

TOWARD A THEORY OF COHERENT EXISTENCE

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A Philosophical Framework for Subjective Experience, Suffering, Community, and the Nature of Meaning

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The measured life begins in the fact that existence feels like something.

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Abstract

This paper presents a philosophical framework for the structure of conscious life, organized around five linked concepts: Jays, subjective coherence, the Center, intent, and the ecology of community. The Jay is proposed as the fundamental unit of analysis — a discrete, meaning-laden moment of conscious experience defined by three features: a perceiver, a felt quality, and an orientation toward or away from integration. Over a lifetime, Jays accumulate into the patterns we recognize as character. Subjective coherence is the degree to which accumulated Jays form an integrated, self-consistent whole; it is distinguished from happiness and from comfort, and treated as dynamic rather than fixed. The Center denotes the stable orientational core from which experience is organized, and intent the deliberate expression of that core in action. Suffering is analyzed not as a problem to eliminate nor a virtue to seek, but as a signal carrying information about misalignment between Jays and Center. Community is the ecology within which coherence is sustained or eroded. The framework's central claim is that the progressive coherence of one's Jays — the deepening integration of experience, Center, and intent in authentic relation with others — is what it means to live well. The account draws together phenomenology, Jungian psychology, Buddhist philosophy, Stoic ethics, attachment theory, and contemporary work on predictive processing, global workspace theory, and the default mode network as convergent perspectives on the felt structure of being a conscious subject in time. The prose account given here is complemented by a phenomenological functional, Ψ , developed in the author's *On Completing*, which gathers the same primacy of felt experience into a single integrable form.

Keywords: consciousness; subjective experience; coherence; selfhood; intent; meaning; phenomenology; well-being

Introduction: The Problem of Existence

Most great philosophical traditions begin by asking what is real — about matter and mind, about whether perception corresponds to anything stable, about God, about whether the self endures. These are worthy questions. But there is a prior one, more urgent because we cannot escape it for a moment: not what is real, but what it feels like to be real.

We wake each morning into a world already there — already lit, already populated by familiar faces and voices, already saturated with the emotional weather of yesterday and our anticipations of today. Before we ask whether the world is an illusion or the self a construction, we are already living, already inside the experience of existing. That felt texture of being alive is the datum from which any serious philosophy of life must begin.

This framework does not deny metaphysics its importance. It proposes an inversion of method. Rather than beginning with what is real and deriving how we should live, it begins from the irreducible fact of subjective experience and builds outward. It treats the fact that existence feels a certain way as philosophically primary — not a derivative phenomenon to explain away, but the

central one to understand.¹

The inversion has precedent. Husserl insisted that philosophy begin with a rigorous examination of consciousness as actually lived, not as theorized by physics or biology. Merleau-Ponty extended this into the body, arguing that consciousness is never disembodied cognition but always embedded in a perceiving, feeling organism. William James, writing contemporaneously, described the stream of consciousness — not discrete snapshots but a continuous flow in which each moment shades into the next. From different traditions, they converged on a shared insight: the inner life is real, structured, and philosophically indispensable.

Contemporary philosophy gives this its sharpest form in what David Chalmers called the hard problem of consciousness. The easy problems concern how the brain processes information, integrates sensory data, directs attention, and produces behavior — hard in practice but tractable in principle. The hard problem asks why any of this processing is accompanied by subjective experience at all. Why does it feel like something to see red, to taste coffee, to hear a minor chord and feel its particular melancholy? No purely materialist account has answered this. It is not merely a gap awaiting a better neurological theory; it is a genuine explanatory gap, where third-person accounts of the brain do not reach the first-person character of experience.

This framework does not claim to solve the hard problem. It claims that any philosophy of life that ignores it — that treats experience as epiphenomenon or footnote — has failed at the most important task. If what we care about most is how to live, and living is fundamentally experiential, we must begin where the experience is.

The account is organized around five concepts: Jays, subjective coherence, the Center, intent, and the ecology of community. These are not merely theoretical; they describe real features of lived experience that any honest introspector can recognize, even without names for them. The framework draws on philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and contemplative traditions not as separate disciplines respected from a distance but as converging lines of inquiry. We begin with the foundational concept: the Jay — a discrete, felt moment of conscious awareness, the basic quantum of lived experience. To understand how Jays accumulate, align or misalign, cohere or fragment, is to understand the basic grammar of a human life.

The present paper sets out the foundational architecture of that grammar, and is intended to stand on its own. Three companion studies, each openly and independently deposited, extend the framework along distinct branches: a reading of the world's major spiritual and mythological traditions through its interpretive lens²; a treatment of frequency and resonance as the framework's physical and mathematical register³; and an account of shared mind and the relational binding of aligned perspectives⁴. Each builds upon, but is not presupposed by, the account developed here;

¹The author's *On Completing* — the late finale of the *On —ing* series — gathers this primacy into a single phenomenological functional, Ψ , in which a felt state is modeled as somebody's, cleared through a threshold, bound into one field, and integrated over felt time, with a remainder no accounting reaches. Johnson, *On Completing*, Zenodo, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21197275>. The present paper states in prose what that equation states in symbols: that experience, not matter, is the primary datum.

²Johnson, *The Resonating Hymn of Divinity*.

³Johnson, *Frequency, Resonance, and the Architecture of Reality*.

⁴Johnson, *Alignment, the Triad, and the Architecture of Shared Mind*.

full details appear under Companion Studies below.

Jays: The Fundamental Unit of Subjective Experience

To name the fundamental unit of any domain is to make a bold claim. Physicists speak of particles, biologists of cells, economists of rational agents — each a conceptual anchor on which a discipline builds. This framework requires its own: not an atom of matter or a unit of time, but a quantum of felt experience. That unit is the Jay.

A Jay is a discrete, meaning-laden moment of conscious experience — the fundamental unit from which a life, and a shared world, is composed. Each Jay has three features: a perceiver, for it is always someone's experience; a felt quality, the particular texture of what that moment is like from the inside; and an orientation, a leaning toward coherence or away from it. Jays are not isolated. They accumulate within a person into the patterns we call character, and they radiate outward between people as the resonance that one life leaves in others. A Jay is what happens when biology, intention, and emotional state move in the same direction at the same moment — and because the field is shared, every such moment is at once an experience we have and a contribution we make.

The term, chosen by the author, is deliberately informal — it carries no inherited philosophical baggage, and that is part of its value. But the concept it names is one philosophy has long circled. A Jay is more than a sensory impression. When you see a familiar face in a crowd and feel a sudden rush of warmth, that is not merely visual input followed by cognitive classification; it is a unified moment in which perception, feeling, memory, anticipation, and meaning fuse into a single, indivisible event of consciousness. That event — irreducible, immediate, entirely your own — is a Jay.

Three structural features distinguish a Jay from mere sensory data. First, it has a perceiver: it is always someone's experience, with a center of experiencing. Second, it has a quality — what philosophers call qualia, the specific subjective character of what it is like to be in that moment, not derivable from any third-person description of neural firing. Third, it has an orientation: it is directed toward or away from coherence. This third feature is the framework's original contribution to the analysis of experience. Every Jay either deepens our sense of inner integration or introduces dissonance; either confirms who we are or contradicts it. The orientation is not always immediately legible — many Jays are ambiguous, and much of reflective life is spent learning what they were telling us — but it is always present. The felt quality identified here as the second feature of a Jay is examined at greater length in the author's essay *On Feeling*, which treats emotion not as noise overlaid on cognition but as itself a mode of coherent perception ⁵.

It helps to distinguish the Jay from neighboring concepts. It is not merely a moment of clock time, which is indifferent to experience: a second of terror and a second of joy have equal duration but are radically different Jays. It is not a thought, though it may have cognitive content; not an emotion, though it may be saturated with one; not a memory, though memories are Jays of a particular kind, re-experienced in the present. A Jay is the whole felt moment of being alive to something.

⁵Johnson, *On Feeling*.

The concept draws on precedents even as it extends them. James described consciousness as a continuous stream and resisted atomizing it into discrete elements. The Jay respects this while adding structure: even within the flow, there are moments of crystallization — experiences that cohere into a unified whole before dissolving back. Husserl contributes intentionality: consciousness is always consciousness of something, reaching toward an object. The Jay is always intentional in this sense. Merleau-Ponty adds that this intentionality is bodily — not a disembodied mind reaching toward ideas but a living organism inhabiting a world.

The Buddhist Abhidhamma offers perhaps the most precise historical analysis of momentary consciousness, describing *cittas* — moments of consciousness arising and passing in rapid succession, each complete yet conditioned by what precedes and conditioning what follows. The Jay is, in certain respects, a westernized and philosophically extended *citta*, though the frameworks diverge on selfhood.

Contemporary neuroscience contributes two relevant programs. Karl Friston's predictive processing casts the brain as a prediction machine, constantly modeling the world and updating in light of sensory data; what we experience is not raw sensation but the brain's best model of its cause. Each conscious moment is the resolution of a predictive cycle — expectation, error, revision — which is exactly the structure of a Jay: not bare reception but meaning-laden interpretation. Bernard Baars's global workspace theory proposes that consciousness is a broadcasting mechanism in which selected information becomes globally available to the whole brain. When something enters the workspace, it becomes fully present — it becomes a Jay. This provides a plausible neural substrate for why Jays feel unified and complete.

Jays accumulate. This is perhaps their most important feature. No Jay is isolated; each arises in the context of all that preceded it and shapes the conditions for those to come. Repeated Jays of a certain quality become grooves in the landscape of experience, shaping what we notice, expect, and are capable of feeling. Over time these patterns solidify into what we call character. This accumulation can run two ways. When Jays align — when they tell a consistent story, reinforcing rather than contradicting each other — the result is coherence. When they conflict — when feeling contradicts belief, when action undermines value — the result is incoherence. That distinction is the core dynamic of human life as this framework understands it. A later essay in the author's *On —ing* series, *On Existing*, formalizes this accumulation as a phenomenological functional that integrates each Jay's contribution across the unfolding manifold of a life, offering a quantitative complement to the qualitative account given here ⁶.

Subjective Coherence: The Inner Measure of a Life

If Jays are the basic units of experience, subjective coherence is the measure of what they add up to. It distinguishes a life that is, in some deep sense, all of a piece — whose experiences, values, and actions point in the same direction — from one internally fragmented, in which different parts of the self pursue contradictory ends. The concept is easily confused with adjacent ones, so we must

⁶Johnson, *On Existing*.

be clear about what it is not.

Coherence is not happiness. A person may be thoroughly happy in the shallow sense — feeling good, enjoying their pleasures — and yet profoundly incoherent: living a life whose surface satisfactions touch no deep sense of who they are, pursuing goals handed to them by others, sustaining relationships that are comfortable rather than honest. Conversely, a person in great difficulty — loss, transition, facing avoided truths — may be more deeply coherent in that difficulty than in years of easier living. Coherence concerns not the feeling-tone of experience but its integration.

Coherence is not comfort. Some of the most disruptive experiences — confronting a suppressed truth, leaving a relationship or career that no longer fits, entering genuine not-knowing — may be precisely what restores coherence after a long absence. The path toward it is often uncomfortable, because it requires looking honestly at how our Jays have been misaligned.

Coherence is not trivial consistency — always saying or doing the same thing. People grow; views deepen and sometimes reverse. What coherence requires is not that the person stay the same but that their changes represent genuine development rather than drift, that the present self can be recognized as continuous with the past even when it differs profoundly, that the life has the quality of a narrative rather than a collection of unrelated episodes.

What, then, is coherence? It is the felt sense that one's inner life holds together — that the dimensions of one's experience, values, and action point the same way, that there is no fundamental war at the center of one's being. Paul Ricoeur distinguished *idem*-identity, the sameness that persists through change, from *ipse*-identity, the identity of self-keeping — fidelity to one's commitments and deepest orientations as circumstances change. Coherence in our sense is close to *ipse*-identity: not the persistence of a fixed personality, but the self's fidelity to its own deepest character. Dan McAdams's narrative identity theory offers a parallel: identity as a story integrating past, present, and anticipated future, in which even painful episodes are made meaningful. The accumulation of Jays is the raw material of that narrative.

Jung's individuation is perhaps the most developed account of becoming coherent: the lifelong integration of the psyche's parts — persona, shadow, anima or animus, the deeper archetypes — into a whole he called the Self. The individuated person has not eliminated inner conflict but achieved a relationship with it; they know their shadow and are not ruled by it. That is coherence in its most developed form — not the absence of complexity but the integration of

it.

Neuroscience contributes through the default mode network, active when the brain is at rest and central to self-referential processing: thinking about the self, integrating past and future, making sense of relationships, constructing the ongoing narrative of identity. In this sense the network functions as something like a coherence engine.¹ Disruptions to its function are associated with conditions marked by profound incoherence — depression, dissociation, certain anxieties, the fragmented self-experience of severe trauma.

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The description of the default mode network as a “coherence engine” is the author's interpretive formulation, not a term used in the neuroscientific literature. The empirical findings on default-

mode function and self-referential processing are, however, well established; see, among others, Buckner et al. (2008), “The Brain’s Default Network,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.

Coherence is dynamic, not static — a direction of travel rather than a fixed destination. It can be lost as well as found: disrupted by trauma, by chronic self-deception, by the slow accumulation of compromises that erode alignment between what we feel and what we do. It can also be restored, and that restoration is often the most formative experience of a life.

Self-knowledge is the precondition of coherence. You cannot cohere what you cannot see. A person systematically blind to their own motivations — acting from fear while telling themselves it is principle, seeking approval while believing they pursue excellence — cannot be coherent, because the Jays that would reveal the misalignment are suppressed or rationalized away. Honest self-perception — the willingness to look at one’s actual experience rather than one’s preferred account of it — is the most fundamental practice of coherence.

There is a deep tension between authenticity and social expectation. Most of us live under pressure to present a face that does not fully match our interior. Some expectations are benign; many are not, requiring self-suppression — that we feel what we do not feel, value what we do not value, pursue ends not our own. This suppression is the most common source of incoherence in modern life. The gap between the self we perform and the self we are is the gap across which coherence falls. A life built primarily on performance rather than authentic expression will be incoherent at its core, and that incoherence eventually announces itself — in the body, in relationships, in the persistent anxiety that accompanies the gap. Subjective coherence is the inner measure of a life because it cannot ultimately be falsified. We can fool others for a long time; we cannot, finally, fool ourselves.

The Center: Gravity of the Self

Jays accumulate into patterns that either achieve coherence or do not. But what do they cohere around? What is the organizing principle toward which aligned Jays converge? This is what the concept of the Center answers. The Center is the stable gravitational core of selfhood — the part that does not dissolve when circumstances change, that persists across the thousand transformations of a life and remains recognizably itself even when it cannot be easily named.

The Center is not the ego. The ego is the conscious self — the “I” that navigates daily life, makes decisions, manages relationships, maintains the story of who we think we are. It is important but plastic, reactive, socially constructed to a significant degree; it can be damaged, inflated, deflated, reformed. Beneath it, in all but the most disconnected persons, is something more stable: a fundamental orientation toward existence, a set of values and sensitivities so deep they do not feel chosen but simply found.

This is the Center, and we should be precise about what composes it. It is not personality, which is partly temperamental and shifts over a lifetime. It is not beliefs, which reason and evidence can change. It is not preferences, which are reactive and context-dependent. What is foundational is

something more like fundamental orientation: an irreducible way of valuing, caring, attending, and responding so basic that to violate it is not merely to err but to do violence to oneself. Consider the person who has always, even in childhood, been drawn to fairness — not as a principle learned from adults but as a visceral response to injustice. For them fairness is not a belief but a feature of how they experience the world. Any life that consistently violates it will be incoherent at its core, however successful it looks.

The Center functions as a gravitational field organizing Jays. Jays that align with it — experiences affirming the person's fundamental orientation — are felt as generative, grounding, life-giving; they increase coherence. Jays that contradict it — acting against one's deepest values to conform or survive — are felt as friction and interior grinding. Unaddressed, that friction becomes suffering of a particular kind: not the suffering of circumstance but of self-betrayal.

Several traditions arrived at parallel concepts. The Stoics spoke of the *hegemonikon*, the ruling faculty whose proper exercise let a person respond to any circumstance — fortune or misfortune, praise or blame — from a stable interior position. Jung's Self is the most developed psychological analog: not the ego but the totality of the psyche, the *telos* of individuation, both center and circumference. The Center here is closer to Jung's Self than his ego, though conceived more concretely.

Buddhism poses an interesting challenge. The doctrine of *anatta* holds there is no permanent, unchanging self beneath the flux — what we take for a fixed self is a construction. This only apparently conflicts with the Center. The framework does not claim the Center is a metaphysical substance, an immaterial soul, or a permanent entity outside the causal order. It claims something more functional: that within the stream of experience there is a detectable pattern of fundamental orientation — a consistent attractor — that functions as a gravitational center even if it is not a fixed thing. The Center is real the way a river is real: not because it has a fixed bottom that never moves, but because it has a consistent character, a direction, a way of flowing that distinguishes it from all other rivers.

Several forces threaten the Center. Severe or chronic trauma can so disrupt the sense of safety that access to it becomes impossible. Social coercion operates subtly: required for years to suppress one's orientation, the Center does not disappear but becomes inaccessible beneath the performed self. Addiction installs a false gravity that organizes Jays around its object. Identity collapse — the sudden loss of defining roles, relationships, or beliefs — can leave a person unable to locate their Center at all.

What restores it? Contemplative practice — meditation, prayer, solitude, any disciplined inward attention — is perhaps most reliable: it trains interior observation, letting a person distinguish reactive noise from the signal of fundamental orientation. Honest relationship, in which another sees us clearly and reflects back with accuracy and care, is another: we often find ourselves by being known. Creative expression lets the Center speak in its own idiom.

Meaningful work creates conditions in which it is continuously expressed rather than suppressed.

Finding the Center is not a one-time discovery — this is its most important practical implication. There is a fantasy, common to spiritual and self-help culture alike, of a single transformative moment after which everything is clear and the person is permanently oriented. The framework does not

support it. The Center is real and can be found, but the finding is not final. Life continuously covers it over with new demands, roles, pressures, comforts. The practice of returning — repeatedly finding the place from which genuine action flows — is not a symptom of failure but the nature of a lived life. It is not that the centered person never gets lost; it is that they have learned the way back.

All purposeful action flows from Center. This does not mean only action from a calm or enlightened state is worthwhile — many of the most important actions are taken in agitation, uncertainty, even despair. It means that action untethered from the self's fundamental orientation — motivated entirely by external pressure or reactive desire — will be incoherent however productive or morally impressive it appears. The test of purposeful action is not its outcome but its origin: does it flow from who this person actually is?

Intent: The Direction of Coherent Will

If the Center is the gravity of the self, intent is the expression of that gravity as motion — how the Center moves through the world. It is the deliberate alignment of action with one's deepest orientation: not merely wanting something, not merely planning, but being genuinely organized, at the level of fundamental values, in a particular direction. Intent is the bridge between inner and outer, the mechanism by which subjective coherence becomes a living presence in the world.

It must be distinguished from two things it is confused with: desire and goal-setting. Desire is reactive, arising from the encounter between organism and environment — need, appetite, longing, aversion. It tells us what we want, but what we want is not always what we most deeply intend. A person may desire approval intensely while intending, at a deeper level, to live honestly regardless of what others think. The framework does not dismiss desire — it is vital information about what matters to us — but insists on the distinction between reactive desire and oriented intent. Goal-setting is cognitive: identifying outcomes, building plans, monitoring progress. It is indispensable, but goals are means, not ends, and can be pursued in ways aligned or disconnected from one's Center. One can pursue admirable goals in a way entirely disconnected from any genuine orientation, driven by the desire for achievement or recognition. Such pursuit produces Jays that are busy but incoherent. Intent is not a specific outcome aimed at but a direction committed to.

William James spoke of the “fiat of the will” — the moment the mind settles on a course and commits, bringing the full weight of attention behind the choice. Intent is close to this, but operates not at the level of individual choices but of overall life-orientation: the settled commitment to a direction that provides the context within which individual choices are made. Kant's good will offers another resonance: the only thing good without qualification, good not for what it produces but for what it is. While this framework is not Kantian in architecture, it shares the intuition that the quality of the will — the orientation from which action flows — is philosophically primary.

Contemporary psychology maps this closely. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory proposes three fundamental needs — autonomy, competence, relatedness. Intrinsically motivated behavior, performed for its own sake because it is genuinely meaningful, tends to satisfy these and produce well-being and growth. Extrinsically motivated behavior, performed for reward or to avoid

punishment, may produce compliance and even impressive outcomes but tends over time to undermine the very needs it was meant to serve. Intent is the subjective correlate of intrinsic motivation in its deepest form: action aligned with what the person most fundamentally values, not because anyone is watching, but because it is the truest expression of who they are.

Intent functions as a filter. A person with a clear, genuine intent — toward honest inquiry, say, or compassionate service — finds it naturally organizes the field of their choices. They recognize, with a clarity that is felt as much as cognitive, which ways are generative and which are distractions. The person committed to honest inquiry feels the difference between a genuinely exploratory conversation and one merely confirming beliefs already held. This recognition is not infallible — intent can be rationalized, self-deception is always possible — but it provides a compass that purely calculative reasoning does not.

In everything a person does, the quality of their inner intent is either the source of their coherence or the root of their fragmentation. To act from intent is not to control the outcome; it is to ensure that whatever happens, the action was genuinely one's own.

— Jamison Todd Johnson

Intent without Center is not genuine intent at all — it is manipulation: great apparent directedness not rooted in any fundamental orientation, force applied to achieve an outcome disconnected from who one is. This is the structure of ambition without integrity — impressive purposefulness organized around status, wealth, or power in ways disconnected from the person's actual Center. Such a person may be very successful by conventional measures; they will not be coherent. Center without intent is potential unrealized: people of extraordinary depth and goodness who never translate their Center into sustained action. This is not a moral failure — its causes include trauma, depression, lack of opportunity — but it is an incompleteness: the gravitational field exists but generates no motion. Intent is what makes the Center dynamic.

To live intentionally is not to live with perfect control. The intentional person has not engineered their circumstances to match their orientation — that is neither possible nor desirable. Circumstances are unpredictable; others are free; the future is genuinely open. To live intentionally is more modest and more profound: to consistently orient one's action toward one's deepest values regardless of what circumstances present. The storm comes, and the intentional person responds from their Center rather than merely reacting from fear or habit. This does not guarantee success. It guarantees authenticity — a different and ultimately more important thing.

Intent has a collective dimension too. Shared intent — a group's alignment around common values that arise from their actual orientation rather than external pressure — is the foundation of genuine culture, institution, and movement. So organized, people sustain commitment through adversity, welcome honest conflict because it serves the shared orientation, and hold each other accountable to meaning rather than rules. The history of significant human achievement is in part a history of collective intent — the beginning of what the ecology of coherence will develop.

Suffering: The Signal and the Teacher

No account of human existence is complete without a serious treatment of suffering. A philosophy that cannot account for why we hurt — and what to do with the hurting — has failed precisely where philosophy is most needed. It is easy to philosophize in good weather; the test of a framework is whether it remains useful when the weather turns.

Two inadequate responses have dominated both popular culture and philosophical tradition, and the framework rejects them both. The first is eliminativist: suffering is purely negative, a problem to solve, an experience to avoid by any means. This takes suffering seriously as something bad, but errs in treating it as having no information content — as if the pain of a broken leg were equivalent to the pain of a broken marriage. The second is the glorification of suffering: pain builds character, difficulty is inherently productive, comfort is the enemy of growth. This recognizes that suffering can be transformative, but errs in making it intrinsically good rather than potentially informative. Unnecessary suffering is not ennobling; trauma that is not metabolized does not build character but breaks it.

The framework advances a third position: suffering is a signal. It carries information. Received, understood, and integrated, it becomes the foundation of depth. Suppressed, avoided, or glorified without being understood, it festers or hardens into character patterns that make coherence harder to achieve.

The framework distinguishes three types. Signal suffering is the pain of misalignment between one's Jays and one's Center — of living in ways that contradict one's fundamental orientation, performing a self that is not one's own, pursuing ends that feel hollow because they were never genuinely one's own. This is perhaps the most common and least recognized form in modern life: it presents as anxiety, as vague dissatisfaction, as the sense that something is wrong even when everything looks fine. Circumstantial suffering is caused by external conditions — loss, illness, injustice, bereavement. It is not primarily informational. A person who loses a child to disease has not received a signal about their inner life; they have been struck by the world's indifference, and the appropriate response is not analysis but compassion. Accumulated suffering is the weight of unprocessed signal suffering, solidified over time into habitual patterns. When the information signal suffering carries is consistently refused, it does not disappear but changes form — into depression, chronic anxiety, compulsion, or rigid defensive structures. Bessel van der Kolk's research demonstrates that unprocessed suffering lodges not only in the mind but in the body — in posture, breathing, the autonomic nervous system; Peter Levine's work on somatic experiencing similarly shows that trauma is a full-body phenomenon whose processing must engage the body as well as the mind. Accumulated suffering is the most serious form, because it most thoroughly disrupts coherence and closes off access to the Center.

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, developed from his survival of Auschwitz, is among the most powerful testimonies to suffering as teacher. Frankl observed that prisoners who survived psychologically were often those who found some way to maintain meaning in their suffering — not because the conditions were anything but monstrous, but because the orientation toward meaning provided an

interior structure the external conditions could not entirely destroy. His central observation — that everything can be taken from a person but the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances — is not a counsel of resignation. It is the recognition that the Center can survive circumstances seemingly designed to annihilate it, provided the person refuses to cede their interior orientation to external forces.

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.

— Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946)

The Buddhist analysis is a convergent line. The first noble truth — *dukkha* — is not the pessimistic claim that life is nothing but misery, but the subtler observation that all conditioned experience carries impermanence and incompleteness that, when resisted, produces suffering. The second noble truth — the origin of suffering in craving and attachment — maps onto signal suffering: the pain of clinging to experiences and identities that are inherently impermanent rather than letting the Jays flow through. The eightfold path is, among other things, a systematic practice for receiving the signal of suffering rather than being overwhelmed by it or escaping from it.

The difference between suffering that integrates and suffering that fragments is perhaps the most important practical distinction in the framework. Integrating suffering is metabolized — received, felt fully, understood as best it can be, and allowed to settle into the fabric of experience as something that happened and, having been genuinely encountered, no longer needs to be avoided. It deepens the person, increasing their capacity for compassion and their contact with reality. Fragmenting suffering has not been metabolized — suppressed, denied, intellectualized away, or converted into a defense that protects from feeling at the cost of protecting from genuine contact with life.

The purpose of suffering, in this framework, is not to be endured but to be understood.

This must be held with care: it is not to say all suffering has a silver lining, or that the badly suffering person simply has not found the lesson. Some suffering is genuinely devastating and leaves permanent marks that cannot be turned into wisdom. The claim is more modest: where suffering can be engaged rather than merely endured, received as information rather than purely resisted, it tends over time to deepen rather than diminish the person. And the community within which one suffers — the presence or absence of those who can witness and accompany it — makes an enormous difference to whether it integrates or fragments. This is the bridge to what follows.

Community: The Ecology of Coherence

There is a temptation, in a philosophy of the inner life, to treat the self as a solitary project undertaken in the privacy of one's own interior. This temptation, strong in cultures that valorize independence, must be resisted. The self is not a solitary achievement; it is constituted in relation. The Jays that compose a life arise almost entirely in the context of other people — in encounters,

conversations, the subtle interpersonal textures that shape not only what we feel but what we are capable of feeling. Coherence is fundamentally social.

The concept for this dimension is the ecology of coherence. An ecosystem is not merely organisms in shared space but a dynamic web of interdependence in which each is shaped by and helps shape the others. No organism flourishes in isolation from its ecological context; no person achieves or sustains coherence in isolation from the community within which their life is embedded. As a healthy ecosystem requires diversity, interdependence, and productive tension, a coherence-supporting community requires genuine difference, honest encounter, and members willing to be genuinely affected by each other.

Three functions of community are central. The first is mirroring: others reflect aspects of ourselves we cannot see. The other person, in genuinely encountering us, makes us visible to ourselves in ways solitary introspection cannot. The friend who names a pattern we are too close to see gives us self-knowledge no private reflection could produce. This requires from the other a quality of attention and honesty that is itself a form of love. The second is friction: healthy community creates productive tension that catalyzes growth rather than merely producing conflict. A community that never challenges its members, consistently confirming their self-understanding, is not supporting coherence but sedating it. We need people who care enough to disagree, to refuse the comfortable version of us and insist on the real one. Aristotle distinguished friendships of pleasure, of utility, and of virtue, recognizing that only the third involves genuine care for the other as they are — exactly the kind that provides productive friction. The third is witness: being seen and known is not merely pleasant but a component of coherence itself. A Jay never witnessed — never shared or held within a relational context — remains somehow incomplete. To be fully known by someone who continues to regard us with care is among the most coherence-generating experiences available; chronic invisibility is among the most reliable sources of incoherence and despair.

Martin Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou illuminates this with precision. In an I-It relationship the other is an object — used, managed, classified. In an I-Thou relationship the other is encountered as a genuine subject, irreducible and free. Buber argued that I-Thou relationships, though they cannot be sustained indefinitely, are the moments in which genuine human existence is realized. These are the moments of witness the framework identifies as constitutive of coherence.

Aristotle's description of the human being as *zoon politikon* grounds this in the oldest stratum of Western philosophy. Community is not an optional addition to human life but the condition within which it achieves its proper form. *Eudaimonia* is not possible in isolation; it requires a polis. The ecology of coherence is a contemporary restatement of this Aristotelian insight, informed by a century of psychological research.

Attachment theory provides the empirical foundation. Bowlby's insight was that human beings are, from birth to death, oriented toward attachment — seeking proximity to others who provide security and attunement — and that development is shaped by whether those others are reliably available. Ainsworth's research on attachment styles — secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized — showed that early attachment shapes the patterns with which a person approaches all later relationships. The implication for the ecology of coherence is direct: secure early experience makes both

contributing to and benefiting from community easier. This does not condemn the insecurely attached to incoherence — adult relational experience can gradually revise early templates — but it does mean the stakes of early community are high.

Social neuroscience adds further evidence. The social brain hypothesis proposes that the brain's size and complexity evolved largely to navigate complex social relationships. Research on loneliness shows chronic isolation is associated with elevated cortisol, disrupted sleep, impaired immunity, accelerated cognitive decline, and increased mortality — the isolated person is not merely unhappy but physiologically compromised. Coherence is biologically as well as psychologically dependent on genuine community.

It is essential to distinguish life-giving community from codependency or conformity. A coherence-supporting community does not dissolve the individual into the group, demand the abandonment of one's Center as the price of belonging, or enforce uniformity. A community that requires incoherence as the condition of membership — performance over authenticity, compliance over honest expression — is not an ecology of coherence but of suppression. Such communities are common; they may be families, religious institutions, professional cultures, or entire societies, and may not intend harm. But their effect is incoherence-inducing, and recognizing them for what they are is a necessary act of self-knowledge.

Solitude is the necessary complement to community. The capacity to return to Center alone — to be present with oneself without the mediating presence of others — is not the opposite of community but its precondition. A person who cannot be alone is not choosing community but fleeing solitude; their relationships are organized around managing the anxiety that arises in others' absence. Solitude, practiced as discipline, lets a person distinguish what they actually think and feel from what the social environment has convinced them to. It creates the interior quiet in which the Center can be heard. A person who has developed genuine solitude chooses community rather than clings to it — and that choosing makes the community a genuine encounter rather than a refuge. The quality of a person's community is among the strongest predictors of whether their Jays cohere over time — a recognition not of social calculation but of the deep truth that we are ecological beings. To take seriously the project of living coherently is to take seriously what kind of community we are building and inhabiting.

The Purpose of Life: A Coherent Answer

We come to the question the framework has been building toward: what is the purpose of life? The history of proposed answers is long and marked by both wisdom and failure. Before advancing its own, the framework surveys the landscape — not to demolish but to locate precisely where each falls short.

Hedonism — that the purpose of life is pleasure and the avoidance of pain — captures something true: pleasure is real, and pleasant Jays are genuinely valuable. But it cannot distinguish shallow pleasures that leave us empty from the deeper satisfactions that constitute a genuine good, nor explain why a person might sacrifice immediate pleasure for something valued more deeply. Plea-

sure is a byproduct of coherent living, not its goal. Aristotelian eudaimonia is far richer: the good life is not feeling good but doing well what is proper to a human being — exercising the characteristic excellences, living in community, actualizing our highest capacities. This is much closer to the framework's proposal. But Aristotle's account is anchored in a teleological metaphysics — each thing with a fixed natural end — difficult to sustain after modern biology and the recognition of the genuine diversity of human natures. The framework is less metaphysically committed: it does not assume a fixed human nature toward which all development tends, but begins from the actual character of the individual.

Religious traditions propose salvation, enlightenment, union with the divine. These have nourished billions of lives, and the framework does not dismiss them; the experience of transcendence is real and has a place here. But in their traditional forms they require metaphysical commitments — to God, to a permanent soul, to a life beyond death — that the framework does not assume, aiming to remain available to those whose relationship to such commitments is uncertain or absent. Nietzsche's will to power contains real insight — growth is essential, and a life without challenge stagnates — but its emphasis on individual self-creation struggles to account for the communal dimension of a good life. Existentialist creation of meaning is appealing in its honesty about the absence of metaphysical guarantees, but places an enormous burden on the will: if meaning is purely chosen and never discovered, it becomes hard to distinguish genuine meaning from skillful self-deception. Utilitarian maximization of happiness captures the insight that others' experience matters, but as an account of individual purpose it dissolves the particular self into an aggregative calculation.

The framework's answer draws on the wisdom in each while going beyond their limitations. The purpose of life is the progressive coherence of one's Jays — the deepening integration of experience, Center, and intent in authentic relationship with others, such that one's existence becomes increasingly whole, genuinely expressive, and contributing to the coherence of those around us. This proposal is carried into a more personal register in the author's essay *On Living*, which follows the same orientation — coherence as a direction rather than a destination — through lived rather than systematic form ⁷.

Each element bears unpacking. “Progressive” signals that direction matters more than destination: there is no final state of perfect coherence achieved and then maintained. Coherence is always becoming rather than being. What is required is not completion but orientation. The person who dies still imperfect, still learning, still becoming more fully themselves has lived purposefully; the person who achieved an impressive final form at the cost of genuine inner exploration has not. “Coherence of Jays” means the inner life becomes less fragmented and more integrated over time — the feeling life, intellectual life, relational life, work, values, and history brought into increasing alignment, so the person lives a single deepening life rather than several incompatible ones in the same body. This does not mean simplicity; the most integrated lives are often the most complex, holding together seemingly contradictory truths without being fragmented by them. “Center and intent” means this integration is actively pursued, not accidental — distinguishing the purposeful life from the merely lucky and the merely driven. “In authentic relationship with others” means

⁷Johnson, *On Living*.

this is emphatically not a philosophy of individualism: the coherent life is always already communal, constituted in relation to others who mirror, challenge, witness, and sustain it. “Contributing” means a coherent person naturally generates coherence in others — not by imposing their way of being but by existing in a way that makes genuine encounter possible. They are the kind of person in whose presence others feel more genuinely themselves, because authenticity creates permission for authenticity. This radiating effect is not strategy but the natural consequence of a life organized around its own deepest truth.

The framework acknowledges the objection that purpose is invented rather than discovered — that there is no fact of the matter about what life is for. Its response is that this presents a false dichotomy. The Center is discovered: found, not constructed, even if the finding requires great effort and the found thing is genuinely particular. The expression of Center is invented: the forms through which a person lives out their orientation are genuinely creative, shaped by circumstance, choice, and encounter. Purpose is neither purely discovered nor purely invented but the ongoing creative act of expressing what is genuinely found.

A brief word on death. Erik Erikson described the final developmental task as the tension between integrity and despair — integrity being the acceptance of one’s life as genuinely one’s own and worthwhile, despair the sense that time has run out and the life was wasted or never truly one’s own. The coherent life is most likely to achieve Erikson’s integrity, because it was lived from Center, toward integration, in authentic relation with others. Not a perfect life, but an honest one. The framework is also compatible with, though it does not require, transcendent experience: when the Jays align not only with the individual Center but with a dimension of reality that exceeds any individual, the experience of coherence deepens in a way many describe as spiritual. The framework does not adjudicate the metaphysics; it notes that such moments fit its account as moments of extraordinary coherence.

What would a world look like if more of its inhabitants lived purposefully in this sense? The framework resists painting a utopia, but some things can be said. It would be a world of more honest communication, because coherent people need not perform; of less reactive violence, because they respond from Center rather than fear; of more genuine community, because they can be present to others without requiring others to confirm their pretenses. It would not be a world without conflict — conflicts of value between genuinely different Centers are real, and honest conflict is preferable to dishonest harmony — but conflict would be engaged with more mutual recognition and more willingness to be changed by genuine encounter. This is not a small thing. It is, perhaps, as much as philosophy can responsibly hope for.

Objections and Responses

No framework is immune to objection. This one has been developed to take its own possible failures seriously; four objections warrant sustained response.

The coherence fetish. The first objection is that coherence is simply another word for comfort — that pursuing it is really pursuing a self-narrative that feels good, smoothing over genuine con-

traditions, so the coherent person is not more integrated but more successfully self-deceived. The response begins by acknowledging that this identifies a real pathology — one the framework itself names as self-deception. False coherence, achieved by suppressing or rationalizing the evidence of misalignment, is precisely not what the framework means; real coherence requires honest self-perception as its precondition. The person who maintains their self-narrative by avoiding uncomfortable truths is engaged in the most fundamental form of incoherence — the gap between the self they experience and the self they actually are. And genuine growth often disrupts surface coherence on the way to restoring deeper coherence. The person who leaves a long-held belief system, or confronts a suppressed aspect of their character, may feel profoundly incoherent in the short term — moving through surface incoherence toward deeper integration. Properly understood, the pursuit of coherence often requires the courage to become temporarily more fragmented by facing what has been avoided. It is not comfort; it is harder than comfort.

The privilege objection. The second concerns privilege: the pursuit of coherence, with its requirements of self-reflection, seems to presuppose safety, stability, and material sufficiency unavailable to much of the world's population. For a person in extreme poverty, a war zone, or systemic oppression, the luxury of pursuing inner integration can seem offensively beside the point. The response takes this seriously without conceding its conclusion. The framework distinguishes the subjective achievement of coherence from the circumstances surrounding it. Frankl's testimony is that the pursuit of meaning is possible even in conditions of extreme deprivation. This is not to say circumstances do not matter — they matter enormously, and a world that creates such conditions is failing its inhabitants. But the orientation toward coherence is available across a wide range of circumstances, and matters even, perhaps especially, in the hardest ones. And there is more to say here: the framework's concept of circumstantial suffering explicitly acknowledges suffering for which the appropriate response is not self-examination but structural change and the redress of injustice. The framework is not indifferent to the conditions that make individual coherence easier or harder; it focuses on the inner because that is where a philosophy of life must begin, not because the outer is unimportant.

The relativism objection. The third: if coherence is defined relative to the individual's own Center, doesn't the framework justify any lifestyle? If a person's Center is organized around cruelty or the accumulation of power at others' expense, can they not claim a life organized around those values is perfectly coherent? This misunderstands the nature of the Center. The framework does not claim that whatever a person happens to value constitutes their Center. The Center is not equivalent to current preferences, conditioned desires, or even stated values; it is

the fundamental orientation that persists beneath social conditioning and self-presentation. A person whose behavior is organized around cruelty or domination may have genuine values, but the framework maintains those are typically not the deepest layer — they are far more often adaptations, defenses against vulnerability, strategies for managing the fear of powerlessness, patterns formed in response to violation. Beneath them lies something more fundamental that the cruelty is, in its distorted way, trying to protect. And acting in ways genuinely destructive to others is almost always accompanied by significant self-deception; the person who harms and tells themselves it is justified is

not living from Center but from a defensive construction that has mistaken itself for the real thing. The framework does not guarantee identical values — it expects and celebrates genuine diversity of Centers — but holds that Centers, honestly discovered, tend toward rather than away from what has been recognized across traditions as constitutive of flourishing: honesty, care, genuine engagement, the capacity to be affected by others.

The community conflict objection. The fourth concerns the tension between the framework's affirmation of community and of the individual Center. If community is essential to coherence, what should a person do when their community demands incoherence — when belonging requires suppressing one's Center? Is the framework asking people to choose between community and themselves? The response is direct: it does support the courage to leave or actively reform incoherence-inducing communities, and regards this not as anti-social but as pro-person and ultimately pro-community, because a person who has found their way toward coherence contributes more authentically to any community they later join or help build. The person who stays out of fear, contributing their own inauthenticity to a system already organized around inauthenticity, reinforces rather than challenges its dynamics. This does not mean leaving is always right — communities can be reformed from within, and a person whose Center is oriented toward transforming oppressive systems may find their deepest purpose in the costly work of engaging communities not yet coherence-supporting. The framework prescribes no single response; it insists only that the person not sacrifice their Center indefinitely as the price of belonging — that whatever they choose be chosen from Center rather than imposed by the fear of exclusion. There is a profound difference between staying because one's deepest orientation calls for it and staying because one cannot tolerate the loss of belonging. The first is living from Center; the second from fear. That difference is decisive.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Coherence

We have traveled a considerable distance — from the irreducible fact of subjective experience, through the structure of Jays and the dynamics of coherence, the gravity of the Center and the direction of intent, the crucible of suffering and the ecology of community, to a proposed answer to the oldest and most personal of questions. It is worth stripping away the architecture and stating the framework in its most essential form.

We are bundles of experience. The moments of conscious awareness that constitute our lives — Jays — are the basic material of being human. They are not raw data but meaning-laden events, each carrying an orientation toward or away from integration. Their accumulation across a lifetime is who we are — not a fixed identity but an ongoing, deepening pattern that becomes our character and our story.

We have a stable core. Beneath the reactive surface of personality and the performed self that social life requires, there is a Center: a fundamental orientation toward existence that, when we are willing to do the honest and often uncomfortable work of finding it, provides the gravitational field around which a coherent life can organize. It is not found once and possessed forever; it must be returned to, again and again.

We express that core through deliberate orientation. Intent is not wishing and not planning but the settled commitment to express our deepest orientation through our actions and relationships — what makes the Center active, what transforms an inner truth into a lived life.

We grow through suffering. Received as a signal rather than avoided as an intrusion, suffering carries information about where our Jays have misaligned with our Center, and that information, genuinely metabolized, becomes the raw material of depth. Suffering is not the point; coherence is. But suffering, honestly engaged, is among the most reliable teachers of it.

We flourish in community. The self is not a solitary project. Our Jays arise in relation to others; our Center is discovered through honest encounter; our suffering is metabolized in the presence of those who witness it. The ecology of coherence is not peripheral to purpose but constitutive of it. We cannot cohere alone.

And our purpose is to bring these into increasing alignment throughout our lives — not to achieve a finished perfection, not to arrive at a final enlightenment, but simply and profoundly to keep orienting, keep returning, keep engaging: with our own experience, our Center, the world, and the irreplaceable others who make genuine existence possible. The goal is not perfection but direction. Not arrival but orientation. Not the triumphant crossing of some invisible finish line, but the quality of attention, honesty, and courage with which we walk the distance between here and whatever comes next.

This work is offered not as a completed system but as an invitation — to the reader who finds something recognizable in the concept of the Jay, who has felt the gravitational pull of their own Center even without a name for it, who has known the particular pain of signal suffering and wondered what it was trying to say, who has found their deepest coherence in the presence of others who truly knew them. The invitation is to take these experiences seriously — not as byproducts of biology, but as the primary material of a genuinely examined life. The examined life, Socrates told us, is the only one worth living. This framework suggests an amendment: the coherent life — examined honestly and lived in the direction of its own deepest truth, in genuine relation with others — is not merely worth living. It is, in the fullest sense available to us, the purpose for which we are here.

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Companion Studies

Three companion studies, each an independent open deposit, are referenced throughout the text. Each is an independent deposit that stands on its own while elaborating a distinct branch of the framework set out here. Journal Two, *The Resonating Hymn of Divinity: On the Universal Architecture of Faith*⁸, applies the framework's interpretive lens to the world's spiritual and mythological traditions. Journal Three, *Frequency, Resonance, and the Architecture of Reality: A Theoretical*

⁸Johnson, *The Resonating Hymn of Divinity*.

Framework Measured by Science and Mathematics ⁹, develops its physical and mathematical branch. Journal Four, Alignment, the Triad, and the Architecture of Shared Mind: The Convergence of the Branches ¹⁰, gives an account of shared mind and the relational binding of aligned perspectives. The physical, mathematical, and noetic material in these companion studies is offered as speculative philosophy of science rather than as established result; full bibliographic details, including deposit identifiers, are listed under References.

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