

Distinguishability, Meaning, and the Conditions for Personal Existence

Philosophical Foundations of the Void Energy–Regulated Space Framework (VERSF)

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We begin from a fact so fundamental that it is often overlooked: we know that we exist—not as an abstraction, but as an immediate presence in awareness. This is not an empirical inference drawn from measurement, nor a metaphysical assumption about the nature of substance. It is an immediate certainty. There is something rather than nothing.

To exist, in the most minimal sense, is to be distinguishable from nothing—to register as something rather than absence. If no distinction were possible—if there were no difference between a supposed entity and the absence of all structure—then no statement of existence could be meaningfully made. Existence therefore presupposes distinguishability.

Here, "nothing" does not denote empty space, vacuum, or the absence of matter. It refers instead to the absence of any distinguishable structure whatsoever. In this sense, existence is not defined by location, duration, or composition, but by the persistence of difference against total indistinction.

Distinguishability implies information. This implication is not metaphorical but logical.

If something exists, it must differ from nothing. Difference requires contrast. The minimal form of contrast is binary: a distinction that could, in principle, be otherwise. A realised distinction therefore corresponds to the minimal unit of information.

Thus, existence implies information, not because reality is assumed to be informational, but because information is the unavoidable consequence of distinguishability.

Existence alone does not yet imply meaning.

A single, isolated distinction may exist, but it does not signify. Meaning arises only when an entity exists in relation to something else—when what it is depends, even slightly, on what surrounds it. Meaning therefore requires relational structure.

This dependency introduces asymmetry. If one distinction depends on another, the two are no longer equivalent. Order matters. Constraint matters. They have meaning through contrast and connection.

However, relational structure alone is insufficient to account for personal meaning.

A system may exhibit rich networks of dependency and lawful interaction without anything mattering to the system itself. Crystalline lattices, planetary orbits, and purely mathematical structures possess relational structure and stability, yet lack an internal perspective.

Personal meaning requires affective experience.

Emotion is the mechanism by which distinctions acquire felt significance for a system—the way events come to matter, rather than merely occur. Here, "emotion" denotes any internal affective valuation mechanism—not necessarily human emotion, but any process by which distinctions are experienced as mattering to the system itself.

The death of a close friend may be recorded as a fact, but without grief—without the sense of absence and rupture—that loss has no personal significance.

A purely mechanical device is a system whose state transitions have no intrinsic significance for the system itself.

The cogs of a wheel may turn or break, but nothing is at stake for the cogs. Without affective valuation, relations remain mechanical rather than meaningful. A system ceases to be purely mechanical when changes to its state alter its own valuation landscape, rather than merely propagating state transitions.

The preceding paragraphs establish the cumulative conditions for personal meaning: existence through distinguishability, information through contrast, relational structure through dependency, and affective valuation through emotion.

A system crosses the threshold into personal meaning when it possesses not merely relational structure but internal states that register distinctions as mattering to it. This threshold is not sharp but graded; systems may exhibit varying degrees of affective sensitivity, and thus varying depths of personal meaning.

What follows from this threshold is that personal meaning is neither universal nor guaranteed. It is an achievement of certain configurations of matter and process—configurations that include, but need not be limited to, biological organisms with nervous systems capable of valuation.

Personal meaning is not exhausted by internal experience alone. A further and distinct form of personal meaning arises from the impact one has on other systems that themselves possess affective significance. To matter to others is to shape their internal states in ways that persist, influence future distinctions, and alter the structure of their emotional landscape.

This form of meaning is inherently relational and distributed. It does not reside solely within the individual, but in the network of dependencies and memories through which one's existence continues to exert influence. A person's life may acquire profound significance

through love given, harm done, guidance offered, or presence shared—effects that endure even in absence.

The death of a person does not therefore terminate their personal meaning if their loss continues to destabilize, reorient, or enrich the internal coherence of others. In this sense, relational personal meaning can outlast the individual system from which it originated, persisting as a propagated distinction within the lives of those who remain.

Within the VERSF framework, this persistence corresponds to the continued activation of distinctions across coupled affective subsystems. Meaning is conserved not as substance, but as influence.

Human existence begins under conditions not of our choosing. We do not choose our parents, the historical moment into which we are born, the culture that shapes our early development, nor the genetic inheritance that constrains our physiology, temperament, and vulnerability. Nor do we control how others initially treat us, the opportunities afforded to us, or the harms imposed upon us. These factors form the boundary conditions of personal existence.

From this observation, it would be a mistake to conclude that choice is illusory. What follows instead is a more precise account: choice is always influenced, but not eliminated—shaped by circumstance, yet still real in its consequences. Within the constraints imposed by biology, history, and circumstance, individuals retain the capacity to select among available responses. It is within this constrained space that agency operates.

The significance of choice does not lie in absolute freedom, but in directional commitment. Each choice represents an irreversible selection among possible futures, shaping both the internal coherence of the individual and their relational impact on others. Through repeated commitments, a trajectory is formed. This trajectory constitutes a life.

Personal meaning emerges as individuals navigate these constrained choices, responding to circumstances not of their making while nevertheless determining how they will act within them. Relational personal meaning arises as these choices propagate outward, altering the emotional states, expectations, and futures of others. Responsibility, in this sense, is not grounded in uncaused freedom, but in the capacity to influence what follows.

Within the VERSF framework, influenced choice corresponds to irreversible commitment under finite distinguishability. Constraints define the available state space; choice selects a path through it. Meaning arises not from the absence of constraint, but from commitment within it.

Choices are not merely decisions among alternatives; they are the primary means by which agents navigate time. In a universe where the future is not yet fixed but constrained, choice functions as the mechanism that selects which potential distinctions become actualized. Through choice, an individual does not move through time passively but actively participates in its unfolding.

Time, within the VERSF framework, is not a pre-existing dimension through which agents travel. It emerges from irreversible commitment—the accumulation of distinctions that cannot be undone. Each meaningful choice represents such a commitment, collapsing

multiple possible futures into a single realized trajectory. To choose is therefore to advance time locally.

From this perspective, the past is constituted by commitments already made, the present by the boundary at which commitment occurs, and the future by the space of constrained possibilities not yet resolved. Choice is the act that converts possibility into history—the moment when what might have been becomes what is. Without choice, temporal experience would reduce to mechanical progression rather than lived direction.

Personal meaning is inseparable from this process. What matters to an individual is inseparable from the choices they make and the futures they foreclose. Regret, hope, responsibility, and purpose all arise from the recognition that time advances through commitment, and that commitment is enacted through choice.

Thus, choice is not an add-on to temporal existence but its navigational core. To live is not simply to endure the passage of time, but to steer a path through it under constraint. Meaning arises in the steering.

Within the VERSF framework, entropy is not best understood as a drive toward disorder, but as the unfolding of distinction. Entropy measures the irreversible realization of differences—the process by which potential distinctions become actualized and committed to history. Disorder is not the goal; it is a byproduct of expanding distinguishability under finite constraints.

Seen in this light, the large-scale behavior of the universe exhibits a persistent tendency toward balance. Gradients relax, extremes dissipate, and systems evolve toward configurations that minimize unsustainable asymmetry. Balance, rather than chaos or order alone, emerges as the long-term signature of cosmic evolution. It is not imposed, but arrived at through lawful relaxation. This tendency toward balance is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it identifies stable regimes, not moral imperatives.

This observation suggests a reframing of cosmological purpose. The universe need not possess an agenda, intention, or end-state toward which it strives. Instead, it exhibits regularities that function as signposts rather than commands. Balance is not demanded; it is revealed as the condition under which distinction can persist with minimal friction.

For agents embedded within such a universe, this carries philosophical weight. If meaning arises through distinction, relation, emotion, and choice, then balance offers guidance without prescription. It suggests ways of existing that reduce destructive friction—internally, relationally, and socially—without invoking cosmic purpose or moral decree.

In this sense, the universe does not tell us what to value. It merely reveals which patterns endure. Meaning is not granted from above, but cultivated locally through choices that align with balance rather than oppose it. The signpost is not destiny, but coherence.

It is appropriate to conclude with a personal reflection, not as prescription, but as application. If existence unfolds through distinction, if meaning arises through relation, emotion, and choice, and if balance is the long-term signature of the universe, then a way of living suggests itself—quietly, without mandate.

To be alive is to experience emotion, both welcome and unwelcome—joy and gratitude alongside anxiety, grief, and sorrow. Gratitude, in this sense, is not reserved for pleasure alone. Anxiety, grief, anger, and sorrow are not failures of existence but signals of stake, attachment, and vulnerability. To feel deeply is to participate fully in meaning. To reject difficult emotions would be to reject the very mechanism by which anything can matter.

Choice, under constraint, becomes the practical expression of meaning. While circumstances are rarely chosen, responses remain partially open. To make good choices is not only to act in one's own interest, but to recognise the impact one's actions have on others whose lives are also shaped by emotion and vulnerability. Personal meaning and relational meaning are inseparable in practice.

Balance offers a further guide. To seek balance is not to avoid commitment, but to avoid destructive excess. Kindness and fairness matter, not because they are commanded, but because they reduce unnecessary friction within relational systems. At the same time, balance does not require self-erasure. To overcommit, to accept exploitation or abuse, is itself a form of imbalance that degrades meaning rather than deepens it.

In the long arc of time, only a small subset of choices persist. Status symbols, possessions, and transient markers of success rarely propagate beyond their moment. What endures are the distinctions impressed upon others: how one treated them, whether one offered care or harm, whether one contributed to coherence or disorder in their lives. No one is remembered for the watches they owned, but many are remembered for how they made others feel.

If the universe offers any guidance at all, it is not an agenda but a pattern: distinctions unfold, balance persists, and meaning emerges where choices are made with awareness of their consequences. To live well, then, is not to seek perfection or control, but to navigate time with care—grateful for feeling, attentive to impact, and oriented toward balance.

The preceding sections were written in a deliberately precise and scientific tone. That tone is necessary when ideas must align carefully with a broader theoretical framework and withstand critical scrutiny. But the core message does not belong only to those with a background in physics or philosophy. At heart, it concerns ordinary human experience.

Put simply, this work begins from the observation that **we know we exist**. Not because a theory tells us so, but because we feel it directly. We are here. Something is happening rather than nothing at all. That basic fact is the starting point.

To exist means to stand out from nothing — to be *something* rather than absence. From that difference comes information: the simple fact that one state is not the same as another. But information alone is not yet meaning. Meaning begins when things exist **in relation** — when what happens to one thing depends on something else.

Personal meaning goes a step further. Things matter to us because we can feel. Joy, fear, grief, love, hope, and regret are not distractions from meaning; they are the way meaning becomes real. Without feeling, events would still occur, but nothing would be at stake. The loss of a loved one would be a recordable fact, but it would not hurt — and therefore it would not truly matter.

Meaning also extends beyond what we feel inside ourselves. We matter to others, and others matter to us. The way we treat people leaves traces that persist long after individual moments pass. Even after someone is gone, the impact they had — the care they gave, the harm they caused, the love they offered — continues to shape the lives of those who remain. In this sense, meaning does not disappear at death; it carries on through influence.

None of us begins life with complete freedom. We do not choose where we are born, who raises us, or many of the conditions that shape us. But this does not mean our choices are meaningless. Within the limits we are given, we still decide how to respond. Each choice closes off some possibilities and opens others. Over time, these choices form a path. That path is what we call a life.

Time, in this view, is not something we simply drift through. It is something we participate in. Each meaningful decision turns “what might have been” into “what is.” Our past is made of choices already taken; our future is made of possibilities not yet resolved.

The universe itself does not appear to hand us a purpose or tell us what to value. What it does show, consistently, is that **balance endures**. Extremes tend to collapse. Systems that reduce unnecessary conflict and friction tend to last longer. This is not a moral command — it is an observation.

For a human life, this suggests a quiet orientation rather than a rulebook. Meaning grows where we allow ourselves to feel, where we recognise the impact of our actions on others, and where we try to live in ways that do not generate needless harm — either to ourselves or to those around us. Balance does not mean passivity or self-erasure; it means avoiding destructive excess while still committing to what matters.

In the end, very little of what we accumulate survives us. What does endure is how we affected other people — whether we brought coherence or disorder into their lives, whether we offered care or indifference, whether we helped steady the world around us or made it harder to inhabit.

If there is any guidance here, it is not imposed from above. It is simply this: **existence unfolds through difference, meaning arises through connection, and a life takes shape through the choices we make while feeling our way forward.**

It is fitting to conclude where the journey began: with grief. Grief is often described as love with nowhere to go. While this captures an aspect of its truth, it does not reach its depth.

Grief is not merely displaced affection; it is the consequence of having allowed another to matter profoundly.

Within the framework developed here, grief arises when a deeply coupled relational distinction is irreversibly broken. A person whose existence had been woven into one's internal ordering is suddenly absent, yet the structure that depended on them remains. The resulting dissonance is not an error to be corrected, but evidence of genuine meaning having existed.

At its deepest level, grief is the part of oneself that was entrusted to another and is not reclaimed. It is the portion of identity, vulnerability, and emotional coherence that was shaped in relation to someone who is no longer present. To grieve is therefore not only to miss another, but to acknowledge that one has been permanently changed by love.

Grief teaches, with painful clarity, the preciousness of both life and deep emotion. It reveals that meaning is not free: it is purchased through openness to loss. A universe in which nothing could be lost would be a universe in which nothing could matter. Grief is the cost of having lived relationally rather than mechanically.

In this sense, grief is not a failure of balance but its proof. It testifies that one chose connection over protection, meaning over insulation. Though grief carries suffering, it also affirms that one has participated fully in existence, allowing distinction to penetrate deeply enough to leave a permanent mark.

To grieve is to bear witness to love that was real, to meaning that was earned, and to the truth that the most important choices are those that risk leaving parts of us changed forever.