sentence becomes false even when it correctly describes the speaker's intention but is contradicted by their behavior. " **You can stop"** loses meaning if stopping causes irritation. " **You can ask"** loses meaning if the question is ridiculed. The present tense we offer to the other includes the continuation of our words. It's not enough to introduce a possibility into the conversation: we must allow it to produce effects when the person uses it.

In the scene, Bruno's statement shouldn't challenge the past for its right to be true. Ada has truly experienced humiliations. What's new is that a subsequent circumstance doesn't necessarily reproduce them. If Bruno demanded that she immediately recognize the difference, he would transform that novelty into a test. If she remained coherent even in the face of his distrust, he would make it easier to overcome it. The other's time isn't a public demonstration of the effectiveness of our benevolence.

The present thus becomes more than a simulation when something happens that the expectation does not contain and that the person can, at least in part, encounter. This is the chapter's strong interpretation. We cannot describe it entirely with a single mechanism, and not every unexpected experience will be favorable. A surprise can worsen a prediction; an encounter can confirm the danger. The point is not to provide novelty, but to enable a different and sufficiently reliable event to gain weight over what was already expected.

The possibility of leaving the room remains part of that fact. Ada can stay precisely because Bruno doesn't prevent her from leaving. Staying under duress and staying with the ability to interrupt are different experiences. We shouldn't generalize this condition to every care or education situation without considering needs and capabilities. But we must recognize that a promise of freedom loses credibility when its primary effect is to take away the right to stay.

The objection of those who are not safe

The strongest objection doesn't come from those who deny change. It comes from those who can tell us why change, in their circumstances, is too costly. It's easy to talk about a broken screw in a benevolent room. Outside that room, there are people returning to those who threaten them, families for whom a missed shift means an unpaid bill, teenagers who have no other place to sleep. The present may not offer any data capable of disproving the past. It can simply continue with it.

In those lives, distrust isn't necessarily rigidity. Recognizing a sign early can be more useful than offering the world the benefit of the doubt. A person who has already paid for believing a promise might evaluate a new promise with reasonable caution. If the book asked her to open up because the brain is plastic, it would use a biological fact to impose a risk. The language of openness can become the language of those who don't have to bear the consequences.

The objection goes even further. Even where the immediate danger has passed, the work required for change is unequally distributed. Some can buy time, care, silence, transportation, childcare. Others must choose between a date and a payday. If we present the ability to change as the primary asset, we risk once again rewarding those with better conditions. A difficult past would be judged by how quickly a person manages to make its consequences invisible.

Finally, society could adopt the discourse of the Self precisely to evade responsibility. If the present can change the trajectory, why change a humiliating institution? A path of adaptation

can be offered to those who are humiliated. If the problem is the individual's prediction, why make their contract less precarious? They can be taught to tolerate uncertainty. In this version, epigenesis would become an ideology of maintaining people for the benefit of conditions no one intends to correct.

We don't reply that, even in the worst situations, there is always a choice. The phrase is too broad to be demonstrated and too easily used against those who cannot use it. Nor do we reply that a person must be completely safe before receiving any treatment. Perfect safety may not exist, and waiting for it could mean abandoning someone who needs help now. The distinction concerns the type of possibility we intend to make practicable and the conditions necessary for that possibility, in that life.

Safety is part of the conditions for change, not a reward given to those who have shown a willingness to change. This is the chapter's civilized response. It doesn't derive like a theorem from physiology. It's a position we choose because real danger, dependence, and scarcity impact the activities we ask people to perform. If we know that a condition makes a job difficult to sustain, we can't ignore it and then use the outcome to measure the individual's merit.

Even in uncertainty, there may be limited scope for interventions, and they cannot be effective until every risk is resolved. They won't be the same for everyone, and they won't replace necessary protection. A willingness to listen, access to a service, and a concrete opportunity to report danger can be important. However, we must define their limits, prevent partial assistance from being sold as a solution, and avoid shifting the burden of making it work against conditions that contradict it to the individual.

The same distinction prevents us from idealizing resilience. If someone manages to maintain their skills and connections under adverse conditions, we can acknowledge their achievement. But we shouldn't turn that ability into a justification for leaving conditions as they are. The success of some doesn't make the risk imposed on others acceptable. Dignity doesn't require a performance of resistance, and a society doesn't need to wait for everyone to collapse before acknowledging a harmful situation.

Poverty adds a factor here that should not be confused with trauma. Anandi Mani, Sendhil Mullainathan, Eldar Shafir, and Jiaying Zhao studied the relationship between economic worries and cognitive performance in 2013. In the paradigms used, financial worries and variations in farmers' availability before and after harvest were associated with differences in performance; the authors proposed a cost of worries on available mental resources (Mani et al., 2013). The result does not imply a lower intrinsic capacity of poor people, nor does it measure a universal penalty. It helps to question the demands we add to those who are already bearing the burden of material insufficiency.

When a service asks a person to gather extensive documents, keep multiple appointments, and reconstruct their history in detail, that request may be formally the same for everyone, but concretely more burdensome for some. This doesn't give us permission to treat the poor as incompetent. It requires us to evaluate whether a procedure requires the very resources that their condition makes scarce. Simplifying it can increase participation without replacing the person.

The objection, therefore, corrects the thesis without invalidating it. A different present can contribute to a different future, but the present is not private property that each of us can

create alone. It includes what others do, the resources available, the ongoing risk, and the protections we lack. If we want to speak of liberation, we must include this world in the sentence. Otherwise, we are asking an organism to learn security while leaving it exposed to its own denial.

The debt is not of the one who suffered

Here we must maintain a distinction that discussion of growth often overlooks. No one incurs a moral debt for failing to transform their pain into an exemplary life. Violence remains the responsibility of the perpetrator; failures to protect remain questionable in their own circumstances. The person who bears the consequences does not need to produce a happy ending to prove that it was worth helping.

This doesn't mean that every subsequent action is exempt from evaluation. If Ada, frightened or humiliated, harmed someone, the harm would require attention. Understanding her history might help assess her capabilities and circumstances, but it wouldn't make the harmed person disappear. The opposite error would be to expect Ada to be equally available in every circumstance because, one morning, she managed to stay. An observed possibility doesn't certify general sovereignty over one's own state.

The present responsibility, as addressed in the previous chapter, must be measured against what the person could understand and do, and the actual power of their actions. In this chapter, we add that access to a capacity can be hindered by history and current conditions. It's not enough for an alternative to exist on our list. It must be recognizable and practicable enough to be included in the assessment. Judgment requires this concrete work; a word like trauma doesn't replace it, nor does a word like choice shorten it.

The right not to reconcile also remains. A greater chance of living does not imply the obligation to return to the person who hurt you, forgive them, understand their intentions, or make a relationship you wish to end tolerable. Change can consist precisely in acknowledging that you no longer need to offer your presence to that relationship. Others may desire a form of reconciliation. We will not grant either side a monopoly on healing.

Public narrative should also avoid transforming trauma into a required identity. Those who have suffered may want to share it, or they may not always want to be introduced through that experience. Ada doesn't have to tell every teacher about her father for a life to remain a life. History can be important for healing and justice, but it shouldn't become the price of every respectful gesture. Respect isn't a special service we activate only after receiving documentation of the pain.

Change, when it happens, also belongs to those who fail to describe it as a turning point. There are lives that lack a decisive phrase, a recognizable encounter, or a date to celebrate. A response can fade through many conditions, help can slowly become useful, a skill can open up a possibility that wasn't there before. There's no need to invent a heroic moment to recognize that a trajectory has undergone a change. The subtlety of change doesn't diminish its reality.

What needs to change on our side

For a parent with a history of humiliation, the chapter poses a particularly difficult question. What happens when a child's mistake leads to a response the parent didn't choose to learn? Understanding that response isn't enough to protect the child. Someone needs to address

what's happening in the present, even if working through the history will take a long time. A family may need concrete support and care; a child may need protection. We shouldn't wait for adults to fully understand their past before taking the current risk seriously.

In everyday situations that don't involve serious danger, a consequence can already be very specific. If a parent has turned a broken object into an accusation against the person, they can return to that statement and acknowledge their actions: the object requires repair, the insult was theirs. There's no point in asking the child to understand how difficult their childhood was. Acknowledgement should restore the child's sense of distinction that the adult has erased, without assigning the child the task of consoling them. It's an ethical proposal for repair, not a technique that guarantees the interruption of an automatic reaction.

The parent's story can explain why that work is difficult and what support is needed. It shouldn't become an argument for the child to endure indefinitely. The child isn't the place where the adult demonstrates their ability to achieve their own development alone. If a response risks causing harm, making support accessible is part of the parent's responsibility to both. Protecting the child and understanding the adult don't require denying each other.

For a doctor, the issue also concerns the predictability of the encounter. Imagine a person who dreads an appointment and struggles to respond. Explaining what will happen, clarifying the options for participation compatible with the situation, and not immediately interpreting silence as refusal can make the encounter less opaque. A request for time alone does not prove trauma; a traumatic history does not automatically explain every symptom. The clinical assessment must remain open to relevant causes, while respect should not await the diagnosis.

What happens after the visit also matters. A person may have understood a proposal and yet be unable to reach the recommended service. They may meet a new professional to whom they must explain everything all over again, or they may miss an appointment due to a material condition. When possible, continuity and clarity of the process reduce a cost that the clinical content of the recommendation alone cannot address. We are not establishing a protocol that applies to every service. We are asking whether the help offered remains accessible after the consultation is over.

For a teacher, a student's past shouldn't become an off-the-cuff diagnosis. A child who stands up when corrected may be angry for many reasons. Attributing the gesture to a violent family without supporting evidence would be an abusive interpretation. However, we can distinguish a correction of homework from public humiliation. We can prevent the mistake from becoming the name by which the group recognizes that person. These are educational responsibilities that don't require knowing the entire history of the student.

If a student has truly endured adverse experiences, the academic challenge doesn't disappear. But we can question how it's addressed: what's predictable, what help is available, what happens after a difficulty, how to return to work without having to undergo a public character trial. An adult who maintains proportionate consequences and forgoes devaluation isn't abolishing all limitations. They're making limitations less easily confused with humiliation. Where a protection issue arises, the teacher's good intentions are no substitute for the work of competent professionals.

Discretion also matters. A teacher may know something their classmates shouldn't. Using them in front of the class to explain a reaction, perhaps with a sympathetic intention, can take away a student's control over part of their history. Help shouldn't turn the past into a public

commentary. The person should be accessible through what they're learning, not just what happened.

For those who legislate or organize services, this chapter takes the question to a different level. Announced protection exists only if it can be applied to the actual circumstances of those who need it. Schedules incompatible with work, non-existent transportation, redundant administrative procedures, or constant changes in contact points can make a right difficult to access. The assessment should include these obstacles, rather than considering them details external to the quality of the service. A care policy cannot simply produce an offer and then interpret non-compliance as disinterest.

This criterion does not impose a single solution and does not promise that every material intervention will resolve every consequence of the trauma. It requires verification: who can access it, who interrupts it, what costs it incurs, what makes a process more stable and open to challenge. Protection should avoid another subordination, in which the person receives help only if they show the expected gratitude or improvement. The ability to complain about a service's injustice is part of its reliability, not an obstacle to treatment.

Finally, for the person alone in a room, this chapter shouldn't become an additional request. It can help distinguish questions that, when we're tired, become confused: is the danger continuing? Is a learned response being activated in a different situation? Are we lacking the resources to address what's being asked? It's not necessary to possess the exact answer alone. The distinction can help describe a difficulty and make a request for help more relevant, when that help is available.

There's also the possibility of not being able to do this work now. A read page doesn't necessarily produce the margin it speaks of. If the reader continues to suffer, the chapter doesn't acquire the right to question him why he hasn't used his plasticity well enough. His dignity precedes the outcome of the work. The civic duty remains even where we can't demonstrate improvement: making life less burdensome, protecting from further harm, maintaining access that doesn't depend on a performance of hope.

The screw remains on the bench

We return to the workshop without attributing to him what he didn't do. The screw has been removed. Ada hasn't had to pay for anything and hasn't told her father. A joint is reinforced; she watches, then tries a movement on the remaining wood. That morning, she learns something about restoration. Perhaps she also learns that, in that place, an explanation doesn't always prevent an attack. We can't know what part of the experience will last, how it will be used, or what will happen the following week.

We know, however, which interpretation would be incorrect: that a teacher freed Ada from her past. The subject was not replaced by the beneficial action of another. Ada joined the course, brought attention, remained in a difficult situation, and completed an activity. Bruno contributed to making that stay less risky. The rules regarding materials and the availability of the course also contributed. The present includes these contributions without making them a sum of merits or the absolute origin of the choice.

The opposite conclusion would also be incorrect: since the past continues to weigh heavily, nothing changes that morning. A limited change doesn't have to pretend to be total to matter. Ada now has an episode in which a prediction didn't come true. She might still consider it an exception. She might remember it when another life breaks. She might need subsequent

experiences, different protections, or a cure that the course can't offer. The scene ends here because respect for a life includes the refusal to invent a favorable outcome.

The past hasn't stopped happening. A loss remains a loss, the wrong remains attributable to the one who committed it, and no repaired chair makes the suffering from which Ada comes necessary. But that past didn't contain this morning. The present adds something to the story: not proof that anything is possible, but rather a fact from which an organism could learn. It is the limited and serious sense in which the book argues that a trajectory can encounter new conditions.

The next question arises precisely from this limitation. A different experience can exist and remain difficult to utilize. Knowing that something is possible doesn't mean being able to recognize it when a learned response takes over. How, then, do we sustain the abilities that allow us to distinguish, interrupt, or direct an action, without forcing a person to constantly monitor themselves? We need to understand the relationship between automatism and awareness, and why habit is more than just an obstacle.

Let's not entrust Ada with the task of reminding herself, every time, that she's free. Let's remain faced with the question that her morning made more concrete: when the next thing breaks, what will she find around her before having to decide whether to stay?

Chapter Sources

The sources document the scientific findings and attributions cited in the text. The laboratory scene is imagined. The landscape and the scar are images; the embodied prediction is an interpretive key, not a diagnosis. The civil consequences are normative arguments. The chapter distinguishes memory updating from clinical efficacy and does not propose an individual treatment procedure.

Squire, L. R. (2004). Memory systems of the brain: A brief history and current perspective. Neurobiology of Learning and Memory, 82(3), 171–177. DOI: 10.1016/j.nlm.2004.06.005. Source

Bechara, A., Tranel, D., Damasio, H., Adolphs, R., Rockland, C., & Damasio, A. R. (1995). Double Dissociation of Conditioning and Declarative Knowledge Relative to the Amygdala and Hippocampus in Humans. Science, 269(5227), 1115–1118. DOI: 10.1126/science.7652558. Source

Herman, J.P., et al. (2016). Regulation of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenocortical Stress Response. Comprehensive Physiology, 6(2), 603–621. DOI: 10.1002/cphy.c150015. Source

McEwen, B. S. (2007). Physiology and neurobiology of stress and adaptation: Central role of the brain. Physiological Reviews, 87(3), 873–904. DOI: 10.1152/physrev.00041.2006. Source

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Traumatic Events and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Institutional factsheet consulted in October 2026. Distinction between traumatic exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder. Source

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14(4), 245–258. DOI: 10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8. Source

Boyke, J., Driemeyer, J., Gaser, C., Büchel, C., and May, A. (2008). Training-Induced Brain Structure Changes in the Elderly. Journal of Neuroscience, 28(28), 7031–7035. DOI: 10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0742-08.2008. Motor Learning in Healthy Older Persons; Not a Trauma Treatment Study. Source

Nader, K., Schafe, G. E., & LeDoux, J. E. (2000). Fear memories require protein synthesis in the amygdala for reconsolidation after retrieval. Nature, 406, 722–726. DOI: 10.1038/35021052. Animal study. Source

Sevenster, D., Beckers, T., & Kindt, M. (2013). Prediction Error Governs Pharmacologically Induced Amnesia for Learned Fear. Science, 339(6121), 830–833. DOI: 10.1126/science.1231357. Source

Schiller, D., Monfils, M.-H., Raio, C.M., Johnson, D.C., LeDoux, J.E., & Phelps, E.A. (2010). Preventing the return of fear in humans using reconsolidation update mechanisms. Nature, 463, 49–53. DOI: 10.1038/nature08637. Read in conjunction with the limitations and replication reported in the chapter. Source

Chalkia, A., Schroyens, N., Leng, L., Vanhasbroeck, N., Zenses, A.-K., Van Oudenhove, L., and Beckers, T. (2020). No persistent attenuation of fear memories in humans: A registered replication of the reactivation-extinction effect. Cortex, 129, 496–509. DOI: 10.1016/j.cortex.2020.04.017. Source

Roullet, P., et al. (2021). Traumatic memory reactivation with or without propranolol for PTSD and comorbid MD symptoms: A randomized clinical trial. Neuropsychopharmacology, 46, 1643–1649. DOI: 10.1038/s41386-021-00984-w. Source

US Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense (VA/DoD) (2023). Clinical Practice Guideline for Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder. Official summary from the National Center for PTSD: Overview of Psychotherapy for PTSD, accessed October 2026. Source

Bouton, M. E. (2004). Context and Behavioral Processes in Extinction. Learning & Memory, 11(5), 485–494. DOI: 10.1101/lm.78804. Source

Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function. Science, 341(6149), 976–980. DOI: 10.1126/science.1238041. Source



Movement II — The Self that chooses

6. Automatic and conscious

Luca knows the traffic light after the market doesn't last long. He doesn't look at his watch to decide: he knows it by the number of people who manage to get through, by the line that begins in front of the bread truck, by the light on the bar window. He's been driving the same bus for years, on routes he knows well enough to notice a detour before reading the sign. This morning he slept poorly. His mother called twice during the night; nothing urgent had happened, but the second call stayed with him. At 6:20 he was already at the depot. Now it's almost 9:00.

A bicycle appears between two stopped cars. The boy riding it looks the wrong way. Luca slows down and brakes; the movement of his hands accompanies that of his foot. He doesn't tell himself he has to avoid a collision, he doesn't list the interests at stake, he doesn't formulate a moral maxim. He's seen, he's assessed what's needed, he's acted. The boy stops, raises a hand, and turns back. Behind the driver's seat, a bag falls from the seat. Luca checks the mirror, asks if anyone's hurt. A woman says no and picks up the bag.

He drives off again. Almost immediately, a man bangs on the glass separating the driver from the passengers. **"Are you capable of driving?"** The question comes after the danger has passed, while Luca is still checking that everything is proceeding normally. The man bangs again. Luca feels his jaw tighten. The phrase he wants to respond with is ready, precise, older than this morning: then you come, if you're so good. He knows the tone before he's said it. In his house, when he was little, a question about someone's ability to do something could become the beginning of a humiliation that would last until dinner.

It's not a complete thought. His father doesn't appear before his eyes. Above all, he feels the need to block out those words, to immediately demonstrate that he's not one to be treated like that. For a moment, the passenger takes up more space than the road. Luca realizes he's been looking at his face in the mirror for too long. He looks back ahead. **"I have to drive. We'll talk about this at the stop."** His tone is harsh, less controlled than he'd have liked. The man continues talking; Luca hears a few words and misses the others. At the next stop, he opens the doors. The passenger gets out, protesting.

At the terminus, Luca meets Nadia, who's driving the next bus. He tells her first about the bicycle, then about the passenger, and finally says he got nervous. Nadia doesn't give him a diagnosis or explain her childhood. She asks if anyone fell. He says no. She points to the detour sheet: they've closed a section after the bridge, the afternoon route is changing. Luca had read it at the start of his shift. Now he looks at it as if it were new. "Show me where to turn," he says. Nadia places her finger on the map and waits for him to follow the route.

For a few minutes they talk about roads. Luca remembers the boy, the accusation, an answer he would have liked to have given better. Meanwhile, he finds the point on the map where his familiarity with the line might lead him in the wrong direction. He hasn't discovered a way to be constantly present. He asked a colleague to make a difference visible. When he sets off again, the sheet of paper is where he can consult it as his work permits. The rest he lacks hasn't been replaced by a conversation. The day continues to demand his attention, and he still doesn't have an infinite amount of it.

The scene is imagined. It doesn't allow us to determine which nervous system produced Luca's every gesture, nor to label a family history as trauma based on a single sentence. It presents us with three facts of ordinary life that a theory of choice must be able to distinguish. An acquired skill helped protect a boy without waiting for explicit reasoning. A hasty response risked diverting attention from an urgent task. A small decision, supported by a person and a map, made the subsequent work more practicable.

If we said that Luca should free himself of all his automatic reactions, we would also be depriving him of part of his ability to drive. If we said he should leave them all undisturbed, we would have nothing to say about the moment the face in the mirror replaced the road. If we entrusted the distinction to a consciousness that continuously monitors every operation, we would be introducing another task within an already demanding one. The problem begins here: how do we become capable of noticing what needs to be revised, while continuing to live thanks to what doesn't need to be revised every time?

The skill that doesn't have to start over

We have traversed the past without being able to treat it as a repository from which to draw only what we need. Now we must avoid a different mistake: turning everything that comes naturally to us into suspicion. The word "automatic" evokes the image of a blind executor. Applied to a person, it seems to immediately strip them of intelligence, sensitivity, and responsibility. Yet our lives would become almost impractical if every family act required the deliberation with which we learned it.

Reading this sentence involves operations that the expert reader doesn't have to decide individually. We can focus on the meaning because we aren't forced to consciously reconstruct each letter. Even manual skill allows us to focus our attention on the material, the interlocutor, or a new problem. There's no need to attribute a complete lack of awareness to these activities. It's enough to recognize that part of the work proceeds without an explicit decision about each step, and that this very familiarity unlocks other skills.

Wendy Wood and Dennis Rünger's review, published in 2016, describes habits as responses learned through repetition in recurring contexts. Familiar situations and cues can foster their activation without the original purpose having to be redefined. The authors emphasize the relationship between habit and the deliberate pursuit of goals: many habits arise while a person is trying to achieve something and can continue to serve that purpose. Furthermore, the fact that a behavior is often repeated does not prove that it was intentionally chosen each time.

The relationship between automatism and awareness cannot therefore be arranged along a moral scale, with the former on the lower rung and the latter on the higher. Sometimes the competent action is rapid because it has a learning history; sometimes reflection is slow because it fails to move beyond a recurring question. A person can think for a long time and increasingly narrow down the range of alternatives. Instead, they can perform a familiar gesture and find, thanks to the time it saves, the opportunity to listen to someone.

Even the word "habit" requires measurement. In everyday language, it encompasses skills, rituals, preferences, and regularities that are not identical on an experimental level. Driving a bus involves perception, learned actions, decisions, and verification: it is not a single, pure example of habit. We can use the scenario to understand a coexistence of processes. We

cannot derive from its description the result we would obtain in a laboratory task designed to separate some of them.

The thesis of this chapter is as follows. A practice can broaden choice when it makes certain crucial steps recognizable and builds responses, habits, and supports that allow one to navigate them. This broadening remains situated and uneven: it does not require continuous awareness, does not guarantee total control, and does not make those who, in a certain situation, fail to use it guilty.

The two sentences must remain together. If we only kept the first, training would become a promise to be sold. If we only kept the second, the limitation would risk becoming a reason to leave everything as it is. The practice we seek must have a more precise purpose than a person's complete transformation: to make less inevitable a transition that, until then, seemed to have no accessible alternatives.

Three functions that can inhabit the same gesture

We can distinguish between habit, defensive automatism, and choice, as long as we don't turn them into three separate inhabitants of the brain. The distinction we propose is functional: it asks what a process makes possible, what costs it saves, what information it remains sensitive to. It is not a clinical taxonomy and does not perfectly match the categories of a single neuroscientific model.

Habit allows us to avoid starting a recurring task from scratch. It is often an ally: it lightens the burden of eating, dressing, performing a task, or keeping a commitment. It can become unsuitable when the context changes and behavior continues as before. Someone walking a familiar path may arrive at the old address even though they know they must go elsewhere. To understand that mistake, you don't need to uncover a secret desire to go back, nor a childhood wound. You need to consider a consolidated response that prevailed over the new intention.

Here, we call a defensive automatism a rapid response organized around protection: avoidance, attack, compliance, immobilization, anticipation of an accusation. These behaviors have different origins and mechanisms; listing them together doesn't mean diagnosing or attributing them all to trauma. The category serves to help us see a problem: a response that reduces a risk, or the feeling of it, can persist even when certain conditions have changed. It can then hinder the encounter with information that would allow for a more adequate assessment.

Protection, however, retains its right to exist. If the risk is present, refusing to expose oneself can be a good response. If a person is truly being humiliated, anger isn't automatically a vestige of the past. The passenger in the scene accused Luca in the present. A theory that attributed everything to his family history would require him to question the reality of an offense. We're interested instead in how to respond to that offense without losing sight of the path he still has to pursue.

Choice, finally, here indicates the ability to guide action by considering what matters in the situation: a goal, a reason, new information, a consequence for others. It may involve explicit deliberation, but it doesn't always have to take the form of an internal debate. A previously made commitment can be made practicable by a learned response. Choice can also involve distributing one's work, asking for a check, or interrupting a conversation that is diverting attention from an urgent task.

Luca's gesture of looking forward again doesn't become free because it slows down every process. At that point, continuing to argue would be a dangerous detour. His gesture of consulting the map, however, requires slowing down enough to distinguish the new path from the familiar one. Speed alone doesn't determine the value of an action. We must ask what the action responds to and whether it can be corrected when what it responds to changes.

The three functions are intertwined. A decision can create a habit; a habit can support a protection; a protection can make a subsequent choice possible. We shouldn't demand a definitive classification of ourselves before acting. Distinction becomes useful when it avoids indiscriminate treatment: not everything that is rapid should be curbed, not everything that protects should be dissolved, not everything that is thoughtfully considered is better.

If we use the image of the signature, we must clarify its limits. The old prediction about to sign the future isn't a hidden hand within the body. It's a way of representing a set of processes that yields a particularly prompt response. The image helps us ask the question of the transition to action. It doesn't demonstrate the existence of a final moment, the same for everyone, in which a sovereign consciousness could intervene and change everything.

Attention has a job to do

When we say that attention is limited, we're not imagining a reservoir with a universal amount of willpower. Attention involves different processes: selecting, maintaining a task, switching between demands, resisting distraction. The limits depend on what is being asked, how tasks interfere, and the individual's state. We can't deduce a moral reserve from a performance measure, nor can we establish the number of decisions after which each individual would lose the ability to choose.

Harold Pashler, in his 1994 review of interference between simple tasks, discussed experiments in which two closely spaced demands slowed down the response to the second task in particular. One important explanation involves a bottleneck in response selection: certain central operations cannot be completed simultaneously under the conditions studied. Other components may overlap. This result doesn't mean that doing two things is always impossible; it just means that knowing two tasks separately doesn't guarantee performing them together costlessly.

Luca knows how to drive and how to respond to an irritated man. This doesn't mean he can give both of them, at the same time, as much attention as they would separately require. The scene doesn't replicate Pashler's experiment. It raises a reasonable question: what work do we add to a person when we ask them to also control the way they control what they do?

Constant monitoring of one's state can become a competing demand. If a person, while speaking to another, must monitor every fluctuation in their breathing, every involuntary thought, every possible sign of defense, part of the meeting is taken up by this examination. They may be able to describe certain internal events more precisely. This doesn't mean they'll listen better to what the other person is saying. Careful attention must be able to emanate from within us.

This is the first criterion of a theory of practice: it's not enough to ask how much awareness it produces. We must ask what it restores access to. If it allows us to realize that the other has finished speaking, that a path is closed, that a pain requires a visit, it has a concrete function. If it merely increases the number of checks necessary before each action, it can make life more limited even as it promises to expand it.

The mind shouldn't become a room of mirrors. It's an image, and we use it only to demonstrate the paradoxical outcome of an ideal: seeing every part of ourselves, to the point of no longer having a window onto the place where we act. Useful attention maintains an openness toward the task, the body, and others. It can focus on one of these aspects for a while and then switch. It doesn't have to continually make them all explicit.

We can also alleviate the demand without changing a person. A clear map, a timely warning, an avoidable interruption that is eliminated can make it less necessary to remember everything while doing something else. These are not shortcuts that devalue the work of the Self. They are ways of organizing the present in which that work takes place. The ability to choose can depend on a difference that someone has made visible outside of us.

Realizing is not yet being able to stop

Awareness of what is happening doesn't equate to the ability to change it. We can sense a response as it arises and be unable to prevent it. We can recognize a mistake immediately after we've made it. We can know, with great clarity, what behavior would be preferable and not have the means to execute it at that moment. If we confuse these levels, we transform understanding into evidence: you knew it, therefore you should have succeeded.

Adele Diamond, in her 2013 review of executive functions, distinguishes between abilities such as response inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. In simple terms: withholding a dominant action, maintaining useful information available, and shifting perspective or rules when necessary. These abilities are interconnected and can be exercised; their expression is also affected by stress, sleep, and emotional and social conditions. They are not a single faculty called willpower, and performance does not depend solely on declared effort.

From this distinction we draw a practical consequence, which informs the book's reasoning. To interrupt a response, it's not enough to simply see it. It may be necessary to have another action available, to remember why one wants to perform it, to recognize a signal early enough, to be able to bear the cost of the difference. A person may succeed in one of these operations and encounter difficulty in another. The difficulty doesn't disappear if we generically call it a lack of awareness.

Belated recognition should neither be scorned nor celebrated as if it had already made amends for what happened. If Luca only realizes at the end of the line how much he's let himself be absorbed by the man, the passenger on the previous ride doesn't retroactively benefit from his understanding. But that recognition can inform the organization of the next ride: a request for support, a decision on when to respond, a report about work. The relevant present isn't always the one immediately preceding the gesture. It's also the one in which we prepare the conditions for the next.

This temporal extension avoids a small, split-second tribunal. We must not imagine that every person, faced with every impulse, has the same invisible opportunity and uses it or wastes it. Some steps can be oriented beforehand, others during, others only afterward. The possibilities for preparation and repair do not render the act irrelevant. They make the question of where responsibility can become operative more precise.

Training then begins to change its meaning. It's not just about applying the brakes. It's about building a more reliable relationship between a recognizable situation and an implementable alternative. The alternative must actually exist: if stopping a discussion leads to punishment, if

asking for help exposes one to ridicule, if a worker doesn't have access to the rest they need, the obstacle can't be resolved by calling it a distraction. Even the best recognition must be matched by the possibility of action.

Feeling the body without attributing an oracle to it

An important transition can be recognized through a physical signal. A tightening of the jaw, a change in breathing, a heaviness in the stomach can help us realize that something is becoming particularly urgent. However, these aren't infallible cues. Tension can accompany different emotions; its presence alone doesn't establish the cause, what danger exists outside us, or what action is right to take.

In the chapter on the Self, we called interoception the perception of the body's internal conditions. Here, we're interested in the possibility of refining certain aspects of this relationship. Refining doesn't mean indiscriminately increasing the intensity with which we listen to ourselves. It can mean better distinguishing, recognizing uncertainty, associating a sensation with verifiable information. The question isn't how much of our body we can sense, but what we can understand and do with what we sense.

In 2015, Sarah Garfinkel and colleagues distinguished three dimensions in a study of eighty people: accuracy in heartbeat perception tasks, subjective assessment of one's own sensitivity, and metacognitive awareness, i.e., the correspondence between confidence in responses and their accuracy. The dimensions proved separable. Feeling capable of perceiving one's body wasn't simply equivalent to performing the task well; knowing when to trust one's own judgment was yet another aspect. These are limited measures, primarily cardiac, not a general ranking of self-knowledge.

This distinction forces us to correct a seductive language. Listening to the body doesn't mean receiving a pre-interpreted truth. The body belongs to the situation we're trying to understand; it doesn't observe it from an external, history-deprived place. It can signal a change worth considering. Giving it meaning can require what's happening, what we know about our health, a check-up, the time needed to avoid confusing the sensation with a conclusion.

When Luca feels his jaw, he doesn't receive the scientifically certain message that his father is driving for him. He can acknowledge, more modestly, that he's entering a response mode in which an argument threatens to absorb him. That recognition is useful if it helps him reorient himself. It would become a problem if it forced him to immediately reconstruct the entire source of the tension while continuing to drive the bus.

There are findings that support targeted training. In 2021, Lisa Quadt and colleagues randomly assigned 121 autistic adults to six sessions of an interoceptive intervention or an active comparison focused on emotional prosody. The intervention combined cardiac tasks, performance feedback, and physical activity. At three months, the analysis estimated a greater reduction in trait anxiety in the interoceptive group, with a modest effect. Only about half of the participants provided data to the control group; missing data were statistically treated. One adverse event of cardiac anxiety was also recorded. This is an encouraging result in a defined population and protocol, but not proof that focusing on the body helps everyone.

The result must be kept on a scale. A structured program isn't just a generic invitation to feel more. The clinical effect alone doesn't prove which component of the program produced it. And we can't transfer an average benefit to every individual, to other conditions, or to an

improvised practice without verification. The possibility of learning something about one's relationship with internal signals remains real; its use requires more precision than the formula that says the body always knows the way.

A person may find it easier to focus their attention, for a moment, on what's outside: an understandable voice, the task at hand, an object they can distinguish without feeling scrutinized. Another may find it helpful to recognize how an internal sensation varies. We don't derive two immutable human types from this. We're establishing a criterion: the practice must be adaptable based on how it's encountered, rather than classifying every difficulty in following it as resistance.

Trainable interoception thus belongs to a theory of discrimination, not of possession. We can learn not to immediately believe every interpretation of a signal, without denying the signal. We can acknowledge that we don't yet know. Uncertainty, when it remains bearable, prevents a bodily change from automatically confirming a prediction. It is a margin of knowledge, not a guarantee of calm.

Regulating does not mean making it disappear

Emotion regulation encompasses the ways a person influences their course: the situations they encounter, the attention they devote to them, the meaning they attach to what happens, and the behavior they respond with. It may involve containing an expression, but it's not limited to that containment. It shouldn't be confused with a general repression of feelings, nor with the ability to appear unperturbed by anything.

In an experiment published in 1998, James Gross showed a disgusting video to 120 participants, asking some to reinterpret it to attenuate its effect and others to hide the expression of emotion. A comparison group watched it without these instructions. Both strategies reduced the visible expression; reinterpretation also reduced reported disgust, while expressive suppression increased sympathetic activation. The point is a difference between processes and outcomes: a less expressive face does not mean that the internal experience has diminished.

We can't turn this result into a universal ban on restraint. Sometimes restraining an expression is necessary to protect someone, carry out a task, or maintain privacy. And reinterpretation isn't always possible or desirable: an offense can be an offense, a loss a loss. The experiment distinguishes strategies under specific conditions. The consequence we propose is more limited: the appearance of control isn't enough to establish that a person has found a sustainable way to cope with their feelings.

If a teacher simply asks for silence, they can obtain it without knowing whether the student has understood, is afraid, or has given up speaking. If an organization only measures the absence of conflict, it can mistake a highly efficient distribution of silence for well-being. It's not necessary to deny the value of containment to see the problem. We need to ask what experience remains possible behind the behavior that satisfies us.

In Luca's case, regulating his response doesn't mean convincing himself that the passenger was kind. It means maintaining enough direction to avoid relying on that accusation to guide him. He can then decide whether to report the incident, discuss it, or not dwell on it. The feeling doesn't have to disappear for the next action to be appropriate. Action and feeling can change at different times.

A practice that seeks only to reduce intensity also risks misinterpreting certain situations. A motivated protest may require staying in touch with indignation. A difficult conversation can become more genuine when a person is able to express what was previously hidden. The challenge isn't keeping every emotion within a comfortable threshold for the listener. It's being able to address it without letting every increase in emotion automatically dictate a single course of action.

This is an ethical distinction in the book. Virtue cannot be deduced from a level of physiological arousal. A calm person can exercise precise coercion; an agitated person can make a responsible choice. We will not measure goodness by the low tone of voice. We will consider the relationship between the gesture, the situation, and the opportunities that gesture preserves or removes from others.

Containing harmful action remains necessary even when it comes at a cost. Difficulty does not authorize attacking, insulting, or endangering others. But a community that wants to make that containment more likely must address its cost and the conditions that make it accessible. Simply rewarding those who appear not to experience it produces a selection of appearances, not a theory of practice.

Before and together are not synonymous with forever

Self-regulation carries within its name a solitude that its history does not entirely encompass. A young child depends on others for many of their conditions: nourishment, protection, daily rhythm, response to distress. As they grow, they acquire skills that allow for more autonomous management. This development occurs within relationships and material conditions; it is not the simple emergence of a separate regulator that replaces all others.

Co-regulation, in the sense used here, refers to the contribution of interaction to the regulation of state and action. It can involve an adult supporting a child, two people facing a difficult time, or a caregiving relationship. It doesn't necessarily involve identical physiological oscillations in two bodies, and it doesn't require every variation in one to be reproduced by the other. Being co-regulated can actually mean not both entering into the same escalation.

Camelia Hostinar, Regina Sullivan, and Megan Gunnar, in their 2014 review of the mechanisms of social stress attenuation, examined animal and human studies across development. The presence or support of significant others can attenuate stress responses under certain conditions; the effect varies with age, relationship, and context. These findings support the biological value of some forms of support. They do not demonstrate that a human presence is always calming, nor that a person without support cannot acquire regulation skills.

The statement that a nervous system stabilizes with another before stabilizing on its own captures an important priority of developmental care, but it becomes false if we take it as an absolute law. Relationships can be destabilizing; solitude can sometimes protect against a dangerous relationship. An adult doesn't have to find another person every time before being able to act. And those who have experienced insufficient care haven't forever lost the ability to learn.

The limit doesn't weaken the relational thesis. It makes it more concrete. It's not the number of bodies present that guarantees support. What matters is what a presence allows, whether it's reliable, whether it respects the necessary distance, whether it doesn't add a request precisely where the capacity to respond is already under pressure. A person can help us by

making less noise, avoiding a question, making it clear what will happen next. Their contribution doesn't have to resemble a scene of consolation to be real.

In 2006, James Coan, Hillary Schaefer, and Richard Davidson used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study sixteen married women exposed to the threat of an electric shock. Participants held their husband's hand, that of an unknown man, or no hand at all. Holding their husband's hand was associated with a broader attenuation of neural responses to the threat; the effects also varied with the reported quality of the marriage. The sample was small and specific. The study highlights a relational influence in that context, does not prescribe physical contact, and does not prove that every partner is a source of security.

The wrong person's hand may be precisely what we want to avoid. We shouldn't use a result on proximity to cast suspicion on a refusal of proximity. The meaning of the relationship belongs to the conditions of the effect, and consent belongs to the conditions of treatment. These latter are normative statements: we are not asking the laboratory to establish the right not to be touched.

Nadia doesn't need to hold Luca's hand to contribute to his morning. She reduces a request: it makes it easier to identify the deviation. She leaves him the task of following the map, without testing his lucidity. We can't know if this conversation has changed an autonomic parameter. We can describe what changes in the scene: a problem no longer needs to be entirely solved by one person alone, while that person is still absorbed in something else.

The ability to receive help is not the opposite of autonomy. It can be a component of it, if help makes an action more practicable, one the person can recognize and direct. Instead, it becomes a substitution when the decision permanently shifts to the person providing help and support is conditioned on obedience. A relational practice must be able to reduce dependency, respect it where necessary, or make it less coercive where it cannot be eliminated.

We shouldn't ask every colleague, friend, or family member to become a professional regulator of others. Even those who support others have limitations, other tasks, and the need to interrupt. Informal care acquires an impossible responsibility when it becomes the only means by which a society addresses difficulties that would otherwise require services, protection, and time. The importance of meetings does not justify burdening them with everything that is missing outside of them.

Practice needs a place and a duration

We can now give the word practice a more demanding meaning than the repetition of an exercise. It is an activity that, by encountering situations, feedback, and opportunities for correction, modifies what a person is able to distinguish and do. It can include deliberate practice; it can include a daily habit or a shared organization. It is not guaranteed by the number of repetitions, because even a way of confirming the same mistake can be repeated over and over again.

The study by Phillippa Lally and colleagues, published in 2010, followed 96 volunteers who chose a specific eating, drinking, or physical activity behavior to repeat in a daily context for twelve weeks. Reported automaticity increased at highly variable rates and over time; the model's estimates did not produce a single, valid-for-all duration. A single missed opportunity did not materially alter the observed process. The study involved limited behaviors and self-assessments; it does not establish how many days it takes to transform a defense or deal with a trauma.

The conclusion we're interested in isn't a timetable. It's the possibility that a chosen activity, repeated under recognizable conditions, becomes less dependent on deliberate recall. The very thing that seemed opposed to freedom can begin to support it. If every useful gesture were to be constantly wrested from a more ready response, the cost of living would remain extremely high. Practice can also try to make an alternative we rightly prefer more readily available.

This doesn't mean that a new habit completely replaces an old one. A person may become more accustomed to asking for clarification when they don't understand an instruction, and still feel ashamed while asking. Changing behavior doesn't guarantee the disappearance of the emotion. However, it can allow for a different outcome: obtaining the information, avoiding a mistake, or encountering a response that doesn't confirm the expected humiliation. The path forward involves recognizable consequences, not just a sense of progress.

Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, in their 2006 meta-analysis of implementation intentions, examined plans that link an anticipated situation to a response: when a certain condition is encountered, a certain action is initiated. Overall, these plans helped achieve goals in the contexts studied. Simply wanting an outcome wasn't enough: making the when and how more recognizable could facilitate action. The outcome concerns a set of tasks and goals, not a universal procedure for trauma or freedom.

Research shows a possibility that our reasoning can utilize without turning it into a recipe. A choice made earlier can influence how we approach a situation later. Not everything needs to be decided at the most costly moment. But a plan must be revisable when the situation isn't as expected. If the prepared alternative becomes a command that no longer recognizes differences, we will simply have created a new rigidity.

Consider a recurring conversation between two people. One tends to respond before the other finishes, fearing that a criticism will quickly become a condemnation. They may want to listen better, but that desire alone doesn't allow them to do so. If both agree on a way to mark the end of a conversation, part of the work no longer depends on the interpretation of each pause. Agreement doesn't heal a story or resolve the conflict on its own. It simply makes a passage where conflict was building up less ambiguous.

This is an example, not an instruction to be applied to every relationship. In a coercive relationship, an agreement can be ignored or used to impose silence. In a relationship open to reconsideration, the cost of speaking can be distributed differently. The object of the practice is never simply a response within a person. It is also the way in which a situation makes that response probable, necessary, or replaceable.

For this reason, duration matters without becoming a requirement for indefinite perseverance. A possibility may take time to become reliable. Time, however, is not sufficient proof that it's worth continuing. If an activity increases fear, humiliation, or addiction, it must be possible to stop or modify it. Always asking for another week before listening to an objection makes the practice unchallengeable.

Feedback must also come from those who practice it. It's not enough for the observer to see fewer bothersome episodes. Is the person able to do something they couldn't do before? Does they better understand a difference? Can they ask for a change? Does their range of actions expand, or is their capacity for endurance simply being stretched for longer? These questions assess the meaning of the practice; they are not a clinical test or a universal scale.

A local result is not a general freedom

The word training easily leads us to imagine a skill that grows as a single force and then becomes available everywhere. But improving at one task doesn't automatically mean improving at all similar tasks in everyday language. Recognizing a signal while we're safe, with time and support, may not be enough to recognize it during a conflict. The difference between these contexts lies in the problem we must understand.

Daniel Simons and colleagues, in their 2016 review of cognitive training programs, found evidence of improvement primarily in practiced tasks. Evidence of transfer to proximate tasks was more limited, while transfer to far-removed capabilities and everyday performance was very weak; many studies presented methodological problems. This finding does not deny that learning is possible. It requires examining what has been learned and where it can be used, rather than calling every performance improvement a general enhancement.

We are not evaluating a particular psychotherapy here through that review. We are exercising methodological caution: transfer is something to be demonstrated, not presumed. A skill useful in a laboratory can be an important starting point. It should not be presented as an acquired property of the Self that no situation can ever take away. A positive result loses credibility when it is expected to mean more than it demonstrates.

The relationship between stress and habit also requires this discipline. In 2009, Lars Schwabe and Oliver Wolf observed increased reliance on habitual responses after acute stress in an instrumental learning task. Participants learned actions linked to food rewards; a reward was then devalued through satiety. Continuing to choose the action linked to the devalued outcome served as an indicator of reduced sensitivity to the updated value of the outcome. This is a specific experimental measure, not a snapshot of all decisions under pressure.

Tom Smeets and colleagues, in 2023, published two pre-registered replications of the original studies without reproducing the pattern of results. A major limitation was that even the unstressed groups did not display the expected devaluation-sensitive control, thus lacking an adequate basis for testing the shift from that control to habit. The result does not prove that stress is irrelevant; it shows that this particular effect and paradigm require attention to the conditions under which they operate.

The formula "stress equals automatism" is therefore too simple. We cannot assign every behavior under pressure to a single mechanism, nor call a habit what could be an action aimed at obtaining immediate relief. Sometimes the way a person acts changes; sometimes what they seek changes; sometimes both. A more precise description may require external information that is lacking.

For Luca, the interrupted night, the accusation, and the task of guidance are inherent to the situation. We don't need to claim that they flipped a universal switch between two systems. We need to enable verification: under what conditions does he lose his bearings more easily, what supports are useful, what demands can be reduced. Rigor restores the concrete case to us instead of reducing it to a ready-made brain image.

The practice thus retains a limited ambition: to make certain skills more reliable in situations where they are needed, and to build access to support where they are not sufficient. It doesn't promise to protect a person from all failure. If it works in one place, that place matters. If it doesn't work elsewhere, the difference must be studied and addressed, not immediately blamed on a lack of conviction.

The objection of the person being coached

The best objection isn't that change is impossible. It's that the proposed change might be of most benefit to those who don't want to change their circumstances. An exhausted worker is encouraged to better manage his irritation. A patient who gets no answers is encouraged not to interpret expectations as rejection. A young man exposed to humiliation is encouraged to recognize the point at which he's about to react. Everyone is offered a skill that, in itself, can be useful. The problem is what remains the same around them.

Training could become the place where a public problem is reassigned to an individual. If they learn to restrain themselves, the organization can continue to ask them to do the same amount of work. If they stop protesting, the service may consider its relationship with users to have improved. If they silently address a challenge, the adult may believe the class problem has been solved. In these cases, practice succeeds precisely to the extent that it makes what should be challenged less visible.

It's not enough to simply say that those proposing the training have good intentions. The objection concerns the effects and distribution of power. Who chooses the behavior to be modified? Who defines success? Who can refuse? Who must pay, in time and exposure, the cost of a trial? A person dependent on authority can accept a program without feeling entitled to say they don't need it. The formal agreement doesn't address the issue of the freedom of the agreement.

Then there's a less visible cost. For those who grew up anticipating someone's mood, the requirement to monitor every internal signal can feel like a continuation of the old work. Previously, they monitored the other person's face to avoid humiliation. Now, they monitor themselves to avoid disappointing an ideal of awareness. The object has changed; the day can remain organized around the need to never make mistakes. The person is no less monitored simply because they have become their own monitor.

The promise of total control adds a form of loneliness. Every unexpected emotion becomes something the individual should have anticipated. Every relapse demonstrates that they haven't practiced enough. Every request for help feels like an unresolved addiction. A theory born to restore a sense of freedom could end up depriving them of the right to fail, to fail to understand immediately, to be supported without showing signs of improvement.

The objection isn't external to the book. It touches precisely on its most important verb: to choose. If this verb is used without regard for conditions, someone who suffers a wrong might be told they are carrying it out, that their future depends on when they stop doing it. The language of choice would become a new attribution of blame. A book about the present cannot help but ask itself what kind of present it is offering through its own words.

Finally, there is a theoretical difficulty. If the alternative is constructed through repetition, context, and learned responses, in what sense would it be a choice? Haven't we simply replaced one automatic response with another, making it more acceptable to ourselves or to those who govern us? The person who responds more calmly may have been trained, rather than becoming more capable of directing their actions. The apparent success of practice doesn't answer this question.

Critique deserves to be maintained even where assistance is serious. No word, including co-regulation, shields a relationship from power. No positive measure allows us to omit the question of what the subject can now do, say, or refuse. And no theory of plasticity authorizes

us to consider each person as material to be improved according to a purpose decided by others.

A practice must be contestable

The answer begins with a distinction between making a behavior more accessible and making the management of that behavior more accessible. In the first case, success can be defined entirely from the outside: a person does what is expected of them, with less friction. In the second, we must also consider their relationship with what they do: they can understand its meaning, evaluate its consequences, modify it, oppose a request, ask for different support. These are not absolute guarantees, but they are differences we can look for in the situation.

A new habit can sustain a choice when it serves a purpose recognized by the person and remains open to revision. It doesn't need to be reexamined every minute to maintain its value. The problem arises when no contrary information can count anymore, or when the objective belongs only to those with the training. The automaticity of the action doesn't decide on its own whether the practice has increased autonomy. It is also determined, in the ethical sense we propose, by the relationship between that action and the reasons for which it is supported.

This response does not demonstrate metaphysical free will. It does not claim that the individual has become the causeless origin of his or her own conduct. It reflects the level of freedom the book can address: a capacity, itself caused and sustained, to respond to relevant differences and to reconsider a course of action. The fact that learning participates in this capacity does not make it fictitious. It raises the question of what kind of learning, what purpose, what possibility for correction.

In Luca's case, the criterion isn't whether he spoke less harshly. That may be important, but it's not enough. What matters is that he retains his driving skills, can acknowledge the accusation without being completely absorbed by it, has channels for addressing problematic incidents, and can request working conditions compatible with the task at hand. If we simply teach him not to show fatigue, we've robbed him of an important opportunity just when we were telling him to increase it.

Institution must therefore become part of the practice and its evaluation. It can reduce incompatible requests, make information visible, ensure reporting spaces, and change what creates avoidable burdens. Individuals are not exempt from all responsibility; responsibility is distributed based on actual capabilities and power. Those who monitor shifts can influence a constraint that the worker cannot change through attention.

The distinction also applies to time. A useful process may require duration; a harmful condition does not become acceptable because the process is still ongoing. Individual work is no reason to postpone any intervention in the context. Nor does a change in context always make personal assistance superfluous. Both may be necessary, with different objectives and without one becoming a justification for avoiding the other.

A practice must be able to listen to a refusal without immediately turning it into a symptom. This doesn't mean that every refusal proves the intervention is useless, or that every external observation is illegitimate. It means that dissent contains information and rights that we cannot erase by attributing a psychological origin. A person may have difficulties and, at the same time, valid reasons for challenging what is being proposed.

The sufficiency of choice, then, is not a minimum established by the observer. We cannot assign each life a certain level of awareness after which it is considered successful. Instead, we can stop demanding total presence and recognize the value of a limited change. An interrupted response, a modified agreement, a uttered request can matter without transforming the entire biography. The outcome should be considered for what it makes possible, not as a certificate of liberation.

The return of the old answer does not close the case

A person can change a behavior and find themselves, the next day, within the same response. We can recognize this oscillation without automatically attributing meaning to it. It doesn't prove that the change was illusory; nor does it prove that every painful repetition is a necessary stage of progress. We need to look at what happened, with what consequences, under what conditions.

The useful criterion is a verifiable difference. Is the behavior less frequent in certain situations? Can the person stop it sooner, or repair the damage more clearly? Do they ask for help without having to wait for a serious outcome? Have they stopped being in a context that imposed the same cost every day? These are concrete questions; we shouldn't turn them into a mandatory log of every moment of the day. Even measuring can become a burden.

The damage done, however, remains something to be addressed. If an adult has insulted a child, their own story and struggle shouldn't dominate the entire discussion that follows. The child needs the wrong to be acknowledged without becoming responsible for the adult's comfort. Any work on what made the act likely belongs later; protection from similar acts must begin without waiting for that work to be completed.

Repair, in this chapter, is also a form of action revision: admitting a consequence, correcting what can be corrected, modifying the conditions for repetition. It doesn't coincide with a sufficiently intense feeling of guilt. A person can feel very guilty and leave everything unchanged. Instead, they can carry out concrete work without immediately finding a coherent narrative of their feelings.

We must not use the possibility of reparation to diminish the severity of an act. Some harm cannot be undone; those who have suffered it are not obligated to participate in the reconstruction of those who committed it. Reparation can be refused, and change must be allowed to proceed even without reconciliation. The process remains accountable when it fails to ask the injured party to provide proof that the process is succeeding.

Intermittent choice belongs to this imperfect temporality. A capacity may arrive earlier in some stages and later in others. It may be available when the person has support and disappear when that support is withdrawn. This does not mean it was a worthless loan. An action made possible by others remains an action of the person, as long as the support does not entirely dominate its direction.

The conditions we can change

For a parent, the most immediate consequence concerns the amount of work required of the child in times of distress. Understanding an emotion, finding the right words, holding back a gesture, and listening to an explanation may be different demands. It's not enough to formulate them all in a reasonable tone for them to become simultaneously accessible. Parents can separate the time spent protecting themselves from the harmful action from the time

spent trying to understand it together with their child. They don't need a perfect account to recognize that something is difficult.

It can also make a recurring situation more understandable. A comprehensible and relatively stable rule requires less work than one that changes with the adult's mood. This does not prescribe families without unexpected events or conflicts. It requires that the child's ability to continually anticipate what the adult hasn't made clear not be considered autonomy. Parents also need support: care that depends on their inexhaustible availability already carries a fragility that affects the child.

For a doctor, the distinction between knowing and being able to do changes the way a difficulty is interpreted. A patient may have understood a prescription and yet encounter obstacles in following it: costs, schedules, side effects, fears, competing instructions. Repeating the same explanation more insistently may not address any of these obstacles. Verification concerns what the patient has understood and what allows them to translate it into action; it requires clinical information and material, without pre-assigning the difficulty to willpower.

Even an invitation to pay attention to the body must be framed within a comprehensible framework. What signals should be recognized, what allows for a decision, and when professional consultation is needed? A vague increase in self-monitoring is not a sufficient result. The patient must be able to report that a procedure increases anxiety or is inaccessible to them without feeling like a poor practitioner of the treatment. This chapter does not establish a treatment; it clarifies the responsibility within which a treatment is proposed.

For a teacher, a difficulty with attention may require a review of the situation before becoming a character judgment. A lengthy instruction, delivered only once while other requests are being made, can challenge a student who knows the subject matter. Making the task visible, distinguishing steps, and verifying understanding without publicly exposing the error are ways to reduce an avoidable cost. They don't solve all difficulties and don't replace an assessment when needed; they avoid adding a test of endurance to the learning process.

Teachers must also be able to distinguish an orderly class from a class capable of thinking. If a student who dissents is always considered less disciplined than one who remains silent, education rewards a form of conformity that can appear to be self-control. It is necessary to foster conditions in which an objection can be voiced without aggression or humiliation. Controlling behavior is essential for coexistence; coexistence must restore a space in which thought can have consequences.

For those who legislate or organize a service, the ability to choose should not be treated as a resource the user brings entirely from home. A right accessible only after many repeated requests, contradictory information, and tests of perseverance also selects those who can shoulder that burden. A more understandable procedure doesn't necessarily make decisions for the individual. It can restore the ability to focus on the decision that matters, instead of wasting time figuring out how to get there.

Regulatory support offered at work must be evaluated in conjunction with working conditions. Is it optional, without punitive consequences? Can those who use it report shifts, workloads, and behaviors that make their job more difficult? Are the outcomes considered merely as reduced conflict or also as the opportunity to request changes? The issue isn't rejecting any

personal intervention. It's preventing its presence from automatically absolving those with the constraints.

For a person alone in a room, the chapter shouldn't become another chore to be completed thoroughly before being able to rest. Understanding some passages doesn't mean reconstructing them all. One can recognize a concrete difficulty without being able to explain its origins; one can need help without yet knowing what help will be effective. A reading can offer a useful distinction and not produce any immediate change. The page limit isn't a failure of the reader.

The question we propose is narrow: when an answer restricts what we can do, is there something that would make an alternative more accessible? The answer could concern a skill to be exercised, a relationship, a condition to be changed, professional support, or something currently lacking. We shouldn't pre-select a private explanation. And we shouldn't consider every difficulty as proof that automatism has occupied our entire life: a person continues to be broader than the point at which they encounter an obstacle.

These consequences do not automatically arise from the experiments cited. They are ethical and organizational commitments that the book discusses, taking seriously some measured limitations and many concrete differences. Science allows us to correct the image of inexhaustible control. The choice not to humiliate those who lack it is our responsibility.

The sheet on the route

Let's get back to the bus. The detour is after the bridge, not before. Luca followed it on the map with Nadia, to the terminus, when it was possible to do so. In the afternoon, he recognizes the sign and takes the indicated route. We don't need to add a sense of rebirth. He simply needs to navigate a less familiar route, relying on what he knows and paying attention to what changes. Expertise continues to serve him, even as his familiarity with the route isn't enough.

The morning passenger hasn't become a neutral figure. Luca can still feel irritated when he thinks of his voice. His family history hasn't ceased to exist, and a colleague hasn't resolved it through a map. The conversation did something minor and describable: it made it easier to orient oneself on a new task when the previous episode was still occupying part of one's attention. A small difference doesn't have to be transformed into a healing to count.

We don't know how Luca will meet the next morning. The scene remains open: a theory of practice doesn't possess the person after having described a passage.

The Self that chooses, at the end of this movement, has not become a supervisor residing above the body. It is the living unity we have tried to understand, with varying degrees of skill, a history, useful habits, and responses that sometimes narrow the field. The word epigenesis here retains the book's interpretative meaning: the present participates in the formation of what follows through a system that does not passively receive what happens. It is not the name of a molecular mechanism just demonstrated by Luca's choice.

Practice can contribute to that development by making some steps more recognizable and some alternatives less costly. It doesn't have to promise an ever-aware Self. It must also be able to build trust in the work, which can proceed without being constantly observed. The situated freedom we've discussed doesn't reside solely in the interruption of a gesture: it can reside in the preparation that makes the interruption less necessary.

A question remains that we cannot resolve within a single person. Part of Luca's potential passed through Nadia, the paper, the way the work was organized. The cost also came from outside: a difficult night, a voice, a request added to the journey. Encounters don't all remain at the threshold of a fully formed individual; they enter the conditions in which that individual perceives, responds, and continues to develop.

This doesn't justify calling all independence an illusion. Asking a colleague for a test doesn't mean you've handed over your life to her. However, it forces us to ask what independence might mean when one of our abilities is supported, or made more difficult, by someone other than ourselves. The next step must follow this relationship without transforming it into an identical bond between everyone, and without using dependence as a right to govern the other.

At the terminus, Nadia resumes her shift and Luca his. Two people remain, with tasks that don't coincide. But the gesture with which he will find the detour has met her finger on the map: where, then, ends a possibility that we can exercise alone and that we didn't create ourselves?

Chapter Sources

The cited research documents the findings cited in the text. The Luca and Nadia scene is imagined. The functional distinction between habit, defensive automatism, and choice is an interpretative proposal of the book; the signature and the mirrored room are images. The civil consequences are normative arguments. Studies on specific interventions are limited by the populations, measures, and contexts in which they were conducted.

Wood, W., & Rünger, D. (2016). Psychology of Habit. Annual Review of Psychology, 67, 289–314. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033417. Source

Pashler, H. (1994). Dual-task interference in simple tasks: Data and theory. Psychological Bulletin, 116(2), 220–244. DOI: 10.1037/0033-2909.116.2.220. Source

Diamond, A. (2013). Executive Functions. Annual Review of Psychology, 64, 135–168. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750. Source

Garfinkel, S. N., Seth, A. K., Barrett, A. B., Suzuki, K., & Critchley, H. D. (2015). Knowing your own heart: Distinguishing interoceptive accuracy from interoceptive awareness. Biological Psychology, 104, 65–74. DOI: 10.1016/j.biopsycho.2014.11.004. Source

Quadt, L., Garfinkel, S. N., Mulcahy, J. S., Larsson, D. E. O., Silva, M., Jones, A.-M., Strauss, C., & Critchley, H. D. (2021). Interoceptive training to target anxiety in autistic adults (ADIE): A single-center, superiority randomized controlled trial. EClinicalMedicine, 39, 101042. DOI: 10.1016/j.eclinm.2021.101042. Source

Gross, J. J. (1998). Antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation: Divergent consequences for experience, expression, and physiology. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74(1), 224–237. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.224. Source

Hostinar, C. E., Sullivan, R. M., & Gunnar, M. R. (2014). Psychobiological mechanisms underlying the social buffering of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis: A review of animal models and human studies across development. Psychological Bulletin, 140(1), 256–282. DOI: 10.1037/a0032671. Source

Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. Psychological Science, 17(12), 1032–1039. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01832.x. Source

Lally, P., van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modeling habit formation in the real world. European Journal of Social Psychology, 40(6), 998–1009. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.674. Source

Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P. (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 38, 69–119. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1. Source

Simons, D. J., Boot, W. R., Charness, N., Gathercole, S. E., Chabris, C. F., Hambrick, D. Z., & Stine-Morrow, E. A. L. (2016). Do 'Brain-Training' Programs Work? Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 17(3), 103–186. DOI: 10.1177/1529100616661983. Source

Schwabe, L., and Wolf, O. T. (2009). Stress prompts habit behavior in humans. Journal of Neuroscience, 29(22), 7191–7198. DOI: 10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0979-09.2009. Read in conjunction with the reply and limitations discussed in the chapter. Source

Smeets, T., Ashton, S. M., Roelands, S. J. A. A., & Quaedflieg, C. W. E. M. (2023). Does stress consistently favor habits over goal-directed behaviors? Data from two preregistered exact replication studies. Neurobiology of Stress, 23, 100528. DOI: 10.1016/j.ynstr.2023.100528. Source

Movement III — No One is Immune



7. The spider web

At eight past ten, the director enters the room with an empty folder. Elena notices him because, when it comes to discussing a quote, he usually brings along papers that no one has had time to read. This morning, he simply places his phone on the table, screen down. The people already seated stop talking at different times. Paolo finishes a sentence; Rina closes the cap on her pen; Elena leaves a word unfinished on her computer.

The studio designs shopfittings. The photographs hanging on the walls show bright rooms, empty of people and free of wires. In the meeting room, however, an extension cord runs across the floor. Elena rests her right foot on it, as if it can prevent someone from tripping. Her contract expires in six weeks. She doesn't yet know if it will be renewed. No one said the meeting was about this, but she's already started listening to it like this.

The manager announces that a customer has suspended two jobs. He says, **"We have to be adults** ," then **, "We can't afford mistakes** ." He looks at Elena as she says the second sentence. The day before, she sent a board with the wrong measurements; Paolo corrected it before delivery. The mistake exists. The correction also exists. The manager only mentions the first.

Paolo shifts in his chair. He has a stable contract, a long tenure, and a list of other offices he could call. He's annoyed: he'll have to revise his calendar, perhaps cancel a weekend away. Elena thinks about July's rent. Rina thinks about the bill the client hasn't yet paid. The same words have entered the room; they haven't found the same room in each.

"Some people here still believe that work is exercise," the director continues. No one laughs, but no one interrupts. Elena feels the need to explain and, at the same time, to disappear from the conversation. She opens the correct file. The cursor isn't where she's looking for it. Her hands, until recently engaged in a simple task, seem to have become overly visible objects. We don't know what her cortisol is doing. We don't know which genes are expressed in her cells. We see a person who now has to find a sentence while fearing the consequences of finding it.

Paolo says the table delivered was correct. He doesn't add that Elena never makes mistakes. He shifts part of the discussion to what happened. The manager replies, **"That wasn't the point."** Rina asks if this month's salaries are covered. The question isn't consoling, but it clarifies something that until then had been occupying the room without a name. The manager says yes. He doesn't answer about renewals.

The meeting lasts another twenty minutes. Elena takes very neat notes. Anyone reading them might think she feels calm. When the others stand up, she stays to look for a page she knows she hasn't missed. Paolo asks her if she wants a coffee. She says no, then asks if he can send her the date of the correction in writing. He nods. This is all the assistance she can ask for at that moment.

In the corridor, Rina meets a technician who didn't attend the meeting. He tells her about the traffic; she responds with a brusqueness that surprises him. The technician stops, looks at the cart he's supposed to push through the door, and waits. There's no need to imagine a vast invisible chain: a recently concluded conversation has reached, through a person, someone who didn't even know of their existence. But even here, we can't know how long the effect will last, or if it will even last.

At noon, Elena receives a voicemail from Miriam, a friend who lives elsewhere. Her daughter has passed a difficult exam. Miriam speaks too quickly and corrects herself with a laugh. Elena smiles before deciding how to respond. For a few seconds, she can taste the bread she's eating again. Then she feels ashamed of her envy: she, too, would like news she can abandon herself to without counting. Her friend's joy doesn't erase the morning. It enters a morning that continues to be there.

Elena records a reply, deletes it, and simply writes: **"I'm happy. Call me tonight** ." Then she opens Paolo's email. The date has arrived. She adds the message to a folder with her contract. Outside the window, someone shakes a tablecloth; crumbs fall into the courtyard. The studio is still working. No one in the room has become another person by decree. Yet everyone's day now depends in part on people who aren't sitting next to them.

The room doesn't end at the skin

This scene is imagined. It's not a clinical case, it's not the report of an experiment, and it doesn't authorize us to diagnose its characters. It serves to make visible a question that, before being scientific, is ordinary: where does a person's action end? On the surface of their body, at the end of their sentence, the moment they leave the room? Or does it continue within the possibilities it has opened or closed for those who remain?

We have very clear linguistic habits. We say that an emotion is "mine," that a problem is "theirs," that everyone must learn to manage it. These formulas have a reason. Elena is the person experiencing fear; Paolo cannot assume the first person of that experience in her place. The contract is Elena's. The mistake must be attributed to the person who made it, the correction to the person who worked on it. The distinction between people allows us to promise, ask, disagree, and assign responsibility. Without it, the relationship would lose its interlocutors.

But it's one thing to distinguish who feels; another to imagine that the conditions of feeling all come from him. Elena didn't single-handedly determine the length of her contract. She didn't set the tone for the director. She doesn't control Paolo's willingness to confirm a date. She has a history and skills, but she exercises them in a world that can make them usable or costly. Her singularity doesn't require that every relevant cause be contained within her body.

The phrase **"no one is immune from anyone else** " originates here. It must be read carefully, because it can immediately become false if we transform it into the assertion that every human being exerts a measurable effect on every other human being at any given moment. A passerby might go unnoticed. A message might not get through. A person might remain almost indifferent to what shocks the person sitting next to them. There is no experiment that can demonstrate the effective connection of everyone with everyone, across any distance and circumstance.

The book uses that phrase to challenge a more limited claim: the idea that simply being an individual is enough to possess general immunity to the lives of others. We are not guaranteed against encounter. We can be changed, supported, disturbed, made more or less capable by what others do and by the conditions they help organize. The effect must have a path; it is not a substance that magically passes through walls.

The path can be a voice, a gesture, a salary, a schedule. It can be the decision not to call, when the other person is expecting a response on which something important depends. It can be a document written months earlier by a stranger and applied today to someone requesting a

service. The passage doesn't always coincide with the proximity of bodies. A distant person can have very tangible access to our day; a close person may have almost none.

Before even discussing biology, we must therefore do some fine-tuning. Ask ourselves how an action reaches someone, what alternatives that someone has, and who can interrupt the connection. "We are connected" says too little. Elena and the director are connected, but they cannot sever that connection at the same cost.

To be distinct, to be separate

Independence, as absolute separation from relational conditions, is, from the perspective of this book, a false description of the concrete person: others can participate in shaping the state in which we feel and choose. This dependence does not abolish our distinction, does not make the effects of encounters identical, and does not detract from the task of acquiring a capacity for response that can even reject the relationship.

These are the two sentences of the thesis. The second prevents the first from turning into a compulsory sense of belonging. Because a relational conception of the Self can be generous in acknowledging support and authoritarian in prohibiting distance. It can remind us that no one grows alone; it can also use that memory to tell someone they have no right to leave. We must recognize both possibilities before falling in love with the image we have chosen.

Absolute separation would be the condition of a being who receives from others no resources, no language, no opportunity, no significant threat to what he or she becomes. This is not a good description of our lives. However, the difficulty of describing ourselves in this way does not mean that scientific findings have demonstrated a complete metaphysics of the person. Biology can study dependencies and mechanisms. It cannot, with a blood sample, settle every question about what it means to be an individual.

The independence we can practice is more concrete. It consists, for example, in having an income that allows us to disagree; in being able to distinguish a request from a threat; in maintaining a friendship without having to hand over every piece of information; in asking for time before responding. In each of these cases, relationships, resources, and rules exist. The ability to act doesn't require eliminating them. It requires that they leave the person a real margin for direction.

Elena is more independent when she has Paolo's email, even though that email comes from someone else. Her dependence on shared evidence increases while her dependence on the director's story diminishes, at least somewhat. Not all dependencies add up in the same direction. Some make one less vulnerable to blackmail from others. A right can function just like this: it creates an impersonal bond that limits the power of a personal connection.

This is why the question "Are you independent?" often needs to be addressed. Independent from whom, to do what, with what consequences if you say no? An adult can decide where to live and yet be unable to refuse a family phone call. They can evade an emotional judgment rather than a financial obligation. They can be self-confident in one situation and have very few options in another. None of these conditions exhausts their person.

The Self that chooses, in the previous movement, was not described as a sovereign without precedent. Here we must take a further step: some conditions of choice are also continually negotiated, offered, or subtracted from the body that will choose. This step does not add a

second owner to the person. It makes the way we treat their primary and irreplaceable right to exist more demanding.

What passes when an emotion passes

"You gave me anxiety" is a familiar phrase. It may describe something we recognize, but it contains an implicit theory: imagine anxiety as an object that leaves one person and enters another intact. In the opening scene, it didn't necessarily happen that way. The director might have been irritated; Elena became fearful. Rina might have been worried about a payment; the technician encountered his brusqueness and was left perplexed. The relationship also produces differences in state, not just copies.

The scientific term **"emotional contagion"** refers to processes in which people's emotional states tend to be influenced by the emotions expressed by others. It doesn't identify a single pathway. We can react to tone, interpret a situation through another's behavior, adapt an expression, expect a consequence. In real life, these processes can be intertwined. The term " **contagion** " is useful when it indicates a phenomenon to be studied; it becomes misleading when it makes us forget that an interlocutor is interpreting.

In 2002, Sigal Barsade studied groups engaged in a decision-making simulation, introducing a participant who expressed different emotional states. The design allowed for variation in the situation rather than simply observing people who were already similar. Contagion effects were observed, and in the positive emotional condition, greater cooperation, less conflict, and better performance ratings. These latter findings should not be confused with evidence that every cheerful group produces objectively superior results. An experiment on a limited task does not, by itself, describe an entire organization.

We are primarily interested in what this type of research makes questionable: the assumption that each individual's state is a strictly private affair, which the group can witness without participating. The conclusion is not that every state becomes common. Nor that the best mood should be imposed on everyone. In a meeting, the angry person may be the one who has acknowledged a problem that the others prefer to ignore. The fluidity of the interaction is not a sufficient measure of its justice.

Silence can also contribute to the situation, but it doesn't have a single meaning. Paolo may be silent because he doesn't understand; because he's afraid of the director; because he agrees; because he's looking for a formulation that won't make matters worse. Elena doesn't have direct access to these differences. Her body can react to what she can glean from the scene, not to a complete inventory of the others' intentions.

Here we encounter a fundamental limitation of everyday empathy. Being touched by another person isn't the same as knowing them. We can sense tension and attribute it to the wrong cause. We can share someone's relief without understanding the price someone paid to produce it. Emotional closeness can foster a question; it doesn't automatically provide us with the answer.

If Elena smiles at Miriam's message, she hasn't become Miriam. She's encountered an expression of joy in her present. She can feel joy and envy, gratitude and weariness. The web must also accommodate this transformation: what reaches a thread doesn't necessarily continue in the form in which it began.

Bodies that meet without becoming one body

The relationship can also be studied through physiological measures. In a 2017 systematic review, Richard Palumbo and colleagues collected research on the relationships between the autonomic dynamics of interacting people, measured, for example, through cardiac indices or electrodermal activity. The literature documents forms of interpersonal association, but presents considerable heterogeneity in contexts, measures, and methods. Talking about physiological coordination is not equivalent to saying that two nervous systems merge, nor that every correlation is caused by the passage of an emotion from one person to another.

It's a caution that changes the way we look at things. If we all flinch when a door slams, we have a shared external cause. If in a conversation our bodily dynamics are associated, we still need to determine which part depends on mutual contact, which on the task, which on movement, and which on other conditions. Measuring together isn't enough to prove that one is regulating the other, nor that coordination is beneficial.

We can imagine two people who, during a conflict, both become increasingly agitated. We can imagine one becoming agitated while the other maintains a cool tone and controls access to the door. The first scene shows a similarity; the second a much less reassuring complementarity. These are examples, not additional findings attributed to the review. They serve to prevent the word " **synchrony** ," due to its pleasant sound, from becoming synonymous with understanding.

You don't have to beat at the same pace to help each other. A friend can be helpful because he isn't entirely caught up in the speaker's alarm. An interlocutor can sustain a disagreement precisely because he doesn't share the impulse to withdraw it. A relationship that expands a person's possibilities can maintain a difference in status, judgment, and time. Coincidence is not its necessary condition.

When we say that the other participates in our autonomic state, we must therefore avoid two simplifications. The first makes the influence inevitable, uniform, and externally discernible. The second grants the body only changes already recognized by consciousness. Between these two claims lies the space within which research can formulate meaningful questions: what is detected, in what situation, with what comparisons, for how long?

Our interpretative proposal is a step beyond measure, and must be declared as such. We treat the Self as the whole person experiencing the encounter: their body is not simply the executor of an opinion formulated elsewhere. This does not mean that every somatic manifestation possesses a hidden relational meaning to be deciphered. A racing heart does not identify the person before us. An authentic feeling can accompany an inaccurate reading.

Experience deserves to be listened to; interpretation deserves discussion. Keeping these two gestures together protects those who suffer without authorizing us to know everything about their suffering. It also protects those accused of causing it: responsibility must be reconstructed through actions, conditions, and possibilities, not deduced from a single bodily signal.

The mirror doesn't know the whole room

Mirror neurons have offered our imagination a powerful shortcut: if the brain responds when we act and when we see others act, then perhaps the other is already within us, perhaps understanding means reproducing, perhaps empathy finally has its own direction. The discovery is important. The conclusions just listed are not all contained in the discovery.

In the work published in 1996 by Vittorio Gallese, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, neurons were recorded in the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys that responded both during specific actions and during the observation of actions performed by others. This finding concerns properties of neuronal responses under defined conditions. It does not, by itself, document the understanding of any intention, the experience of another's pain, or the moral goodness of the observer. Moving from the correspondence between observation and action to a general theory of the encounter requires further evidence and further distinctions.

In 2009, Gregory Hickok formulated a detailed critique of the theory that mirror neurons explain action understanding. His objection doesn't require denying the existence of observed responses. It challenges the inference that makes them sufficient or necessary for understanding. A property of the motor system can participate in a process without exhausting it. The debate concerns, among other things, precisely this leap: from a measured activity to the overall cognitive role assigned to it.

Our chapter doesn't rest on that leap. If a significant part of the interpretation of mirror neurons were to change tomorrow, questions about affective influence, the social conditions of threat, sleep, and biological regulation would remain. The difference between seeing an outstretched hand and knowing whether that hand is asking for help, offering an object, or demanding something would also remain. A human relationship contains actions, but also histories and rules, not all of which are present in the observed movement.

Elena can perfectly recognize the manager's gesture as he puts down the phone and misunderstand what he's about to say. She can understand that Paolo wants to offer her a coffee without actually wanting that coffee. She can understand a request she decides not to accept. None of these steps is less human because understanding and response don't coincide.

Furthermore, the mirror metaphor risks placing our similarity to others at the center. We then more easily understand those we can translate into ourselves; those who remain different seem to require an exception. But the responsibility to listen cannot depend entirely on the ease with which we mirror ourselves. We must be able to take a person seriously even when we don't share their reaction, don't recognize their pain, and can't imagine their life from the inside.

The spider's web, if it is to be useful, must allow us to do this: describe a contact that doesn't become an identity. The other can reach us while remaining someone we are not. Our difficulty hearing them doesn't erase their needs; our ease in hearing them doesn't give us the right to speak in their place.

Molecules without moral vocation

Oxytocin seems tailor-made for a reassuring story. Its name is associated with love, trust, and bonding. If a relationship benefits us and a molecule participates in certain social processes, it's easy to imagine that molecule is the relationship's benefit made visible. It's an understandable temptation. It's also a mistake of scale and meaning.

In their 2011 review, Jennifer Bartz, Jamil Zaki, Niall Bolger, and Kevin Ochsner demonstrated how the social effects of oxytocin in humans depend on context and individual characteristics. The literature discussed did not support a universal increase in prosociality. Outcomes could vary depending on the situation and individual differences. The review's

contribution lies precisely in making the formula "more oxytocin, more trust" insufficient: what is facilitated cannot be separated from the conditions in which that facilitation occurs.

Vasopressin also participates in social processes and stress regulation. In 2012, Inga Neumann and Rainer Landgraf examined these systems and their interactions, drawing extensively on animal models. The distinction between central and peripheral actions, the circuits involved, and the context prevent us from assigning each molecule a fixed moral character. We cannot divide love and aggression into two conceptual bottles, nor can we seamlessly transfer the results of one species to a promise for human life.

Adding to these caveats are the null results. In 2019, Benjamin Tabak and colleagues published a randomized trial in which the administration of oxytocin or vasopressin did not produce the expected effects in the series of social and cognitive tasks examined. This result does not prove that these systems are irrelevant to every social process. It does demonstrate that a plausible biological function does not guarantee a general experimental effect, much less a reliable relationship technology.

Why persist in a book about the Self? Because we're ready to use a biological explanation as absolution or condemnation. If trust is mediated by molecules, some might think it's no longer true. If hostility is mediated by molecules, some might think it's no longer debatable. But mediation describes a part of the process. Evaluating a relationship must still consider what happens within it, what freedoms it allows, what harm it causes, and who can opt out.

We don't ask the body to become noble for an encounter to be worthy. Nor can we declare an encounter worthy because a molecule we've given an affectionate name appears in it. A bond can be intense and coercive. Trust can be exploited. A person can feel relief when faced with someone who, in other circumstances, threatens them. The reality of the effect doesn't resolve the question of its value.

In our relationships with others, we constantly encounter this excess. Biology helps us understand the processes through which certain conditions become bodily experience. Deciding how to treat one another also requires descriptions of actions, public criteria, and the possibility of contestation. No recipient alone can perform the work of a kept promise or a door we can open from within.

The work of preparing for the other

The word " **stress** " risks making everything the same: a deadline, a loss, traffic, an attack, an interview. But different situations demand different things and leave different alternatives. This is why another person's judgment can't be treated simply as information added to an already complete and ready body. It can help define what that body must face.

Sally Dickerson and Margaret Kemeny, in their 2004 meta-analysis of 208 laboratory studies, examined the conditions associated with cortisol responses to acute stressors. The threat of negative social evaluation and uncontrollability emerged as particularly relevant characteristics; their combination was associated with more pronounced responses. This doesn't mean that every criticism increases everyone's cortisol. It does mean that the social structure of a task can influence a HPA response, and that " **difficult** " is not a sufficient description of the stressor.

Elena's scene isn't proven by that meta-analysis. We didn't measure her response. However, the comparison allows us to ask a concrete question: are we asking someone to correct a

measurement, or are we putting them in a position where they fear that an error will make their entire presence questionable? The technical task can remain the same while the conditions under which it must be performed change profoundly.

Bruce McEwen, in his 1998 synthesis, described the dual nature of stress mediators: they can protect in short-term adaptation and contribute to damage when activation is prolonged or regulation is altered. " **Allostasis** " refers to the achievement of stability through change; **"allostatic load"** refers to the cumulative cost of certain stresses. It's not a uniform toll imposed by every unpleasant emotion. What matters is the dynamics of activation and recovery, not a moral accounting of individual encounters.

The distinction helps us look at time. An isolated rebuke and a relationship in which a rebuke is expected daily are not interchangeable. Duration isn't just the number of sentences spoken. It includes the wait, the ability to predict what will happen, the certainty or uncertainty of a truce. This is how the book interprets relational continuity; it's not a measurement of our characters' allostatic load.

A person can spend a quiet afternoon while remaining focused on avoiding the next episode. They may appear efficient because they've organized every move around a risk. It's not enough, then, to ask if someone raised their voice today. We must be able to ask what freedom of movement exists before the voice is raised. Relationships can exert influence even through what has become reasonable to anticipate.

This doesn't make every prediction accurate. Elena might fear an outcome that won't materialize. She might interpret a neutral gesture as threatening. The past plays a role in the interpretation of the present, and sometimes hinders it. But the possibility of a prediction being flawed doesn't justify ignoring the conditions that make it plausible. The responsible response is to clarify those conditions, not to proclaim from the outside that fear is simply a bad choice.

A full room can leave you alone

Being alone and isolated are not unique conditions. We can long for an afternoon without visitors. We can live with other people and have no one to confide a difficulty in without fear of consequences. We can have few contacts and consider them sufficient. The number of people present alone does not indicate the quality of the opportunity to meet them.

It's helpful to distinguish between desired solitude, social isolation expressed through contacts and resources, and loneliness perceived as a lack of desired connection. These three conditions can be intertwined, but they shouldn't be substituted for each other. A policy that increases the number of available activities can address part of the problem and leave the experience of not being heard intact. A mandatory visit can even deprive someone of the time they finally have to rest.

In 2011, Lianne Kurina and colleagues studied sleep in a Hutterite community, analyzing comprehensive data from 95 adults. Higher loneliness scores were associated with greater sleep fragmentation as measured by actigraphy, even after adjustments; no association with sleep duration emerged. The design was cross-sectional: it did not establish causality by itself. The community context also made it particularly clear that living within a dense network of relationships does not necessarily equate to feeling connected.

We shouldn't turn this result into the idea that lonely people always have disturbed sleep patterns or that every awakening reveals an emotional loss. We're interested in the question it opens up: can a relational experience be associated with something that happens when we're not conversing with anyone? The day doesn't end completely when the lights go out. This is an image from the book, not a causal formula that works for everyone.

The quality of a relationship isn't even measured by the amount of trust we manage to extract. Elena doesn't tell the technician about her contract. The technician hasn't failed a universal duty of intimacy. People can coexist respectfully without becoming confidants. When every encounter is burdened with the obligation to deeply acknowledge the other, social life becomes a series of tests that no one can overcome.

What's missing in a situation of painful loneliness may be availability, not invasion: knowing that a request can find an interlocutor; having access to places where the right to be present doesn't have to be earned every time; being able to offer something without buying, with that offer, permission to stay. These are civil and existential possibilities we propose here, not outcomes already guaranteed by a scientifically validated intervention.

We must also be able to defend those who choose few relationships. The reserved person is not a problem to be solved. The person who lives alone is not a walking diagnosis. Acknowledging our social vulnerability is valuable only if it preserves the right to define, to the extent possible, the form and extent of our encounters. Otherwise, under the guise of care, it adds another demand to the struggle of existence.

The relationship reaches all the way down to the genes: which genes, in what sense?

It's at this point that language can become too fast. We've mentioned emotions, autonomic regulation, the stress axis, and sleep. The next sentence seems ready-made: **"Others change our DNA** ." It would be a sentence capable of circulating, of making an impact, of giving the chapter a memorable conclusion. But it would confuse different processes and make the research say more than it measured.

In 2007, Steve Cole and colleagues compared gene expression in the leukocytes of 14 people selected for chronically high or low levels of perceived loneliness. They detected differences in transcripts, with indications of greater activity in proinflammatory processes and lower activity in some programs linked to the antiviral response. The sample was very small, and the comparison was observational. The results opened a line of research into the social regulation of gene expression; they did not show that loneliness had altered DNA sequences, nor did they offer an individual diagnosis derived from a single encounter.

In 2015, Cole and colleagues examined five longitudinal transcriptional profiles from 141 older adults and combined their human work with analyses in a macaque monkey model. The framework correlated perceived isolation, sympathetic activity, monocyte populations, and expression profiles. Cellular composition was an important part of the signaling architecture. The temporal dimension strengthened the investigation; however, the human results remained to be interpreted, given the potential confounders and the complexity of the causal direction. The animal model contributed to the search for mechanisms, without making the two species interchangeable.

In the 2019 review, Cole called CTRA, or Conserved Transcriptional Response to Adversity, a profile observed in various conditions of adversity: increased expression of proinflammatory

programs and decreased expression of type I interferon response programs. It should be considered a line of research on processes and contexts, not a single unhappiness switch. Its appearance in diverse conditions precludes it from being interpreted as an exclusive signature of loneliness or a molecular marker of the quality of a single relationship.

A subsequent finding makes a uniform law even less plausible. Yvonne Yang and colleagues, in 2024, studied 102 participants recruited through two different advertisements, one aimed at socially isolated people and the general population. The associations between isolation and CTRA varied across groups, in different directions; the study did not support a simple correlation between greater isolation and a more unfavorable profile. Selection through advertisements, the sample, and the design limit inference. This is not a conclusive refutation of previous work: it indicates that isolation, social motivation, and perceived loneliness require distinctions and that contact should not be prescribed as a universal molecular good.

What does "expression" mean? To produce certain cellular products, a gene's information is used through processes that include transcription into RNA. Different amounts of RNA can indicate different activity of the observed programs. This does not imply that the order of the DNA bases has changed. And it does not prove, without a relevant measurement, that the change is due to a stable epigenetic modification. These are related but distinct questions.

Even the location of the sample matters. A leukocyte result doesn't allow us to describe the brain, liver, or every cell in the body in the same way. Nor can we treat blood as a complete archive of a person's biography. If the proportions of different cell types in the sample change, the overall profile detected can change. To understand the result, we need to study this level, not mentally eliminate all the cells and retain only the story we wish to tell.

The most sober formulation remains quite strong: ongoing social conditions can play a role in the processes through which biological activity is regulated, and some of these relationships are subject to molecular measurements. We don't know, therefore, what happened in Elena's cells today. We can't quantify the effect of Miriam's voice. We can't promise that a good conversation will reverse an inflammatory profile.

Precision doesn't diminish the importance of the encounter. It prevents that importance from being attributed to a false assertion. If another person influences our access to food, rest, the persistence of a threat, or the ability to ask for help, they aren't simply adding opinions to a biological life that remains elsewhere. How much of this influence reaches a specific level, through what steps, and for how long, remains a question to be explored.

Epigenetics is not a receipt for love

The title of this book imposes a further discipline on us. Those who read **"Epigenesis of the Self"** might expect every philosophical passage to be confirmed by an epigenetic alteration. This is not the proposal. The epigenesis of the Self is the interpretative name for a person's becoming: the past participates in how the present is experienced and oriented. Molecular epigenetics studies specific biological processes. A relationship between the two discourses must be constructed, not achieved by making two words sound similar.

A pertinent, yet limited, example comes from the work of Nadine Provençal and colleagues in 2012. In rhesus macaques assigned to different initial rearing conditions—with their mother or with a surrogate and peers—DNA methylation differences were observed in the prefrontal cortex and T cells in early adulthood. Here, methylation was actually measured, in specific tissues. The animal design covered complex developmental conditions: it did not isolate the

value of an affectionate phrase, did not demonstrate that the same effect was produced in people, and did not establish a psychological destiny.

This example must be kept close to its limits. "Raising conditions" refers to a set of experiences and environmental characteristics. Care cannot be reduced to an abstract quantity that can be seamlessly transferred from a macaque to a child, from childhood to an adult relationship. A methylation measurement does not, in itself, contain the judgment that a person has been well loved. To arrive at that judgment, facts about their life and criteria are needed, which the measurement cannot replace.

It would be particularly serious to use research to divide bodies into loved and unloved, protected and damaged, recoverable and compromised. We would be reproducing a past verdict in the present. The error would not only be moral: we would be exchanging findings on groups, conditions, tissues, and time for a complete inventory of an individual's possibilities.

Nor should we imagine a fixed scale in which the voice first modifies the emotion, then cortisol, then genes, then methylation, and finally the person. The processes can interact, have different durations, and not all appear in every situation. The effect of an encounter can be life-changing without leaving a demonstrable epigenetic modification. Biology must not become a court of law that only recognizes what we have found a molecular trace of.

The formula "a continued relationship changes the chemistry with which the genome is read" retains an intuition, but it must be made conditional and specific: certain relational conditions can contribute to modifying the cellular signals and processes involved in gene regulation. It is then necessary to verify which processes change, where, through what mediations, and for how long. Not every conversation rewrites the genome. No book has the right to present its most beautiful image as the measure it does not possess.

We can therefore leave epigenetics in the chapter without making it the seal of the thesis. It shows us a possible level of incorporation of life conditions, with evidence that must be evaluated individually. It does not establish the value of the person experiencing those conditions. That value does not wait for a successful sampling, a significant correlation, or a favorable change to become recognizable.

The spider's web and what the image hides

A spider's web makes a possibility visible: if one point is stimulated, movement can propagate through the connections. Not every thread needs to touch every other. Position and structure matter. A nearby strand can move a lot, a farther one only slightly, another almost not at all. The image helps us escape the fantasy of people placed next to each other with no path of transmission.

Then it begins to fail. Threads don't interpret. They can't reject a meaning, remember a humiliation, find an ally, change a rule. People can, within different possibilities. Moreover, a spider's web has a relatively defined material structure; our relationships can form, break, change function. A casual contact can gain importance, an old relationship lose it. Metaphor must not deprive its object of its very capacity to change.

There's also a potential scientific error. Cosma Shalizi and Andrew Thomas, in 2011, demonstrated the problems of causal identification that arise when, in observational studies of social networks, influence and homophily intertwine: people can become similar because they

influence each other, but they can also bond because they were already similar in relevant characteristics, including unmeasured ones. Seeing associated outcomes between connected people isn't enough to separate them. This objection doesn't deny all influence; it requires designs, assumptions, and comparisons capable of supporting its attribution.

If some colleagues sleep poorly at the same time, they might influence each other's conversations. They might also work the same shift, face the same salary uncertainty, or have been selected for shared circumstances. To recognize the connection, we must also be able to recognize what doesn't pass from one person to another. The spider's web isn't a license to turn every similarity into a story of contagion.

As an interpretive image, it remains useful if it forces us to specify at least four things: effective proximity, duration, power, and vulnerability. Effective proximity includes access: a daily voice, a message on which a decision depends, an administration that controls a service. Duration includes continuity and expectation. Power concerns the consequences someone can impose. Vulnerability concerns the conditions under which those consequences are received and the alternatives available for addressing them.

It's not a mathematical formula. We can't multiply four numbers and get the quantity of the modified person. It's a way to prevent the image from becoming uniform. The director may have little emotional importance for Elena but a great deal of practical importance. Miriam may have a great deal of emotional importance without having any power over the contract. A stranger can become decisive when he guards a door we must pass through.

We must also ask ourselves what holds the threads together. In the opening scene, there are people, but there are also contracts, leases, procedures, a client who suspends work. Reducing everything to the manager's tone would simplify the problem and make the description less truthful. Improving that tone would be significant; it wouldn't stabilize Elena's income by itself. Personal relationships unfold within structures that provide the opportunity for peace of mind.

The image finally stops short of dignity. No one is valuable for the function they play in the plot. The person who today fails to offer support is not a useless thread. The one who distances himself is not a laceration to be forcibly mended. We can depend on each other without transforming mutual usefulness into a condition for having a place in the world.

The objection: who protects us from the relationship?

The strongest objection can be formulated like this. You've spent many pages demonstrating that others participate in our state. But this very language can expose us to endless scrutiny. If every action has consequences, every action becomes open to judgment. If a relationship constitutes us, leaving that relationship seems like a mutilation. If we are responsible for the state of others, those who suffer can claim us entirely. The spider's web ends up being the elegant description of a trap.

The objection is serious because it doesn't merely point to a remote misunderstanding. A family can say, **"You can't do this** to someone who wants to leave." A partner can use their own distress to prevent a separation. An organization can invoke team spirit to make protest unthinkable. Even a community devoted to listening can force its members to share their stories, as if keeping a private part of their lives were a lack of solidarity.

Then there's the problem of proportion. No one can foresee all the consequences of an action. A reasonable gesture can hurt someone; a necessary boundary can cause suffering; a legitimate decision can leave someone dissatisfied. If the harm felt by the other becomes the sole criterion, the most prudent action is to remain silent. But even not moving will have consequences. Total responsibility provides no direction: it paralyzes and makes one vulnerable to blackmail.

The chapter must respond without declaring the objection already overcome by its own good intentions. The central distinction is between being involved in the conditions of a life and possessing a right to govern that life. The first fact can exist without the second right. That someone's departure causes me suffering does not automatically grant me the power to prevent it. That someone has contributed to my growth does not grant them permanent ownership over my choices.

A bond becomes defensible even through what allows it to be interrupted. A boundary is a relationship governed by the possibility of not continuing in a certain way. It could be a door closed for an hour, a topic we don't want to discuss, a contact we choose to suspend, a procedure that removes a decision from someone's discretion. Not all boundaries are just; they can exclude and abandon. But they don't become unjust simply because they create distance.

We must then ask what obligations exist, where they come from, what they require, and what alternatives they make feasible. An adult's responsibility toward a child is not the same as that toward an acquaintance. Those who direct the work have different powers than those employed. A professional obligation does not authorize any intimacy. These differences must be discussed through shared roles, facts, and criteria; they cannot be derived solely from the intensity of the questioner's emotion.

Potential influence does not create unlimited responsibility. Responsibility does not begin where we control every consequence, because it would never begin there; rather, it requires a measure tied to what we can reasonably know, do, prevent, or correct. When the outcome surprises us, we can question it and reconsider our behavior. We cannot promise that no one will suffer for what we are authorized to decide.

A legitimate disagreement remains: someone might prefer a less relational theory of the individual than ours and still recognize the importance of support and boundaries. The research cited does not settle that philosophical debate. Our thesis is exposed to it. Its usefulness must also be assessed by its ability to describe a person who, within crucial relationships, is able to say: this part of my life does not belong to you.

The distance that makes a meeting possible

There are distances that take something away, and distances that finally allow you to have it. A pause in a conversation can interrupt a pressing request and allow for a less obligatory response. Having a place of your own can make a visit less threatening. A relationship that tolerates temporary separation can become more habitable precisely because it doesn't interpret every absence as an insult.

We're not proposing a one-size-fits-all technique. Some people need more contact, others less, others different forms. Conditions can change. The relational thesis requires that these differences have their place, without first having to be justified as a flaw or a virtue. An individual doesn't have to prove they're extroverted enough to deserve help, nor resilient enough to deserve privacy.

Furthermore, the protected person's boundary doesn't necessarily coincide with their private efforts to establish a boundary. Elena can utter a firm sentence and remain exposed to non-renewal. She can stop reading her emails in the evening and miss a piece of information that her morning work depends on. When the cost of distance is unilaterally imposed, celebrating its psychological value isn't enough. We need to address the conditions that make detachment prohibitive.

A second relationship can help. Paolo's support doesn't require Elena to tell him her entire life story. The email confirms a fact and allows it to be preserved. A person accompanying someone to a difficult meeting can offer a presence without assuming the right to respond on their behalf. A service can make a choice possible without demanding, as a price, personal gratitude. These are forms of relationship in which help shouldn't become a new command center.

Even the distance from ourselves, understood as our only resource, has a meaning here. We can stop demanding that every margin of autonomy be produced internally. Assigning part of a task, consulting a document, or requesting a verification does not necessarily reduce our capacity for choice. It allows us to employ that capacity where our orientation matters, rather than expending it entirely to rebuild conditions that could be shared.

But support must be left open to change. Help requested yesterday can be rejected today. A person who knows someone well can be mistaken precisely because they think they know them without having to ask anything. A shared history offers insight; it can also harden the interpretation. "You're made that way" sometimes becomes a bond's way of preventing the other from appearing different from how they were.

The human web must therefore be able to change its texture. Some threads are added, others loosen, others are broken. Consequences, memories, specific responsibilities remain; there is no universal right to continuity. The maturity of a relationship can include the ability to no longer be necessary in the same form.

There's no cult of self-sufficiency here. There's a recognition that a relationship contributes to autonomy only if it accommodates the possibility that the other can use it to move on. The support that demands to become indispensable begins to shift its function. What saves a place for farewell also makes staying there more credible.

Consequences enter into roles

For a parent, the chapter's thesis makes a phrase like "he must learn not to be influenced" insufficient. A child certainly faces frustrations, differences, and limitations. But the adult participates in the conditions under which those limitations are learned. They can correct behavior without constantly undermining belonging; they can show their own fatigue without assigning the child the task of resolving it; they can acknowledge a mistake without making reconciliation a reward granted to those who immediately show serenity.

This responsibility does not require a parent who is free of anger or always available. A family life in which difficult emotions are forbidden would add fiction to the conflict. Rather, it requires that transitions be given the opportunity for repair and that the power imbalance not be erased by the language of reciprocity. A child can profoundly influence the adult's state; this does not mean they possess the same resources to interpret it, regulate it, or avoid its consequences.

Imagine a father who responded harshly and later said, **"I was angry, but that statement wasn't right. We adults deal with the money problem** ." This chapter doesn't promise any immediate results. It's a return of responsibility: it allows the child not to have to figure out where his task ends on his own. The value of the gesture doesn't depend on whether the child smiles, forgives, or immediately calms down.

For a doctor, acknowledging the relational dimension broadens the scope of questions without authorizing the psychologization of every symptom. Rest may depend on living conditions, noise, shifts, or requests for assistance; the ability to follow a treatment may depend on who helps and who supervises. Asking about one's life can reveal a concrete obstacle. Inferring that a biological problem is caused by a relationship based on an impression can, however, deprive the person of a necessary investigation.

Family support should also be verified, rather than assumed. Those who accompany the person can be helpful, but they can also talk excessively and make it difficult to respond. The ability to listen to the person alone, when appropriate and desired, ensures access to their experience. These are implications of our discussion of respect for the interlocutor; they are not a universal clinical procedure. A person may want someone by their side without giving up their own voice, or they may want to speak without that presence.

Furthermore, doctors work within an organization. The continuity of a contact person, the clarity of an appointment, the ability to understand who to contact can be more important than a deeply empathetic remark uttered at the end of a visit. If the system produces uncertainty, we must not entrust the impossible task of correcting it all to the emotional abilities of a single professional. The healthcare relationship also has an administrative form, and that form can be designed.

For a teacher, the chapter invites us to consider the group as part of the conditions under which a student can expose themselves. A public question doesn't reach everyone equally. Those who can make mistakes without losing their reputation face a different task than those who have already been designated as incompetent. The content of the lesson remains important; distributing the risk of appearing to be struggling is also important. A seemingly cohesive group can be built around the person everyone has learned to mock.

This doesn't mean all questioning should be abolished, or that schools should avoid every uncomfortable experience. It's important to distinguish the difficulty inherent in the task from the humiliation created by the environment. For example, allowing students to submit their initial written response before a discussion can offer some a more practical approach. Reconstructing an incomplete response without turning it into a character trait can preserve the opportunity to try again. These are teaching choices to be evaluated in context, not recipes guaranteed by physiology.

The teacher cannot become the total regulator of a classroom. However, they can contribute to the rules by which students interact: who gets interrupted, which mistakes become a lasting joke, who is always asked to be patient. This level isn't limited to individual sensitivity. It requires a public practice of limiting, capable of not leaving the target person with the full cost of opposing.

For a legislator, the easiest mistake would be to translate relational vulnerability into an obligation to socialize. Obliging participation, measuring the quality of relationships, classifying people through biological profiles: these solutions would confuse the importance of

a condition with the right to impose it. Research on the effects of social conditions does not automatically grant the state greater access to intimacy.

The implications we propose concern, first and foremost, opportunities and protections: accessible places, services that don't depend on personal favors, questionable working conditions, and support that makes it less costly to leave harmful relationships. A community where one can ask for help without knowing the right person distributes dependency differently. An administration that makes a contact person identifiable reduces the need to repeat the same problem to a succession of strangers.

The difference between a guarantee and benevolence becomes crucial. Elena could meet a kinder director tomorrow. It would make her day better. But if all protection depended on that kindness, it would be difficult to disagree when the kindness ends. Institutions also have the task of ensuring continuity of what shouldn't be granted or withdrawn according to the mood of those in charge.

Finally, for those who live alone, this chapter shouldn't become an accusation. It doesn't mean their life is incomplete until they join a group, nor that they should accept the first available relationship to protect their health. They can acknowledge a lack, desire a meeting, choose distance. They may need a specific relationship or a practical form of assistance. This need shouldn't immediately translate into a defective identity.

Sometimes access starts with something small: knowing who can pick up an item if we can't get out, having a place to return to without having to buy something, finding someone to keep an agreement. Not all these contacts will become friendships. They don't have to become friendships to be useful. Civil life can provide enough connections for a function without demanding, in return, the merging of biographies.

A recurring question arises through these roles: how much of the burden are we leaving on the individual just because we call them autonomous? Autonomy deserves to be supported even in places where it doesn't present itself as a brilliant performance. If we ask someone to do alone what we've made unnecessarily difficult, we haven't recognized their Self. We've transformed a modifiable condition into a test of their value.

What's left in the room

At six thirty, Elena has completed the table she'd been working on for most of the afternoon. Before shutting down the computer, she checks a measurement, then checks it again. We can't decide whether it's caution or fear. From her seat, the distinction isn't necessarily clear. She closes the program and finds, under the window, the cup she hadn't used mid-morning.

Paolo has already left. Rina is preparing an email to the client. Elena asks her if she's received a response about the invoice. Rina shakes her head. Then she says, **"I'll try calling tomorrow."** The sentence contains a task, a possibility, and a limitation. It's not a promise of salvation. Elena picks up her bag. For a moment, she considers asking if she found the tone of the meeting harsh, but the phone vibrates: it's Miriam.

She answers as she descends the stairs. Her friend asks if it's a good time. Elena says she can talk until she gets to the bus stop. There's a clear, unceremonious line that allows the conversation to begin. Miriam talks about the exam again, this time more slowly. Elena asks her a question and listens to her answer. Her happiness hasn't returned to its purest form; it shouldn't be. After a while, she says it's been a tough day at work.

Miriam asks if she wants to tell the story. Elena summarizes the meeting. Her friend replies: **"Maybe he was just worried about the lost work** ." The statement isn't absurd. The director could actually be one. Elena, however, feels that, said like that, she leaves out her contract and the look that accompanied the reference to the mistake. She doesn't need Miriam to declare the director a bad person. She needs the difference between their positions to remain.

"Maybe," she says. **"But he doesn't have to wait six weeks to find out if he's staying** ." Miriam is silent for a moment. Then she asks what, precisely, she knows about the renewal. The conversation takes on a different form. Neither of them can read the other's mind. One sentence was insufficient; a second question allows them to realize it. The relationship isn't just about the possibility of influencing, but also about the possibility of reconsidering the way we are influencing.

At the bus stop, Elena says goodbye. She hasn't resolved her uncertainty. She has a document saved, a conversation she can resume, a question to ask the next day. She's still afraid. To describe her, you don't have to choose between the isolated person who creates everything within herself and the person absorbed in external causes. We can recognize someone who, through conditions not entirely her own, tries to maintain the direction of what she will do.

No biological measure accompanies the final scene. We don't know if he'll sleep well. The chapter isn't intended to ensure healing through listening. It sought to show why encounter isn't an afterthought to an already defined life, and why this importance makes both availability and boundaries all the more necessary.

Miriam's sentence remains. It might have contained some truth: the director might have been worried. And yet, Elena had felt it as a way of losing her place in the story. If the relationship contributes to the state in which we listen, how do we distinguish the truth of what is said from the meaning it takes on when it reaches someone? The next meeting begins with this difference.

Chapter Sources

The cited research supports the specific findings cited in the text, within the limitations of their designs, samples, and contexts. The scenes of Elena, Paolo, Rina, and Miriam are imagined. The relational conception of the Self is an interpretive proposal; the spiderweb is a metaphor, not a demonstrated biological model. Gene expression, epigenetic modifications, and DNA sequence are distinct levels. The civil consequences and boundary assessments are normative arguments, not clinical prescriptions.

Barsade, S. G. (2002). The ripple effect: Emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior. Administrative Science Quarterly, 47(4), 644–675. Source

Palumbo, R. V., Marraccini, M. E., Weyandt, L. L., Wilder-Smith, O., McGee, H. A., Liu, S., & Goodwin, M. S. (2017). Interpersonal autonomic physiology: A systematic review of the literature. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 21(2), 99–141. Source

Gallese, V., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., & Rizzolatti, G. (1996). Action recognition in the premotor cortex. Brain, 119(2), 593–609. Source

Hickok, G. (2009). Eight problems for the mirror neuron theory of action understanding in monkeys and humans. Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, 21(7), 1229–1243. Source

Bartz, J. A., Zaki, J., Bolger, N., & Ochsner, K. N. (2011). Social effects of oxytocin in humans: Context and person matters. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 15(7), 301–309. Source

Neumann, I. D., & Landgraf, R. (2012). Balance of brain oxytocin and vasopressin: Implications for anxiety, depression, and social behaviors. Trends in Neurosciences, 35(11), 649–659. Source

Tabak, B. A., and colleagues (2019). Null results of oxytocin and vasopressin administration across a range of social cognitive and behavioral paradigms: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial. Psychoneuroendocrinology, 107, 124–132. Source

Dickerson, S. S., & Kemeny, M. E. (2004). Acute stressors and cortisol responses: A theoretical integration and synthesis of laboratory research. Psychological Bulletin, 130(3), 355–391. Source

McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. New England Journal of Medicine, 338(3), 171–179. Source

Kurina, L. M., Knutson, K. L., Hawkley, L. C., Cacioppo, J. T., Lauderdale, D. S., & Ober, C. (2011). Loneliness is associated with sleep fragmentation in a communal society. Sleep, 34(11), 1519–1526. Source

Cole, S. W., Hawkley, L. C., Arevalo, J. M., Sung, C. Y., Rose, R. M., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2007). Social regulation of gene expression in human leukocytes. Genome Biology, 8, R189. Source

Cole, S. W., Capitanio, J. P., Chun, K., Arevalo, J. M. G., Ma, J., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2015). Myeloid differentiation architecture of leukocyte transcriptome dynamics in perceived social isolation. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 112(49), 15142–15147. Source

Cole, S. W. (2019). The conserved transcriptional response to adversity. Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences, 28, 31–37. Source

Yang, Y. S., Wynn, J. K., Cole, S., & Green, M. F. (2024). Stress-related gene regulation: Do isolated and connected individuals differ? Brain, Behavior, and Immunity, 120, 372–378. Source

Provençal, N., and colleagues (2012). The signature of maternal rearing in the methylome in rhesus macaque prefrontal cortex and T cells. Journal of Neuroscience, 32(44), 15626–15642. Source

Shalizi, C. R., & Thomas, A. C. (2011). Homophily and contagion are generically confounded in observational social network studies. Sociological Methods & Research, 40(2), 211–239. Source



Movement III — No One is Immune

8. The truth that splits in two

At 4:40 a.m., Irene opens the apartment door with a key she's known for thirty years. In the hallway, there are two unfolded boxes, a canvas bag, and her brother Marco's shoes, left against the wall. Their mother died Thursday evening. The funeral was that morning. They had agreed to meet at four to begin looking for some documents; Irene missed a bus and didn't call. When she enters the kitchen, Marco is tearing a piece of paper from the refrigerator with the schedule for a visit that won't happen.

“You arrived late ,” he says.

There are four words. Marco could be referring to that afternoon's appointment. Irene could be hearing her mother's last hours, during which he was present and she was not. She arrived in town on Friday evening, after a trip that began after everything had already happened. Marco knows she tried to find a flight earlier. Irene knows Marco spent many nights in that house. Neither of them fully understands what the other had to do to get to this kitchen.

Irene puts down her bag without answering. She looks at the piece of paper her brother is holding. There's a coffee stain on the edge. She remembers her mother using a pear-shaped magnet to hold her shopping list. She doesn't think **"I'm in mourning** ," as one might name a category. She thinks someone will have to decide what to do with the pear. Then she asks, **"Do you mean today?"**

Marco looks at her. **"Sure. We were supposed to meet at four."**

Irene nods. The time is true; the delay is true. She could apologize and start with the documents. Instead, she says, **"I thought you meant Thursday."** Marco puts the paper on the table. **"I didn't say Thursday."** That, too, is true. The conversation already contains several truths, and none of them, alone, can explain why it's become difficult to take off your coat.

The sound of a scooter comes from the street. Irene opens her bag and searches for her phone, as if she could obtain evidence. There are flight schedules, text messages, a phone call that lasted just a few minutes. She could show them all. She doesn't yet know which accusation she should refute. Marco could show her another log: the visits, the medications picked up, the number of times he interrupted work. The facts are there. For now, she lacks a way to bring them in without turning them all into a defense.

“I was waiting for you ,” says Marco.

The sentence changes something, but it doesn't decide. It could be a request to be seen, it could become a matter. Irene pulls out a chair. She says she's sorry she didn't warn them about the delay. Then she adds that, when she received the call on Thursday, she was still convinced they'd have a few days. Marco lowers his gaze. **"Me too** ." It's the first thing they say they've had in common without either of them having to give up their position.

They sit down. On the table are a blue folder and a cup with a spoon. Irene asks if Marco has eaten. He replies that he had a sandwich at the funeral, then corrects himself: he hasn't finished it. She finds some bread in a bag and places it in the center. Bread doesn't resolve the

grief. It doesn't prove the initial statement was innocent or guilty. It merely makes it possible to move on from a slightly different situation.

Marco opens the folder. Irene asks him to start with what they're looking for. **"The receipts,"** he replies. She picks up the first sheet and begins reading. Halfway through the page, she asks if a date refers to the payment or the visit. Marco points to a line. Here, the clarification is simple: all it takes is a finger, a question, a comparison with the document. Previously, it hadn't been enough to simply say that the words spoken were those spoken.

After a few minutes, Irene says, **"I still don't know how to talk about Thursday** ." Marco doesn't respond immediately. Then he says he doesn't know either. They haven't agreed on a definitive version of the last few hours. They haven't established that every interpretation is equally correct. They've found, for the moment, a place where not knowing doesn't prevent them from remaining interlocutors. The pear-shaped magnet is still on the refrigerator. No one takes it down.

Four words are not all that happened

The scene is imagined. It doesn't describe how everyone experiences grief. It doesn't diagnose those who seek accusations within a sentence or defend themselves by displaying the exact words. It presents us with a more specific difficulty: when we say something, what do we actually have in common?

Marco said, "You're late." Irene heard those words. She understands them well enough to ask what time period they refer to. The problem doesn't stem from an incomprehensible sound. It stems from the possibility that a sentence conveys a different story than the one the speaker was using to formulate it. The sentence is short; what each person brings to it is long.

A very common solution is to return to the words and stop there. You didn't say Thursday; therefore, Thursday doesn't belong in the message. But the words "you arrived late" don't even contain the number four, the missed bus, or the search for receipts. To refer them to the afternoon, we must already use context. We can't claim context when it makes our meaning clear and ban it when it makes the other person's interpretation clear.

Another solution is to focus on what Irene heard. If she recognized an accusation in it, Marco accused her. This conclusion, too, is too far-fetched. Reception is a fact of the encounter, but it doesn't automatically coincide with the speaker's intention or the only justified interpretation. Irene may have reason to fear an accusation and attribute to the sentence a force that Marco wasn't attributing to it. Realizing this wouldn't disprove her pain.

To move forward, we must maintain multiple questions simultaneously. What words were spoken? What did they refer to? What did the speaker intend to do? What information was available to the recipient? What happened in the subsequent conversation? The difficulty is not an invitation to abandon the facts. It is a requirement to seek out a sufficient number of them.

A recording can resolve a disagreement about the spoken text. It may not resolve a dispute about the function of a sentence. A document can establish a time and leave open the question of what that time means to two people. Having proof doesn't mean you already possess every relevant description of the situation.

Hence the title. "The truth that is made by two" doesn't mean that two people can make what hasn't happened happen by agreeing to tell it. It points to a part of the truth of the encounter

that each person, alone, risks describing only from their own perspective. To understand it better, what the other has to say must also be able to reach them. And it must be able to reach them without the first person having already decided to do so.

The fact does not require our consent

If Irene arrived at 4:40, her arrival isn't punctual because they both prefer to avoid an argument. If the appointment was at 4:00, it isn't at 5:00 because Marco later forgave her for being late. They can change their judgment, the consequences, the relevance they attribute to the episode. To change what they believe happened, they must have reasons regarding what happened.

The truth of facts cannot be voted on. This does not grant us infallible access to the facts. Testimonies can be incomplete, instruments imperfect, memories conflicting, categories inappropriate. A number requires knowing what was counted; a temperature requires a method and a time of measurement. Distinguishing these limits from the freedom to invent is a task, not an academic detail.

Saying " **there was a fever"** can be a well-founded observation, a conjecture, or a vague memory. The degree of justification varies. It doesn't follow that the temperature depended on the agreement between those who remembered it. Saying **"there was a blow"** requires verifying an action, not reconciling two versions at all costs. If an event harms someone, the need to avoid harm during the comparison doesn't justify erasing it.

We must be particularly clear when the language of relationships is used against those seeking recognition. **"Everyone has their own truth"** can become a seemingly tolerant phrase that leaves the affected person without a shared fact. The perpetrator and the victim do not always occupy equivalent positions with respect to evidence, risk, and the ability to speak. Mediation cannot be the name of a cancellation.

However, even the use of facts can be misused. A father tells his son he lacks nothing, showing the expenses incurred. The expenses may be real, but they don't prove the absence of any other shortcomings. A manager indicates the number of people interviewed and claims that number proves the quality of the interview. A correct number can support a conclusion that doesn't follow. The error lies in the transition, not necessarily in the data.

This chapter therefore proposes a discipline of relevance. What claim are we trying to verify? Does the available evidence specifically address that claim? Have we confused the fact that someone was present with the fact that they were accessible? The fact that an explanation was uttered with the fact that it could be understood? The fact that someone didn't protest with the fact that they agreed?

Questions don't weaken the need for truth. They make it less easy to imitate. "I'm objective" is not a method. Confronting what can contradict us, distinguishing between questions, and paying attention to the limitations of evidence are all part of a method. The world must be able to prove us wrong even when our version is coherent and makes us feel right.

The meaning does not arrive already closed

The meaning of a sentence in an encounter also depends on the recipient's history, situation, and response options, and therefore its understanding requires work that neither person can always accomplish alone. This work doesn't arbitrarily alter the facts, doesn't make every reading equally sound, and doesn't force the speaker to control every effect of his words.

"Truth of meaning" is a philosophical expression of the book, not the name of a second type of experimental measurement. It refers to the search for a faithful description of what a fact or a word becomes in someone's life. Not every assessment is true; not every experience contains an exact explanation of its origin. But an explanation that systematically omits experience can be incomplete with respect to the very phenomenon it claims to explain.

For Irene, the delay may be met with a guilt she already fears. For Marco, it may be yet another wait during days of having to respond to numerous requests. The proposal about the timetable can be shared without these two experiences coinciding. Neither authorizes the other to rewrite the other's journey. Both are relevant to understanding why the conversation took that direction.

We shouldn't imagine meaning as a fluid secretly placed within words. A word can have a fairly stable linguistic meaning and serve different functions in different situations. **"Okay"** can accept a proposal, close a discussion, signal exasperation. Sometimes the tone clarifies. Sometimes the relationship makes even the tone ambiguous. Sometimes a question needs to be asked, and the question is met with acceptance or refusal.

In the model proposed by Herbert Clark and Susan Brennan in 1991, communication requires building and updating common ground: knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions that interlocutors treat as shared. The process of verifying understanding, called grounding, does not require mental identity. It requires evidence sufficient for the purposes of the moment. Different means of communication offer resources and impose different costs to achieve that sufficiency. It is a model of coordination, not a theory according to which agreement produces truth.

To find receipts, Marco might just point to a line. To talk about Thursday, that pass mark isn't yet available. People need to at least establish what question is being raised, what accusations are actually at stake, what each person knows. The shared effort doesn't necessarily consist of finding a phrase that makes them feel better. It can consist of making a disagreement moot without distorting it.

Understanding, moreover, is not the same as agreeing. Irene can understand why Marco was irritated and felt his formulation was unfair. Marco can understand Irene's guilt and continue to ask her to let him know when he's late. The relationship doesn't gain truth only when it reduces differences. It can gain it when it finally allows us to say what difference remains.

We don't see everything the other sees

In 2000, Boaz Keysar, Dale Barr, Jennifer Balin, and Jason Brauner studied instruction comprehension in a situation in which some objects were visible to the recipient but not to the person giving the instruction. Eye movements and certain actions showed that the recipient could also consider objects excluded from the speaker's perspective, even though they were aware of the difference. Taking into account what the other person could see was not a constraint that was always applied without interference. The task was circumscribed; it did not describe every conversation or a general moral fault.

The result highlights a difficulty: possessing information about the other's position isn't equivalent to using it perfectly in understanding. Irene knows that Marco was waiting to look for the documents. That information can coexist with another possible reference, very present to her. Marco knows that Irene wasn't in the room Thursday evening; he may underestimate

how much that absence affects his listening. These are interpretative comparisons with the scene, not tentative conclusions about the two characters.

We are often invited to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. This invitation can reduce indifference, but its cognitive success shouldn't be presumed. We can imagine generously and be wrong with great certainty. The more we can tell ourselves a convincing story about someone, the less we sometimes feel the need to verify whether that story is true to them.

In 2018, Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley presented 25 experiments on the accuracy of interpersonal understanding. Instruction to take another's perspective did not reliably improve accuracy in the tasks examined and could increase confidence in one's own judgment. In the final experiment, obtaining information directly from the other person through conversation improved accuracy. This comparison distinguishes perspective imagining from perspective acquisition. It does not prove that every conversation is sincere or sufficient, nor that imagining is useless in all circumstances.

This distinction is valuable for a book that asks us to consider the listener's state. The risk is taking the invitation and transforming it into a new presumed competence: now I know what's happening to you because I'm an attentive person. But attention must make the arrival of missing information more practicable. If it's used only to further elaborate our hypothesis, it can leave the other in the same solitude.

"I imagine you're sad" can open up a possibility. **"You're sad, so you don't understand"** can close it. The difference isn't just in tone. It's in the other person's right to correct their attribution and the weight we give to their correction. They can tell us they're angry, that they understand perfectly, that the issue isn't about the emotion we mentioned. They may also not want to tell us their feelings.

We don't ask the listener to fill out a form before being authorized to be heard. We can consider possible conditions without possessing an inventory of them. Marco can avoid an ambiguous formulation about a delay without knowing exactly how guilty Irene feels. He can specify **"today";** he can ask if it's an appropriate time. Respect can function prior to complete knowledge, precisely because it doesn't pretend to have it.

The voice enters the sentence

Language doesn't reach us through a channel that retains only a succession of definitions. In listening, there is a voice, a moment, a recognized or unknown person. In reading, there is a sender, a text's layout, the knowledge of a relationship. Some of this information can contribute to understanding as it unfolds, rather than appearing only as a subsequent comment.

In 2008, Jos van Berkum and colleagues recorded brain potentials evoked by listened sentences, examining the integration between content and speaker characteristics inferred from the voice. Incompatibilities between the message and expectations related to those characteristics produced early effects, including an N400 response. The work showed that information about the speaker could rapidly participate in linguistic processing. It did not demonstrate that the stereotypes inferred from the voice were true or that an electrical response fully described the meaning attributed to the sentence.

The N400 is a component of evoked potentials, a variation in electrical activity detected on the scalp that typically appears around 400 milliseconds after a meaningful stimulus. In a 2011

review, Marta Kutas and Kara Federmeier described its sensitivity to numerous aspects of meaning processing, including stimulus-context relationships. Its amplitude is not a measure of truth or sincerity. An unexpected word may require different processing without being false; familiar content may be easily processed and remain false.

This research supports a limited but important point: context isn't always an addition we apply after receiving a completely neutral meaning. Elements that the speaker may not have included in their intention also contribute to comprehension. How much of this process is available to consciousness and how it should be described theoretically are further questions. It's pointless to pretend they're resolved in order to recognize the result.

The book then makes an interpretative shift. When Marco speaks, Irene encounters her brother in a kitchen from which their mother has just disappeared. She doesn't receive the same sentence she might hear at the entrance to a meeting she arrived at forty minutes later. The temporal content may be identical; the possibilities of reference and action are different. We don't deduce this scene from an N400: we use it to make visible a structure of experience.

There's also the opposite risk: explaining meaning through voice and forgetting the words. A warm tone can accompany a falsehood. A brusque tone can accompany urgent and accurate information. A person can communicate with little expressiveness without feeling indifferent. Not all bodies provide the same cues in the way the observer expects. Communication cannot be assessed through a single convincing facial model.

The civil responsibility we propose doesn't prescribe a voice. It requires considering whether the channel and context make what we want to share possible. A written explanation can help someone avoid being dependent on the speed of conversation. An oral clarification can resolve an ambiguity left in the text. No single medium is sufficient in every situation. The choice of medium is already part of the way we meet the recipient.

The listener's state is not a side note

Hungry, humiliated, in love, distracted, under a headline that portends catastrophe, in mourning: the other's state can influence our understanding of what we say. We must now free this attention from a misunderstanding. It's not a list of categories that automatically explain every response. It's an indication of something that might be relevant and that we often don't see.

In 2019, Jennifer MacCormack and Kristen Lindquist published three studies on the relationship between hunger, context, and emotional experiences. In the tasks examined, hunger alone did not lead to a more negative judgment in every condition: the negative context and, in the laboratory study, the direction of attention to emotions contributed to the outcomes. Some findings concerned judgments of ambiguous stimuli, others emotions and interpersonal evaluations. The study supports a situated interaction; it does not justify inferring an individual's anger from hunger or dismissing a protest by offering them food.

Caution is inherent in the outcome, not added out of courtesy. Hunger isn't a key capable of unlocking everything Marco says. Grief doesn't explain every interpretation of Irene. A condition can contribute to a response without exhausting it. We can take it into consideration and continue to discuss the content of that response.

In 2009, van Berkum and colleagues also examined evoked potentials during the reading of statements evaluated by people with conflicting political and ethical orientations. Responses

showed rapid sensitivity to the discrepancy between statements and the reader's values, with effects on the processing of meaning. This finding concerns the interaction between evaluation and comprehension in the task studied. It does not decide which moral orientation is correct, does not transform disagreement into a pathology, and does not allow an individual belief to be derived from a single signal.

We can recognize, then, that listening doesn't happen without a body and a story. But acknowledging that story shouldn't become a way of revoking the speaker's voice. **"You've been humiliated, so you're too sensitive"** can be a description used to make an objection irrelevant. **"You're in love, so you're not thinking clearly"** can evade the actual point. A possible explanation for the intensity of a reaction doesn't refute what the person is saying.

Status is part of the received message in the interpretative sense we propose here: it contributes to what becomes salient, plausible, urgent, threatening, or negligible. It doesn't make the listener a defective vessel to be reduced to a neutral standard. None of us speaks from outside our own situation; no one listens from a place that doesn't exist.

This entails a proportionate responsibility. We don't have to anticipate every private story. We can avoid assuming that our level of availability coincides with that of the other. We can acknowledge fatigue without attributing every disagreement to it. We can offer a break without making it the price of maintaining our voice. If the other person says they can listen, we don't have to keep interpreting their body to contradict them at every turn.

The status question should remain correctable. It serves to gain better access to the meeting, not to invent an explanation the person will no longer be able to dispute. Sometimes the most helpful response is: I don't know what status you're in, but I can clarify what I'm saying and give you a chance to interrupt me.

The tone we hear in our head

When we write, we already know the intention. We can read a line and mentally sense its lightness. The recipient has the words, perhaps a relationship with us, perhaps a few clues. Our experience of the sentence is richer than what we actually sent. The problem doesn't just concern those who write poorly. It can also concern those who believe they write clearly.

In 2005, Justin Kruger, Nicholas Epley, Jason Parker, and Zhi-Wen Ng published five experiments on email communication. Participants tended to overestimate their ability to convey tone; the final studies linked this overconfidence to the difficulty of separating their own experience of the message from that available to the recipient. The research focused on specific tasks and media. It does not prove that every text is more ambiguous than every oral conversation or that written communication should be abandoned.

This phenomenon interests us because it offers a precise form to the **"it was obvious" alibi.** Obvious to someone who already had access to what? A sentence may be obvious to someone who reads it knowing it's ironic, but less obvious to someone who receives it after a day of reminders. The sender may be sincere in his or her astonishment. That astonishment isn't yet evidence of the casualness with which the recipient should have read it.

We shouldn't, therefore, burden every message with a comprehensive explanation of our intentions. Ordinary life contains abbreviations, jokes, jokes, and innuendos. The problem becomes more serious when interlocutors don't have the same resources to clarify, or when a misunderstanding can have significant consequences. **"When you can,"** written by a friend

and written by someone evaluating our work, may require different clarifications. Even apparent courtesy can leave the degree of obligation unclear.

Imagine an email: **"Great, finally."** The sender is celebrating the completion of a difficult project. The recipient sees a rebuke for the slowness. It's not enough to simply declare that both sides are right. One can ask what the purpose was, what history of deadlines was shared, whether the wording actually left an ambiguity. Clarification can correct the recipient's response without denying that the ambiguity existed.

Writing also offers advantages: it preserves a formulation, allows for rereading, and allows someone to respond in their own time. An oral conversation can be overwhelming, inaccessible, impossible to reconstruct. There's no nostalgia for an ever-improving presence. There's a need to use the resources of each medium without attributing to it resources it doesn't possess.

Whoever sends a message can return to it. "I see how it might sound; this is what I meant" acknowledges two elements at once. It doesn't impose guilt that might not exist; it doesn't leave the recipient with the burden of considering their reading absurd. The intention remains relevant. It must find a form that is available even outside the mind in which it originated.

Ease does not decide the truth

A clear sentence can be false. A difficult sentence can be true. We must keep this in mind, especially in a chapter that places importance on the conditions of comprehension. Making a proposition more accessible does not mean making it more sound. Efforts to communicate and verification of content are distinct tasks, which can either complement each other or diverge.

In 2015, Lisa Fazio, Nadia Brashier, Keith Payne, and Elizabeth Marsh studied the effect of repetition on truth judgments. They found that repetition could increase the credibility attributed to a statement even when relevant knowledge was available to participants. The results show that knowledge does not guarantee that it will always be used in judgments. It does not establish that people will inevitably believe every repeated falsehood or that a single conversation will produce the same outcome.

In our argument, the consequence is above all a limitation. If a sentence finally "rings true" to me, this is a change in the experience of understanding or believing it. It can accompany a good clarification. It can accompany a deceptive familiarity. To decide, we need to return to the proposition and its reasons, not take the fluidity of its arrival as a certificate.

Even comfort can mimic proof. "Everything will be fine" can seem more credible when it comes from someone we love. The relationship explains why that phrase has power; it doesn't impart information about the future that the speaker doesn't possess. A person can choose to rely on a presence without having to transform every reassurance into a confirmed prediction.

There is a more precise use of trust: believing that the other person will tell you what they know and distinguish what they don't. In this form, the relationship doesn't replace evidence; it makes it less necessary to defend oneself from its distortion. A trustworthy interlocutor can give us an unpleasant response and acknowledge uncertainty. The absence of consolation doesn't measure the absence of care.

The opposite is also true. Just because a piece of news scares us doesn't make it true. Harsh language doesn't mean it's more honest. A peremptory tone can offer a certainty that the

content doesn't justify. It's not enough to pit the courage of truth against the listener's weakness: we must verify whether that truth has truly been established.

The Self interprets, but the interpretation remains exposed to the world. The present can change a prediction precisely because a fact arrives that it didn't contain. If we call everything that protects it "my truth," we've closed that passage. The relationship useful for knowledge allows a fact to contradict both, without the denial canceling either's right to remain in the conversation.

What we do by saying something

A sentence can describe and, in the same act, ask, promise, warn, accuse. Not all of these functions can be read by counting the words. When someone says "I'll wait for you," it can communicate a presence; it can demand punctuality; it can make clear a dependency. How the recipient responds also depends on the strength the sentence carries in the relationship.

In the lectures collected in 1962 in How to Do Things with Words, John Austin developed the distinction between saying something with meaning, performing an act in saying it, and producing effects through saying it. Speech act theory allows us to distinguish the content of a statement, its force, and its consequences. It does not make them independent; it avoids treating them as a single object. Furthermore, the success of certain acts depends on conditions and conventions, not on the magical power of words.

For this reason, "I didn't make a threat" can be a relevant or insufficient defense. A formulation can convey a consequence without naming it directly. Conversely, the recipient may fear a consequence that the speaker isn't envisaging. Context, precedents, real alternatives, and offered explanations are key to distinguishing between the two. Fear alone doesn't prove a threat; the absence of the word "threat" doesn't prove its absence.

The brothers' scene remains simpler and more uncertain. Marco may have made a point about punctuality. Irene may have recognized it as an assessment of her presence in recent days. "I didn't say Thursday" clarifies the literal meaning. It may not entirely clarify the discussion Marco is opening. "I was talking about today's appointment" adds pertinent information; "You can't hear it any other way" instead claims to govern a reception that has already taken place.

A similar distinction applies to an apology. We can describe our intention, acknowledge inadequate wording, or correct a fact. These are different actions. "I'm sorry you took it that way" can express sincere regret; it can also leave the entire problem to the other person's understanding. To understand what that phrase is doing, we need to look at what follows: is there still a chance to address our part, or is the dialogue being closed?

There's no need to find a culprit for every linguistic difficulty. A language works partly because many steps are incomplete and are fixed without due process. The requirement to always name the error can become a form of control. We're interested in being able to review a document when a significant problem emerges, without assuming that the emergence of the problem already proves a hostile intent.

Words, therefore, don't end in the mouth in the precise sense the book advocates: what we do when speaking must be questionable in light of what the other person has achieved. This is an ethical proposal. It isn't the automatic deduction of a cerebral result, nor a request to accept

any interpretation. It demands that the recipient not disappear from the description of the act that concerns him.

A question can reopen the sentence

"Do you mean today?" contains a slight pause. Irene doesn't immediately declare that she knows the accusation; she asks Marco to clarify the reference. The question could be provocative, it could be sincere, it could be both. We don't have a formula that guarantees the quality of a meeting. We do, however, have an observable difference: asking allows, at least in principle, information to reach us that can change our interpretation.

In 2015, Mark Dingemanse and colleagues analyzed conversations in twelve languages from eight language families. They studied the moments when one speaker signals a problem with understanding and prompts the other to take back what they said. In the material examined, these episodes recurred on average every 1.4 minutes. The forms varied, but common principles emerged in managing communication problems. This is a result of conversations collected in specific contexts, not a universal measure of how often each of us misunderstands.

A request to repeat a word and a request to acknowledge an offense are not the same operation. The former can be resolved by making a syllable audible; the latter can require examining a report. Research does not demonstrate that all moral disputes are listening problems. It helps us see that adjustment is part of the ordinary functioning of communication, rather than always constituting its exceptional failure.

When we say **"which day?"** , we don't have to justify the existence of days. When we ask **"what did you mean by incompetent?"** , a further obstacle may appear: the speaker feels his authority is being challenged. The transition from clarification to conflict also depends on the cost of clarification. Making a judgment explicit can force us to support it with reasons that previously remained hidden in the brevity of a sentence.

A useful question can be a simple one: **"Are you talking about this time or about the others?"** It doesn't require a confession. It defines the subject. Another can concern an alternative: **"Are you asking me to change my schedule, or are you telling me you no longer want to work with me?"** If both possibilities weren't in play, the speaker can adjust the question. The recipient offers a reading without proclaiming it definitive.

The speaker can also verify: **"I realize I wasn't very precise: I meant to refer to this episode."** Or they can ask what happened. But here we must resist the temptation to turn the other person into a diagnostic tool. "Repeat to me what you understood" can help; spoken from above, it can become a test in which every mistake confirms the listener's inferiority. Verification must also be able to identify a flaw in the explanation.

Not everything needs to be spelled out explicitly. Clarifying every detail would make many relationships impractical. Some agreements work precisely because they don't require ongoing certification. The criterion proposed here addresses pertinent difficulties: when the response shows a gap that changes what we will do, we have a reason to stop. The precision needed to choose a treatment isn't the same as that needed to pass the salt.

The other person's response offers us a clue as to what has been understood, but never a clear insight into their mind. An assent can be understood, polite, tired, or afraid of prolonging the encounter. The possibility of a follow-up is important: being able to return to the sentence, ask

at another time, use another medium. An explanation that only works if the recipient can no longer ask questions is unlikely to be a successful explanation.

Who is believed before speaking

Imagine two people reporting the same error in a meeting. The first is asked for details. The second is told that she misinterpreted the information. The difference could be for pertinent reasons: one is more familiar with the document, the other has already mixed up the data. It could also be due to a judgment formed before listening: accent, age, or a social category perceived as lacking expertise. The opportunity to clarify is not always equally distributed.

Miranda Fricker, in Epistemic Injustice (2007), calls testimonial injustice the unjust deficit in credibility a speaker receives as a result of the listener's prejudice. This is a philosophical proposal on the relationship between knowledge, power, and injustice. The point is not that every rejected testimony is true: it is that the judgment of its reliability can be distorted by reasons unrelated to the merit of what is said.

This concept encounters our topic at an awkward point. So far, we've asked the speaker to consider reception. We must also ask the listener to consider the credence they give. Listening attentively to a person we've already determined to be unreliable may mean looking only for the clue that will confirm our judgment. Apparent openness to dialogue isn't enough if no response could change our position.

Recognizing this risk doesn't require erasing differences in expertise. Direct experience and conjecture don't have the same evidentiary value. Relevant expertise matters. But expertise must address the question we're asking. Knowing a procedure doesn't automatically mean knowing what a person has understood of its explanation. Being responsible for an office doesn't mean knowing in advance the meaning of every encounter that takes place there.

The person describing a pain has access to their own experience that we don't possess in the same way. This doesn't mean they know every cause of the pain without fail. We can combine these two things: taking what they report seriously and investigating what produces it. If, however, we ask them to demonstrate all the causes before we give them attention, we impose a task that often not even experts could complete in the first meeting.

The problem can be even more basic. To recount an episode, you need words that distinguish what happened from what we fear we caused. Someone interrupted after three sentences might never get to the fourth, where the crucial detail appears. The time allowed for formulation becomes part of the conditions through which a fact can be known. It doesn't change the fact; it changes the likelihood of it being included in the common examination.

The responsibility, therefore, doesn't always fall on those who find it more difficult to explain themselves. Sometimes an imprecise sentence prompts a question; sometimes a powerful interlocutor uses imprecision to avoid the question. We must distinguish between a correctable error and the devaluation that makes it permanent. **"It's not clear"** can open the door to help. It can also be the final word, excluding someone from the possibility of clarifying.

In the relationship between Irene and Marco, we don't know who usually holds more authority. It would be incorrect to complete the scene by automatically assigning the right to the sister or the brother. We do know, however, that the available documents are different. Marco's shifts of presence are visible in a sequence of appointments. Irene's attempts to anticipate the trip could be left out of the story if no one asks. Neither record alone

demonstrates the extent of the love between them. Both can prevent a judgment from being based on a lack of information mistaken for an absence of life.

The truth can't wait until we're ready

The strongest objection comes here. If we must consider the listener's state, will the truth become hostage to their availability? Can a person say they feel humiliated and still get a mistake not mentioned? Can someone in power invoke their vulnerability to avoid scrutiny? Can a family indefinitely postpone news because someone doesn't seem ready? The language of care already, in our ordinary experience, contains these potentials for abuse.

The objection isn't resolved by saying we're referring only to people of good will. A civil principle must hold even when interlocutors lie, defend an advantage, or transform their own sensitivity into a demand for obedience. If negative reception were enough to render content illicit, we would have given everyone enormous power over what others can say. Those most capable of imposing their discomfort might become the least objectionable.

Then there's a less obvious risk: deciding for the other how much truth they can tolerate. Hiding a difficulty behind reassuring formulas can appear to be attentive and reduce the possibility of choice. A person excluded from information about themselves isn't necessarily protected. They may be deprived of the time needed to prepare, ask questions, and disagree. The idea that we need to know someone's condition doesn't authorize us to unilaterally declare that that condition makes them unfit to tell the truth.

We must therefore distinguish between the basis of a proposition and the conditions for its communication. The first question is whether what we assert is supported by relevant evidence. The second concerns how, when, and through what response options we make it available. A difficulty in the second does not cancel out the first; the correctness of the first does not render the second superfluous. These are not two obligations that cancel each other out.

If it's urgent to warn someone of a concrete danger, we can't wait to learn their entire biography. Speed limits the scope for formulation. A short, direct sentence may be necessary. Responsibility concerns what was reasonably available in that situation, not a perfection imagined after the fact. However, it's still possible to distinguish the urgency of information from the pleasure of imparting it with contempt. Not all harshness is avoidable; not all harshness is required by the facts.

If a recipient attributes an intention that we deny, we can support the denial and ask for the reasons. We don't have to confess a thought we don't admit to having. We can, however, acknowledge that a formulation offered clues to that interpretation. Or, after examination, we can conclude that the interpretation is unsupported. The relationship also includes the option of saying, "I understand that it came across to you that way; however, I don't think it describes what I did." This response must remain open to discussion, like the interpretation to which it responds.

Sometimes disagreements remain unresolved. A story may contain verifiable falsehoods; a person may refuse any correction. We are not required to continue a conversation endlessly to demonstrate respect. A boundary, an interruption, the use of an independent procedure can better preserve the conditions of truth than another hour of dispute. Two people does not mean locked in two: documents, witnesses, public criteria, and competent third parties may be indispensable.

The recipient also has an interpretative responsibility, when their circumstances allow them to exercise it: distinguishing an impression from a proven accusation, asking for clarification, accepting that the other person can correct their story. This responsibility is not the same in every relationship. A child, a threatened employee, an exhausted person do not have the same freedom to interrupt and question. Asymmetry changes what we can reasonably ask; it does not make anyone infallible.

Truth doesn't have to wait for our consent. However, we may need better conditions to recognize it, challenge it with reason, or know what to do with it. Taking this difference seriously prevents both the blackmail of susceptibility and the excuse of brutality. It doesn't promise a frictionless conversation. It allows us to ask what purpose friction serves and who is forced to pay the price.

"Be careful how you speak."

There are words of everyday education that carry with them two legacies. **"Be careful how you speak"** can mean: consider the person listening to you. It can also mean: remember your place. In a home, a classroom, an office, the same admonition can limit an offense or prevent a protest. We cannot recover it without deciding which of these functions we want to support.

While the phrase always protects those in command, it doesn't describe a relational responsibility. It establishes a privilege. The adult can yell, the child must control himself; the superior can insinuate, the subordinate must respond with impeccable formulas. Correct tone becomes a condition imposed on those with less power to be able to name what is happening. In this usage, attention to the word doesn't initiate the meeting: it selects who has the right to disturb it.

The question changes if the person issuing the warning also applies it to themselves. **"Be careful"** can then mean: your words reach someone who doesn't match your intention. That someone has a history, is living in the present, and may understand differently. Our way of speaking contributes to the situation in which they will have to choose whether to approach, defend themselves, ask questions, or remain silent. It doesn't decide all these actions, but it is not unconnected to their circumstances.

We can read this ordinary intuition as an anticipation of the problem the book calls the relational epigenesis of the Self. It is an interpretative reading, not a proven historical genealogy or a statement about DNA modifications. The point is that the experience of being reached by a word enters the present, from which the person interprets what they can do. A respectful reprimand and a humiliation can contain the same data and offer different possibilities for recovering it.

There's no need, then, to monitor every expression as if it were a measurable toxic substance. We need to be able to answer for our use of it when we recognize its relevance. We can be irritated, clumsy, or ineloquent. We can express something necessary imperfectly. Responsibility doesn't require replacing our voice with polished language; it requires not declaring it immune from scrutiny just because it's ours.

Attention includes the right to protest. A person may raise their voice because calm responses have gone unheard. This doesn't justify every outcry, but it prevents judging it separately from the sequence that preceded it. Asking only for the protest to improve its form can be a way to leave intact the situation that made it necessary.

The recovered sentence therefore also concerns the listener: be careful how you assign meaning, what experience you exclude, what doubt you present as certainty. We can begin to respect a person by acknowledging precisely what we don't yet know about them. We leave room for the other person to clarify without already having been reduced to the version that suits us.

The real content and the possibility of using it

For a parent, the distinction can begin with a broken object. **"The glass fell while you were holding it"** is a description to be tested. **"You always break everything"** turns an incident into a general story. **"You're a disaster"** makes that story a definition of the person. It's not just three degrees of kindness. The sentences offer different objects to examine and different response possibilities. In the first case, the child can describe how he held the glass. In the third, he must defend himself from what would be.

Stating the facts precisely doesn't eliminate any potential responsibility. It can make it more manageable: gathering information, understanding where to base it, recognizing a reckless act. If the child denies what we saw, there's no need to pretend all versions coincide. We can support our description without adding a judgment on their entire character. The right to correct an action doesn't require confining the person within that action.

For a teacher, the problem may arise in a half-submitted assignment. **"You didn't follow the instructions"** might be accurate and still too vague to allow for a correction. What part was missing? Was the prompt made available in a legible format? Did the student understand that they needed to justify their answer, or did they feel it was sufficient to simply state it? These questions don't transform an incomplete assignment into a complete one. They make the omission, the difficulty, and the misunderstanding clear.

An assessment must be able to communicate that something has gone wrong. The teacher's job isn't to ensure that every assessment is pleasing. But an assessment that allows us to identify the steps that need to be redone offers a possibility that "you're not suited" often takes away. This last phrase claims to foresee a future much broader than the task at hand. Its confidence may derive from the habit of judging, rather than from the evidence needed to support it.

For a doctor, accurate information must address the patient's needs. "The risk is increasing" leaves essential questions unanswered: with respect to what, on what data, with what uncertainty, for which people? Explaining the meaning of a number doesn't mean deciding for the patient how much it should matter. It means offering them elements to connect it to the decision that concerns them. Reassurance and alarm can both become misleading if they obscure the outcome of the discussion.

We don't propose a clinical protocol here. Let's consider a communication option: asking what aspects remain unclear, distinguishing what is known from what is hypothesized, and making a follow-up question possible. A written explanation can help someone who can't retain everything at that moment. Another person will require a different form of access. The need for clarification doesn't demonstrate a lack of intelligence and shouldn't be treated as a shortcoming to be confessed to an authority figure.

A doctor may also have to say something the person doesn't want to hear. Respect doesn't require turning it into welcome news. It requires that its unpleasantness not be used as evidence that the recipient must give up all hope. If information remains difficult, it's possible to continue to distinguish its content from the fear it arouses, without devaluing either.

For those who write public rules, the distinction becomes a question of access. A provision may be formally precise and difficult to use for the people it addresses. Knowing that a deadline exists doesn't mean knowing what day it begins; knowing the name of a document doesn't mean knowing where to obtain it. Here, reception isn't a private problem always attributable to carelessness. The form of information contributes to the effective possibilities for action.

Legislators and administrators cannot ensure that every citizen interprets every text without error. However, they can address recurring difficulties, provide relevant examples, and provide accessible explanations and avenues for clarification. It is not enough to say that information was published if the conditions for its use were foreseeably lacking. This is a civil proposal on institutional accountability, not the description of a uniform legal obligation in every jurisdiction.

Here too, listening isn't the same as accepting all requests. A rule may be necessary and yet encounter sincere opposition. The testimony of those affected by it doesn't in itself determine its validity, but it can highlight a consequence that its abstract formulation didn't reveal. The recipient's technical expertise and experience answer different questions; a more informed decision requires knowing which questions were left out.

For a person alone faced with a message, the first step can be even more modest. They read "we need to talk" and already sense the outcome of the conversation. The sentence has been received; the outcome is not yet known. They can distinguish these two elements without denying their fear. They can ask what it is about, whether it is urgent, and when to talk about it. The right to ask doesn't guarantee a reassuring response; it allows them not to treat every prediction as a fact.

The same person may encounter news that confirms a fear. Checking who's making the claim, what evidence there is, and what exactly it's saying isn't the same as distrusting one's own sensitivity. It means protecting it from the need to function as a tool for verification. Not everything that reaches us demands an immediate response. Sometimes we can leave a statement hanging until the information allows us to give it the weight it deserves.

In all these situations, the task isn't to adapt the truth until it's harmless. It's to make what we're saying recognizable and leave a relevant opportunity to use or challenge it. A good explanation can increase disagreement: the person finally understands what's being asked of them and refuses. This outcome doesn't prove we explained poorly. It can prove that the encounter has become clear enough to allow for a choice that wasn't available before.

Go back at four forty

The search for receipts proceeds slowly. In a drawer, Irene finds the envelopes sorted by month. Marco says his mother had continued to sort them even when going out became difficult. Irene nods. She has different memories of the same habit: phone calls during which her mother would ask where she had put a bill, as if the distance could be bridged by pointing to a drawer together.

Marco returns to the first sentence. **"You could have warned me today."** Irene says yes. The clarification doesn't erase the delay and doesn't allow her to attribute it entirely to grief. She had a phone; she could have sent a message. She can acknowledge this fact without accepting that it explains everything Marco thinks about her absences. A limited responsibility is not a general admission.

Then Marco says, **"I wish you were here on Thursday."** Now the day is named. The sentence is more painful than the first and less ambiguous. Irene can't answer simply by showing her flight time. That time might explain when she arrived; it doesn't eliminate Marco's desire to have her by his side. And Marco's desire, while understandable, doesn't prove that Irene could have satisfied it.

“I wish I could have been there too ,” she says. After a moment, she adds, **“But I don’t know if you mean you missed me, or that you think I didn’t do enough.”**

Marco looks at the envelopes. He doesn't answer immediately. We don't know whether, by questioning himself, he's rediscovering an already clear intention or distinguishing for the first time two things he'd previously held together. Even those who speak can better understand what they meant after being asked. This doesn't mean that the question retroactively creates every intention; it just means that we don't always know ourselves with the precision we demand of others.

“I missed you,” he says. Then: **“I’m also angry. I still don’t know who I’m angry with** .”

Irene doesn't reply that the accusation was all in his head. She doesn't even ask him to immediately transform his anger into an acceptable version. She can listen to that distinction and maintain her own: not having arrived in time isn't the same as not having wanted to arrive. Neither statement resolves the grief. They make it less necessary to use a single episode to judge an entire person.

It would be possible to tell the story differently. Marco could continue accusing; Irene could get up and leave. A question doesn't necessarily lead to reparation. We followed a possibility, not demonstrated a guaranteed outcome. Its value lies in having let in information that the first sentence, defended as self-sufficient, could have kept out.

The two brothers agree to separate the receipts from the photographs for now. It's a small, shared decision. It doesn't mean the past finally has a single interpretation. It means they're able to do something together while parts of the past remain difficult. Marco sets aside the medical report. Irene leaves the pear-shaped magnet on the refrigerator.

The mother died on Thursday. Irene arrived on Friday. She had an appointment at 4:00 on Saturday, and she arrived at 4:40. No amount of work on meaning makes these facts different. That work, however, can change the judgments they draw from them, which questions become utterable, and what it will be possible to ask next time. The truth that is shared concerns this understanding exposed to the facts, not a world constructed by their agreement.

A difficulty remains that clarification doesn't resolve. Marco now knows that a sentence might reach his sister in a different place than he had imagined. Irene knows something more about what her brother is trying to say. This knowledge offers both of them the ability to influence the meeting. It doesn't yet tell them how to use it. A more precise understanding of the other can support a decision or make pressure more effective.

If our words can change the conditions under which someone makes a choice, what power do we have over their well-being? And how can we exercise it without taking the place of those who must live that choice?

Chapter Sources

The cited research supports the specific findings cited in the text, within the limits of their designs and contexts. The scenes of Irene and Marco are imagined. The truth of meaning and the relational conception of the Self are interpretative proposals. The evoked potentials are not measures of truth or sincerity; the reference to relational epigenesis does not affirm a molecular mechanism. The civil consequences are normative arguments, not clinical prescriptions.

Clark, H. H., & Brennan, S. E. (1991). Grounding in communication. In LB Resnick, JM Levine, & SD Teasley (eds.), Perspectives on socially shared cognition, pp. 127–149. American Psychological Association. Source

Keysar, B., Barr, D. J., Balin, J. A., & Brauner, J. S. (2000). Taking perspective in conversation: The role of mutual knowledge in comprehension. Psychological Science, 11(1), 32–38. Source

Eyal, T., Steffel, M., & Epley, N. (2018). Perspective mistaking: Accurately understanding the mind of another requires getting perspective, not taking perspective. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 114(4), 547–571. Source

Van Berkum, J. J. A., van den Brink, D., Tesink, C. M. J. Y., Kos, M., & Hagoort, P. (2008). The neural integration of speaker and message. Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, 20(4), 580–591. Source

Kutas, M., & Federmeier, K. D. (2011). Thirty years and counting: Finding meaning in the N400 component of the event-related brain potential (ERP). Annual Review of Psychology, 62, 621–647. Source

MacCormack, J. K., & Lindquist, K. A. (2019). Feeling hangry? When hunger is conceptualized as emotion. Emotion, 19(2), 301–319. Source

Van Berkum, J. J. A., Holleman, B., Nieuwland, M., Otten, M., & Murre, J. (2009). Right or wrong? The brain's fast response to morally objectionable statements. Psychological Science, 20(9), 1092–1099. Source

Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J., and Ng, Z.-W. (2005). Egocentrism over e-mail: Can we communicate as well as we think? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89(6), 925–936. Source

Fazio, L. K., Brashier, N. M., Payne, B. K., & Marsh, E. J. (2015). Knowledge does not protect against illusory truth. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 144(5), 993–1002. Source

Austin, J. L. (1962). How to Do Things with Words. By JO Urmson. Clarendon Press. Source

Dingemanse, M., and colleagues (2015). Universal principles in the repair of communication problems. PLOS ONE, 10(9), e0136100. Source

Fricker, M. (2007). Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing. Oxford University Press. Source



Movement III — No One is Immune

9. The power of determining the good

When Eva arrives, her mother has already set the table for two. The plates are on the table, the bread is still in its bag, and a chair has been pulled up to the kitchen counter. Nora had returned from the hospital three days earlier. She needs help with some tasks; with others, not with others. Her daughter looks at the chair and asks why she hadn't waited for her. Nora replies that she sat down precisely so as not to tire herself out. Eva takes the plates and moves them. **"I'll take care of it."**

She's brought a bag with groceries, a folder, and a notebook. In the notebook, she's written down her weekly commitments: the times they need to remember, who can come by, and when she'll be free from work. It's a concrete commitment, including phone calls during lunch breaks and a time-off request from her manager. Nora knows this. She's thanked her several times. When Eva opens the notebook, however, she notices that Tuesday's box says **"rest."**

“Teresa is coming on Tuesday,” he says.

«I wrote to her to postpone it».

Teresa lives two streets away. She plays cards with Nora, shares neighborhood news, and discusses matters Eva finds unimportant. The visit could have been brief. Nora might have gotten tired; she could have asked her friend to leave. Eva thought avoiding a visit was the best thing to do. She didn't lie, and she's not trying to cause harm. She took an appointment out of someone she loves's week.

“You could have asked me ,” says Nora.

Eva replies that she did it for her. Then she adds, **"With all the things I have to organize, I can't ask you for everything."**

The sentence contains a real difficulty. Her daughter doesn't have unlimited time. She's taking on tasks she didn't have before. If every decision required thorough discussion, some things wouldn't get done. Nora looks at her notebook, then at her shopping bag. For a moment, she feels as if protesting would mean denying all that help. She doesn't want to be ungrateful. She doesn't even want "thank you" to become the name she uses to give up deciding who can enter her home.

Eva puts down her pen. **"Then you tell me what to do."**

Nora doesn't have a complete solution to offer her. She makes a distinction. To go to an appointment, she might need someone to arrange transportation; to find out if she wants to see Teresa, she doesn't need someone to wish for her. She says, **"I'm not asking you not to help me. I'm asking you not to cancel an appointment without telling me."**

Eva sits down. Lunch isn't ready yet. Both are right about something the other risks leaving out: the work required to make a week possible and the life that week must encompass. It's not enough to say that the mother's best interests are evident. We need to ask what good they're talking about, what risks are real, what preferences were swapped out of necessity.

Nora suggests calling Teresa after lunch. She can tell her she's still unsure how long she'll be able to spend with them. Eva asks if she wants her to stay during the call. **"If you like,"** her mother replies. It's a small choice, and it doesn't erase the difficulties. Eva will have to work on Tuesday. Someone will still have to bring the groceries. Teresa's availability isn't guaranteed by Nora's wishes.

While they wait for the water to boil, their mother takes a deck of cards from the drawer. Eva says she doesn't remember the rules very well anymore. Nora begins to explain, then passes her some cards. "Let's help each other out."

In the first game, Eva makes a mistake. Her mother shows her the options, but lets her choose. In the second, Nora asks her daughter to pick up a dropped card. Their powers aren't equal: Eva has the car, the phone with which she organized help, and greater ease with many gestures. Yet, for a few minutes, it's not just her mother who receives. There's an activity whose operation Nora knows, and which Eva has yet to learn.

When the pot starts making a noise, they stop. The cards remain on the table, next to the open notebook. Tuesday's space is still to be filled in.

The verb that promises too much

"Determining the good of the other" seems like a generous phrase. It gives importance to our gesture, frees the encounter from distraction, asks us not to act as if the consequences always concern someone else. However, it contains a verb that we must question before letting it direct the chapter. To determine can mean to contribute to making something possible. It can also mean to completely determine its outcome. In the transition between the two meanings lies a power we do not possess.

Eva can carry groceries, reschedule an appointment, explain information, or choose how to address her mother. She can't guarantee that Nora will feel better. She can't erase the physical limitations, ensure everyone's availability, or know all the consequences in advance. She can change some of the day's circumstances. Nora will continue to encounter them with a story and desires that aren't her daughter's.

The scene is imagined. It doesn't describe a prescription for recovery, nor does it authorize us to deduce what a particular person should do after hospitalization. It serves to distinguish three things that tend to overlap in care: what we know is necessary, what we deem preferable, and what we can materially offer. When we confuse them, one of our limitations can be used to describe another's well-being.

"I can't go with you on Tuesday" is different from **"You don't have to go out on Tuesday** ." The first sentence describes a willingness. The second claims to describe a necessity that requires other reasons. Sometimes those reasons exist and must be taken seriously. Sometimes we're trying to avoid the awkwardness of declaring a limit. The precision here concerns the distribution of power: who can assert what, on the basis of what information?

The chapter's thesis can be formulated as follows: we have a real and asymmetrical power to contribute to the well-being of others, which we propose to direct toward preserving, restoring, and expanding the other's capacity to participate in the choices that affect them. This power does not entirely determine their future, it does not make us owners of their well-being, and it does not make the ability to choose the only value to be protected.

The second sentence corrects a promise that the first, heard alone, might suggest. We have not found a principle capable of necessarily producing a positive outcome. We have proposed a criterion for evaluating the direction of an intervention. This criterion may conflict with the protection of the body, with justice towards others, with the limitations of those providing assistance. Precisely for this reason, it must remain debatable.

Non-zero does not mean infinite

In the movement we are concluding, we have examined the encounter as something that participates in the conditions to which a person responds. It does not follow that every gesture exerts a great, recognizable, or lasting influence. We can speak without leaving a trace we can identify. We can believe we have changed a life when a change has already begun elsewhere. The subjective force of an episode and its causal weight are not the same measure.

We must, however, avoid using this caution to declare ourselves irrelevant. If Eva has the means necessary to reach a place, her availability enters into Nora's practical possibilities. If a manager decides who receives an assignment, he or she is not merely a passing element in the employees' experience. If an adult responds to a child's request for help, the child cannot always get the same response elsewhere. Some powers are concrete even before we measure their psychological effects.

" **Non-zero"** here means that there are relationships and actions in which we actually contribute to the possibilities of others. It's not the hypothesis that each individual measurably influences every other individual. The phrase "no one is immune" retains its interpretive function: it prevents us from conceiving autonomy as an absolute separation. It doesn't describe a network in which every contact has the same weight, nor does it offer a universal formula for calculating it.

Limited power can be decisive for a limited choice. The person who opens a door doesn't control everything that happens next; they can control, at that moment, access. Limitation doesn't absolve them from using that access. We must distinguish the vastness of the world we don't govern from the specificity of the passage that depends on us. The latter can require responsibility even when the former remains enormous.

There is an illusion opposite to omnipotence: believing that, since the future has many causes, none of our actions can be evaluated. But a plurality of causes does not negate the relevance of individual ones. An explanation does not have to isolate an absolute author to acknowledge participation. Responsibility may concern a decision we made, a condition we could have changed, a consequence foreseeable enough to merit attention.

This limit also protects those who help. If Nora continues to suffer, Eva must not conclude that all treatment has been useless or insufficient. Pain can persist even in the presence of appropriate help. If the mother makes a choice her daughter would not have made, it does not follow that the help has failed. The success of the treatment cannot always coincide with the other's arrival in the place we had imagined for them.

We must learn to acknowledge a contribution without turning it into an exclusive signature. Sometimes our gesture opens up an opportunity, and that opportunity will be used differently than we had hoped. If we had only called our preferred outcome a good one, right there we might discover how little room we had left for the person.

Where the other can't just walk away

The power of an encounter changes with the available alternatives. An unpleasant remark from a stranger can hurt. The same remark uttered by the person deciding whether we'll keep our job enters a different relationship. Not just because the second person holds more authority in our minds. They can alter our income, time, access, and reputation. Their judgment is linked to consequences we can't so easily avoid.

Talking about asymmetry means acknowledging this difference without reducing a relationship to a single ranking. Nora knows the rules of the game; Eva controls part of the practical organization. In one area, one can help the other; in another, the roles shift. But the pleasure of playing cards doesn't restore the mother to all the material possibilities her condition has restricted. The reciprocity present in one gesture doesn't erase the dependence present in others.

Power tends to become particularly effective where a person is in training or dependent on someone for basic needs, information, protection, or belonging. Childhood, illness, care, love, and command all reveal different forms of this exposure. We do not propose an experimental ranking that assigns a universal maximum to every relationship. We indicate the situations in which it is most serious to ignore the other's difficulty in rejecting, correcting, or finding an alternative.

In childhood, adults participate in the conditions in which their ways of asking questions and anticipating a response are also being formed. In illness, a concrete need can limit the scope for discussion with the person providing help. In love, the possibility of losing an important bond can give a request a force that its formulation doesn't suggest. In command, a superior's preference can be received as an order even when presented as advice.

None of these relationships is inherently abusive. Addiction makes many forms of life and many moments of recovery possible. The ethical issue concerns what happens when someone uses an addiction to make protest unavailable. A person may receive valuable help and have reasons to disagree with the way it is offered. If the two options become incompatible, help begins to cost one's voice.

Asymmetry therefore increases the responsibility of those who can change the conditions. Not because they must anticipate every desire, but because they can make expressing it more or less safe. Saying **"you can say no to me"** means little if the refusal is followed by punitive silence, the withdrawal of an essential service, or derision. The conditions of refusal are part of power, not an addition to its courtesy.

We must also look beyond the couple. If only Eva can carry the groceries, the relationship focuses on a necessary task. If other resources are available, disagreement between mother and daughter doesn't threaten the week to the same extent. Distributing help can change the quality of a relationship without requiring anyone to become morally perfect. Good organization can make it less necessary to obtain everything from the benevolence of a single person.

Autonomy needs conditions

In the self-determination theory presented by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in 2000, autonomy concerns the voluntary and recognized nature of one's actions; it is not equivalent to independence or individualism. The model also places importance on competence and relationships with others, and organizes a line of research on the social conditions that

support or hinder motivation. It is a psychological theory with specific hypotheses, tools, and results. It is not a proof of metaphysical free will, nor a complete definition of moral good.

This distinction allows us to describe a case that otherwise appears contradictory. Nora may choose an activity and need Eva to carry it out. This need does not automatically make the mother's choice less appropriate. Instead, it may raise a question about her daughter's availability. The latter retains the right to set limits; the former retains the right to express a preference. The solution must address both realities.

"I do it myself" can mean actual autonomy or the absence of someone to ask for help. **"I ask for help"** can mean giving up or making a decision. The external form of the action isn't enough to distinguish them. We need to know how much the person understands, what alternatives they have, whether they can change the relationship, and whether the help is being used to influence decisions that aren't related to the task for which it was requested.

On a philosophical level, the 2000 volume edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, Relational Autonomy, brings together perspectives that examine the social dimensions of autonomy, identity, and responsibility. It does not offer a single theory shared by all the authors. It helps clarify a problem: individual capacities are formed and exercised within relationships that can support or hinder them. This is a philosophical discussion, to be distinguished from experimental research on motivation.

Our topic enters this debate with a specific proposal. The autonomy we wish to protect must be able to utilize support without being absorbed by the one who offers it. It can include continued dependence. It does not require that everyone achieve the same tasks without assistance. A life in which others enable many actions can preserve real decisions, preferences, rejections, and forms of participation.

This clarification is necessary to avoid transforming the ability to choose into a new measure of human value. A person who today is unable to decide is no less valuable than a person who decides easily. Those who will always need support should not justify it by promising a future of self-sufficiency. The criterion concerns the direction of our action; it does not establish which lives deserve support.

Sometimes contributing to the good means preserving a small margin that a difficulty could erase. Sometimes it means making a preference more understandable to those who need to help. Sometimes it means taking on a task without demanding a decision-making performance in return. Sustained autonomy must include the opportunity to rest from the obligation to continually demonstrate our autonomy.

Driving without taking up all the task

Guidance can increase the possibility of action. To understand this, we must stop opposing complete direction and laissez-faire, as if they were the only alternatives. Between the two, there are many ways to distribute a task. We can take care of a difficult part so that the other person can perform a task within their capabilities. We can show a way, wait for an attempt, intervene where a difficulty prevents progress.

In 1976, David Wood, Jerome Bruner, and Gail Ross described a tutor's interactions with thirty three-, four-, and five-year-old children as they built a pyramid with wooden blocks. This work developed the concept of **scaffolding** , *a form of support that manages parts of the task initially beyond the child's capabilities, allowing them to tackle accessible parts*. The



authors presented systematic observations of a specific task, not a general demonstration of the superiority of any form of assistance. They identified functions such as reducing complexity, maintaining direction, and making important elements visible, while also warning of the risk of overdependence on the tutor.

We can use this description to ask a question about our own actions: what part of the action makes possible for the other? If Eva organizes transportation, she can enable Nora to reach a place of her choosing. If she also decides the location without involving her, the same practical work supports a different structure. Transportation remains useful. Utility does not exhaust the evaluation of the intervention.

Help doesn't always have to be reduced. This would be an unwarranted generalization, especially outside of a learning task. Material support may need to remain stable because a difficulty persists. Its quality, then, doesn't depend on how quickly it disappears, but on how much it leaves the person with relevant opportunities to direct, correct, and utilize what is made available. Continuity of help doesn't equate to the continuity of a command.

Another experiment helps distinguish guidance from pressure. In 1987, Wendy Grolnick and Richard Ryan studied ninety-one fifth-grade children in a learning task. They compared task-oriented instructions, given in a controlling or non-controlling form, to a spontaneous learning condition. Both guided conditions favored rote learning over the spontaneous one; the controlled condition, however, showed less interest and conceptual learning than the other two. These are the results of a limited experiment, not a verdict on every school rule. The relevant distinction is that providing direction and imposing pressure were not the same thing.

A teacher can therefore assign a task, specify the criteria, and maintain a request. The civic issue isn't to abolish all requests to avoid influencing them. It's to examine whether the individual can recognize what they need to do and use their own energy to address it. Pressure can elicit immediate performance; that performance alone doesn't demonstrate that a skill has been improved.

In the language of the book, help participates in the present from which the Self selects a response. This is an interpretative reading of the situations described, not the biological result of the studies just cited. The experimental data concerns learning and motivation measured with specific instruments. The ethical issue concerns what participation we intend to support. We must maintain a recognizable transition between the two.

Good does not coincide with our satisfaction

Eva feels relief when she manages to complete the notebook. Each filled box corresponds to a problem faced. That relief is valuable: she, too, is experiencing a difficult situation. But the calendar can be perfect for those who organize it, but poor for those who will have to live with it. A week without unexpected events may have left out an important visit, a favorite, a part of the day that a person recognizes.

The good of others doesn't coincide with the satisfaction we feel in doing something for them. A choice oriented toward good can give us pleasure; it can also make us lose a comfortable position. Someone who learns how to complete a task might stop asking our permission. Someone who receives better information might question our advice. Someone who finds other help might need us less often. These outcomes question our contribution without automatically rendering it useless.

The phrase **"I'm doing it for you"** describes an intention. It doesn't address the question of what the act allows, prevents, or demands in return. We may have acted with affection and misinterpreted a need. We may have offered a necessary resource and attached an extraneous condition to it. A shopping bag may arrive with the expectation of choosing who the person will associate with. The need for food does not make that expectation relevant.

We therefore propose to look at goodness as a concrete direction of action, not simply as the quality of a feeling. In this chapter, this direction concerns the ability to participate in one's own life: understanding a possibility, expressing a preference, attempting a gesture, reconsidering a decision, asking for help without surrendering any other choice. It is a normative criterion of the book, not a single variable measured in a laboratory under the name of goodness.

However, choice is not a sufficient good in itself. A person can become more capable of pursuing an unjust goal. A manager can learn to better manipulate employees. An attack can be prepared with great clarity. Increasing the effectiveness of those who act is not enough to make the action good: we must also consider the respect due to those who will suffer the consequences. The autonomy we defend does not authorize the erasure of others.

Even pain isn't irrelevant. Offering opportunities without addressing actual suffering can be an elegant way to let go. An exhausted person doesn't always need another decision to make. It might be helpful for someone to take on a previously agreed-upon task, bring something necessary, or remain available. Maintaining participation also means not wasting it on unnecessary requests.

The criterion then corrects itself the moment it is applied. We must ask what capacity we are supporting, at what cost, with respect to what needs, with what effects on others. Good does not thereby become unknowable. It becomes less easy to identify with our sense of having been good. The feedback from the person we help is relevant, even when it lacks the gratitude we would have desired.

More possibilities on paper

An office offers five routes to obtain a service. A person cannot use four of them because they require a vehicle they don't have, a schedule incompatible with work, or information difficult to obtain. The number of routes is not false. It is insufficient to describe the freedom available to that person. The civic duty consists in examining the relationship between an announced possibility and the conditions necessary to pursue it.

In his 1979 lecture "Equality of What?", published in 1980, Amartya Sen proposed considering people's actual capabilities to do certain basic things, in addition to the amount of goods they possess or their stated satisfaction. Different people can convert similar resources into different possibilities. This is a philosophical and economic argument about assessing equality, not a cerebral measure of autonomy. Sen himself did not present equality of basic capabilities as a sufficient guide to all moral good.

The question we derive for this chapter concerns what our help means for someone. Giving equal time to everyone can be fair in one respect and inadequate in another. Information available in only one form can reach some and remain unusable for others. A sum of money can solve a problem or address an obstacle that also requires a service. We shouldn't assume the outcome simply because we've distributed a resource.

This argument does not authorize those who help establish every preference. Knowing that material obstacles exist does not mean one already knows the life desirable for each individual. It does mean examining those obstacles is relevant. Actual possibilities can grow through changing conditions, while choosing between possibilities continues to require the individual's participation.

We must also be wary of another shortcut: counting the options and attributing the quality of the decision to that number alone. A choice between two important and understood alternatives can be more meaningful than a choice between twenty irrelevant ones. And a reduction in alternatives can be a temporary relief or a deprivation. The difference depends on what was excluded, who excluded it, and the possibility of reconsidering it.

Research on choice overload prevents us from replacing this caution with a new slogan. In 2010, Benjamin Scheibehenne, Rainer Greifeneder, and Peter Todd summarized fifty experiments, with a total of 5,036 participants, on the hypothesis that a greater number of options worsened outcomes such as motivation to choose or satisfaction. The average effect was close to zero, with considerable variability across studies. The result did not prove that quantity was always harmless; it showed that "more options are harmful" was not a general law supported by that summary.

Simplification therefore deserves a situated justification. Eve can gather information and help Nora compare it. She can tell her which alternatives are truly available. But she shouldn't remove a possibility just because her own preference would simplify the schedule. The fact that someone is tired can justify a more accessible way of deciding; it doesn't automatically give another person the right to decide everything.

Making decisions with a skill we don't possess

Many important decisions require knowledge that no one can fully acquire at the time of decision. We rely on a doctor, a technician, a teacher, someone who knows a problem better than we do. This distribution of expertise makes a complex life possible. The question is not how to abolish it, but how to prevent relevant expertise from becoming a boundless authority.

A Cochrane review published in 2024 by Dawn Stacey and colleagues, with literature searches updated to March 2022, compiled 209 randomized trials of healthcare decision support tools, involving 107,698 participants. These tools clarify decisions, present information about alternatives, and help clarify what matters to the individual. Compared to usual care, the review found high-certainty evidence of improvements in knowledge, accuracy of risk perception, and participation in the decision. Evidence of increased concordance between informed values and choices was moderately certain. The findings do not demonstrate universal clinical superiority of any one option, nor do they eliminate the need for professional judgment.

Here, a concrete possibility arises: the expert can use his or her knowledge to empower the person to participate, rather than using lack of expertise as a reason to exclude them. Not every technical aspect needs to be decided by the recipient. However, the relevant alternatives, uncertainties, and consequences that impact their lives must be recognized. A personal preference does not replace clinical data; clinical data alone does not contain every personal preference.

Trust can also include delegation: **"I prefer you to guide me on this."** It would be disrespectful to force everyone to direct a decision with the same level of initiative. But

delegation must have a purpose. Entrusting the technical discussion doesn't necessarily mean giving up knowing the reasons for the proposal or reporting a cost that is crucial for us. A subsequent question doesn't revoke all the trust placed in us.

This applies outside the office. A consultant may know which procedure to use but be unaware of the commitment a family may have. A manager may know a deadline but be unaware of the obstacles facing those who must meet it. Asking for relevant information doesn't diminish expertise; it allows it to be applied to a less imaginary situation. The recipient's experience isn't always a solution, but it can be part of the problem we need to understand.

Nora and Eva don't possess medical expertise simply because they experienced hospitalization. If they have any doubts about a specific limitation, they need to clarify it with someone who can assess it. Our scene doesn't reward the mother for requesting a visit against all indications. It highlights the risk of presenting as an indication what was merely an organizational preference. The distinction protects both their safety and the possibility of not being governed by invented information.

Helping someone choose doesn't mean making them navigate complexity alone. We can take on the task of making a problem more understandable, stating what we know and what others require, proposing a direction with its rationale. Expertise remains a power. One of its best forms is making a question more accessible to the recipient that, initially, wasn't yet able to formulate.

The need to be needed

There's a reason benevolent power can become difficult to see: many of its actions are useful. Eva takes care of tasks that someone else needs to do. If her mother protests a canceled visit, it may seem to her that the entire task has been rejected. The contested action disappears within the sum of successful actions. The recipient is then left faced with an unjust choice: accept everything or appear incapable of acknowledging something.

Acknowledging help shouldn't function as a limitless retroactive delegation. Nora might be grateful for the expense and unwilling to have a phone call made on her behalf. Eva might have sacrificed time and made a mistake. These descriptions are compatible. They become difficult to sustain when the helper's identity depends on feeling validated in every decision.

Difficulty deserves respect. Doing something for others can shape our days, offer us a place, allow us to express an affection we otherwise can't name. Losing a task can be like losing importance. It's no use attributing a hidden desire for domination to every care. However, we need to be able to examine that desire when the other's greater freedom feels like a personal deprivation.

A person begins to call someone else for help they previously asked us for. We feel left out. We can speak up, seeking a different way to be present. We can also discredit the new help, blame the use of an alternative, recall every sacrifice made. In this second case, we're not just defending the quality of care: we're defending the concentration of power.

Philip Pettit, in Republicanism, originally published in 1997, proposes freedom as the absence of domination, distinguishing it from the simple absence of interference. Being exposed to arbitrary power can limit freedom, even when that power is exercised leniently or not at all. This is a political philosophy argument about the conditions of relationships and the controls

that power requires. It does not offer a diagnosis of our affections; it allows us to ask whether someone's safety depends solely on the benevolent disposition of another.

Let's apply this question to our scene as the subject of the book. If Nora can see Teresa only when Eva deems it appropriate, her access remains conditioned by a personal decision that is difficult to challenge. If they can distinguish the actual limits and seek other ways to organize themselves, the relationship changes. Eva must not lose her voice. She must be able to offer it as a voice that gives reasons, not as the point from which all reason receives permission to exist.

Sometimes help succeeds precisely when it no longer feels indispensable. Sometimes it remains indispensable and can be shared, verified, and discussed. In both cases, the person offering it must be able to accept the possibility of not being the sole point of reference. It's not a renunciation of affection. It's a difficulty of affection: accepting that a person can use what we've given them to reach places where we won't be present.

The need to be needed doesn't invalidate all care. However, it can direct it toward outcomes that preserve our place rather than sustain the lives of others. The point at which we notice this isn't just when we intervene. It's also when the other person is succeeding, and we feel the need to explain why, without us, they won't succeed.

What if the other person chooses badly?

The best objection to the chapter's criterion doesn't come from those who want to be in charge. It comes from those who have had to assume real responsibility. An adult stops a child from running into the middle of the street. A person intervenes when someone, disoriented, is committing a dangerous act. A professional must deal with an urgent situation in which the time and conditions for ordinary deliberation are not available. Protection may require an act that interrupts a decision.

If every intervention were to immediately increase the recipient's margin, we would risk calling unjust the very thing that keeps them alive. Furthermore, the capacity to choose is unequal, intermittent, and sometimes profoundly limited. Offering alternatives is not enough for a person to understand them. And allowing them to express themselves is not enough to conclude that every expression describes a stable or informed preference. A theory of autonomy that ignored these situations would be a theory constructed for those who do not have to face them.

The objection becomes stronger when it concerns time. An unpleasant intervention today can make more possible tomorrow. A request for exercise can be experienced as an imposition and contribute to learning. A limit can protect a relationship from the violence of an impulse. What is good does not always coincide with the preference of the moment. Those who refuse to take any direction can leave the other exposed to consequences they could have helped them avoid.

But who decides that the choice is bad? Here, objection encounters the opposite risk without losing its force. A parent might mistake a plan different from their own for an irreparable error. A superior might call dissent immaturity. A person might declare their partner incapable of understanding every time they disagree. The word "protection" can support a necessary intervention or shield the need from scrutiny.

There's a further problem: our own criteria can be used paternalistically. **"I'm increasing your ability to choose"** can become the phrase we use to justify a long sequence of choices made on someone else's behalf. We declare that one day they'll be free, and in the meantime we decide what desires they should learn to have. A guardianship that always promises future autonomy can make the present of guardianship permanent.

We cannot answer by relying solely on honesty. Eva's honesty does not prove that Nora's Tuesday was organized optimally. An educator's honesty does not determine the relevance of every request. We must ask what reasons support the intervention, what actual problem it addresses, what alternatives were considered, and what would make it possible to revise it. Those who intervene must face a cognitive limitation, even when they have a necessary role.

The objection ultimately forces us to abandon a morality of perfect outcomes. A reasonable decision can go awry. An arbitrary decision can, by chance, produce a desirable outcome. It's not enough to look at what happened next to know whether power was exercised well. What matters are the available information, the proportion of the intervention, and the possibility of correcting it. The actual consequences also matter, because a good initial justification doesn't allow us to ignore them.

The criterion, therefore, cannot be "always let them choose." Nor can it be "choose when you're convinced you know better." It must describe how necessary protection can avoid turning into a general authorization to govern. This distinction does not eliminate conflict. It requires us to address it without attributing to our affection a competence it does not possess.

Protection must be able to change form

The book's answer begins with the perimeter. A protective intervention requires a reason relevant to the risk being faced. That reason does not automatically extend to all areas of a person's life. If someone needs help with a movement, it doesn't follow that others should choose their friends. If a student doesn't know a procedure, it doesn't follow that they can't say when an explanation is incomprehensible. The limitation present in one capacity doesn't completely revoke all others.

The second step concerns proportion. We may need to restrict an option to address a danger, but we must examine how much we restrict and what we leave available. Simply having a responsibility doesn't make every restriction necessary. Sometimes there are less invasive ways to achieve comparable protection. Sometimes there aren't, and intervention remains difficult. The task is to seek verifiable reasons, not to construct a formula that will always make us appear respectful.

The third concerns revision. A need can cease, diminish, or change focus. If power continues to function as before, we must be able to ask why. This does not imply a uniform deadline for everyone or the promise that all dependencies will end. Lasting protection can change form even when it remains necessary: it can recognize retained capacities, use different ways of communicating, involve other stakeholders, and better define what is decided for the individual.

Even when someone cannot participate in a given decision, we must avoid describing them as if their entire presence has disappeared. Preferences understandable in other contexts, forms of response, a history known to reliable people may remain. Not every signal can be interpreted with certainty. Precisely for this reason, the interpreter should not be the only person authorized to judge their own interpretation.

We are formulating general ethical criteria, not a clinical protocol or a legal rule that applies to every case. Specific situations require relevant expertise, procedures, and safeguards. The chapter's contribution is more limited: a justified limitation of choice does not confer ownership of the person. It must be explainable, maintained within its scope, and reexamined when conditions permit.

Care can also be valuable even when it doesn't enhance future capabilities. A presence that alleviates loneliness, a gesture that reduces suffering, the protection of dignity can be important without producing a measurable recovery of autonomy. It would be cruel to require every helper to demonstrate an increase in their ability to deserve being offered. The chapter's criterion concerns the risk of replacing the person; it doesn't establish that growth alone makes care effective.

We must therefore distinguish between conserving, recovering, and expanding. Conserving can mean not taking away a still viable preference. Recovering can require time and support. Expanding can mean making a previously excluded possibility accessible. In none of the three cases are we authorized to promise an outcome we don't know. Responsibility also concerns how we address a limitation that will remain.

The caregiver retains the right to a life of their own. Eva doesn't have to give up work, sleep, or relationships to confirm her mother's every wish. She can say what she can't. Nora can seek another caregiver; sometimes she won't find one. A shared boundary isn't necessarily an abuse. It becomes different when personal availability is transformed into a verdict on the legitimacy of another's wishes.

Protecting may require making a decision. Supporting autonomy may require remaining present. The useful distinction isn't simply between doing and not doing. It concerns the relationship the intervention builds with the other's reasons, with time, and with the other's ability to impact their own lives.

What we can call total

There remains one word from the original thesis that we must openly correct: total. If it indicates the amount of power we have over the other, it is wrong. We do not possess all the causes, we do not know all the possibilities, we do not control their future. Even where a dependence is very strong, we do not become the exclusive authors of a life. To mistake the intensity of the encounter for absolute control is to transform a perception into a metaphysics.

However, we can use the word "total" to describe, with caution, a subjective experience: in certain encounters, we feel present with all that we are, and what we do doesn't appear neutral. A response matters. A silence can be received. A decision about something small can reveal the shape of a relationship. The word then describes a way of experiencing the moment, not a measure of the effect we will have on the other.

It's not a universally proven experience. Not all encounters are experienced this way, and not all people describe attention with the same intensity. An encounter can be genuine even if it's sober, brief, and unemotional. Caring doesn't require an exceptional state of mind. Sometimes the most reliable form of presence is a routine availability, maintained without expecting the person to fully appreciate its importance.

This clarification avoids another injustice. If we demand that every good gesture arises from a complete presence, we exclude tiredness, correctable distraction, and repetitive work. Eve can

make a helpful phone call while also thinking about her office deadline. A concrete cure doesn't become false because the person providing it has other duties. Subjective totality is not the moral requirement for every appropriate act.

The value of the word, in its limited use, lies in the disappearance of an alibi: in that moment, I recognize that I am participating in a situation that concerns someone. It doesn't attribute to me the ability to foresee everything. It prevents me from speaking as if my gesture were unintended. I can acknowledge this participation and maintain the modesty necessary to ask what I don't know.

When the book calls epigenesis the process through which the Self interprets the present and selects a response based on its own history, it uses a theoretical proposal already distinct from molecular epigenetics. Here, the adjective "relational" indicates that my action enters into the conditions of another's interpretation, and that their response can enter into mine. We are not claiming that a calendar, a game, or a visit necessarily alter specific biological markers. We do not know a molecular mechanism that allows us to read the good in the direction of a sentence.

The ethical shift requires a further argument: the people who depend on our actions deserve not to be treated merely as instruments of our project. The ability to influence does not in itself create this norm. The norm concerns the respect we intend to accord and the reasons for limiting power. Science can inform us about the conditions and effects; it does not author the moral justification for us.

We can thus maintain intensity without maintaining its pretensions. Much of ourselves can be at stake in an encounter, while our power remains small. Sometimes this very combination allows us to act: knowing that a gesture matters, without having to believe that it already contains the outcome of a life.

«Let's play»

Nora doesn't suggest a game to prove she's still capable. She suggests it because she wants to play and because Eva is there. If her daughter turned every hand into a recovery test, the activity would take on a different function. Pleasure can become a performance required by those who provide care. To maintain it, the game must be able to begin without having to certify improvement and end without certifying the person's defeat.

" **Let's play** " is a plural word. In the sense we suggest for the book, it also indicates a way of approaching an activity knowing that what we do changes the other person's response. Nora explains a rule, Eva tries a move, her mother sees that the explanation isn't enough and adds an example. They don't need to know everything that will happen. They need to be able to use what happens as they go along.

The game contains constraints. Not every card can be played at every moment; not every move is correct. These constraints can make an action understandable, rather than erasing its freedom. A shared rule allows us to recognize a mistake without having to transform it into a personal quality. The ability to redo a move allows us to distinguish an attempt from the final version of the person who made it.

Not all games produce this situation. We can use a game to humiliate, to impose unwanted competition, to confirm a hierarchy. The word "game" doesn't guarantee good, and the fact that someone smiles doesn't mean they can refuse. In the encounter between Nora and Eva,

it's important that both have a way to interrupt and that the mistake doesn't have to be hidden to preserve the bond.

In their 2002 synthesis, Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described flow as an experience of intense absorption in an activity. They discussed conditions such as clear proximate goals, immediate feedback, and perceived challenges that can be addressed with one's own abilities. The research used, among other tools, interviews, questionnaires, and sampling of everyday experience. The concept concerns a way of experiencing an activity and models of its functioning; it is not a certificate of virtue, does not equate to a perfect understanding of others, and does not demonstrate free will.

It's important to distinguish this description from our use of play. An activity can be intensely absorbing and unfairly directed. A person can be focused, competent, and unwilling to consider the consequences for those around them. The pleasure of effectiveness doesn't necessarily include the justification of the goal. The quality of the experience and the moral quality of the act raise different questions.

We can, however, recognize a common difficulty: if we constantly observe every gesture from the outside, the activity risks becoming a control over how we appear. Eva may stop playing because she wants to check with every move whether she's helping in the right way. Nora may stop trying because every attempt is accompanied by an evaluation. A mindfulness that takes over the whole field can take away from what she wanted to care for.

The chapter's proposal is an awareness capable of re-entering the activity. We clarify the relevant constraints, remain attentive to signs of difficulty, and correct when necessary. We don't need to articulate a moral theory between cards. Some limitations may be sufficiently shared to not require constant monitoring; an unexpected response may prompt a reexamination. Presence concerns this willingness to change something, not the uninterrupted contemplation of one's own attention.

The plural doesn't equalize all roles. A teacher holds responsibilities that the student doesn't. Those who provide care have tasks that can't simply be distributed in shifts. "Let's play," used as an image of participation, must maintain these limits. It cannot be an invitation to those who are suffering to make our experience of their suffering easier.

Its strength lies elsewhere: we can do something together without having already written down all the answers. In that doing, each provides data to which the other can respond. The outcome is not entirely predictable and should therefore not be left to chance. We can maintain conditions good enough to allow for an attempt, a check, a correction. It is an image of joint work, not an experimental model of epigenesis.

What changes in the ordinary gesture

For a parent, power appears, for example, when it's time to leave the house. The child can't decide every time and destination on his or her own. The adult can keep a commitment and leave a pertinent choice: what to bring, which step to begin with, how to communicate a difficulty. But offering a choice that will be denied by the adult anyway doesn't broaden participation. The child encounters a question whose true meaning was already hidden.

Clearly stating what's decided and what's open can be more respectful than a false sense of freedom. **"We have to go out now; choose which book to bring"** allows us to recognize a boundary and a margin. **"Do you want to go out?",** when no negative answer would be

accepted, confuses the two. We're not prescribing a universal educational formula. We're making visible a difference in the use of a question: it can offer a possibility or mask an order.

For a doctor, power also concerns the way a professional proposal is presented. They can explain which aspects require technical evaluation and which consequences make the patient's preferences relevant. They can formulate a recommendation with their reasons. Engaging the patient doesn't mean leaving them without guidance, nor promising that all options are equivalent. It means preventing guidance from being mistaken for complete ownership of their life.

If the person wants help comparing alternatives, support can be more readily available. If they want to be assigned a task, it's important to understand which one. If they can't understand a step, the difficulty must be addressed with the relevant expertise and guarantees. Respect isn't just procedural: it must be able to accommodate the need to participate and the need to avoid bearing the entire burden of the decision alone.

For a teacher, a practical option is to leave the student with a step to follow after the correction. Rewriting an answer entirely may produce a better paper without improving comprehension. Pointing out the contradiction and offering ways to address it may take more time, but it leaves the learner with a recognizable task. Sometimes you need to show; sometimes you need to wait. The adult's role includes discerning this difference.

The student may struggle. We shouldn't interpret this persistence as automatic evidence of a lack of willpower or poorly provided support. We can reexamine the request, the timing, and the form of the explanation. The teacher's power is also exercised in the criteria with which they interpret a failure: as a clue to finding a different path or as definitive confirmation of what the student is.

For a legislator, the problem concerns the gap between a declared right and a sustained possibility. If an essential decision requires a service that people cannot access, the task does not end with formally recognizing the decision. Considerations are needed regarding the means, timeframes, costs, and forms of assistance. Here, the good depends not only on the attention of a single person. It also depends on how a community distributes conditions and responsibilities.

Resources are limited, and needs can conflict. Focusing on autonomy alone won't solve a public budget. However, it can change the question we use to evaluate it: what concrete opportunities are preserved, for whom, and which dependencies are concentrated? A guarantee of independent review can be as important as the initial quality of a decision. Those who depend on an office shouldn't also depend on whether the person they meet is willing to entertain a challenge.

For a person alone in a room, power can present itself as an offer made to a friend: **"I can come, or I can take care of this call."** The second option isn't less personal simply because it's practical. The friend can choose, refuse, or remain unsure. A limited offer can make what's available more readily apparent and leave less work for someone who lacks the energy to formulate a complete request.

The same person may find themselves on the receiving end. They may need to accept help without wanting the offerer to organize everything. Saying, "I need help with this; I'd like to decide on that myself" doesn't guarantee an easy relationship. However, it can provide a basis

for discussion. Need shouldn't be denied to defend one's voice, and one's voice shouldn't be surrendered to acknowledge the need.

In all these situations, responsibility involves an action that ordinary people can perform. It doesn't require becoming capable of predicting the entire future. It requires distinguishing availability from a right to command, competence from ownership, difficulty from the disappearance of a subject. Sometimes this distinction changes a sentence. Sometimes it requires a service, an organization, a limitation on our role. Good must also be able to meet this concrete reality.

The Tuesday box

After lunch, Nora picks up the phone. Eva shows her the message sent to Teresa: **"Better to postpone, she needs to rest."** Her mother reads it twice. She doesn't say it's a complete lie. She needs to rest. But she asks why that need had ruled out any visits without them discussing it. The sentence had given the appearance of finality to a decision still to be discussed.

Eva says she didn't want to add to her burden. Then she looks at her notebook and acknowledges something else: it seemed easier to have a day without any changes. This isn't a confession that erases everything she's done. It's information that allows us to distinguish the daughter's relief from the mother's need. There may be reasons to protect both. They don't all need to be attributed to one person.

The phone call doesn't last long. Teresa has already made another commitment on Tuesday; she can stop by on Wednesday. Nora suggests a quick visit and says that if she's too tired that day, she'll call. Her friend says that's fine. A preference has become part of an agreement; it hasn't become an order to the rest of the world. Teresa, too, has her own time.

Eva writes "Teresa, Wednesday" in her notebook. She adds a question mark, then crosses it out when Nora reminds her that the date has been agreed upon. The visit can still be changed, but that doesn't mean it always has to look suspicious. Her daughter smiles at her habit of writing down anything that might get complicated. Her mother asks her for a pen and adds the time.

We don't know what will happen on Wednesday. Nora might be happy with the visit, she might tire sooner than expected, she might ask for a postponement. An unpleasant outcome wouldn't prove by itself that she should have been excluded from the decision. A pleasant outcome wouldn't prove that Eva's fears were unnecessary. Both will have to make use of what happens without immediately turning it into a verdict on who should have been in charge.

When Eva gathers her things to leave, Nora asks her to leave the notebook on the table. She doesn't want to manage everything in it alone. She wants to be able to see it, remember what was agreed upon, ask questions before a box is filled in. Eva thinks it would be more convenient to take it with her. Then she closes it and leaves it next to the deck of cards.

The game didn't erase the dependency. The conversation didn't resolve the distribution of work. The mother will still need help, and the daughter will still need her time to be taken seriously. However, they separated a task from the claim of ownership of the entire week. A part of their life can be organized together without one becoming simply the other's project.

Eve's power remains real. She can change certain conditions, bring in a resource, facilitate or complicate a transition. Nora retains the ability to influence that power. The direction of good,

in the limited sense suggested by the chapter, concerns this participation and what sustains it. It does not require either subject to disappear for the other to be able to act.

With adults, we can often ask what they want and receive an answer that already contains a history of words, choices, and objections. With children, the problem is different. The adult also contributes to the conditions in which the child is learning to recognize a possibility, to express a desire, and to understand what to do with a refusal. Power doesn't simply come when a choice is already formed: it participates in its formation.

How can we educate a Self that is already present, when our guidance also helps shape the capacity with which, one day, it will be able to say no to us?

Chapter Sources

The research cited relates to the specific findings cited in the text, within the limits of their designs, samples, and contexts. The scenes of Nora, Eva, and Teresa are imagined. The criterion of goodness, the relational reading of the Self, and responsibility proportionate to power are interpretative and normative arguments. Play is also an image of participation; psychological flow is not a measure of moral goodness. The chapter does not attribute specific molecular effects to individual interactions and does not propose clinical prescriptions or universal legal rules.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68–78. Source

Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (eds.) (2000). Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self. Oxford University Press. Source

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17(2), 89–100. Source

Grolnick, W. S., & Ryan, R. M. (1987). Autonomy in children's learning: An experimental and individual difference investigation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52(5), 890–898. Source

Sen, A. (1980). Equality of What? In S. M. McMurrin (ed.), The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, vol. 1, pp. 197–220. Cambridge University Press. Lecture delivered at Stanford on May 22, 1979. Source

Scheibehenne, B., Greifeneder, R., & Todd, P. M. (2010). Can there ever be too many options? A meta-analytic review of choice overload. Journal of Consumer Research, 37(3), 409–425. Source

Stacey, D., Lewis, K.B., Smith, M., and colleagues (2024). Decision aids for people facing health treatment or screening decisions. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 1, CD001431. Source

Pettit, P. (1997). Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government. Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press edition, 1999. Source

Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). The concept of flow. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), Handbook of Positive Psychology, pp. 89–105. Oxford University Press. Source



Movement IV — Directing the good

10. The children

Elena holds the pitcher with both hands. She's eight years old and for a few weeks she's been wanting to pour water for her brother, too. Tommaso, three, holds out his glass when she's not ready yet and protests if he's served last. Their father, Andrea, is draining the pasta. Their mother is working that evening; on the table is a sheet of paper with the next day's schedule, yet to be tidied up. The kitchen isn't a scene of abandonment. Someone has done the shopping, remembered a favorite, prepared a dinner everyone is looking forward to.

“Wait until I’m done ,” Elena says to her brother.

Tommaso pushes the glass toward the carafe. She moves it, he tries to catch it. The water hits the table, runs down the rim, and soaks the paper. Andrea hears the glass fall, turns around, and sees the wet floor. He hasn't seen the boy's two hands, nor his sister's first request. He sees the result just as he has yet to put the pot away.

"Elena, you're always the same. You can't be trusted."

The little girl puts down the jug. **"But he..."**

“Don’t start blaming others.”

The father sets down the pot, grabs a rag, and tells them both to sit down. Elena obeys. Tommaso asks if the pasta is ready. The difference in their answers doesn't mean one is more sensitive than the other: neither of them received the same sentence. The little girl looks at the paper. She knows her father needed it. She also knows she tried to stop her brother. She can't reconcile the two because, as soon as she starts explaining, the explanation becomes another form of guilt.

During dinner, Andrea notices that she no longer asks for water. He refills her glass, thinking that at least that has been solved. Elena thanks him. She eats without speaking. Her father might interpret that silence as the end of the problem: the table is dry, dinner has begun, no one is shouting. He might also interpret it as a demonstration of the effectiveness of the reprimand. He said something harsh, she understands, she'll be more careful next time.

Then she sees the carafe next to her plate. Elena usually keeps it next to hers. **"Don't you want it?"**

"No".

"Why?"

The little girl waves her fork. **"If you can't trust it."**

Andrea remembers the exact words. They seemed like hasty words; she used them to decide where to put a carafe. He doesn't know what will remain of that evening. He can't see a future insecurity taking shape, nor attribute it to a single episode. He can see a renunciation that has just occurred and the connection Elena establishes with what he said.

He feels like replying that he didn't mean that. It would be true in terms of his intention, but it would leave her with the task of reconstructing a sentence different from the one she heard. He also feels like telling her how tired he is. Tiredness exists; it wasn't invented as a defense.

Yet, if he focuses on it now, the child might find herself reassuring him before she's had a chance to explain what happened.

"I said you couldn't be trusted. It wasn't fair. I'd seen the water, but I hadn't seen everything."

Elena looks up. Andrea waits. She talks about the moved glass, about Tommaso's hand, about the attempted pour. She doesn't give a perfect account; her brother interrupts her and recalls things differently. Her father doesn't turn the dinner into a trial. He can admit he's made an unfair judgment even without resolving every detail of the fall.

"Tomorrow we'll find a way to pour without throwing the glass," he says. "I'll rewrite the paper tonight."

Elena doesn't run to him. She doesn't say everything's fine. She finishes her pasta and asks if she can go get a pencil. Her father says yes. Later, as he's putting away the plates, he sees her drawing on the back of a dry sheet of paper. The jug is still next to her place.

When he reminds her to brush her teeth, she asks, **“Can I pour in tomorrow?”**

Andrea says they can try again, keeping the glass on the table and waiting for Tommaso to let go. He hasn't abolished a rule. He hasn't guaranteed that Elena will forget the rebuke. He has once again rendered moot a conclusion that, just minutes earlier, seemed to have come from his mouth with the authority of fact.

The person we are already meeting

The scene is imagined. It doesn't illustrate a clinical outcome, nor does it claim to condense a childhood into a single evening. It allows us to observe a commonplace event: an adult interprets a gesture, formulates a judgment, and a child uses that judgment to guide their next action. Before even asking ourselves how long the effect lasts, we can ask ourselves what we have made available to the other person to respond.

A child doesn't begin to be someone when he can clearly explain why he doesn't want something. A newborn directs his gaze, becomes tired, seeks or interrupts an exchange. A toddler approaches an object, rejects contact, insists on a recognized sequence. These activities are not equivalent to an adult's deliberation. However, they demonstrate that care encounters an active organism, with needs and ways of responding that are not entirely created by the adult's command.

We call this living entity the Self, in the sense constructed by the book: the body and its history as they participate in the present experience. Applying the term to the child is an interpretative proposal, not a diagnostic classification. It doesn't mean attributing to the newborn a narrated biography, to the child complete political competence, or to the adolescent complete ability to assess risk. It means that the development of skills occurs already in someone's life, not before its emergence.

The distinction changes the way we view incompleteness. We can recognize a capacity yet to be formed without considering the dignity of the person who will shape it as temporary. The child doesn't have to earn respect by finally becoming reasonable. He needs guidance precisely because many possibilities are not yet within his reach. Respect dictates how to exercise that guidance; it doesn't ask us to wait until it's no longer needed.

Raising involves choosing for someone else. We set a time, interrupt a dangerous activity, organize treatments and meetings. Sometimes there's no time for discussion, and at other times we still lack the capacity to understand it. The problem isn't hiding this asymmetry under kind words. It's understanding what justifies it, what part of the experience it leaves the child with, and how it changes as their abilities grow.

An adult can ask, "What kind of person do I want to make of this?" and have no violent intentions. They may want their child to be generous, courageous, and capable of living. But within the question lies the possibility that any difference will be recorded as a deviation from the expected outcome. The quiet child will have to become expansive, the one who loves to observe will have to be enterprising, the one who doesn't pursue a passion will inherit the disappointment of those who prepared it for him.

We can rephrase the question: what experiences, protections, and opportunities for participation should we make available to this person? Reframing doesn't eliminate our judgment about values. It requires us to exercise it by meeting the child who is there, even when it makes the project we had envisioned more difficult.

Conditions are not a guarantee

The parent does not determine the child's well-being: they help create the conditions in which the child can recognize it, discuss it, and direct their life. This responsibility includes protection and the necessary decisions during development, but it does not give the parent control over all conditions, nor does it give the child unlimited authority over matters affecting others.

These are the two sentences of the thesis. The second prevents the first from becoming a formula for abandoning children to their own choices or for making parents responsible for any outcome. This is not a conclusion drawn from an experiment. It is the ethical criterion we propose to test in the face of research findings and the challenges of everyday life.

Conditions include things a child can name and things they can't yet see. Having food, rest, and care; being able to call someone; knowing a rule stable enough to navigate; finding an adult who doesn't consider every question a challenge. They also include explicit teaching: explaining a consequence, demonstrating a procedure, introducing knowledge the child wouldn't have discovered on his own.

None of these conditions alone creates a good person. A child can receive serious support and yet commit a wrong. They may have ample opportunities and use them in ways that worry us. They may encounter obstacles that the family cannot avoid. If we evaluated every treatment solely by its final outcome, a biography would become a retroactive report card for the adults who accompanied it. We would know the outcome and, therefore, believe we knew all the causes.

Parenting responsibility must be examined more precisely. What did we know? What could we do? Did we ignore a difficulty because it disturbed our image of our child? Did we maintain a prohibition when his reasoning had failed? Did we offer help that could have been used, or did we demand a benefit to demonstrate that the help had been effective?

Furthermore, the ability to choose doesn't exhaust the value of childhood. A child has the right to experience days that aren't merely preparation for a future adult. The pleasure of a game, the relief of being comforted, a walk without a learning objective, are valuable while they

happen. If every action must enhance a skill, we risk replacing the old child to be disciplined with a child to be constantly developed.

We can therefore discuss conditions without reducing care to a factory of autonomy. At times, support means allowing someone to rest, accompanying a loss, offering a closeness that doesn't require any progress. Adults will continue to need it, too. Practical independence grows gradually and in different ways; the need for recognition isn't a flaw to be overcome.

This point also concerns legacy. We pass on a language, stories, beliefs, and affections. It would be impossible to educate without passing anything on. However, we can distinguish the handing down of a world from the expectation that our children inhabit it exactly as we do. A tradition remains alive even when it becomes the object of a demand we hadn't foreseen. Adults must be able to offer reasons without considering dissent a failure to reciprocate love.

Attachment does not read destiny

Attachment refers to the bond through which a child seeks protection and availability from a caregiver, especially when experiencing difficulty. It is not the same as how much a parent loves their child, nor is it the child's constant calm. In the work of Mary Ainsworth, Mary Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally Wall, collected in Patterns of Attachment in 1978, home observations and a procedure called Strange Situation allowed them to study different types of relationships with the caregiver. The procedure involves brief separations and reunions in an unfamiliar context; the assessment focuses on behavior across the episodes, not a single cry. Security describes a modality in which the child can turn to the caregiver and return to exploration. Classifications require method and training: they are not labels assigned by watching a scene at the school gate.

It's important not to transform an observed relationship into a personal essence. Saying, **"This child is insecure,"** in everyday language, can suggest a property that belongs to him everywhere and forever. The scientific concept is more limited. It concerns the organization of the relationship with a figure, under specific observation conditions. It doesn't allow us to read the complete character or predict adult life on our own. Attachment classifications, including those of insecurity and disorganization, should not be used as synonyms for a diagnosis of attachment disorder.

In 2010, Pasco Fearon and colleagues synthesized 69 samples, for a total of 5,947 children, studying the relationship between attachment insecurity and externalizing problems, such as aggression and oppositional behavior. The average association was significant, with an effect size of 0.31 according to the authors' metric. The distributions of the groups overlap: the results do not allow us to know which individual child will develop those problems. Furthermore, the synthesis of associations does not isolate a single cause: family difficulties, individual characteristics, and subsequent conditions may contribute to the trajectory.

The data deserves attention precisely without becoming a judgment. A relationship can enter into the probabilities of development. We can't eliminate it from the explanation because it doesn't determine every outcome. Nor can we make it support what it doesn't measure: a personal percentage of happiness, a moral prediction, the verdict on a parent.

Consider a child who struggles with separation in the morning. The parent might use a popular category to accuse themselves, or the other parent. The teacher might see the protest as evidence of excessive dependence. But a separation difficulty can have different meanings;

examining it requires context, duration, and concrete conditions. The initial task is to understand the difficulty and what can support its transition, not to assign a future biography.

Scientific categories become harmful when they replace the observation they were meant to sharpen. We can begin to see only what confirms the label. The little girl seeks closeness: confirmation. She tries to do it alone: a defensive attempt, more confirmation. Every answer becomes proof, and no answer can reopen the question.

This is why the concept's limits have a civic value. A teacher and a parent don't need to diagnose an attachment to be available to a specific request. A professional can use appropriate tools without handing over a definitive identity to the family. Research helps identify risks and intervention options; it shouldn't introduce a conclusion in the present from which the child can no longer escape.

What an intervention can change

If attachment isn't destiny, the question remains whether the phrase merely describes the uncertainty of prediction or also the possibility of change. The two are different. Not knowing how a story will end doesn't prove that any intervention can change it. To speak of effectiveness, we need comparisons, measurements, and defined timelines.

In 2012, Kristin Bernard, Mary Dozier, and colleagues evaluated a randomly assigned program for families enrolled in child protective services for neglect. The program, Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up, involved ten parent-child sessions, focusing on sensitive care, responsiveness to cues, and reducing frightening behaviors. In an evaluation of 120 children, aged approximately one year to less than three years, the program group showed a higher rate of secure attachment (52% versus 33%) and a lower rate of disorganized attachment (32% versus 57%) compared to the comparison group, which received another intervention. The percentages relate to that outcome and that sample: they do not measure overall recovery, do not guarantee identical benefits in every family, and do not establish that ten sessions resolve every difficulty.

Here, support isn't based solely on the desire to improve. There's a structure in place, and someone guides an adult through observing and modifying specific practices. The parent isn't simply asked to know they should respond differently. They're offered opportunities to learn how to do so, in a situation where responding may be difficult.

This difference is important for our thesis. Talking about conditions also includes what makes treatment feasible. If we ask an adult not to repeat an answer they learned during childhood, we must recognize that the task may require help. Knowing a correct phrase doesn't guarantee that that phrase will be accessible when the person is exhausted, frightened, or overwhelmed by incompatible tasks.

The experimental outcome doesn't support a morality that simply participating in a program is enough to be a good parent. It allows us to say something more limited and more useful: some treatment modalities and some relational outcomes can be influenced by structured interventions. Risk doesn't equate to condemnation, and support isn't a mere embellishment added after judging the family.

From this observation, it does not follow that staying within the family is the right choice. Where the child's safety is compromised, protecting them may require changes the adult does not want. Nor does it mean that a program should be imposed indiscriminately. Its relevance,

accessibility, outcomes, and costs must be assessed. Maintaining relationships cannot become a reason to leave a person in danger.

On an ethical level, the result helps us correct two opposing habits: thinking that everything has already happened in the early years, or thinking that change must come only from within those experiencing difficulties. A trajectory can find new conditions; often these conditions must be organized by multiple people. It's not necessary to attribute infinite power to the relationship to stop considering a limited intervention useless.

A gesture that finds a response

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University uses the term serve-and-return to refer to responsive exchanges between a young child and an adult caregiver. The child makes a sound, directs a gesture, or shows interest; the adult responds in response to that signal. It's a popular name for a family of processes, not the title of a single experiment. The center also emphasizes that economic hardship, isolation, and health issues can make responsive care less feasible. The concept involves repeated and available exchanges over time, not the obligation to respond to every signal without interruption.

The image of serving and returning comes from play. Declaring this image also allows us to correct it. A child doesn't serve a ball according to shared rules, and the adult doesn't have to return it with sporting precision. A signal can be ambiguous. An appropriate response might be to wait, decrease stimulation, or notice that the child is looking for a break.

An experimental finding exemplifies the importance of the relationship between signal and response. In 2003, Michael Goldstein, Andrew King, and Meredith West modified mothers' reactions to their eight-month-old infants' vocalizations. Contingent social responses, temporally linked to the infant's sounds, favored vocalizations with more mature characteristics than non-contingent responses. They measured the structure of the babbling, not the moral quality of the bond or future intelligence. The experiment shows that, in that task, it matters how the response is linked to the infant's activity; it does not demonstrate that a greater amount of indiscriminate stimulation produces a better infant.

The interpretative consequence is that the educational environment isn't just what the adult introduces. It includes what the child brings out and how that initiative is embraced. If we look at a book together, we can follow a figure the child points to, rather than correcting him for not following the order of the pages. We can also suggest another figure. Reciprocity doesn't require the adult to forgo all initiative.

A parent hears their child misname an animal and understands what they're trying to say. They can respond to the content, simultaneously offering the word. Or they can make the correction the price of access to the exchange: first pronounce it correctly, then I'll listen to you. Both situations can involve the same correct term. They contain different possibilities for continuing the conversation.

This doesn't prohibit explicit teaching. When a child wants to learn, clear correction can be helpful. It simply requires that we acknowledge the task we're performing. Conversation, practice, comfort, and testing a skill aren't interchangeable activities. We can err not because we've mispronounced a word, but because we've transformed a request for a meeting into an unannounced test.

Furthermore, this exchange isn't exclusively for parents. A grandparent, a caregiver, or a trusted adult can participate. The caregiver may have a body, voice, and history different from our own. This doesn't diminish its value. Raising children sometimes means allowing the child to receive from others something we can't offer at that moment.

The relationship is not a continuous synchronization

The child turns around just as we try to look at him. We interpret what was tiredness as a request to play. He insists when we have to stop. Community life contains these gaps. If educational presence required a constant correspondence between signals and responses, the family would be doomed before it even began.

In 1989, Edward Tronick and Jeffrey Cohn analyzed videotaped interactions between 54 mother-infant pairs, spread across three, six, and nine months. Coordination, measured by behavioral correspondence and reciprocal changes, accounted for a limited portion of the interaction. The authors suggested describing exchanges through shifts between coordinated and uncoordinated states, rather than simply the degree of coordination. This was not an experiment on the effectiveness of apologies, and it did not establish an optimal rate of errors. It made clear that interaction cannot be understood by imagining it as an uninterrupted agreement.

Another procedure, introduced by Tronick and colleagues in 1978, studies what happens when the adult, after an exchange, briefly maintains an expressionless face and does not respond. In the still-face paradigm, infants' reactions to the interruption of reciprocity were observed, ranging from attempts to reestablish it to increased distress. A controlled disruption in the laboratory is not equivalent to domestic life: it does not warrant diagnosing damage because a parent was distracted or had to attend to other tasks. Nor is it a procedure to be reproduced at home to assess one's child.

The two references help us distinguish ordinary mismatch from persistent closure of the exchange. The distinction is not limited to a threshold of seconds. What matters is the context, the possibility of finding a response, the duration, and the repetition of what happens. The child can protest against a pause without the pause being an injustice. He or she can also stop protesting without the relationship having become available.

Our interpretation is that a relationship must be able to bridge gaps. We shouldn't always know immediately what the other person is asking; we must retain the ability to notice and modify our response. This openness doesn't require a fixed gaze. Sometimes it's recognizable precisely when the adult reflects on a moment they misunderstood.

In the opening scene, Andrea didn't see Elena's request. The problem isn't solved by pretending that an attentive father should have observed every gesture simultaneously. It worsens when the partial vision is declared complete and the child can't add anything. Repair begins with the adult's loss of certainty: what I had seen wasn't everything that was happening.

Research on early interactions doesn't directly demonstrate this moral proposition for an eight-year-old girl. However, we can formulate the proposition without masking it as an experimental result. A responsible adult doesn't need to be infallible; they need not make their fallibility impossible to name. The child can thus discern the difference between being dependent on someone and having to maintain that someone is always right.

Words also organize the moment

When we tell a child , **"Let's put away now, then we'll go out,"** we convey content and organize a sequence. We offer them a way to distinguish what's happening from what's coming next. When we say, **"You can be angry, but you can't hit,"** we try to make a recognizable difference between a state and an action. Language can enter into regulation through these distinctions, not just through the amount of vocabulary learned.

A 2003 experiment by Natasha Kirkham, Loren Cruess, and Adele Diamond demonstrates a limited function of words. Three- and four-year-old children were asked to sort cards according to one dimension, such as color or shape, and then move on to the other. In the standard condition, the youngest children tended to continue according to the first rule. When they had to name the relevant dimension on each trial, many three-year-olds were able to change their approach. The authors interpreted the results in terms of reorienting attention. They were not measuring the regulation of family conflict: the data relate to a specific task and does not support the idea that naming an emotion is sufficient to manage it.

This distinction prevents us from frequently misusing psychological explanations. A child can say **"I'm angry"** and still be angry. The sentence hasn't failed because of this. It may have provided a description; it may not be enough to stop the action. The state of the body, the context, and the concrete help remain present. We can't give the child a word and then scold him for not having achieved the desired effect.

Our language can also become overloaded. Once a child has lost the ability to follow us, a long explanation risks becoming just another request. The adult may think they're being respectful by not raising their voice, while still demanding understanding, a response, and agreement. Tone matters, but it doesn't automatically make the amount of work we're asking for sustainable.

There's also a difference between describing and attributing an identity. **"The water fell"** allows us to determine what happened. **"You're always the same"** assigns the event to a nature. **"You can't be trusted"** broadens the judgment from a gesture to a relationship. A child might use that phrase to give up an activity, like Elena; another child might question it or ignore it. We don't know the universal outcome. We can recognize the extent of the judgment we've made.

Educational words also require temporal precision. **"You can't do it yet"** can open up a possibility, but it can become an unfounded promise if we know that skill might remain elusive. **"Let's find a way to do it"** leaves more room for help, a tool, a different way of participating. Dignity shouldn't depend on the assurance that every limitation will end.

There's no need to speak to a child with a vocabulary that's been carefully controlled to the point of unnaturalness. It's important to recognize when a description has become a condemnation and when a sentence is asking more than the child can handle. Language also regulates because it distributes tasks: who should explain, who should listen, who should correct themselves, who should wait. An adult can adjust this distribution before asking the child to change himself.

Silence has more than one meaning

Elena remains silent during dinner. Her father has several interpretations at his disposal: she understands, she's offended, she wants to punish him, she's calming down. None of them becomes true simply because they're useful to him. A child might remain silent because she

doesn't yet know how to organize what she wants to say, because she fears an interruption, because she's tired, or because she wants to be silent. The gesture is visible; its meaning isn't entirely available to the adult's gaze.

We can offer a chance to speak without demanding it be used immediately. "If you want to tell me how it went, I'll listen" differs from "now you tell me what's wrong." In the first sentence, the adult makes himself available; in the second, availability risks turning into a performance required of the child. Even a loving question can become invasive if any lack of response is interpreted as a rejection of the relationship.

The adult's silence is equally ambiguous. It may be a waiting game, a way of not completing the child's sentence. It may be a necessary pause to avoid a negative reaction. It may be the suspension of affection, forcing the child to ask for forgiveness. Two people remain silent; one remains available, the other communicates that the relationship will resume only when the other has adjusted.

We can't distinguish all these cases by looking at duration alone. We can look at their function in the relationship. Does the adult announce that they need to stop and actually return? Does the child continue to receive the necessary care? Does he or she know that the rule can be discussed later, or does he or she have to guess when the parent will stop withdrawing? Does the pause protect the exchange or does it become a tool for the one with more power to control access?

A pause doesn't always require an elaborate explanation. In a conflict, a short sentence, appropriate to the person's age, can suffice: "I'm too angry to talk about it properly. I'll stop and then come back." But the return must find a concrete form. If "then" never comes, we've simply given a better name to unavailability. If we return to start the rebuke again without listening, the pause has altered the volume, not the relationship.

Children also need moments where they aren't interpreted. They can play without telling us the meaning of every choice, look at a landscape without naming the emotion, keep something to themselves that doesn't endanger anyone. Attentive care can go too far when it transforms into constant surveillance of their inner selves. Not every distance is a breach of connection, and not every thought needs to become educational material.

This is an ethical proposal on the right to personal space, not a product of the immobile face paradigm. Space changes with age and the actual risks. It doesn't prohibit parents from intervening when there are concrete reasons for concern. It requires them to distinguish those reasons from the desire to always be the privileged recipient of their child's every experience.

Knowledge does not always equate to success

"You know very well ." This phrase accompanies many educational scenes: a thrown toy, a forgotten rule, an aggressive response. Sometimes it actually describes a child's choice. Sometimes it mistakes the possession of knowledge for the availability, at that moment, of the ability to use it. A child may repeat a rule and fail to apply it with the same ease in every situation.

The card task mentioned above highlights a limited version of this distance. We shouldn't automatically extend it to moral life. We can use it to avoid too hasty an inference: if a person knows how to answer a question, it doesn't follow that they already know how to consistently

direct the corresponding behavior. Educational evaluation must also consider what the task requires at the moment it is performed.

Consider Thomas who wants the same object as his sister. The **"no pulling" rule** may be familiar to him. In his urgency to reach the glass, it wasn't enough. The father must hold back, not wait for the child to fully formulate a decision. Later, he can show how to ask, how to wait, how to receive another glass. The prohibition and the assistance in carrying it out may be part of the same intervention.

We don't have to choose between attributing every action to ill will and declaring the child incapable of any responsibility. We can assign proportionate responsibility: acknowledging the impact of their actions, participating in an accessible solution, learning an alternative. The child doesn't need to feel the amount of shame the adult deems appropriate for the correction to be serious.

The learning curve introduces a real challenge. Something may need to be repeated many times. The adult has work to do, other children to care for, and his own needs. He doesn't always have the patience that the exercise requires. We can recognize these limitations without using the effort as proof that the child should already be capable. We can organize the situation so that it requires less control: a lighter carafe, a steady glass, a divided task.

Moving an object isn't always an educational achievement. It can reduce the difficulty enough to allow participation. The key isn't to eliminate every obstacle, but to understand what obstacle we're introducing and why. If failure recurs, we can ask ourselves whether the task was designed to be learned or simply to separate those who succeed from those who fail.

For an older child, the problem is different. The capacity for understanding grows, but it doesn't become uniform across all areas. We can demand more complex commitments and continue to distinguish between an explanation of what happened and absolution. Understanding how a behavior occurred doesn't oblige us to accept it. It allows us to choose a response that has a reason other than mere exasperation.

Punishment and what we call discipline

The term punishment encompasses very different practices. A ban that prevents harming another, a limited consequence for a behavior, a slap, a public insult, are not variations of the same thing. If we treat them as a single object, we can use the necessity of a rule to justify violence, or use the effects of violence to discredit any rule.

In 2016, Elizabeth Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor published a meta-analysis specifically on spanking, a form of physical punishment generally understood as open-handed hitting. The synthesis included 111 effect sizes, referring to a total of 160,927 children. Thirteen of the seventeen average effects examined were significant and associated the practice with a greater risk of adverse outcomes. The research was primarily observational: associations do not make all families identical, do not establish the certain harm of each incident, and do not eliminate all problems of confounding or mutual influence. The result does not indiscriminately apply to all educational consequences. It offers reasons not to present physical punishment as a generally harmless or necessary means.

From a normative perspective, we can add a reason that doesn't depend on the statistical outcome of a single attack. A child's body doesn't become susceptible to violence because the adult has the duty to protect it. This is an ethical judgment we support; the scientific evidence

contributes to the discussion of risks, without replacing the discussion of dignity and the use of force.

Physical intervention to remove a child from danger requires a further distinction. Grabbing a child as he runs toward the street may be necessary. The force used must respond to the danger and cease when no longer necessary. Hitting a child afterwards, to instill fear, introduces another action with a different purpose. We cannot legitimize the second just because the first was justified.

Some will argue that he was beaten and raised well. His life shouldn't be dismissed to justify a claim. A person can retain love for the person who raised him, acknowledge acquired abilities, and not consider every experience he receives devastating. This testimony, however, doesn't prove that violence was necessary for those abilities. To establish this, we would also need to know what would have happened with other forms of education.

It's possible to acknowledge the good received without invalidating every means used to offer it. We don't ask an adult to disown their family to stop repeating a gesture. We ask them to consider whether that gesture is defensible now, faced with the actual child and the available alternatives. Faithfulness to history doesn't oblige us to be faithful to every one of its practices.

Finally, an educational consequence isn't just because it doesn't include a blow. It can be disproportionate, arbitrary, humiliating, or impossible to understand. It can deprive the child of necessary support precisely when it is needed. Research on physical punishment doesn't resolve all these cases. Further moral examination is needed: what are we trying to teach, what effect does the measure have on other areas of life, how can it be understood and reexamined?

Shame and the Foresight of Threat

Correction can indicate a behavior: you've hurt someone, you've taken what wasn't yours, you've violated an agreement. Humiliation can extend that behavior to the point of making it the value of the person, often in front of an audience. **"What you did needs to be corrected"** and **"Look who we have here"** unequally distribute the possibility of re-entering the relationship.

Not every experience of shame is deliberately provoked, and not every discomfort following a reprimand is traumatic. A child may suffer because he discovers he has hurt another. We must not prevent him from encountering this truth. We can accompany it without adding the message that his place among us depends on the display of his inferiority.

In 2014, Ming-Te Wang and Sarah Kenny studied 976 two-parent families, tracking the relationship between harsh verbal discipline and difficulties in adolescents between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. Harsh discipline at age thirteen predicted subsequent increases in conduct problems and depressive symptoms; opposite relationships were also present for conduct problems. Parental warmth did not moderate these associations in the model studied. The longitudinal design helps examine temporal order, but it is not equivalent to random assignment and does not demonstrate that every harsh sentence produces a disorder. It studies harsh verbal discipline patterns and does not prohibit clear and respectful reprimands.

This data doesn't justify the **"love doesn't matter" formula.** It warns us against overly simple compensation: being affectionate at certain times doesn't automatically make what happens at other times irrelevant. A teenager may know their parent loves them and still find

it difficult to tell them about a mistake. Emotional bonding and the willingness to talk about certain things aren't the same experience.

When we say that a body learns to predict the world as a threat, we're interpreting learning and regulatory processes, not describing a sentence literally written in neurons. The prediction doesn't have to become conscious to influence a response. But we can't identify it in an individual child from a facial expression, nor attribute it with certainty to a parent or an event.

A limited physiological reference comes from the 2015 work by Bernard, Camelia Hostinar, and Dozier. Approximately three years after the intervention, 115 children previously assigned to the ABC program or the comparison program were assessed through saliva samples collected upon awakening and in the evening over three days. The ABC group showed a more typical diurnal cortisol pattern, with higher morning levels and a more pronounced decline; evening levels did not differ significantly. The subjective sense of security was not measured, nor was there a reduction in adversity. Cortisol is not a simple indicator where less is always better. The result concerns a physiological rhythm, in a specific sample, after a structured intervention.

Treatment can therefore also be studied through bodily outcomes. This does not mean that every word changes an identifiable molecular marker. None of the examples in this chapter allows us to say that a reprimand rewrote DNA or that an apology restored a previous organism. Epigenesis, as interpreted in the book, concerns a living trajectory; molecular epigenetics would require measures and mechanisms that we are not presenting here.

The ethical consequence is more concrete than a biological promise. If a child fears above all that the mistake will make him unworthy of being heard, we can change the way we receive unpleasant news. The fact must be addressed. The person must not become the necessary target to demonstrate that we are taking it seriously.

The objection we must know how to listen to

The best objection isn't that children deserve to be humiliated. It's that a theory centered on their experience risks making it impossible to educate them. The adult would have to observe their child's condition, interpret the signals, explain the limits, avoid definitive words, and correct their own mistakes. The child could learn that every discomfort demonstrates the injustice of a request. Parents would have unlimited responsibilities and an authority that is always suspect. Those with time and money could support this practice; those who live with shifts, rent, and a lack of support would receive another measure of their inadequacy.

The objection becomes even stronger when we remember others. In a classroom, there are many children, not a single Self to listen to. The child who hits can't get attention at the expense of the one being hit. A family can't spend every evening negotiating bedtime. Society demands cooperation even when we don't want to, acceptance of limitations, and the ability to tolerate frustration. If we call good only what our child recognizes as good in the present, we can poorly prepare them for life with people who aren't required to organize around them.

Furthermore, an education that is constantly scrutinized can lose its spontaneity. The parent becomes the controller of their own words, and the child the recipient of a protocol. Attention to relationships creates a new level of vigilance. The fear of making mistakes prevents us from playing, laughing, or saying something imperfect without immediately making a big deal out of it. The project of protecting childhood ends up making the room where it should take place feel anxious.

These are serious reasons. If our thesis required complete knowledge of the child's condition and a consistently appropriate response, it would be impractical. If it made frustration the measure of wrong, it would be false. If it transformed all conditions of care into private duties of the parent, it would be unjust. We must correct these consequences, not attribute them to the reader's misunderstanding.

The distinction that advances concerns the possibility of crossing the line. A child may have to accept that they won't have an object, that a game is over, that the adult is busy. Acknowledging their experience doesn't force them to change their decision. It may mean not declaring their disappointment absurd, not using their protest as evidence that they don't deserve treatment, and, when possible, offering them an understanding of the transition.

Respect doesn't make every child's need sovereign. The bodies of others are also present. Stopping someone who strikes protects one person and limits another; both remain human. There's no need to wait for consensus on the necessary action. We must also prevent the protection of one from becoming a pretext for inflicting further humiliation on the other.

Authority thus retains a recognizable role: to decide what the child cannot yet safely decide, to take everyone into account, to organize a viable life. Its legitimacy does not depend on the absence of protest. It depends on the reasons and proportionality of the intervention, on the possibility of reviewing it when conditions change, and on whether those exercising it claim to be free from error.

As for surveillance, we can narrow our scope. We don't have to interpret every second. We can learn to recognize certain moments where power weighs more heavily: the child tries to tell a story, we interrupt him; he makes a mistake, we transform it into an identity; he challenges a rule, we feel threatened by our affection. The task isn't to sterilize shared life. It's to make these moments correctable when we see them.

Repair without asking for absolution

"Reparation matters more than perfection" is a moral proposition, not a scientific ranking of families. Perfection is not a defined experimental group, and we have no measure to establish how much each apology should be worth compared to each avoided action. Preventing violence remains preferable to committing it and then acknowledging it. The phrase makes sense when it rejects an ideal of infallibility and places importance on what an adult does after making a mistake.

The first difficulty in repairing is naming one's own action without shifting responsibility. **"I'm sorry you took it personally"** conveys a child's feelings and leaves the judgment of the action uncertain. **"I interrupted you before you could explain"** acknowledges a fact. **"I called you incompetent, and it wasn't fair** ," adds an evaluation. The second form doesn't guarantee the child will receive it well. However, it does provide him with something he can understand, challenge, and remember.

An adult can explain their own tiredness without delegating it to their child. "I was tired, but what I said was my responsibility" keeps the context and the perpetrator separate. An explanation becomes a new pressure when it requires the child to withdraw their own pain and acknowledge the adult's. We may need comfort; we must seek it even in relationships that don't place the child in charge of portraying a positive image of ourselves.

In the opening scene, Andrea doesn't say, **"I'm a terrible father** ." That sentence could seem like a profound confession and shift the entire conversation. Elena would have to deny it, reassure him, show him that the episode wasn't that serious. Acknowledging the wrong would translate into caring for the person who committed it. Making amends requires less drama and more precision.

The child may not forgive immediately. He or she may remain angry, not want a hug, or find no response. The child's time is not the measure of the authenticity of our apology. If we ask, "So, are we okay?" to resolve the discomfort we feel, we risk making the repair dependent on the emotional cooperation of the person who suffered the insult.

This doesn't mean the parent must remain subject to a trial indefinitely. It means they can acknowledge and change their behavior without immediately obtaining a certificate. Life together continues: they eat, go to school, and follow the rules. The excuse doesn't abolish the necessary authority. It prevents that authority from making the adult's wrongdoing irrelevant.

Repairing also requires considering what was taken. If we have publicly accused our child, a private acknowledgment alone could leave them vulnerable to the judgment of others. Correction may be necessary in front of the people involved, while respecting their privacy. If we have destroyed an object, we must address the material loss. If we have excluded our child from an activity based on an unfair judgment, it's not enough to tell them they are capable: we must reexamine the exclusion.

Andrea rewrites his paper and makes it possible to try again with the carafe. He doesn't force Elena to pour it immediately, to demonstrate that her trust has returned. The business is reopened; her use of it doesn't entirely belong to her father. In this difference, the book's proposal finds concrete form: the present can introduce an answer that the previous episode didn't offer.

It can, but it doesn't have to. Repair doesn't erase the fact and doesn't force the recipient to become different. It doesn't need to demonstrate a biological effect to be owed. An apology can arrive late, be insufficient, or be disbelieved. Acknowledging this doesn't render the gesture useless; it prevents us from claiming its result as something the other owes us.

When Apologies Are Not Enough

The word "reparation" can be used to protect the continuity of the damage. An adult humiliates, apologizes, is moved, promises, repeats. The child learns that he must welcome the affectionate return to demonstrate understanding. The relationship contains numerous excuses and little security. Counting the acknowledgements without considering what comes next means losing the sense of purpose precisely where it is needed.

A serious incident doesn't become trivial simply because it was followed by appropriate words. Where violence, threats, or neglect persist, the issue also concerns protection, interruption, and intervention by competent adults and services. We cannot use the value of the bond to ask the child to remain exposed. Repair may require external help, a change in living conditions, or distance; it doesn't always coincide with the reunification desired by the adult.

Preventing repetition is a daily part of life. A parent who regularly loses control at a certain point can seek support, redistribute a task, or recognize a difficult point in advance. Not all solutions are available, and not all work. The limits of possibility must be considered without

making any behavior inevitable. If our plan consists simply of promising that next time we'll have more willpower, we might leave intact the conditions that make the behavior likely.

Even children can inflict harm and make amends. Here, the adult must avoid two approaches. The first is to demand the apology as a sufficient conclusion: the child pronounces it and the other person must accept it. The second is to engage in the entire process, deciding exactly what the child should feel and how the injured person should respond. We can guide the acknowledgement of the harm and seek possible restitution without directing the inner world of both.

If Tommaso knocks over one of his sister's constructions, he can be helped to see that she worked hard to build it. He can help pick up the pieces or offer to rebuild, in a way accessible to his age. Elena may not want to rebuild with him. The father must protect this possibility as well. The intention to repair does not automatically grant access to the other's activity.

The same distinction applies at school. Someone who has teased a classmate may be required to stop the behavior, correct what they've spread, and accept proportionate consequences. The victim shouldn't be summoned to demonstrate that the class has reunited. The adult desire for visible closure can become a new request addressed to those who have already suffered.

We therefore do not propose an education based on excuses in place of prevention. We propose that prevention and the acknowledgment of error belong to the same responsibility. An adult can explain what should not happen and acknowledge when they have caused it to happen. This teaches us something specific about the rule: it does not depend solely on the position of the person pronouncing it.

The phrase "in this house we don't insult each other" becomes more credible if it can also be applied to the parent. Not because the adult and child have the same duties, but because the asymmetry of duties doesn't transform the insult into a prerogative. The child can thus learn that taking on responsibilities doesn't mean being the only one who has to shoulder them.

The difference that does not have to be corrected at all costs

Our thesis would risk excluding many children if it identified good with a single path to adult deliberation. Some will require long-term support, some will communicate in ways other than words, some will encounter limitations that educational practice cannot eliminate. The Self does not become less worthy because practical autonomy develops differently or because a choice must be accompanied.

This is a normative extension of the thesis, not a clinical description of specific conditions. It asks us to evaluate participation in ways accessible to the individual. A child may express a preference through a gesture, a device, an alternation of attention, or a refusal. The signal must be interpreted with caution, especially when the adult strongly desires a response. Difficulty communicating does not provide us with certainty about their desires.

We can teach a useful skill without making it the measure of a person's ability. If an exercise is important to their life, we must find an appropriate way to present it. However, we must recognize the effort and distinguish the usefulness of the activity from our need to see its success. Improvement doesn't justify any cost; persistent difficulty doesn't make play, closeness, and the options available elsewhere superfluous.

The same criteria applies to children without a diagnosis. The child doesn't like to show off, doesn't want to be in touch with a relative, or doesn't want to continue an activity we've

dedicated time to. We can examine the reasons, discuss commitments, and teach them not to abandon everything at the first sign of difficulty. We can do this without declaring their difference a lack of gratitude.

Emotional contact deserves a concrete distinction. A child can greet and acknowledge another person without being forced to kiss. A relative may feel disappointed; disappointment does not necessarily give them a right to the child's body. Maintaining boundaries does not teach that others don't matter. It teaches that respect can take forms in which affection isn't taken as a tribute.

Privacy also grows gradually. Parents have obligations to protect and may have reasons to verify a situation. Not every verification is intrusion, not every private space is safe. But curiosity, the desire for closeness, and an unspecified concern cannot become a permanent justification for knowing everything. Access must be based on reasons we can examine, not just emotions we claim are decisive.

The possibility of meeting other trustworthy adults is part of this openness. A child can tell the teacher something they haven't yet shared at home. They can discover an interest that neither parent shares. This transition can be disappointing without being a betrayal. Successful parenting isn't a relationship that forever retains a monopoly on the child's thoughts.

There remains a challenge that no theory can eliminate: accompanying someone toward a life in which we won't always be needed in the same way. We can feel that loss without forcing our child to prevent it. The adult task includes seeking places for our own grief that don't require the child to stunt their development to protect us.

Who supports the conditions of care

An adult's availability isn't simply a virtue. They need time, health, a place to live, and someone to share at least part of the workload. The Harvard Center's reference to caregivers' conditions doesn't authorize us to explain every behavior through poverty. However, it prevents us from treating the quality of exchanges as a privately produced resource, independent of the conditions under which it is requested.

A parent returning from a shift may know how they would like to respond and still have very little energy. Another may have access to support and still find themselves struggling. No social category exhausts a family. We can maintain this caution and recognize that organizing work schedules, making services accessible, and supporting caregivers alter some concrete possibilities of domestic life.

For the parent, the enforceable consequence can be limited and precise: revisiting the judgment that extended an episode to the person, reopening a broken explanation, seeking help when the same harmful response recurs. It doesn't require mastering all the skills at once. It requires that the difficulty not be hidden behind the assertion that the child simply needs to get used to it.

For the doctor, this means including the child in the examination in ways that are appropriate for their age and ability to understand. Explaining a step before performing it, distinguishing between what is necessary and what can be chosen, and avoiding false promises about painlessness. An urgent intervention may limit the time available for listening; this does not make the possibility of explaining later irrelevant. Soothing and protecting the child's body remain their responsibility, even when the child is unable to cooperate.

The parent present at the visit should not automatically be treated as guilty or an obstacle. They may know useful ways to communicate with their child and may need to understand as well. Cooperation requires a clear distribution of responsibilities. We cannot call participation a situation in which the child must decide on a matter he or she is unable to evaluate, nor a situation in which no one ever consults him or her.

For the teacher, the consequence concerns the relationship between correction and belonging to the class. A student must be able to receive a negative evaluation without becoming a negative identity. The class may require immediate intervention to stop a behavior; it doesn't need a convened audience to degrade the perpetrator. A teacher who corrects his own incorrect attribution does not thereby lose the responsibility of maintaining the collective work.

This task requires professional conditions. A large class, insufficient support, and impossible deadlines cannot be solved by asking teachers to be more sensitive. This doesn't absolve them of all responsibility, but it must be included in the assessment of what is sustainable. The language of care becomes unfair if it only names the person in charge of the child and leaves out the person organizing the situation.

For those who make laws, we therefore propose examining the conditions public decisions provide: access to services, family support, educational continuity, protection from violence, and employment opportunities compatible with care. These are regulatory guidelines, not the guaranteed effects of a universal measure. Policies must be evaluated for their outcomes, costs, and unintended consequences. The principle does not exempt us from review; it establishes which options should not be left out of consideration.

A person alone in a room may not have children and still participate in the conditions of childhood. It could be a relative, a neighbor, someone who decides a work shift. They can stop the dissemination of a humiliating image, not use a confidence as entertainment, or make themselves available for limited assistance. It's pointless to attribute them the role of parent. We need to recognize the real connection between their actions and a potential opportunity for the child or their caregiver.

The title "Children" does not imply a collective possession. Children do not belong to society any more than they do to their parents. They are individuals with shared responsibilities. The family has a special responsibility; institutions and other adults cannot deny themselves the conditions they help create.

The carafe remains on the table

Let's return to Andrea and Elena's evening. The scene doesn't demonstrate that the repair had a lasting effect. The next day, the father might respond badly again. The girl might still have a doubt, or she might be remembering other things above all else. We can't use the question **"Can I pour in?"** as a sufficient measure of the bond. We can see that the adult's conclusion has been corrected and that an activity has become possible again.

The spilled water wasn't imaginary. The paper had gotten wet, the floor needed to be mopped, the brother's grip needed to be broken. Acknowledging the father's wrongdoing doesn't erase these facts. It allows them to be addressed without subjecting them all to a judgment on the little girl. The boundary survives the acknowledgment of the mistake and changes the way it is crossed.

Elena can try again, she can ask for help, she can give up that evening. Andrea must organize the situation for Tommaso too. He doesn't simply observe his children's autonomy from a respectful distance. He makes it practicable in a step for which he remains responsible. This is the least visible work of parenting: changing a situation before demanding a new response.

The metaphor of the vase, which we could have filled with values and knowledge, fails because it doesn't include this activity on the part of the recipient. Even the metaphor of the plant, while promising that simply providing the right nourishment is enough, may be too simple. The child participates in a story with other people; the possibilities are real, the outcomes are not guaranteed. No image should offer us the comfort of an outcome that the relationship cannot ensure.

In the interpretative meaning of this book, education enters into epigenesis because it modifies some conditions of the present to which a person responds. It does not introduce a previously missing Self into the child. It does not control the selection of every future. It can provide a word, an understandable limit, a protection, the recognition of a wrong. The child will use these resources within a story that encompasses much more.

This story soon begins to transcend the room. The child listens to a classmate, sees a public reaction, encounters images the family didn't choose. Later, a message may arrive during the night, a judgment may carry the weight of a number, a scene may be shown to people who don't know the person appearing in it. Learning to speak well at the table isn't enough to control everything the child will experience.

The parent's responsibility continues, but it must meet that of other adults and those who organize those environments. They cannot be the only ones responsible for correcting, after the fact, the effects of conditions they have no power to determine. The question of the condition of the property expands precisely because we have given up on making it the family's private property.

The carafe remains on the table. It doesn't certify that Andrea has completed Elena's education. It indicates a task that still remains, a possibility that will require further trials and perhaps further errors. The father can't ask the evening to become a demonstration of his goodness. He can prepare the next gesture without declaring the person who will perform it already complete.

Meanwhile, who organizes the present in which our children listen to us, when the words of home are only some of the voices that reach them?

Chapter Sources

The scene of Andrea, Elena, and Tommaso is imagined. The scientific findings concern the outcomes, samples, and drawings described in the text; the associations are not individual prognoses. The interpretation of the child as Self, the criterion of the conditions of good, and the proposals on authority and reparation are interpretative and ethical arguments. The images of the game, the vase, and the plant have an explanatory function. The chapter does not attribute molecular epigenetic modifications to individual encounters and does not present reparation as the erasure of damage.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Routledge reprint, 2015. Original monograph on household observations, the Strange Situation, and attachment patterns. Source

Fearon, R. P., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Lapsley, A.-M., & Roisman, G. I. (2010). The significance of insecure attachment and disorganization in the development of children's externalizing behavior: A meta-analytic study. Child Development, 81, 435–456. Synthesis of 69 samples; group associations, not individual prognoses. Source

Bernard, K., Dozier, M., Bick, J., Lewis-Morrarty, E., Lindhiem, O., & Carlson, E. (2012). Enhancing attachment organization among maltreated children: Results of a randomized clinical trial. Child Development, 83, 623–636. ABC intervention and active confrontation; attachment quality assessed in 120 children. Source

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Serve and Return. Institutional summary resource on responsive exchange and the conditions that support adults in caregiving; accessed October 10, 2026. The term does not refer to a single experiment. Source

Goldstein, M. H., King, A. P., & West, M. J. (2003). Social interaction shapes babbling: Testing parallels between birdsong and speech. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 100, 8030–8035. Manipulating social responses to babbling in eight-month-old infants. Source

Tronick, E.Z., & Cohn, J.F. (1989). Infant-mother face-to-face interaction: Age and gender differences in coordination and the occurrence of miscoordination. Child Development, 60, 85–92. Observational analysis of 54 mother-infant pairs; not a study of apology effectiveness. Source

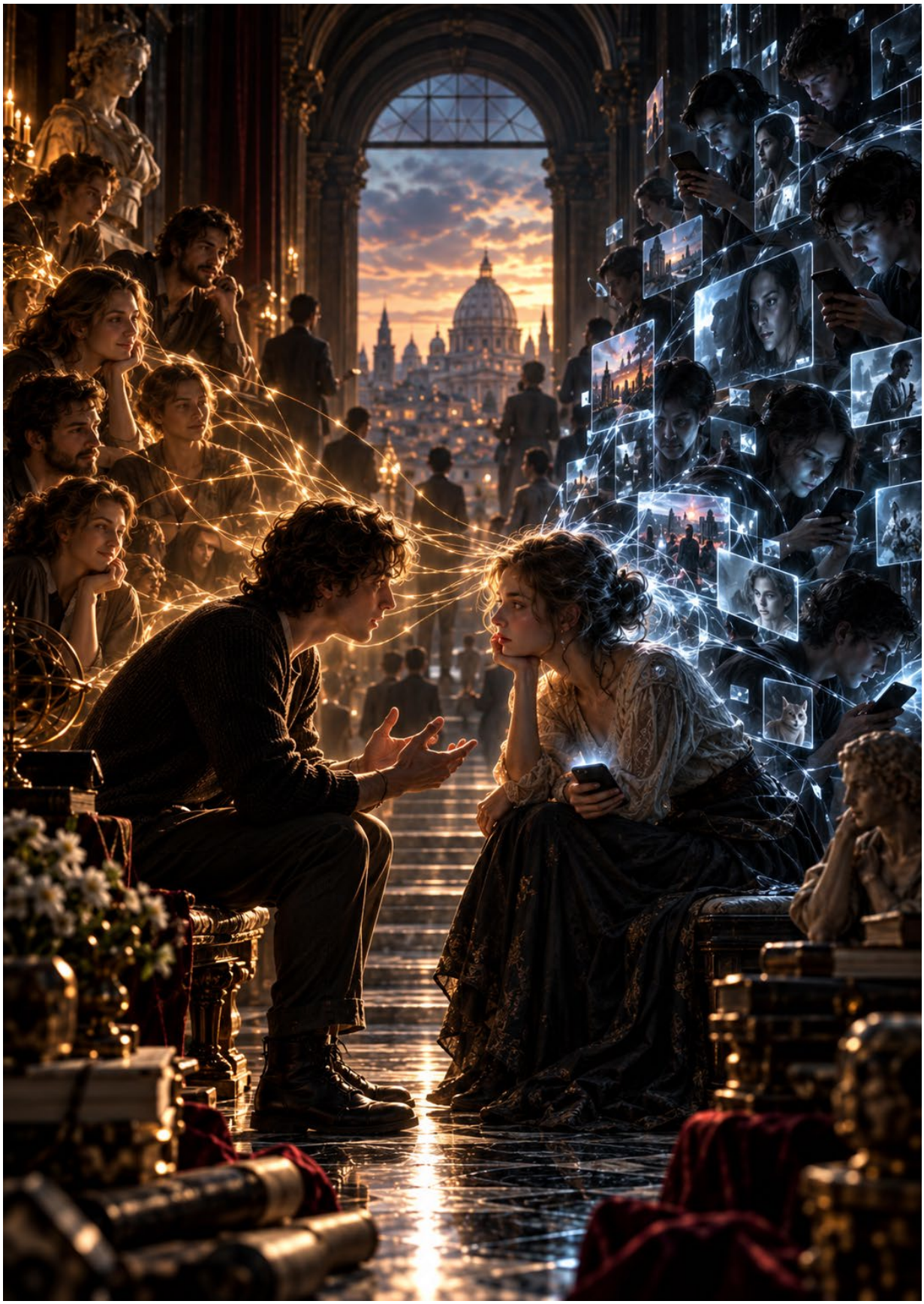
Tronick, E., Als, H., Adamson, L., Wise, S., & Brazelton, T. B. (1978). The infant's response to entrapment between contradictory messages in face-to-face interaction. Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 17, 1–13. Introduction of the still-face paradigm, a limited experimental perturbation of reciprocity. Source

Kirkham, N.Z., Cruess, L., & Diamond, A. (2003). Helping children apply their knowledge to their behavior on a dimension-switching task. Developmental Science, 6, 449–467. Card-sorting task with three- and four-year-old children; the function of verbal labeling in the studied condition. Source

Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. Journal of Family Psychology, 30, 453–469. Specific meta-analysis of physical punishment; 111 effect sizes and 160,927 children, with the limitations of a predominantly observational basis. Source

Wang, M.-T., & Kenny, S. (2014). Longitudinal links between fathers' and mothers' harsh verbal discipline and adolescents' conduct problems and depressive symptoms. Child Development, 85, 908–923. Longitudinal study of 976 families; anticipated publication online in 2013, final volume in 2014. Source

Bernard, K., Hostinar, C. E., & Dozier, M. (2015). Intervention effects on diurnal cortisol rhythms of Child Protective Services-referred infants in early childhood: Preschool follow-up results of a randomized clinical trial. JAMA Pediatrics, 169, 112–119. Evaluation of 115 children approximately three years after the intervention; cortisol rhythms, not a direct measure of subjective sense of safety. Source



Movement IV — Directing the good

11. Social media, and the state in which others listen to us

Marta opens her phone to see if Lia will be at school the next day. It's almost eleven o'clock. Her math notebook is closed, but the desk light remains on: turning it off would seem to her like ending a day she hasn't yet managed to sort out. Lia has been absent for two days. They've exchanged a few messages, enough to know there's a problem at home, but too few to figure out what it is. Marta doesn't want to ask questions in front of others. She's waiting for an answer that could only be "yes."

Before you find her, meet the movie.

It's a short clip, taken that morning during a class presentation. A boy loses his train of thought, looks at the paper, and starts again. The clip ends just before he can continue. Someone has added a sentence. It doesn't need to be repeated: his job is to transform a brief difficulty into a whole identity. Below, the reactions mount. A classmate comments; another classmate signs his approval; someone Marta doesn't know laughs. The clip has been released from the group in which it appeared. Now the boy is no longer just another student in their class. He's available material.

Marta looks at him a second time. Not because she finds the scene funny. She tries to hear her own voice, which had said "wait" when he stopped. It's not audible in the fragment. She wants to write that the presentation continued immediately afterward. She prepares a sentence, then crosses it out. The classmate who commented sits next to her three mornings a week. Tomorrow there will be a break, a line in front of the lab, a desk to return to. The screen doesn't contain these consequences, but Marta already sees them.

In the living room, his father, Paolo, encounters the same video from another angle. He doesn't recognize the class. He sees a boy freezing and a comment about school. He's finishing a work text; he opened the platform to search for news and stopped on a recommended piece of content. It seems to him like confirmation of a belief he's long held: no one teaches kids how to speak in public anymore. He writes a quick reply. He doesn't insult the boy. He criticizes the adults, their methods, their refusal to demand anything. The sentence receives two thumbs-up almost immediately. Paolo looks at it again.

Meanwhile, Marta has received Lia's text. "I'm not coming tomorrow. Can I call you?" That's why she took out her phone. But now she's checking how many people have seen the video. The boy has stopped responding to the class conversation; this silence doesn't reveal where he is, who he's with, or what he's doing. Marta fills him with hypotheses. Then she sees her father's name among the comments.

She goes into the living room without knocking. Paolo looks up and asks if she shouldn't be in bed. She shows him the screen. He recognizes his own text and begins to explain: he was talking about school, not that boy. Marta says that boy has a name and that this morning, after stopping, he was finished. Paolo takes out his phone to watch the video again. She remains standing. For a few seconds, they both look at the rectangle, instead of each other.

The scene doesn't contain a single culprit. Those who filmed, those who cut, those who published, those who distributed the fragment, those who approved it, and those who built the system in which it circulates all performed different actions. Not even the spectators are interchangeable. Marta knows the boy and dreads the next day. Paolo thinks he's found an example for a general discussion. Lia is waiting for a phone call. The boy may not have seen anything yet, or he may have already seen too much. The same image enters into presents that no counter describes.

Paolo puts down the phone. He still doesn't know how to correct what he's written. Marta isn't sure whether speaking publicly will benefit her partner or give the video new visibility. Neither of them can collect what's already arrived from all the rooms. The desk light is still on. Lia texts again: "Are you there?"

The present does not arrive empty

Before a word is read, someone has decided it will be encountered. In direct conversation, this decision can be ours: we seek out a person, ask them a question, choose to stay. On social platforms, the decision also depends on systems that organize content, suggest it, and connect it to previous signals. Not all platforms function the same way; not all their parts pursue the same goals. A private conversation between two friends, a public page, and a series of recommended videos are different environments, even when they're on the same device.

We call the architecture of attention the set of conditions that make some things easier to encounter, some actions easier to repeat, and some interruptions harder to sustain. It's not an external brain replacing our own. It's an arrangement of the field: what appears first, what returns, the signal that alerts us, the number that compares us to others, the possibility of finishing or continuing without encountering an obvious end.

The question **"Who is choosing instead of the Self?"** must therefore be addressed before it becomes a complaint. A system can choose part of what is presented to us. This does not necessarily mean that it is the recipient. We can ignore, misunderstand, look elsewhere, use a suggestion for a purpose other than the intended one. But these abilities are exercised after a selection we have not fully made. Our response remains ours; the distribution of opportunities is not to the same extent.

The chapter's thesis is this: social platforms do not create the epigenesis of the Self, but they can occupy a part of the present in which it interprets and chooses, ordering encounters and feedback according to criteria that do not necessarily coincide with its purposes.

This power is variable, it does not cancel out the capacity to respond, and it can also sustain bonds and possibilities: freedom must be sought in the conditions that make it possible to direct, interrupt, and discuss that occupation, not in the promise of always being immune to it.

The term epigenesis here retains the interpretative meaning constructed by the book. We are not claiming that every recommendation causes a molecular epigenetic change. We are describing the relationship between a historical organism, what it encounters, and the response that becomes part of its history. The studies we will explore measure behaviors, reported experiences, brain activity in specific tasks, associations, and some experimental effects. The transition to the Self is an argument, not a result already certified by these tools.

What does the word "use" measure?

One person spends half an hour arguing with a distant friend. Another spends half an hour searching for images of her body to compare. A third answers a job question. A fourth follows an argument that doesn't concern her and from which she can't detach herself. We can assign them all thirty minutes. We've measured a duration; we haven't yet described an experience. If we then simply ask, **"How much do you use social media?",** we force the person to lump together activities that could have opposing meanings.

The US National Academies' report, "Social Media and Adolescent Health," published in 2024, made this difficulty explicit. The committee's review did not support a general causal conclusion regarding population-level changes in adolescent health. It emphasized the heterogeneity of use, the limitations of many cross-sectional studies, and the potential for reciprocal relationships: online experience can impact health, while a person's status can influence how they use the platforms. This conclusion is based on that assessment of the evidence, not a declaration of universal harmlessness.

The distinction is substantial. If a young person who sleeps poorly uses his phone at night, we have at least two avenues to investigate, and perhaps a third. He might be staying awake to continue a conversation. He might be initiating the conversation because he was already awake. He might be experiencing a difficulty that affects both his sleep and his need to reach out. Removing one of the behaviors doesn't automatically resolve the other. And observing that they are together doesn't give us the right to choose the explanation that best supports our opinion.

In 2020, Ine Beyens and colleagues followed sixty-three adolescents aged fourteen and fifteen, surveying them six times a day for a week. Of the 2,155 responses collected, individual associations between passive social media use and emotional well-being varied: 44 percent showed no positive or negative association, 46 percent a positive association, and 10 percent a negative association. The sample was small, the period short, and the design did not demonstrate causality. Those percentages do not divide all adolescents worldwide into three categories; they demonstrate why an average may not describe the person we are looking at.

Heterogeneity doesn't mean that everyone is a mystery beyond all knowledge. It means that questions must be precise enough to meet them. What does he do? With whom? At what time? What happens before and after? What activity is excluded? The person seeking an answer is different from the person trying to verify whether someone has excluded them. It could be the same person on two different nights.

For Marta, the first goal was a relationship. The second was to control a social threat. The third, after recognizing her father, becomes explaining a context. We don't need to name all three pathological actions to realize that a full duration would hide them. The book suggests looking at the present as a situation, not as a vessel filled with minutes.

The gesture that can receive something

Refreshing a page may not add anything. It can add an important message, a reaction, an expected response. We don't always know when it will arrive or what value it will have for us. We call reinforcement an outcome that increases the likelihood of repeating a behavior; the term describes a relationship between action and outcome, it doesn't establish that the outcome is good. When significant feedback arrives inconsistently, the anticipation can accompany actions that, taken individually, seem futile.

However, we must avoid the overly convenient comparison with a gaming machine. Not all conversations provide the same reward; a message can be a duty, a comfort, a threat, a task. Nor does every service adopt an identical reinforcement schedule, nor can we deduce a diagnosis from the act of checking. The uncertainty of a human response and a function designed to bring us back to a page can intertwine without coinciding.

In 2021, Björn Lindström and colleagues analyzed over a million posts from 4,168 users across four datasets. Reward learning models described aspects of posting frequency in relation to social feedback. An online experiment with 176 participants also supported a causal influence of rewards on behavior in the simulated environment. The work primarily focuses on posting and its timing: it does not demonstrate that every phone check follows the same mechanism, nor that all users are addicted.

This fact is enough to make a question less naive: why did I come back? We can come back because we have something to say. We can come back to see if what we said has had an impact. The second reason isn't shameful. Social recognition isn't a modern contamination of the pure individual. But when it becomes the dominant criterion, the first reason can also change. First, we imagine what we want to say; then we imagine which version will be received; finally, we can stop distinguishing between the two.

Paul didn't need two approvals to have his own opinion about school. Those approvals, however, in the imagined scene, give him a reason to return to the text. The sentence becomes something that is happening, not just something he wrote. He could modify it to be more precise. He could make it clearer because the clarity worked. No laboratory tells us which of the two Paul will do. The scene makes visible a plausible bifurcation, not a law.

Even a valuable reward can be mismanaged. A service can help a person find an answer, but it pushes them to constantly check whether another one will arrive. The quality of the encounter and the quality of the conditions of access must be evaluated separately. We shouldn't devalue friendship by discussing how it is recalled. We can hope for Lia's message to reach us, and hope that between that message and Marta there isn't a path designed primarily to hold her back.

A number next to the face

The evaluation of others precedes social media. A classroom, a playground, an editorial office, a family can be places where we exchange views and seek validation. The difference we're interested in isn't the invention of the desire to please. It's the ability to give certain findings a numerical, visible, updateable, and comparable form. Where this form is present, it doesn't simply accompany an experience: it can suggest which part of the experience matters.

A photograph has twenty approvals, another two hundred. The number describes a reaction registered within a system. It is not a measure of the beauty, friendship, trustworthiness, or worth of the person in it. But a person can interpret it as if it were. They can know in the abstract that it is not a measure of their worth and still suffer upon seeing it. The declared understanding and the experienced meaning do not have to be identical for the suffering to be real.

In 2016, Lauren Sherman and colleagues studied thirty-two adolescents between the ages of thirteen and eighteen in an Instagram-like environment during functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Participants were more likely to approve photographs presented with many likes than photographs with few; there were also differences in activity in regions implicated in

reward and other processes. The number of likes was part of the experimental manipulation. This is a limited result on the influence of approval signals; it does not demonstrate that a metric determines identity, nor does it allow us to read the subjective value of each approval from a brain image.

Our interpretation concerns the significance a metric can take on within a story. If a young person already fears being irrelevant, a visible comparison can become material for that prediction. If they encounter people who share a rare interest, the same kind of signal can make them feel like they have a partner. We shouldn't pretend that these outcomes are equivalent. We should avoid deducing them from numbers alone.

Public metrics can also change our relationship with what we haven't yet achieved. An adult writing, a child singing, or a person showing their work can anticipate judgment before they begin. This anticipation sometimes improves a form: we seek clarity, precision, quality. Sometimes it restricts the effort to what has already been approved. Identity as performance arises, in the interpretative sense we propose, when the question "What do I want to experience?" loses ground in the face of "What version of me will be recognized?"

None of the research cited allows us to quantify this transition in every individual. It's a possibility worth discussing, not a collective diagnosis. The ethical consequence, however, can be concrete: don't use a counter to judge a person we haven't met. Not even when the counter is our own and seems to prove us right.

What comes towards us is not a world champion

A sequence of content isn't a neutral window. Even a chronologically ordered sequence depends on who we follow, who publishes, and what is made accessible. A recommended sequence adds further selection criteria. Personalization can be useful: it prevents us from traversing irrelevant material, helps us discover an author, and connects a question to an answer. The problem isn't that a choice existed prior to ours. It's that it can be mistaken for a complete description of the world.

If we see ten people satisfied with their lives, we haven't observed ten entire lives. We've observed ten presentations. If we encounter ten episodes of violence, we haven't yet measured the frequency of violence in the population. If a page shows us many people who share a belief, we don't know how many disagree and aren't included. Images can be true individually and, through their composition, create a disproportionate impression.

The constant comparison here takes a second form. We don't just compare ourselves to a single person. We compare our entire day with a selection of other people's moments. The headache, the boredom, the unphotographed failure, and the time it takes to do something remain on our side. On the other, there may be achievements, bodies, places, successful sentences. This asymmetry isn't always the result of deliberate deception: choosing what to show is part of all communication. It becomes a problem when we lose sight of the focus.

The same is true for pain. A sequence of real sufferings can call for a necessary responsibility. It can also leave a person without any viable course of action, left with an indefinite obligation to assist. It would be uncivilized to respond by inviting ignorance. It is more accurate to distinguish information that allows action from repetition that prolongs exposure without adding knowledge. Sometimes looking again is pertinent. Sometimes new content merely confirms the state we have already entered.



To say that the present is filled with other people's predictions is a theoretical image that needs to be defined. Those who build a system can predict what content will generate a response; those who publish can predict what the public will approve of; we can predict what reaction will make us appear acceptable. These predictions intersect and can mutually modify each other. None of them corresponds to a complete reading of the mind. A system capable of anticipating a gesture does not therefore know the person in their entirety.

The boy in the video is a particularly clear example: the cut is real, and the missing piece changes the assessment. But many cuts aren't so easy to reconstruct. Civil discipline also involves keeping a question off-screen when the content already seems sufficient to justify a judgment. Not every judgment should be suspended; every judgment must reflect the quality of what it is based on.

The phrase he learns from his audience

The recipient doesn't just receive. He responds, approves, republishes, ignores. The speaker can learn from that feedback. An effective sentence is picked up; a sentence that doesn't resonate can be abandoned. In public life, this learning is inevitable and often useful. A teacher modifies an explanation because the class doesn't understand it. A journalist realizes that a neglected topic is of interest to readers. A witness finds words that expose a wrong.

The problem arises when the rewarded outcome becomes a substitute for the reason to speak. If hostility is being met, we might learn to formulate it better. If it's a personal target that's circulating, we might look for another. It wouldn't be necessary to have been hostile initially. It would be enough to have reasons to want attention and find an environment in which certain ways of obtaining it work.

In 2021, William Brady, Killian McLoughlin, Tuan Doan, and Molly Crockett studied the expression of moral outrage using two pre-recorded observational surveys on Twitter and two pre-recorded behavioral experiments. Positive feedback favored subsequent expressions of outrage; group norms of expression also mattered. The experiments used a simulated environment. This study focuses on observable expression and its learning; it does not demonstrate that the emotion experienced increased to the same extent, nor that outrage is false or morally wrong because it is rewarded.

This last distinction is crucial. A complaint can be justified and widely circulated. A calm word can protect against abuse. Ethics doesn't consist in always preferring calm. It consists in asking what fact we are exposing, what reasons support our assessment, and what we are doing to the people involved. Reward alone doesn't disqualify a complaint, but it doesn't justify it.

Paul thought he was contributing to a discussion. When Marta returns the missing piece, he must choose which feedback to give authority to. The approvals he receives are facts: someone appreciated the sentence. His daughter's testimony is also pertinent information: the presentation had continued. If he defends the text simply because it has already worked, he transforms a distributive result into a cognitive reason. If he corrects it, he doesn't have to abandon all criticism from the school. He must give up using that fragment as sufficient evidence.

It's a small case, but it concretely illustrates a possibility of the adult Self. We can realize that we're formulating the next sentence to maintain the audience of the previous one. We won't always be able to interrupt the movement. However, we can recognize the point at which the

audience is becoming part of our prediction and restore authority to a fact, a person, a reason that doesn't reward us.

The night is not unlimited free time

A finished conversation leaves a trace. A conversation that could be resumed also leaves a wait. This wait can be pleasant: someone is thinking about it, something is continuing. It can become a duty: if I don't answer, it will seem like I don't care. In the evening, when many tasks are finished, it's easier to devote the time that isn't yet taken up to the phone. But sleep isn't a leftover from the day. It's a bodily necessity that should be part of the night even when other desirable things exist.

In 2019, Holly Scott, Stephany Biello, and Heather Cleland Woods analyzed data from 11,872 British adolescents aged thirteen to fifteen. More intense social media use was associated, among other things, with later bedtimes, even after adjusting for several variables. Use and sleep were self-reported, and the analysis was cross-sectional: it did not establish a cause, nor did it completely separate those who stayed up to use social media from those who used it because they couldn't sleep. The result suggests a relationship worth examining, not a single explanation for every difficult night.

Time lost from sleep may be easier to recognize than the reason for it. A continuous playback, an unfinished discussion, the fear of being left out of a conversation, a work request are different conditions. Talking only about the light from the screen risks leaving out the social connection. The device doesn't need to emit a sound for the person to think about what might have arrived.

For Marta, calling Lia could be important even at that hour. A rule that treated every evening use as equivalent would fail to distinguish the connection from the repeated updating of the video. On the other hand, the importance of a friend shouldn't impose endless availability on both of them. You can be there for someone and agree on when to resume. The opportunity to rest shouldn't be seen as evidence of a lack of affection.

For Paolo, the boundary can be different. A professional request arriving in the evening can have real consequences if left unaddressed. If the employer demands a constant response, moving the phone out of the room doesn't alter that expectation. An individual practice can protect a gap; a collective condition can legitimize it. These are different levels of the same problem, without needing to attribute everything to one platform.

The book doesn't propose a universal duration of use or a sleep therapy. It poses a question about direction: does what enters the night retain an important possibility, or does every interruption pose a risk? Will the morning present also have a body that has rested or not? This temporal connection is enough to demonstrate why we cannot discuss online freedom while ignoring the physical conditions under which we will attempt to exercise it tomorrow.

The present body, and the other that we do not see

In the living room, Paolo and Marta watch the video together. They're in the same room, but the room hasn't yet resumed its work. Paolo might see that she's still standing, that she's gripping her phone tightly, that she's not asking for an abstract discussion about school. Marta might see that he didn't recognize the boy and that the mistake isn't necessarily born out of a desire to humiliate him. This information is available only if they stop, for a moment, looking for everything in the fragment.

The co-presence of bodies does not guarantee understanding. You can ignore someone even without a screen. You can understand a lot through a letter, a phone call, a written conversation. The difference is not between real and virtual relationships. It's between ways of connecting that offer different signals and possibilities. A written message can allow a person to speak when their voice is missing. A video call can make a distant face present. A device can be a necessary aid, and removing it can restrict rather than expand participation.

In 2018, Ryan Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev, and Elizabeth Dunn studied phone use during face-to-face interactions. In a field experiment with over three hundred participants gathered for a meal, the condition with phones available on the table was associated with greater distraction and less enjoyment of the interaction than the condition with phones put away. The study also included an experience-sampling survey. It didn't address every social media function, nor every need for accessibility; it supported a situated cost of phone use, not the idea that every mediated relationship is inferior.

We can then ask what a device is doing in that situation. Paul might need to show her the comment so she can correct it. Marta might need to call Lia. The phone isn't just an intruder; it's also the locus of two real tasks. But if it continues to offer other content while they're trying to understand, it can make it harder to complete those tasks. It's not enough to place technology on one side and presence on the other. We need to observe the relationship between a use and what we intend to do together.

The other we don't see remains a more fundamental problem. The boy in the video isn't in the room. We don't know if he wants a public defense, if he fears being named again, if someone is already helping him. Distance leaves room for benevolent fantasies as well as hostile ones. We can invent a fragile person to feel like a savior, or an indifferent person to feel empowered. Neither invention is an encounter.

Responsibility must therefore recognize both the signals present and the signals missing. It does not make us omniscient; it makes us less likely to mistake a lack of information for permission. A recipient we cannot see maintains needs and boundaries. An audience we do not know is not a collective body with a single status. Those who speak in public speak within this plurality, even when the platform returns a single number.

Being in training does not mean being without an author

A teenager may know more about a service than we do and be less likely to avoid the social consequences of its use. Technical expertise doesn't equate to freedom. Knowing how to modify a setting doesn't change the fact that tomorrow the whole class will be discussing what's been circulated. We can understand a function and still not know how to place the judgment of others. Adults, after all, still have to learn this.

In 2022, Amy Orben, Andrew Przybylski, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, and Rogier Kievit examined the relationship between estimated social media use and life satisfaction across development. In a longitudinal analysis of 17,409 participants aged ten to twenty-one, some associations were more pronounced at specific ages: eleven to thirteen for girls, fourteen to fifteen for boys, and nineteen for both. The reverse direction was also evident, from life satisfaction to subsequent use. These are statistical windows observed in the data, not universal biological timelines, nor evidence that a birthday makes a service safe or dangerous.

Age deserves attention without becoming a complete explanation. Two children of the same age may have very different supports, experiences, and possibilities. A teenager who finds

online the only place to discuss an interest or difficulty doesn't occupy the same position as someone who already has many close interlocutors. A child mocked in his school group isn't immune if we take away his device: the mockery can continue and reach him through others. The problem requires addressing the relationship, not just the object that makes it visible.

In the language of the book, the developing Self is already an experiential subject. It isn't yet capable of every evaluation, it doesn't possess all the conditions to protect itself, but what happens to it is already something someone is experiencing. Guardianship cannot treat it like a future adult whose present can be suspended. If we impose a limit, we must also consider what connection we are severing, what need remains unanswered, what learning opportunity we are creating.

Furthermore, training occurs in the presence of systems that are not age-neutral, even when they don't know their age precisely. An environment with public meters, ongoing content, and frequent reminders tests the ability to interrupt and evaluate. It's not necessary to assert that all children will fail to discuss whether it's reasonable to ask them to practice these skills without support. Vulnerability is not a moral flaw in a child, and protection shouldn't depend on proving oneself strong enough.

For adults, the problem shifts, without disappearing. Paul has more experience and more material autonomy than Marta. He can still quickly read a passage, seek confirmation, and confuse a supportive audience with a good reason. Adults' job isn't to declare themselves safe in order to protect others. It's to make their own mistakes visible, too, without asking their children to take responsibility for them. A parent can correct a comment and continue to set relevant limits: admitting a mistake doesn't relieve them of their responsibility to educate.

A break may precede the content

The notification doesn't just tell us something. It suggests switching from what we were doing to another option. Sometimes that's exactly what we want: we're waiting for an urgent response, we've scheduled a meeting, someone needs us. Sometimes we don't yet know whether the content is worth switching to. The signal arrives before the evaluation, and part of the evaluation already occurs in the state created by the interruption.

In 2015, Cary Stothart, Ainsley Mitchum, and Courtney Yehnert observed that receiving notifications on the phone could impair performance on an attention task even without directly interacting with the device. This is an experimental result on a specific task, not a measure of the harm each notification causes in everyday life. However, it allows us to distinguish between two questions: whether we have opened a message and whether its announcement has already interfered with what we were doing. Not all consequences require the content to have been read.

The distinction matters when we shift all responsibility for ignoring onto the recipient. Ignoring can require work; the work isn't always visible. A person studying may continue reading and wonder who wrote. A person waiting for a result may attribute a significant possibility to each signal. We don't know, from the fact that she didn't respond, whether she remained undisturbed. And we don't know, from the fact that she responded, whether she wanted to stop.

Even social signals of availability can be misinterpreted. When a service shows that a message has been read or that a user is active, it offers limited information. It doesn't tell us whether the person has time, whether they've understood, whether they're free to respond, or whether

they're searching for words. The leap from "saw" to "don't care" is our inference. It might be understandable in a history of rejections; it remains an inference, not a fact produced by the interface.

The state in which the other listens thus becomes more difficult to reconstruct precisely as we receive new cues. We may have many traces and little context. The precision of a time doesn't automatically translate to the precision of an interpretation. Exact data can support a false conclusion when asked to answer a question other than the one for which it was recorded.

However, it would be a mistake to ask platforms to solve everything by collecting even more data on users' emotional states. Protection must not become a reason to recognize and preserve every vulnerability. We can reduce unnecessary reminders, make interruptions available, and provide control over public signals without having to intimately classify each person. This is a regulatory proposal: protecting through data collection, not just through personalization that promises to know what we need.

For the writer, the consequence is both simpler and more difficult. We can make explicit whether a response is necessary, by when, and for what reason. We can avoid using technical availability as proof of human availability. We don't have to add a polite phrase to every message; we need to make the debt of attention we're creating less arbitrary.

The best objection: the network has opened a door

The strongest criticism of this chapter isn't denying distraction. It's remembering those who, before the screen, had almost no one. A girl unable to find interlocutors in her hometown can find a community. A person confined to her hometown can participate in a discussion, work, teach, maintain a friendship. An author excluded from traditional venues can publish. A witness can make visible an abuse that an institution would prefer to leave offscreen. A distant family can recognize itself in the voice of each evening.

For these people, talking about a "return to real life" can be offensive. Life before wasn't necessarily freer, richer, or safer. A local group can be more coercive than an online one. A face-to-face conversation can be impossible, humiliating, or dangerous. The ability to choose when to write, to revise a sentence, to speak without showing one's entire body can be a condition of participation. It's not an impoverished copy of what others easily do.

This objection also affects the criticism of selection. Without some sorting, large amounts of content could be unusable. Those who want to find a course, a group, or a piece of relevant news benefit from systems that reduce the search. Distribution doesn't always equate to manipulation. An environment that showed us everything, without any choice, wouldn't therefore be respectful of our capacity for understanding.

And regulation affects it. Who decides what content is suitable for a minor? Who verifies age, collecting what information? Who determines when a discussion is too intense? A public authority can invoke protection to make uncomfortable ideas less accessible. A platform can invoke well-being to erase a difficult testimony. A family can invoke security to monitor their child's every relationship. Protection can reproduce the very problem it claims to solve: choosing the good life over the individual.

Finally, our interpretation of the Self risks being too demanding. If every online gesture must be examined for its impact on one's trajectory, won't we end up turning pleasure into an interrogation? There are jokes, curiosities, pauses, light-hearted content. Not everything needs

to become conscious learning. A person can want to watch something without having to justify an increase in their autonomy. This possibility, too, belongs to freedom.

The objection deserves to be left intact. The chapter would be false if it said that the Internet merely subtracts. It would be paternalistic if it transformed every user into someone to be saved. It would be inconsistent if, after denying individuals ownership of other people's property, it automatically attributed it to those who draft a law. We need a distinction that protects access without making access a justification for every way we are held back.

Access and capture are not the same thing

The answer begins with a distinction: finding Lia and remaining within a content stream are two different possibilities. They can be offered by the same service. They can even support each other: a person comes for a video and encounters a community. But we can't evaluate the quality of the second process using only the value of the first. A valuable relationship doesn't make any cost of the journey through which it is achieved irrelevant.

We call capture, in an interpretative rather than diagnostic sense, a situation in which the continuation of an activity gains more strength than the reason that led us to begin it. This isn't always a long-term practice. A creative project, an important discussion, a desired game can drag on. The problem concerns the relationship with purpose and the possibility of completion. If I want to continue, I can. If I want to stop but each step presents me with a new reason to postpone, the formal availability of the exit command doesn't solve the issue.

Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow, in a study published in 2020, used a randomized trial to examine Facebook deactivation in the four weeks preceding the 2018 US midterm elections. Deactivation increased subjective well-being and some offline activities, but also reduced factual knowledge of the news; other changes were observed, including a reduction in political polarization. This was a one-platform, one-context, and one-sample intervention. It doesn't demonstrate that opting out of every service benefits everyone; it highlights benefits and costs that a single measure cannot capture.

This data prevents us from easily apotheosizing absence. A person can feel better and know less. A choice can improve one dimension and worsen another. The criterion of good cannot be merely the satisfaction of the moment, nor merely the quantity of information. We must ask what relationships, what activities, what knowledge, and what opportunities are becoming viable. And who should have a say in the evaluation.

The freedom to watch something for pleasure remains. There's no need to turn every pause into an exercise in self-control. A respectful environment should also allow for light use, without turning pleasure into an obligation to continue. The distinction isn't between noble content and useless content. It's between an activity we can engage in and conditions that make it difficult or costly to complete.

Even the choice of content cannot be completely left to a single actor. The user has goals; the service has criteria; the community has norms; institutions have responsibilities and limits. We can discuss these relationships without imagining a system that distributes only morally perfect things. The goal is not to eliminate all risk from the encounter. It is to prevent certain risks from being hidden, imposed, or always passed on to those least equipped to recognize them.

A distinction formulated in this way doesn't resolve every conflict. Content can be harmful to some and necessary to others. A function can provide continuity to one relationship and make another invasive. Therefore, good design doesn't mean a single, mandatory setting for everyone. It requires understandable options, proportionate protections, and an evaluation that can also meet the dissent of those who use the service.

Public responsibility enters the project

Simply asking users to use an environment better means accepting its form too easily. If a service makes interruptions difficult, the difficulty shouldn't become a moral test administered to millions of people. If a child doesn't understand why a certain content is being offered, it's not enough to tell them to be more critical. Education needs something to practice: explanations, real choices, information that isn't deliberately made impractical.

The chapter on design characteristics in the 2024 National Academies report linked user literacy with service accountability, calling for age-appropriate design, transparency, and access to research while protecting privacy. This framework alone does not resolve disagreements about measures. It offers a framework for discussing environmental conditions, as well as the behaviors of those who use them. The following proposals are normative arguments for the book, not a description of identical legal obligations in every country.

A first responsibility concerns the criteria by which attention is requested. A service should be able to explain in a comprehensible way which signals it uses to recommend and what purpose the recommendation serves. "We'll show you what interests you" is insufficient if interest essentially means a prediction of persistence or reaction. Focusing on something can express interest, but also alarm, incomprehension, or hostility. The indicator should not be presented as if it already knows the user's needs.

A second responsibility concerns control. The ability to modify notifications, choose a different sorting, suspend suggestions, or reduce the display of certain metrics should be recognizable and practical. It's not enough for it to exist somewhere in the interface. If activating a function requires a gesture and canceling it requires a long path, the design distributes the cost of these choices differently. This distribution is part of the service's behavior, not a decorative detail.

For minors, protective settings can be justified without turning the entire experience into surveillance. Reducing late-night calls doesn't necessarily require reading conversations. Limiting public disclosure doesn't necessarily require recording every vulnerability. When age verification is necessary for protection, we must also discuss what data it collects, who stores it, and what risks it poses. The promised security doesn't negate the duty to evaluate the method used to achieve it.

A third responsibility concerns independent knowledge. If the effects of a feature are evaluated only by those who benefit from its use, public discussion remains limited. Research requires relevant access, protections for personal data, verifiable comparisons, and the ability to publish unfavorable results. Transparency doesn't mean exposing users' lives to the world; it means making claims about how they are treated verifiable.

The issue of freedom of expression remains. Making a moderation decision open to challenge, clarifying the reasons, and providing for a review is part of the protection, not an extraneous obstacle. An environment can harm by what it amplifies and what it obscures. Good cannot be entrusted solely to the good intentions of the moderator, just as it could not be entrusted solely to the good intentions of those who helped Nora.

The civil test of these proposals lies not in the elegance of their names. It lies in what a person is able to do: understand a choice, change it, ask for an explanation, escape pressure, maintain a connection. A regulation that makes service more difficult for everyone without protecting those exposed has already failed to achieve its goal. It must address the effects, costs, and possibilities for correction. Public authority remains a power, even when it intervenes in another power.

Private practice needs a world

We can create conditions that make a desired choice less demanding. We can decide that a conversation doesn't require an immediate response, make certain reminders less present, and agree on a device-free time when they're superfluous. It's not about purifying our attention. It's about recognizing that a limited capacity works better when it doesn't have to deal with all the pressures we know on its own.

But private practice doesn't start from equal conditions. An on-call worker, a person caring for a family member, a young person whose group communicates exclusively online don't have the same margins as those who can interrupt without consequences. "Turn off" may be a possible gesture for one, but a problem for another. The value of a practice also depends on what makes it unavailable, and on who will suffer that unavailability.

The ability to choose what to let in at any given moment is limited because it arrives within a pre-arranged history and environment. It's real because some steps can still be oriented. We can directly open the conversation we were looking for. We can avoid republishing content whose context we don't know. We can return to a piece of news through a process that allows us to verify it. We won't always do this; it won't always be enough. These margins don't justify calling the entire environment free, nor describing the person as an unanswered terminal.

The practice gains more power when it also changes a norm between people. If a school group doesn't require constant availability, interrupting costs less. If an organization distinguishes an emergency from ordinary communication, the recipient doesn't have to guess every time. If adults don't automatically interpret a delay as disrespect, a child can learn to respond without confusing a relationship with constant screen time.

We're not prescribing a perfect regimen. A night might require an exception; a relationship might be in an emergency; a job might have a deadline. The problem is transforming the exception into a permanent availability that no one has truly agreed upon. A reasonable practice can recognize the emergency without giving it the right to occupy all the other hours.

And it must be able to fail without becoming an identity. If we have established a boundary and cross it, there's no point in declaring ourselves incapable of choosing. We can understand the reason that brought us back, whether the boundary was practicable, whether someone else made it costly. Failure informs a revision; it doesn't erase the subject who attempts it. This is an interpretative consequence of the book, not a promise of effectiveness for any method of self-regulation.

Public responsibility and private practice meet precisely here. A public condition can blur the line. A practice can reveal a cost that the project didn't consider. Neither should wait for the other to resolve everything. If a service continues to call us back, we can seek a margin; if we know how to seek a margin, we can still hold the service accountable for the pressure it generates.

Whoever publishes doesn't know the whole room

The responsibility of those who speak online begins with the content and continues in the manner of dissemination. A fact may merit being made public. Not every personal detail is necessary to make it understandable. A criticism may be well-founded. Not every image of a person exposed is necessary to support it. An error can be corrected. Not every correction requires reproducing the material that caused the injustice.

This criterion doesn't consist of shielding the public from all emotion. A testimony can be disturbing because what it reports is serious. An investigation can shatter peace of mind because it reveals a real problem. Responsibility doesn't require us to make everything palatable. It requires us to distinguish what serves knowledge from what adds exposure, excitement, or targets without sufficient reason.

A parent also encounters this problem when publishing something about their child. They may want to share a joy and, at the same time, make accessible a moment their child would not have chosen to share. The family relationship does not equate to the right to use every episode. The less the child can comprehend the extent of the dissemination, the less their lack of opposition is sufficient to justify it. An adult can share a piece of news without revealing the entire story; they can also decide to keep it more limited.

A teacher can't simply observe that a video has been posted outside of class. If it concerns a school report, it can have repercussions within the classroom. They must seek to understand, avoid turning the victim into a public figure, and address the relevant behaviors. They aren't required to become an investigator of every online life. They are required not to treat the medium as a barrier that erases the educational relationship.

A doctor listening to a person concerned about what they've read can ask what information alarmed them and where it came from, without using the word "internet" as a sufficient reason to dismiss them. The content may be false, incomplete, or irrelevant. Fear may have a history and encounter news that intensifies it. Understanding the process is not a substitute for clinical assessment; it can clarify the issue being assessed. This is an example of listening, not a one-size-fits-all therapeutic procedure.

For a legislator, responsibility doesn't end with imposing a protective function. It encompasses accessibility, confidentiality, recourse, and the impact on those who depend on mediated communication. If the protection of minors becomes a reason to collect disproportionate data or indiscriminately exclude useful relationships, this must be seen and discussed. A justified objective does not justify every tool.

For a single person in a room, the problem can boil down to a simple decision: whether or not to contribute to a broadcast. It's not always possible to know who will receive it. You might wonder whether the content is sufficiently well-founded, whether it unnecessarily singles out someone, whether your statement adds understanding or simply adds another presence to the target. It's no use imagining every possible suffering. You need to examine the foreseeable consequences we already know.

For those with a large audience or distribution tools, the same question takes on a different weight. A large audience doesn't confer greater truth to the word; it increases the opportunities for that word to have an impact. We can't require an author to foresee every interpretation. We can require them not to present as inevitable effects produced by avoidable

choices of title, editing, exposition, and reference. Responsibility grows with control over conditions, without becoming total control over the recipients.

Correct without regaining possession

Paul can delete the comment. He can also correct it. Neither action automatically restores his right to declare the problem over. Some people will have read it, others will not; the video may continue to circulate; the boy may wish it were never mentioned again. Making amends doesn't mean regaining control of all the consequences. It means taking the action that remains relevant after acknowledging the wrong or error.

A public correction must address a real conflict. It can expose missing information. It can also attract new viewers to the content. If Paul republished the video to explain how unfair it was, he might offer another broadcast of the same scene. The solution doesn't arise from good intentions. We need to distinguish what needs to be corrected from what shouldn't be re-exposed, and seek the necessary context without using moral urgency as an excuse for not doing so.

Marta shouldn't become responsible for her father's entire repair. She's already provided information. She can say what she knows, she may not know what her partner wants, she may be afraid. Paolo can take on his role: reviewing the text, not defending it through approval, asking what adult intervention is appropriate. The fact that his daughter knows more about the situation doesn't make her the agency responsible for administering the effects of his statement.

Even the child doesn't have to immediately produce a response that absolves the speaker. He or she may not want to speak, may not yet know what to ask, or may need someone else's help. Adults retain responsibility even when they don't receive a thorough education. But responsibility doesn't confer ownership over the story. We can protect a situation without turning the exposed subject into a public test of our goodness.

The difference compared to a limited conversation is distribution. In the room, we can notice a change, stop, and ask. In a public space, many answers don't add up. The silence of the audience doesn't prove the content hasn't had any impact. On the other hand, it doesn't prove it's done any harm. We must work with what is knowable, preserve uncertainty where it remains, and not use it as a general alibi.

Here, power becomes modest without becoming null. We can modify our sentence; we cannot modify every memory. We can stop a new circulation; we cannot guarantee that copies will disappear. We can make a correction accessible; we cannot guarantee that it will reach all the same recipients. This disproportion is a reason to be thorough before publishing and accessible afterward, not a reason to declare every effort futile.

Repair also retains a cognitive function. It must restore what the cut removed, when relevant and possible: the fact that the presentation continued, the limitations of the testimony, the lack of a sufficient basis for judgment. Changing tone isn't enough. A sentence can become more polite and remain false. A correction can be uncomfortable and improve understanding. The recipient's situation matters; without giving the speaker the right to replace the truth with what they imagine will make them feel better.

"You are here?"

Paul rereads the comment and sees something he hadn't seen before: he had used an unknown person as a solved example. The boy wasn't just an image, but that's how it worked in the sentence. His father still isn't sure if his general criticism is entirely flawed. He knows that fragment can't sustain it. He deletes the comment. Then he writes a limited correction, without attaching the video or naming the boy: he commented on an incomplete shot without knowing its context. He doesn't present the operation as a guaranteed solution. It's something he can do and for which he must answer.

Marta tells him she doesn't want him to show up at school tomorrow to argue in front of everyone. Paolo would have already imagined a phone call, a protest, someone to explain. He asks her what happened after the video was posted and whether any adult at school is aware of it. She can only partially answer the first question. She can't answer the second. They agree to find a partner without playing the video in other conversations, and to reconsider their decision if a different need arises. The evening doesn't provide them with a perfect protocol.

Lia's message is still on the screen. Marta suddenly remembers it and feels ashamed: she had taken the phone specifically for her. Paolo could turn the delay into a lesson in social media use. He doesn't. His friend's need for her exists before their argument and shouldn't become a material means of winning it. He simply asks if Marta needs time alone to call.

She returns to her room. She closes the sequence of content and opens the conversation. Lia responds. At first she says nothing, then asks if she can talk without Marta immediately seeking a solution. Marta says yes. The phone, which had earlier brought the video, now makes this question possible. Its nature hasn't changed; what has changed is what they're doing through it. The difference doesn't absolve the platform project of all responsibility, nor does it condemn the bond that exists within it.

In the living room, Paolo isn't aware of the conversation. He wants to know if his daughter is better. He realizes that this question could also become another request to be handled. He prepares her a glass of water and leaves it outside the door, after telling her he's there. He doesn't interpret the lack of thanks as a response. The gesture is small; it doesn't confirm that he's learned forever. He's simply stopped, at that moment, asking his daughter to confirm her intervention.

Later, Marta turns off the desk light. The next day, it wasn't repaired early. The boy will have to return to class; the video might still be accessible; Paolo might make another mistake. Lia has arranged a time to check in with her. Among the unfinished business, there's at least one that doesn't need to be checked until morning.

The scene is imagined. It doesn't demonstrate a technique, it doesn't assign an outcome to the characters, it doesn't pretend that a glass of water compensates for a public statement. It leaves us faced with the same disproportion that runs through the chapter: we can enter into someone else's present with more force than we understand, and we can still make the way we enter it less arbitrary.

How do we direct an act towards good when we do not fully know the other's state, and even our intention to protect him can become a pressure?

Chapter Sources

The cited studies concern specific outcomes and should be interpreted within the limits of their respective samples, designs, and contexts. The scene involving Marta, Paolo, Lia, and her partner is imagined. The reading of the Self, the distinctions between access and capture, and the civil proposals are interpretative and normative arguments. The chapter does not attribute molecular epigenetic changes to individual interactions, does not propose individual diagnoses, and does not present the regulatory proposals as universal legal obligations.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024). Social Media and Adolescent Health. The National Academies Press. In particular: chapters 4, The Relation between Social Media and Health, and 5, Design Features. Source

Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, II, Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. Scientific Reports, 10, 10763. Source

Lindström, B., Bellander, M., Schultner, D.T., Chang, A., Tobler, P.N., & Amodio, D.M. (2021). A computational reward learning account of social media engagement. Nature Communications, 12, 1311. Source

Sherman, L. E., Payton, A. A., Hernandez, L. M., Greenfield, P. M., & Dapretto, M. (2016). The Power of the Like in Adolescence: Effects of Peer Influence on Neural and Behavioral Responses to Social Media. Psychological Science, 27(7), 1027–1035. Source

Brady, W. J., McLoughlin, K., Doan, T. N., & Crockett, M. J. (2021). How social learning amplifies moral outrage expression in online social networks. Science Advances, 7(33), eabe5641. Source

Scott, H., Biello, S. M., & Woods, H. C. (2019). Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns: cross-sectional findings from the UK millennium cohort study. BMJ Open, 9, e031161. Source

Dwyer, R. J., Kushlev, K., & Dunn, E. W. (2018). Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 78, 233–239. Source

Orben, A., Przybylski, A. K., Blakemore, S.-J., & Kievit, R. A. (2022). Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media. Nature Communications, 13, 1649. Source

Stothart, C., Mitchum, A., & Yehnert, C. (2015). The attentional cost of receiving a cell phone notification. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 41(4), 893–897. Source

Allcott, H., Braghieri, L., Eichmeyer, S., & Gentzkow, M. (2020). The Welfare Effects of Social Media. American Economic Review, 110(3), 629–676. Source



Movement IV — Directing the good

12. Towards good, without innocence

Dr. Leone has already explained the procedure twice. She's drawn a line on the sheet of paper, indicated the affected area, and distinguished what she knows from what remains uncertain. In front of her, Neri holds the pen without using it. His daughter, sitting next to her, seeks his gaze. **"Dad, it's for your own good."** He nods. The doctor could gather consent, add a note, move on to the next person. Many people are waiting outside the room. No one in here is trying to do harm.

It's an imagined scene. It doesn't tell us which clinical decision is correct: it lacks a history, a diagnosis, many elements that a real decision would require. It allows us to see a moment that often disappears in reconstructions: the time between a finished explanation and a still-possible signature. Neri's body needs care. This much is certain in the scene. What he has understood, what he fears, what question he is holding back, remains to be seen.

The daughter returns to the benefit. " **At least this way you'll solve it."** The doctor would like to clarify that she didn't promise a complete solution. She's already said it, but that word captured both their desires. Neri looks at the drawing. **"If I sign, will you decide everything?"** He doesn't ask how long the procedure will last. He asks what will happen to his ability to speak afterwards. The doctor had interpreted his silence as a difficulty in making a choice; now she feels it might also imply a difficulty in sticking to the choice.

We don't know where this question comes from. It could be a previous experience, a misunderstood remark, a recent fear. It could simply be the meaning Neri attributes to a signature. There's no point in constructing a past before answering him. We need to explain, regarding that situation, what consent authorizes, what steps will require further decisions, and who he can turn to. We also need to ascertain whether he truly understood what is being proposed to him today. His question doesn't replace these checks: it makes them more urgent.

The doctor shifts the paper. **"Before you decide, tell me what you understand we're going to do and what remains to be clarified. That way I'll see if I've made myself clear."** Neri responds with everyday words. Two pieces of information are correct, one is incorrect, one hasn't arrived. The daughter tries to complete the answer. " **I'll let him speak,"** says the doctor. She doesn't push her daughter away. She asks if her father wants her to stay. He says yes, but adds, **"Don't answer before I do."** It's a small request; it changes the layout of the room.

Neri then asks if there's time to think about it. The doctor clarifies what the situation allows and what it doesn't. She doesn't invent a risk-free wait to appear respectful. She doesn't use risk as a generic threat. Where a decision can be postponed, she says so; where postponement could have consequences, she explains. Neri puts down his pen. The visit hasn't turned into an endless assembly. The point at which a decision must be hers and the point at which professional expertise must take on the task of making recommendations has become more apparent.

The doctor realizes she called the procedure " **simple** ." Simple, perhaps, compared to other procedures she performs. For Neri, it's not. " **I used a word that may have made your**

questions seem trivial ," she says. She doesn't ask for his reassurance of his kindness. She returns to the information. Time is limited; some matters will be covered with his follow-up. Before leaving, Neri asks for the name of the person he can contact. His daughter writes it on the back of the paper.

We don't know if he'll sign. We don't know if the treatment will have the desired outcome. We don't even know if he'll immediately feel less scared. We know that his nod is no longer taken by everyone as a complete answer. In a room where others know more about the treatment than he does, he can begin to better understand the meaning of his own participation. Difference doesn't heal the body instead of medicine. It can help the medicine reach the person without asking them, as a silent condition, to disappear.

A criterion that also obliges those who propose it

An act is oriented toward good when it supports, in others and in ourselves, the possibility of feeling what is happening and not automatically surrendering the present to a pre-existing response. This possibility, however, acquires ethical value only in conjunction with the protection of the body, justice for those who suffer its consequences, and limits on power that benevolent intention cannot suspend.

These are the two phrases that should be kept together. The first indicates a direction. The second prevents that direction from becoming a justification available for any means. If we separate them, we can convince ourselves we're improving someone while depriving them of their voice, rights, rest, or security. We can also celebrate their freedom by leaving them without the material support that would allow them to exercise it.

The criterion concerns a Self that we have described as a concrete unity of the person: body, history, interpretation, relationships, variable capacities for intervention. It does not concern a small internal sovereign to be asked to command better. Neri, with his immobile pen, is already whole. His value does not increase when he asks an elegant question. Even if the question does not arrive, treatment should seek appropriate ways to meet him.

"Feeling the present" doesn't mean being serenely aware of everything. It can mean acknowledging a pain, realizing you haven't understood, distinguishing a promise from a probability, finding a way to express discomfort. It may require an interpreter, an assistant, someone who knows a form of communication. It may mean resting enough to be able to make decisions tomorrow. A clear conscience isn't the only condition worth preserving.

"Don't automatically sign the past" is a metaphor. It doesn't mean that every habit is harmful or that history should lose its authority. A habit can protect us, a memory can correctly warn us, a familiar gesture can make us available to others. The problem arises when what has happened predetermines the meaning of what is happening, and no further information can reach us. The opportunity sought is that of an update, even a minimal one, when there are reasons to update.

We haven't obtained a universal definition of good from biology. We propose an ethical interpretation, which must address ethical objections. Studies can show us that a condition changes a behavior or a stated experience. They cannot, with that result alone, establish whether it was right to introduce it. Good does not coincide with the variable we chose to measure.

For this reason, the criterion must first reach those who use it. When we talk about expanding the possibilities of others, we must leave open the possibility that the other—a colleague, a witness, or an institution—will show us a limit to our intervention. Our ability to change direction is part of the problem. Without it, the promised openness becomes a task assigned to those with less power.

The most serious objection: a good that creates people

The objection can be formulated without caricature. Who decides what it means to feel the present? Who recognizes a response as automatic? A doctor might consider every rejection of his proposal automatic. A teacher might call openness merely an interest in what he teaches. An authority figure might argue that today's restrictions pave the way for a freer citizenry tomorrow. One partner might interpret every limitation of the other as an old wound to be overcome.

The promise of a more capable Self doesn't protect us from domination. It can offer it a refined vocabulary. The intervener no longer says "obey": he says **"become free** ," meaning, however, free to choose what he has already chosen. If dissent proves the existence of the blockage the intervention seeks to cure, no dissent can ever refute the intervention. We have built a door that opens only from the outside.

There's a second part of the objection. Situations don't always allow for time and consensus. Sometimes it's necessary to intervene before a conversation begins. Sometimes an individual choice exposes others to harm. Sometimes two goods conflict and resources aren't enough. If the criterion requires shared transformation, it risks becoming unusable precisely where responsibility weighs most heavily. It could turn a necessary decision into a long wait for everyone's agreement.

These objections attack a possible version of our thesis. We must abandon them: the good is not the production of a particular type of subject, and participation is not an unlimited right to prevent any action by others. The answer is not to declare anyone with good intentions good. It is to make interventions open to criticism, even when their intentions are good.

What is needed are understandable reasons, relevant information, means proportionate to the situation, the possibility of review, and attention to absent parties. Where consent is possible and relevant, it must be seriously sought; where it is not, its absence increases the duty to justify the power exercised. Where rights and safeguards exist, they cannot be replaced by the private belief that the other has been understood.

These are guidelines to be implemented in different contexts, not a legal code derived from the Self. A clinical interview, a school decision, a public intervention, and a domestic conversation are not interchangeable. They have different obligations, responsibilities, and forms of verification. The same care in speaking does not make decisions that produce different consequences equivalent.

So, a tension remains, not an argumentative victory. We must sometimes choose without knowing enough and without fully agreeing. We can embrace this necessity without converting it into innocence. Having a reason to act does not mean we are no longer responsible for the consequences of that action.

The body cannot be the guarantee of our theory

An act that saves the body and extinguishes the Self is an incomplete good. An act that celebrates the Self and abandons the body is a pose. The two formulations indicate a real tension, but they must be read carefully. Body and Self are not two separate objects to be nourished in turn. Anyone who is in pain, hungry, cold, limited, or ill is the same person who desires, interprets, and participates.

"Turning off the Self" here refers, as an image, to a practice that treats the person as an irrelevant presence in its own care: it doesn't communicate what they can understand, it doesn't seek ways to listen to them, it substitutes convenient preferences for their own, and it uses silence as a general availability. It doesn't describe every temporary reduction of consciousness. A necessary anesthesia is not a moral erasure of the subject. An emergency intervention on a person who cannot express themselves doesn't become unjust simply because it precedes their speech.

The question concerns the relationship between what needs to be done and what we authorize ourselves to add. How much of the imposed limit is required by the situation? How much arises from organization, avoidable haste, fear of dissent, or the habit of deciding who depends on it? A limited need does not necessitate everything associated with it.

At the other extreme, talk of participation can conceal abandonment **. "You decide,"** said without explanation, without accessible alternatives, without a competent opinion, places a burden on the person they are unable to bear alone. Even a formally available choice can be practically empty. No one should be forced to become an expert in everything they depend on in order to deserve respectful help.

For Neri, the doctor must be able to say which option she recommends and why. A recommendation is an exercise of expertise, not an abuse in itself. It becomes suspect when it conceals uncertainty, makes the question indecent, or transforms a professional preference into a decision already made by the other. Treatment requires reliable authorities, capable of taking on a task and explaining where it ends.

Furthermore, there are goods that don't produce a discernible increase in the capacity to choose. The relief of suffering, the support of a severely compromised person, the needed companionship, the preservation of a fragile possibility, have value even without subsequent improvement. It would be cruel to evaluate treatment solely based on the more autonomous individual it promises to achieve.

The proposed direction must include maintenance and protection, even when no one can demonstrate progress. We don't ask the body to become a testament to our philosophy. We don't ask those we help to transform themselves to make the help worthy of its name.

The doctor: understanding a decision, being able to stay with it

Let's return to the initial room. The doctor knows the treatment much better than Neri; Neri knows aspects of his own life that the doctor can't glean from the medical report. These are not the same skills, and there's no need to declare them equal to recognize that both can be relevant. A clinical recommendation must meet concrete conditions: what a person can do, what they fear, the help available, the consequences they are willing to endure.

Relative power is also evident in the details. The doctor controls the length of the visit, the technical vocabulary, and the next step. The daughter knows the procedures better than her

father and can speak more quickly. Neri, to obtain treatment, may feel obligated to demonstrate trust. No one necessarily needs to threaten him for his yes to be pressured.

Research documents the importance of communication, without addressing its moral significance alone. Haskard Zolnierek and DiMatteo's meta-analysis, published in 2009, considered 106 correlational studies and 21 experimental interventions on physician communication and patient adherence to treatment. It found a favorable association and benefits of educational interventions on adherence. The designs and outcomes differ: aggregate data does not guarantee the results of a single visit.

This very outcome requires an ethical distinction. Achieving greater compliance does not, in itself, demonstrate that participation has expanded. Communication could help determine appropriate treatment; it could also become more effective in persuading. To evaluate it, we must consider the quality of the proposal, the information, the effective scope for decision-making, as well as the final behavior.

In our scenario, asking Neri to explain in his own words what he understood serves to verify the explanation. It shouldn't become a test that rewards the diligent patient. If an answer is incorrect, the caregiver should be able to change the way they explain. If the patient has difficulty expressing themselves, other methods are needed. If a term isn't understood, repeating it with more authority doesn't make it accessible.

Repair can be small and precise: correcting an overly reassuring statement, acknowledging an interruption, arranging the transition for the person who will continue the conversation. It's also material. A missed call, incomprehensible instructions, or an inaccessible visit can undermine the promised participation in the room. The meeting acquires continuity when someone takes on the responsibility of making the next step feasible.

The best decision isn't necessarily the one that leaves everyone feeling most at ease at the end of the visit. A more thorough understanding can temporarily increase anxiety. The good comes not only from asking whether the patient feels reassured. It also comes from asking whether they were able to face the reality of the choice without being reduced to an obstacle to be overcome.

Giving a chance means making it usable

"You can say no" can be a true and insufficient statement. To use a possibility, you sometimes have to find the words, know who to address them to, understand what will happen next, and hold the gaze of the person making the request. The option exists on paper; the gesture required to exercise it can remain extremely difficult.

Schlund, Sommers, and Bohns studied a limited part of this difficulty. In two laboratory experiments, published in 2024, participants were asked to hand over their unlocked phones to an assistant. Providing concrete words to refuse, rather than simply reminding them of their right to do so, increased their perceived freedom to say no. In the two main experiments, differences in actual handover were not statistically significant. This is primarily a result of the self-reported experience of choice in that context; it does not demonstrate a general solution to coercion nor does it directly test all power asymmetries.

The conclusion we draw from this is interpretative: the availability of an option and its feasibility deserve separate questions. We do not deduce from the study that there is a formula

capable of freeing all consent. Sometimes a single sentence is enough to alleviate a difficulty; other times a single sentence is completely insufficient, because the cost of refusal is real.

An employee may know exactly how to say no and fear retaliation. A financially dependent person may be eloquent and have nowhere to turn. A patient may express every doubt and only find a distant or inaccessible treatment option. It would be a new injustice to transform a power issue into a lack of vocabulary on the part of the person suffering from it.

Making an opportunity available may therefore require discretion, another interlocutor, a means of complaint, support, money, and time. In a private relationship, it may mean stopping demanding immediate explanations for every rejection. In an organization, it may mean preventing those who decide on future opportunities from even controlling, without verification, the collection of dissent.

Not every request allows for a renunciation without consequences. A task undertaken entails obligations, a rule may protect others, a deadline may be necessary. Here too, precision matters: which parts are optional, which are mandatory, which consequences depend on the task, which would be added to punish the person? Saying indiscriminately "you are free" can cover up pressure; saying indiscriminately "you must" can extend an obligation beyond its rationale.

A possibility matters even when it's used against the wishes of the person offering it. This is the point at which a promise can become verifiable. When Neri asks for time, the doctor must be able to distinguish the clinical consequence of waiting from her own irritation at the delay. Only the former can honestly explain the risk.

The teacher: the difficulty without the verdict

Imagine a class where the first papers have been corrected. Professor Riva has underlined passages that don't hold up, noted the absence of some evidence, and asked students to rewrite. Amir only reads the number at the bottom of the page. When she suggests a revision, he says, "We already know how it goes." The teacher might recognize that sentence from many other mornings. If he uses it to recognize everything, Amir is already done listening before he finishes speaking.

The scene is fictional; the problem doesn't require a diagnosis. Amir may be discouraged, angry, unprepared, tired, or mistakenly convinced that the judgment was made beforehand. Several hypotheses can coexist. The professor doesn't have to immediately choose a psychological explanation. She must demonstrate what was assessed and what a review can actually change.

Here, relative power encompasses voting, public visibility, and the language through which a behavior becomes a characteristic. It also includes access to a second attempt: to whom it is offered, with what timeframe, and through what materials. Saying "you can improve" without offering a possible job can sound like yet another request to demonstrate for yourself what you don't yet know how to do.

In field experiments, Yeager and colleagues studied how critical feedback should be accompanied. In the first two studies of the work published in 2014, seventh-grade students received corrections associated, in the experimental condition, with a message about the teacher's high standards and confidence in their ability to achieve them. They were more likely to submit a revision in the first study and the quality of the final version in the second. The

effects were generally stronger among African-American students, especially when there was distrust toward the school. These are contextual findings: they do not justify treating an encouraging statement as a universal cure-all for inequality.

The data doesn't require every task to be made easy. It shows, under these conditions, that the meaning attributed to criticism can change the way it is responded to. Our ethical interpretation adds a requirement that the experiment alone doesn't establish: the affirmation of trust must be consistent with the behaviors and tools offered.

Riva can point out two steps to redo, explain the key error, give an example, and clarify how he will evaluate the new submission. He can ask Amir whether the problem is understanding the request, finding the time, or believing the revision will actually be read. He shouldn't promise any outcome. He must avoid allowing a previous outcome to make the next attempt fictitious.

Reparation, if he said "I expected nothing else from you," doesn't simply consist of withdrawing the sentence. It consists of reinstating a criterion that doesn't use that sentence as a hidden truth. A subsequent elaboration must be interpreted for its full content. No praise can justify an evaluation that is already impervious to the student's work.

The class also includes those who do not speak

A class isn't the sum of twenty private conversations. If Amir requests time, other students may need it; if he's granted a review, the criteria for others' access must be considered. Nurturing a relationship can't buy attention by unreasonably withdrawing it from those who remain less visible.

This is a crucial aspect of goodness. The person present before us can focus our feelings and make us miss those who aren't there, those who don't insist, those who communicate differently. A seemingly generous willingness can lead to injustice if it rewards only those who manage to secure the encounter. Therefore, participation also requires understandable rules and access that don't depend on personal affinity.

Riva can organize the review as an opportunity for everyone, differentiating support without pretending that every student has the same conditions. She can explain that an accommodation doesn't arbitrarily change the criteria, but rather makes it possible to meet them. She can protect personal information without allowing the class to interpret every difference as a secret favor.

Here, too, words encounter a limit. A teacher might formulate a request well and not have the time to follow through. They might know they need help and not have it. Their responsibility doesn't vanish, but it doesn't equate with the power to provide what's missing. An organization must be able to recognize that limitation, assign resources, and make decisions. Asking for infinite dedication from one person can become the way everyone else stops responding.

Classroom safety poses other requirements. If a student threatens or attacks, stopping the behavior can precede a full understanding of their situation. Those being protected don't have to wait until the perpetrator's explanation is complete. The dignity of the person being detained, however, continues to impose limits: the language used, the public presentation, the proportion, and the educational follow-up.

An intervention can therefore contradict an immediate desire and support a broader possibility. But this formula must not be a shortcut. Desire is limited for a specific reason, not

because the authorities have recognized a better fate. After the emergency, the action must be explained and verified.

In Amir's case, the task remains difficult. The review may still prove insufficient. It would be false to call respectful feedback solely when it avoids disappointment. The question is whether that disappointment concerns a project on which there is still work to be done or a person who has been credited, in advance, with everything that could possibly be.

Public Speaker: The Listener We Don't See

Now imagine a room where the closure of a service is being discussed. The person speaking has data, reasons, and a proposal. Among those listening are people who use that service every week, others who pay its cost without using it, and still others who have only heard one voice. Some understand the vocabulary, while others understand the consequences perfectly well but struggle to formulate them in front of everyone.

The state of the listener isn't a single state. A room can contain fear, curiosity, justified anger, fatigue, self-interest, or a willingness to change one's mind. The speaker can't know all of this. He can avoid speaking as if he already knows the meaning of every reaction. Silence isn't approval; a harsh question doesn't necessarily reject the facts; applause doesn't validate a proposal.

Its relative power comes from the microphone, the time allotted, the ability to choose which data to present and which questions to ask. It comes from professional authority and the ability to present a choice that preserves margins as inevitable. Public speech must not only be clear. It must also clarify where the conclusion depends on data and where it depends on a value or priority.

He can say: **"These are the costs we know; we don't yet have a reliable estimate of these effects; this is the proposal I support for these reasons."** It doesn't weaken the argument. It makes it clear where it can be challenged. If he adds **"there are no alternatives** ," he should be able to show which alternatives were considered, by whom, and according to what criteria.

The value of public discourse here faces a temptation: using the audience's state to push through a decision. Inflaming fear, focusing attention on a single case, exploiting collective weariness can be effective. Effectiveness doesn't determine whether we've given people something to judge or simply a push to follow.

Emotionless language isn't necessary. A loss, an injustice, or a danger may require words capable of reaching the heart. The question is whether emotion helps us see what needs to be judged or prevents us from questioning the conclusion. A true story can become a pressure if it's used to make any question about the associated proposition morally indecent.

When a mistake is made, reparation must be given the same space as the damage. Misinformation publicly disclosed cannot be corrected simply by saying in private, "I explained myself poorly." The correction must be made available, distinguished from the previous information, and the decision modified if its basis has changed. The more power the word has, the less it can leave listeners with the task of reconstructing the correction themselves.

Knowing the other's state without attributing it to them

The doctor, the teacher, and the speaker face the same limitation: they don't possess the other's experience. They can gather information, observe cues, ask questions. They can also make mistakes. The criterion of good would become invasive if it allowed them to describe from the outside what the person should feel, and then gauge their willingness to recognize themselves in that description.

Sometimes the first cure is to leave a question without an immediate answer. " **I don't know if this word means to you what it means to me."** This is a concrete limitation of knowledge, not a pose of humility. It can lead to using an example, asking for restitution, offering another opportunity. It can also lead to stopping the pursuit when the information sought isn't essential to the task.

Not everything has to be shared to deserve respect. Neri may have private reasons he doesn't want to share with his daughter. Amir may want to clarify a policy without publicly expressing his distrust. A citizen can challenge a decision without publicly describing the pain it causes. The right to be heard must not become an obligation to be transparent.

There's a difference between verifying an understanding and requesting a confession. The former seeks what's needed for a decision or a task. The latter can become an emotional toll: I'll help you when you've shown me enough of your fragility. If a request for access to a service is well-founded, it shouldn't depend on the ability to convincingly describe a suffering.

Those with more power must therefore also question their own need to know. What purpose will this information serve? Who will retain it? Can it be omitted? Is there a way for the person to correct it? These are ethical and organizational questions. We cannot derive uniform answers, but we can recognize how much the relationship changes when the listener doesn't consider every silence a resistance to be overcome.

In the public space, this means creating multiple avenues for intervention, whenever possible: a written question, a follow-up conversation, an accessible contact person. It means distinguishing the availability of a channel from the actual consideration of what comes through it. Collecting a hundred questions and not allowing any to have an impact can become a representation of listening.

Participation does not require that every request be accepted. It requires being able to understand what was considered, why a choice was made, and where the decision can be reconsidered. Rejection of a proposal can be justified without turning the person making it into someone incapable of understanding. Even a negative response can contain a clear acknowledgement of the request.

In the kitchen, after a wrong

Sara learned from a friend that Davide had shared an incident over dinner that she had asked him not to share. The incident involved a work-related difficulty. It wasn't a dangerous secret, nor did it imply an obligation to protect anyone from harm. It was something Sara wanted to be able to talk about, if and when she decided. Davide brought it up to explain why she'd been "so nervous" lately.

This scene, too, is imagined. The two are adults. We have no reason to diagnose either of them or to generalize about their relationship. The wrong is fairly clear: information given under a

condition was used without respecting that condition. The fact that Davide intended to make it clear to his friends does not negate his actions.

In the kitchen, Sara says, **"I don't know what else I can tell you."** Davide feels a judgment coming on his entire person. He wants to list the things he's kept safe, remember the times he's helped, explain that his friends haven't thought badly of him. This information could have a place in a different conversation. Right now, it risks turning a verifiable fact into a trial of the overall amount of his love.

Sara's state is only partially visible: she speaks slowly, doesn't look at him, and keeps her friend's message open. Davide isn't sure if she's primarily angry, humiliated, worried about work, or tired of a past situation. He can ask what she needs, but first he must acknowledge a fact for which the answer is already available. There's no point in interpreting her state and saying, **"You asked me, so I told you."**

Relative power here doesn't depend on a professional title. David controls access to the friends he spoke to, knows the words he used, and can try to influence the next version. Sarah doesn't know how widely it was shared. He has information about the consequences of his actions that she has a right to know. Even among adults, a principled symmetry doesn't eliminate a concrete asymmetry.

The necessary word is therefore specific. What was said, to whom, in what context? If Davide doesn't remember exactly, he must distinguish memory from uncertainty. He shouldn't promise that no one will talk about it again: he doesn't control other people. He can explain what he knows and ask how to prevent an attempt to correct the matter from spreading the story further.

Sara says she doesn't want to talk about it that evening. Her refusal doesn't prevent Davide from taking responsibility. It prevents him from immediately getting complete instructions from her to feel reconciled. He can stop sharing the story, not add explanations to his friends, and remain available to clarify what he did. He can write down for himself the points he shouldn't forget. The work doesn't begin only when the injured person agrees to accompany him.

To repair means to change the course of events

The next day, Sara asks Davide to tell his friends that he shouldn't have shared the story and that the description of his behavior was his own interpretation. She doesn't ask him to tell another version of the work-related difficulty. She asks him to reduce the power of the version he's already circulating.

Repair here has two dimensions. One concerns information: distinguishing the fact, the interpretation, and what he wasn't authorized to share. The other concerns the relationship: recognizing that access to a confidential information doesn't grant the right to use it to explain the person to others. If he only corrects the tone, David leaves the problem intact.

He can tell his friends that he's crossed a line, without giving details and without assigning Sara the role of the one who forced him to correct himself. He can then tell her what he did, using the actual words he used. He doesn't have to stage a show of sincerity. He must make verifiable a step that would otherwise remain entirely under his control.

We don't know if Sara will confide in us again. Reparation doesn't create a valid credit of trust. It can change conditions that made the mistrust understandable; it can't establish the moment

when the mistrust should end. If the wrong is repeated, a new declaration shouldn't be considered as if nothing had happened before. The continuity of facts is also relevant information.

Davide, too, has a history. He may have learned to defend himself from criticism with lengthy explanations, or to give in immediately out of fear of breaking up. We can't know which is the case. He can acknowledge his own difficulty without turning it into a cause that Sara must address before she can demand respect. If he needs help changing a behavior, he can also seek it elsewhere.

The criterion of good, in fact, applies " **in the other and in oneself."** David must not learn to ignore every accusation. He must be able to verify the facts, challenge an inaccuracy, and point out a limitation. But self-protection does not require denying the wrong actually committed. A precise acknowledgment allows one to distinguish what he is responsible for from what is possibly attributed to him without reason.

Sara, too, can choose to end the relationship. Not every repair is intended to preserve it. The good may consist in making a separation less painful, in giving back what needs giving back, in not using intimate knowledge as a weapon. If, however, they choose to stay together, continuity will require a different way of handling confidences, not just a shared memory of that evening.

The kitchen doesn't contain a perfect courtroom or a scene of redemption. It contains two people who must understand whether one event can cease to govern every subsequent event. This possibility requires observable changes. The injured person isn't required to produce, through their forgiveness, what's still missing in the other's behavior.

The intention, the effect, the responsibility

In all four cases, benevolent intention is both important and insufficient. Wanting to heal, teach, inform, or remedy is not irrelevant. But the good we intend to do encounters a situation we haven't entirely chosen and people who aren't a test of our intention.

Effect matters, but it isn't the only criterion. A correct intervention may fail; an incorrect action may accidentally have a favorable outcome. If we evaluate only intention, we become impervious to harm. If we evaluate only the outcome, we reward luck and demand that the agent control the unpredictable. Responsibility lies in the relationship between what we could have known, what we chose, the means used, and what we do when the effects become visible.

This relationship has a time frame. Before action, we ask for reasons and attention. During action, we ask for the ability to notice, when possible. After action, we ask for verification and reparation. The second and third moments do not cancel out the first. The promise to make amends does not justify avoidable negligence.

Not everything can be predicted. This is precisely why we need to distinguish unpredictability from the decision not to look. If a risk is known and hidden to obtain a yes, we cannot call the consequence we wanted to leave out of the choice unexpected. If information was reasonably accessible and we didn't seek it because it would have hindered our plan, its subsequent discovery also changes our judgment of our previous behavior.

The burden of verification increases with power. Those who make decisions for many, those who possess rare expertise, or those who oversee a service must be able to document more

than those who perform a limited action without authority. Not because people have different value, but because their actions have different scope and scope for scrutiny.

In the kitchen, Davide can reconstruct what he said. In a school, a decision may require written criteria and the possibility of revision. In a service, it may require an organization that records errors and doesn't punish those who report them. These methods don't replace feelings; they prevent the feelings of those in charge from being the only place where harm can be recognized.

The responsibility of the Self, therefore, does not coincide with a more intense sensitivity. It may require a subtle gesture: preserving accurate information, making a procedure accessible, leaving a record of a change, or handing over a decision to someone competent to evaluate it. Ethics takes shape even through tasks that bear no resemblance to a great moral experience.

When you have to stop, choose, lose something

A direction toward goodness does not eliminate conflict. A doctor may have to communicate a difficult prognosis. A teacher may have to assign an unsatisfactory outcome. A manager may have to refuse a request based on a genuine need because fulfilling it would harm others or is not possible with the available resources. Two people may acknowledge a wrong and still not find a form of shared life they desire.

If we simply ask ourselves whether the other will feel their possibilities expand, these situations seem to challenge this criterion. But good cannot be equated with the immediate experience of expansion. A painful truth can allow for a more realistic choice. A justified limit can protect an absent person. A separation can close off one possibility and remove other possibilities from a harmful condition.

This distinction is necessary and risky. Those who impose harm can always describe it as a deferred good. Therefore, the future benefit must not be a promise untested. What reasons support it? What alternatives were available? Who pays the cost? How long does the limitation last? Who can review it? If no one can respond and any criticism is postponed to an indefinite future, the promised good is primarily protecting present power.

In a true emergency, some questions will come later. Their postponement should depend on the urgency and end with it. An exception should not become the usual form of reporting. If each day is too urgent to explain, check, or listen, we need to question the organization that creates that time, as well as the decisions made within it.

There is also damage that cannot be undone through better communication. Not all losses become acceptable when well explained. Precise wording can avoid further humiliation; it doesn't automatically transform a tragic choice into a harmonious one. Sometimes responsibility lies in acknowledging a loss without claiming it should be experienced as an opportunity.

The listener may remain angry. They may reject our interpretation. They may judge the reasons we've given insufficient. Their reaction doesn't in itself prove that we acted badly, but it remains information worth considering. Independent judgment includes the possibility of not granting the decision maker the feeling that would make it easier to decide further.

Directing the good, then, involves distinguishing two questions: do we have adequate reasons for this limitation? Are we adding suffering or subordination that those reasons don't require?

The first doesn't exempt us from the second. The second doesn't always make the limitation avoidable. Moral work often occurs in the difficult space between the two.

The time to stop is also a civil matter

Willingness to see someone doesn't depend solely on our perception of goodness. In a 1973 experiment, Darley and Batson studied forty theological seminary students included in the analysis. While passing between two buildings, they encountered a person apparently in distress. Those who had been urged to hurry were less likely to stop. Preparing a speech on the parable of the Good Samaritan, rather than on another topic, did not produce a significant difference in the likelihood of helping.

The sample was small and unique; the situation was experimentally constructed. We do not derive from this study a law for all rescuers, nor evidence that moral convictions are useless. We see a case in which an immediate condition mattered for behavior, and in which the explicit presence of an ethical theme did not guarantee the corresponding action.

The civic consequence we propose goes beyond that outcome and requires its own arguments: an organization that demands attention must consider the time and conditions in which the request is made. It's not enough to simply present a declaration of principles where the tasks systematically make it difficult to follow them.

In the health service, the doctor's time isn't solely her own. In schools, Riva's availability also depends on the number of students and the available support staff. In the public room, whoever designed the procedure may have decided that questions only arrive once the decision has been finalized. If we attribute everything to the individual's personality, we obscure part of the causes we could address.

This doesn't mean that haste justifies every action. Two people under the same load may act differently, and avoidable choices remain to be evaluated. It does mean that an ethical request should also indicate who can modify the conditions that make it more difficult. A manager who demands greater listening and unnecessarily reduces listening time must be held accountable for both actions.

For a legislator, direction becomes concrete when a recognized possibility is accompanied by accessible means, public criteria, and checks on the power that administers it. We are not prescribing a specific rule here. We are suggesting a question to be asked when making a legislative choice: who, in reality, will be able to use it, with what resources, through what steps, and who will be excluded even if the text appears to include them?

For a parent, the consequence may be admitting that patience isn't maintained by a single purpose. Sometimes it's necessary to redistribute a task, ask for help, or change a schedule. For someone alone in a room, it may mean acknowledging a limitation before promising a commitment they can't keep. Responsibility becomes more credible when it knows how to seek conditions for persistence.

Modest does not mean small; non-delegable does not mean solitary

The ethical responsibility of epigenesis is modest. It doesn't ask us to produce a new life in the other. It doesn't assign us the task of redeeming their history. It doesn't turn every conversation into a healing session and every hesitation into an opportunity to intervene. Many encounters simply require us to do our part well and respect a limit.

This modesty is about pretension, not importance. Accurately stating what one knows, withholding access, halting dissemination, reading a review, or leaving a chance to return can have significant consequences. The gesture doesn't have to be extraordinary to deserve attention. It must be appropriate to the situation and the power we actually wield.

Responsibility is non-delegable in the sense that we cannot hand over to others the justification for what we do. " **They asked me to," "everyone does it," "it was for his own good"** do not complete a reason. But tasks are often delegable, and must be. A doctor consults a colleague, a teacher involves expert support, a person seeks help, an institution distributes functions.

Delegation can be a form of accountability when it recognizes a skill, clarifies a task, and maintains the necessary follow-up. It can be an escape when it serves to avoid knowing what's happening. We don't ask everyone to do everything: we ask that the distribution of tasks not be used to obscure any place where a consequence can be recognized.

Even those who help have the right to rest, protection, and a limit. If good were defined as unlimited availability, it would expose even the most conscientious people to an endless demand. Supporting another's Self sometimes requires refusing to offer intimacy or expertise we don't possess, declaring a timetable, directing someone elsewhere without humiliating them.

A lonely person may wonder whether the message they're about to send is necessary now or is primarily intended to release tension. It's not necessary to know the recipient's entire psychology. It can be enough to distinguish a clear request from a blanket accusation, verify a fact, indicate when a response is desired without imposing an immediate response. These are concrete ways to participate in the relationship even before the other person responds.

The criterion remains demanding because it doesn't guarantee recognition. We can make an appropriate gesture and not receive gratitude. We can correct a mistake and still lose trust. Our orientation toward goodness shouldn't depend on the sentiment the other conveys as proof of our goodness. Otherwise, we'd end up asking them to do something that serves our image.

The worst prediction is not an order

You are not asked to redeem the other's past. You are asked not to be, in this moment, the confirmation of their worst predictions. It is the request with which this movement can end, as long as it is not used against the recipient. No one knows all the predictions of others. No one can guarantee that they will not be associated, by another, with a painful experience. No one should abandon a necessary limit just because that limit will cause fear of abandonment.

The prediction can be unfair. It may require us to demonstrate love by accepting scrutiny, to demonstrate trust by confiding in someone, to demonstrate respect by avoiding criticism. Not confirming it doesn't mean obeying the request. It may mean clarifying the boundary, not adding threats, not using intimacy to cause harm, accepting that our behavior will be judged without surrendering all decision-making.

Responsibility concerns what we can reasonably recognize and do, not domination over another's experience. If Neri fears that his signature will erase any possibility of expression, the doctor can explain the actual steps and make the contacts usable. She can't promise that he will never feel powerless. If Amir fears a pre-written verdict, Riva can demonstrate the

criteria and actually read the review. She can't guarantee that every assessment will seem fair to him.

The speaker in the room can avoid using fear as a shortcut and can make uncertainties clear. He or she cannot, with clarity, achieve everyone's agreement. David can correct what he said, limit further disclosures, and handle confidences differently. He or she cannot demand that Sarah immediately recognize a difference between him and the person she fears.

In each case, the present can offer new information without imposing a new conclusion. The difference needs to be encountered, verified, sometimes repeated. It may remain insufficient. However, it is different from the request to trust because we know we have changed.

Epigenesis, in the theoretical sense adopted in this book, concerns the way a specific person brings a response into being within conditions and a history. With these encounters, we have not described molecular modifications of DNA. We have not demonstrated that a benevolent act rewrites a memory, nor that a respectful gesture definitively interrupts an automatism. We have argued that we participate in the conditions under which a response can take shape, and that this participation concerns us morally.

The renunciation of innocence lies here. We don't control the entire entourage, but we are already within someone else's entourage. Therefore, it's not enough to say we didn't want to. We can learn from the consequences, correct a reason, stop a behavior. We can also recognize that some of the damage will remain and that our task isn't over simply because we don't know how to eliminate it.

A present that does not demand absolution

Neri returns for the next interview. He brings the paper, a written application, and the same daughter. He hasn't changed. The concern hasn't disappeared. He tells the doctor that part of the explanation remained unclear to him and that, at home, he thought of a practical consequence they hadn't discussed. The decision will have to address that consequence as well.

Amir submits a revision. Some passages are better; others still require work. Riva doesn't use the assignment to prove to the class that he was right about him. He reads it. In the public room, a written question reveals a cost that the presentation hadn't considered. The person proposing the choice must decide whether that new information changes the proposal, and explain why. One evening, Sara tells Davide only a part of her day. He doesn't use that little bit as a sign that everything is back to normal.

The scenes don't converge toward a happy ending. They converge toward a more sober possibility: a subsequent answer isn't entirely contained within the previous one. To find it, different things are needed. Expertise in the clinical room, criteria and tools in the classroom, accountability in the room, verifiable behaviors in the kitchen. The name of Self doesn't replace any of these tasks.

There are also those who are unable to return, to deliver, to write, to tell their stories. Care should not interpret their absence as proof that the opportunity was wasted. It should ask, where possible, whether access was genuine and whether support should take another form. However, there are absences we cannot explain and possibilities we cannot reopen. Modesty embraces the limits of our knowledge.

Toward good, without innocence, means acting without expecting the goodness of the direction to exempt us from the consequences. It means being able to maintain a rationale and reconsider a means, defend a limit and acknowledge unnecessary harshness, help someone and accept that we are not the place where that someone wishes to remain.

We don't need to believe that every person harbors a limitless life, ready to emerge if we find the right phrase. We need to avoid mistaking what we know now for everything that person could become. The future doesn't belong to us simply because we helped make it possible.

Neri's pen, Amir's paper, the microphone, the kitchen—all these have remained commonplace objects. Through them, we've seen how much can enter into a gesture: a body to be protected, a story not to be invented, a word that can become a bond, a power to be held accountable. None of these elements disappear when we learn to recognize them. It becomes more difficult to use them without realizing it.

A question remains, simpler to ask than to live: when we encounter a face again, what allows us to see it without having already decided, before its next gesture, who it is?

Chapter Sources

The clinical, scholastic, public, and domestic scenes are imagined. The cited studies describe results limited to the indicated designs and outcomes; they do not establish a scientific definition of good. The proposed criterion, the limits of power, and the civil consequences are interpretative and ethical arguments. The automatic signature of the past and the shutdown of the Self are metaphors, not biological mechanisms. The chapter does not attribute molecular epigenetic modifications to encounters and does not replace specific clinical, normative, or professional assessments.

Haskard Zolnierek, K. B., & DiMatteo, M. R. (2009). Physician Communication and Patient Adherence to Treatment: A Meta-Analysis. Medical Care, 47(8), 826–834. Synthesis of correlational studies and educational interventions; adherence is an outcome distinct from the ethical legitimacy of consent. Source

Schlund, R., Sommers, R., & Bohns, V. K. (2024). Giving people the words to say no leads them to feel freer to say yes. Scientific Reports, 14, Article 576. Two main experiments on perceived freedom to refuse; behavioral differences were not statistically significant. Source

Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A., Hessert, W. T., Williams, M. E., & Cohen, G. L. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143(2), 804–824. The text discusses the first two experiments; contextual findings, not a general solution to inequality. Source

Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). 'From Jerusalem to Jericho': A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 27(1), 100–108. Experimental study with forty participants analyzed; original paper available from Stanford SPARQ. Source



Epilogue

The look that hasn't signed yet

The child returns to the sheet of paper left on the table. The outline is still there, with the color having gone beyond the outline. In the third chapter, we imagined him pointing to himself with one hand, then with his entire body. We hadn't found any evidence in his gesture. We had encountered a presence that our questions struggled to contain. Now we can resume that invented scene without pretending that the child remained still, waiting for the end of our argument.

The adult looks at the red that's leaked from the edge. **"You've gone too far here** ," she says. He follows the spot with his eyes, then moves the brush. She doesn't yet know if he's understood, if he wants to correct it, if he's interested in the outline. Her hand has already reached for a cloth. It's a useful, ordinary gesture: cleaning before the paint dries. But the child places a finger next to the stain. **"That stays."** He's not necessarily defending a work. He might like that shape. He might want to continue using it. To know that, we need to grant him something that the adult's sentence had almost already concluded: the meaning of what he's done.

She stops the cloth. The table must be protected; the color on the paper can wait. **"What do you want to do with it?** " He begins to draw around it. We don't know if it will turn out to be something an adult will find beautiful. We don't need to know to distinguish the table from the drawing, the necessary boundary from the one we've drawn out of habit. The question allows us to see a difference that was already there and that the rush to correct made it difficult to identify.

The child didn't become free because the adult remained silent. He needed her before, and he will need her later. The brush, the paper, the time spent there are conditions he didn't create himself. He may have ideas that aren't suited to what he wants to achieve. He may get irritated when the paint runs out. He may repeat a solution he's seen and believe it's his own. Childhood isn't a space without constraints or a past. This morning, too, comes after other mornings.

Yet her gesture makes us perceive a risk in our knowledge. The adult knows how an outline is usually filled in. This knowledge is useful when the task is to fill it in. It becomes less useful if it is used to unwittingly establish that this must be the only possible task. The problem isn't recognizing the edge. It's recognizing a mistake before knowing what the child is trying to do.

She doesn't need to go back to being a child. She needs to realize a decision she made when she thought she was only seeing. She can maintain her knowledge, protect the table, ask questions. The wait is short. It's not an infinite suspension of all judgment. It's the concrete time in which a first reading can be reached by information it doesn't yet contain.

The child draws a line. The adult may think she's given him a chance. She doesn't know how much it will matter, and she shouldn't make it a prediction about her life. She knows that, in that moment, she hasn't used her knowledge to replace an available question. Her gesture doesn't erase the other times she corrected too quickly. It adds a different encounter to the story they're both living.

Eventually, the child puts down the brush and asks to go away. Perhaps the drawing is finished; perhaps it has ceased to be interesting to him. This, too, matters. The point of openness isn't to force him to continue until the adult has seen a transformation. He can put

the paper aside and devote himself to something else. The whole person he points to when he says "I" also includes that common, unceremonious desire to have done enough.

This is where the book must take its leave. We have tried to understand how a life takes shape without attributing it to a single author. Now the question concerns how we encounter it when we believe we have understood it. The gaze that has not yet signed is a gaze capable of leaving a reading provisional, when the situation allows for verification. It is not a gaze devoid of history, and it cannot promise that every verification will lead us to a better outcome.

The metaphor of the signature concerns the conclusion we add to what we see. A person is silent, and we read disinterest. They hesitate, and we read incompetence. They return to a topic, and we read obstinacy. Sometimes the reading is correct; sometimes something is missing. The signature arrives when the judgment ceases to be a proposition about the meaning of the gesture and becomes what the gesture must confirm, no matter what happens next.

Children can remind us of the possibility of learning, without becoming the emblem of moral superiority. Lucas, Bridgers, Griffiths, and Gopnik, in a 2014 study, compared four- and five-year-old children and adults in causal learning tasks. Participants observed objects that activated a device, either individually or only in combination. Children were more likely than adults to generalize the less common relationship that required a combination. This is a result on specific tasks, not a measure of childish freedom or innocence. It indicates that, under those conditions, more consolidated prior knowledge did not necessarily imply an advantage in learning a new relationship.

This result does not mean that it is better to know less. An adult possesses tools that a child is still developing. Expertise allows us to recognize a danger, avoid wasted attempts, and see a problem where inexperience misses one. The philosophical consequence we propose here is more limited: knowing and remaining available to correct what we know are distinct tasks, and we need both. No experiment, through this distinction, provides us with a complete theory of freedom.

The least closed-off child is therefore an image, not a description of every child. A short story can already contain strong fears and responses that are difficult to change. A long story may have taught us to seek corrections, listen, and change our minds. The number of years does not measure a person's margin of openness. If childhood has a function in these pages, it is to make visible how unfair it is to treat a life in the making as if it had already been reached. The same injustice can affect an adult.

For us, there is no present completely devoid of interpretation. The face we recognize comes to us with memories, expectations, words. Even the intention to look at it differently is part of a history. To say that the present is not yet classified means, in the language of this epilogue, that its classification is not necessarily definitive. We can sometimes distinguish what we have before us from what we expected to have before us. This is the margin, and it can be small.

Revisiting a room doesn't require forgetting what happened there. A chair can remind us of a painful wait; a door can retain the meaning of a separation. If something is different today, we don't have to choose between denying the memory and denying the difference. We can try to acknowledge both. Sometimes we'll do so with help. Sometimes the difference won't be enough, and leaving the room will be the most appropriate choice. The book doesn't ask anyone to stay to prove that the past has lost its power.

Here we encounter the objection that our image must endure to the end. Those who have learned to defend themselves may recognize a risk before they know how to explain it. Inviting them to suspend their reading could expose it again. Those who have suffered a wrong may be asked for another try by the very person who continues to inflict it. The word "openness," then, becomes a burden for those who have already been hurt and an advantage for those who wish to be evaluated as if their story did not exist.

This objection imposes a real limit. A judgment can be revisable without being devoid of practical consequences. We can deny knowing someone completely and still decide to keep our distance, based on sufficient facts. We can listen to an explanation without returning access. We can recognize a limited change without attributing to it the power to correct everything that preceded it. The openness of knowledge does not require opening every door.

Suspending the dictatorship of the past is another metaphor. It concerns the moment when a prediction is treated as incapable of error, not the value of all the memories that protect us. Memory remains a source of knowledge and a reason for action. What we can try, where there is room, is not to grant it a monopoly on evidence. A difference must be verified; damage must be acknowledged. Neither task renders the other useless.

In a relationship, this margin can take a very common form. A father sees his son approaching and prepares for the usual request. This time, the son wants to tell him something. We don't know why the father is unavailable: he might be tired, worried, or accustomed to shielding himself from any interruption. Before answering a question that hasn't yet been asked, he can listen to what the question is. He isn't being asked to become a new father in an instant. He can avoid, in that moment, a specific mistake.

A teacher reads a student's work from which she has low expectations. Knowledge of previous difficulties can help her seek appropriate support. If it becomes an early measure of quality, it prevents her from reading. A doctor meets with a person struggling to follow a treatment plan. He can verify whether a practical situation has changed before repeating a reminder. A legislator can ask who is failing to use a formally recognized opportunity, rather than interpreting every lack of access as a renunciation. In each case, seeing better requires a different level of effort.

For a single person, that work might involve a single statement about oneself. **"I can never do it," "I'm made this way," "When I start, it always ends the same way."** It's not enough to replace it with an optimistic statement. We need to be able to understand what facts it refers to, what conditions persist, what exception would be truly pertinent. If a possibility doesn't exist today, naming it doesn't create it. If something can be changed, a limited attempt can provide information that a comprehensive assessment wouldn't have allowed us to seek.

These gestures aren't a universal method. They don't guarantee inner peace, nor do they require us to constantly monitor every response. We also need reliable habits, rest, and actions that don't require deliberation at every step. Mindful attention is valuable when it can reach a point where it's necessary to discern. If it becomes incessant self-monitoring, it can consume the very resources we need to encounter others.

The present moment is the place where a distinction can become action. It is in this sense that we have called it a laboratory of conscious epigenesis: an image of the work that occurs while we live, not a laboratory capable of isolating causes as an experiment would. That work can begin before the encounter, with preparation, and continue afterward, through verification. Its

possibility depends on bodily processes, relationships, and conditions that are not all conscious or under our control. Metaphor does not replace them.

Awareness, moreover, doesn't always arrive in time. We can understand after speaking, after interrupting, after making a decision. Delay doesn't render understanding useless. It changes its task: now we must correct information, recognize an effect, restore a possibility, avoid repetition. What has happened doesn't revert to a possibility that never happened. It becomes part of the conditions that the next action must confront.

This limitation distinguishes the epigenesis of the Self, in the interpretative sense of the book, from a promise to start over from scratch. We have thus called the contribution of the concrete person to the form a response takes in the present, through everything that made it possible or difficult. We have not made it a cause separate from the body and the world. We have not derived from this word molecular proof of the effects of an encounter. The concept is valid if it helps to ask more precise questions; it would lose value if it made the search for answers superfluous.

A person can act without recognizing all the conditions of their action. They can be supported without knowing how to describe that support. They can be respected even when they are unable to express a choice. The Self is not a title assigned to the most conscious performance. The child pointing to the whole had led us to this need: to distinguish what a person can do without, through distinction, distributing the value of their presence.

For this reason, ultimately, we cannot transform the book into a reader's examination. No one will have to demonstrate their understanding by returning better from each encounter. We can hold individuals accountable for specific behaviors and responsibilities; we cannot judge an entire existence by the extent to which it embodies an idea. Even those who understand a topic well may require different conditions to do what the topic makes desirable.

Our exposure to others remains. Those who know the words of healing can hurt, those who don't can act with precision, those who have helped us can overstep a limit. There is no category of people whose goodness makes it unnecessary to verify their behavior. But neither is there a description of the past that allows us to know every future gesture. Between these two limits, part of civic work occurs: protecting without inventing destinies, enabling revision without demanding it as proof of value.

We who speak participate in a situation that will continue even after our sentence. We can leave behind a usable question, or a judgment that will be difficult to escape. We don't know the full weight they will have. We can better understand what we're doing: to whom we're giving information, what authority we're exercising, what possibility we're closing, whether the limit is sufficiently justified. Power doesn't disappear when we recognize its extent. It can become more precise.

Let us return to Mozart. The London notebook of 1764 is still a working document before becoming, in our eyes, a fulfilled promise. The Mozarteum Foundation presents it in its catalogue of works, along with his keyboard pieces. We know the sequel; whoever wrote those pages had yet to live it. Nothing, in returning to that notebook, authorizes us to reconstruct a formula that, applied to another child, would produce the same life.

Mozart testifies that this singularity occurred. This fact does not prove that any person can become anything. Nor does it prove that his entire development was legible from the beginning. Between the absence of a pre-known destiny and the absence of any limit lies the

distance we have tried to preserve. A possibility can be real without being infinite. A life can have value without reaching a result that everyone will recognize.

The child at the table doesn't have to become Mozart. Nor does he have to confirm our theory of the child. He needs his body to be protected, to be able to learn, to have what he tries to do met enough to be understood. The drawing can be forgotten. Even an activity that leaves no archive belongs to the life of whoever experiences it.

Let's stand before these two pages: the one that history has preserved and the one that perhaps no one will preserve. We know how important Mozart's early works were to his biography; of the imaginary sheet, we only know that a child did something to it and that an adult took the time to ask what it was. The difference between the two pages is enormous. It doesn't establish which of the two had the right to be heard.

Mozart's name is already written in our history. About the life entrusted to us today, whether by a trait or an encounter, the name doesn't yet tell us everything. We can recognize what we know and the limits of what we know. We can avoid calling a difficulty, an ability, a first response destiny. Then we must encounter the next gesture, and see what it demands of the reading with which we awaited it.

Sources of the epilogue

The child's scene echoes a situation imagined in the third chapter and suggests a narrative continuation. The outcome of causal learning is distinct from the ethical interpretation. The Self and epigenesis retain the philosophical meaning stated in the book; the signature gaze, the dictatorship of the past, and the laboratory of the present are images. Mozart's London notebook is a historical document: it does not allow us to reconstruct a formula for its singularity.

Lucas, C. G., Bridgers, S., Griffiths, T. L., & Gopnik, A. (2014). When children are better (or at least more open-minded) learners than adults: Developmental differences in learning the forms of causal relationships. Cognition, 131(2), 284–299. Comparisons of causal learning in experimental tasks; not a measure of childhood freedom. Source

Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum. Köchel-Verzeichnis, sheet music KV 15a–rr, 42 pieces for clavier, so-called London Music Book. Historical document and cataloguing of the London work from 1764; the interpretation of destiny and singularity proposed in the epilogue is interpretative. Source

Contents

To the reader 3
The path of the book 4
Movement I — The third term 4
Movement II — The Self that chooses 4
Movement III — No One is Immune 4
Movement IV — Directing the good 4
Prologue 5
The question that found no way out 5
Sources of the prologue 10
1. Why Mozart, and not someone else? 12
A trajectory is not a sum 13
The lottery and what a number measures 13
Hours are not all the same experience 15
The time when one learns 16
What treatment can leave in the body 17
The landscape and the body that goes through the day 19
Famous lives are not experiments 20
The objection we cannot get around 21
The child after the test 22
Chapter Sources 24
2. Gemini, and the rest that doesn't add up 27
A common origin is not a duplicate life 28
Concordance is not a sentence 29
Before the memory begins 30
Growing old together doesn't mean changing in the same way. 31
The body that met a world 32
What did we actually read in the sample? 33
The rest has a statistical name 34
The same house is not the same environment 35
The case is not a void among the causes 37
Forty animals in the same possibility 38
The sequence is as important as the list 39

The objection that takes the choice out of the picture 40
The answer comes after the fact 40
Two people ask for two listens 41
The face that cannot answer for the other 43
Chapter Sources 44
3. Self: the unit that children indicate as whole 47
Who says I and who is indicated 48
Damasio's proposal 49
Feel from within 51
The hand that seems mine 53
What children don't show 55
The story that becomes mine again 56
The River and the Times of Change 57
The objection that remains 59
To remain someone in front of another 61
Chapter Sources 64
4. The names of freedom 67
Five questions under one word 68
The ability to do otherwise 69
Freedom that has conditions 71
When the brain starts first 72
Determining what we did not foresee 74
Unrepeatable does not mean sovereign 76
The wave as an image and its limit 77
No one chose where to start 78
The cost of no 80
Before the past 82
Chapter Sources 83
5. The past of “shit” 86
The word that doesn't clean 87
What we remember and what we have learned 88
The prediction that comes before the sentence 89
The work of stress 90
A scar is not a future biography 91
Plasticity that does not obey an order 92

When a memory becomes editable again 93
The return is not always a return to the beginning 95
The present must be able to be encountered 96
The objection of those who are not safe 97
The debt is not of the one who suffered 99
What needs to change on our side 99
The screw remains on the bench 101
Chapter Sources 102
6. Automatic and conscious 106
The skill that doesn't have to start over 107
Three functions that can inhabit the same gesture 108
Attention has a job to do 109
Realizing is not yet being able to stop 110
Feeling the body without attributing an oracle to it 111
Regulating does not mean making it disappear 112
Before and together are not synonymous with forever 113
Practice needs a place and a duration 114
A local result is not a general freedom 116
The objection of the person being coached 117
A practice must be contestable 118
The return of the old answer does not close the case 119
The conditions we can change 119
The sheet on the route 121
Chapter Sources 122
7. The spider web 126
The room doesn't end at the skin 127
To be distinct, to be separate 128
What passes when an emotion passes 129
Bodies that meet without becoming one body 130
The mirror doesn't know the whole room 130
Molecules without moral vocation 131
The work of preparing for the other 132
A full room can leave you alone 133
The relationship reaches all the way down to the genes: which genes, in what sense? 134
Epigenetics is not a receipt for love 135

The spider's web and what the image hides ... 136
The objection: who protects us from the relationship? ... 137
The distance that makes a meeting possible ... 138
Consequences enter into roles ... 139
What's left in the room ... 141
Chapter Sources ... 142
8. The truth that splits in two ... 145
Four words are not all that happened ... 146
The fact does not require our consent ... 147
The meaning does not arrive already closed ... 147
We don't see everything the other sees ... 148
The voice enters the sentence ... 149
The listener's state is not a side note ... 150
The tone we hear in our head ... 151
Ease does not decide the truth ... 152
What we do by saying something ... 153
A question can reopen the sentence ... 154
Who is believed before speaking ... 155
The truth can't wait until we're ready ... 156
"Be careful how you speak." ... 157
The real content and the possibility of using it ... 158
Go back at four forty ... 159
Chapter Sources ... 162
9. The power of determining the good ... 164
The verb that promises too much ... 165
Non-zero does not mean infinite ... 166
Where the other can't just walk away ... 167
Autonomy needs conditions ... 167
Driving without taking up all the task ... 168
Good does not coincide with our satisfaction ... 169
More possibilities on paper ... 170
Making decisions with a skill we don't possess ... 171
The need to be needed ... 172
What if the other person chooses badly? ... 173
Protection must be able to change form ... 174

What we can call total....175
«Let's play» 176
What changes in the ordinary gesture 177
The Tuesday box....179
Chapter Sources....180
10. The children 182
The person we are already meeting....183
Conditions are not a guarantee 184
Attachment does not read destiny....185
What an intervention can change 186
A gesture that finds a response 187
The relationship is not a continuous synchronization....188
Words also organize the moment....189
Silence has more than one meaning....189
Knowledge does not always equate to success 190
Punishment and what we call discipline 191
Shame and the Foresight of Threat....192
The objection we must know how to listen to 193
Repair without asking for absolution....194
When Apologies Are Not Enough....195
The difference that does not have to be corrected at all costs....196
Who supports the conditions of care....197
The carafe remains on the table 198
Chapter Sources....199
11. Social media, and the state in which others listen to us 202
The present does not arrive empty....203
What does the word "use" measure?....204
The gesture that can receive something....204
A number next to the face 205
What comes towards us is not a world champion....206
The phrase he learns from his audience....207
The night is not unlimited free time....208
The present body, and the other that we do not see 208
Being in training does not mean being without an author 209
A break may precede the content....210

The best objection: the network has opened a door....211
Access and capture are not the same thing 212
Public responsibility enters the project.... 213
Private practice needs a world.... 214
Whoever publishes doesn't know the whole room.... 215
Correct without regaining possession 216
"You are here?" 217
Chapter Sources.... 218
12. Towards good, without innocence....220
A criterion that also obliges those who propose it 221
The most serious objection: a good that creates people 222
The body cannot be the guarantee of our theory 223
The doctor: understanding a decision, being able to stay with it 223
Giving a chance means making it usable 224
The teacher: the difficulty without the verdict....225
The class also includes those who do not speak....226
Public Speaker: The Listener We Don't See 227
Knowing the other's state without attributing it to them....228
In the kitchen, after a wrong 228
To repair means to change the course of events 229
The intention, the effect, the responsibility 230
When you have to stop, choose, lose something 231
The time to stop is also a civil matter....232
Modest does not mean small; non-delegable does not mean solitary 232
The worst prediction is not an order....233
A present that does not demand absolution 234
Chapter Sources....235
The look that hasn't signed yet 238
Sources of the epilogue....243

