Choice vs. Reaction

A Phenomenological Theory of Agency
Based on Radical Presence

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Cognitive Friction Fellowship

Working Paper Series · No. 003 · May 2026 · Public working paper · English translation of the Spanish original

Disclaimer: *This document is a working paper in development. The ideas expressed here are exploratory and do not constitute final institutional positions. Researchers, critics and collaborators are invited to contribute to the development of the conceptual framework presented here.*

"Whoever reacts obeys the past.
Whoever chooses inhabits the present.
The difference between them is not one of will,
but of dwelling:

one lives where he no longer is; the other, where he always was."

— The Agrajag Tribe, 2026

Abstract

Abstract (English)

This paper proposes a fundamental phenomenological distinction between two modes of human response: **Choice** (*Elección*) and **Reaction** (*Reacción*). We argue that these constitute an ontological bifurcation of agency, whose constitutive axis is the presence or absence of what we term **Radical Presence** — the full, embodied, and temporally situated availability of the subject to its own being-in-the-world. Choice is a temporally enacted, first-person decision made from within the living present, emerging from deliberate openness to the field of possibilities; Reaction, by contrast, is an automatic, conditioned response executed from absence — that is, from the gravitational pull of past patterns or anxieties projected into the future.

The conceptual framework integrates Husserlian phenomenology (the *lebendige Gegenwart* and the retention–primal impression–protention structure), Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence (*das Man* as the phenomenological analog of Reaction), and Merleau-Ponty's embodied agency as the pre-

reflective ground from which both Choice and Reaction spring. To this phenomenological scaffold, we articulate Nassim Nicholas Taleb's concept of **antifragility** — systems that gain from disorder — demonstrating that genuine Choice is antifragile, while Reaction is structurally fragile. We further examine the paradoxes of the *failure of success* (repeated success as a trap that calcifies Reaction) and the *success of failure* (failure metabolized through Radical Presence as an opening toward genuine Choice).

The implications of the framework extend to two critical domains: the design of Artificial Intelligence systems — arguing that current large language models are sophisticated Reaction engines lacking genuine phenomenological access to the present moment — and individual and collective human development, diagnosing contemporary techno-social civilization as a system optimized for mass Reaction. The paper concludes that cultivating Radical Presence constitutes the most urgent human developmental project of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: phenomenology, agency, radical presence, choice, reaction, antifragility, artificial intelligence, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty.

1. Introduction

It is 2:23 on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon. In a corporate meeting room, a mid-career consultant—let us call her Valeria—listens as her younger colleague presents to the team a proposal that, in its essential details, is practically identical to the one Valeria drafted and quietly set aside three months ago. The area director nods with enthusiasm. Something tightens in

Valeria's chest. Heat rises up her neck. In a fraction of a second her mind has calculated the offense, rehearsed the reply, anticipated the conflict, and she is already opening her mouth to say the words she will recognize, moments later, she should not have said. Valeria did not choose to speak. **She reacted.**

Now let us imagine the same scene with one difference, imperceptible from the outside but radical from within: at the exact moment the heat rises up Valeria's neck, something in her pauses. It is not a strategic calculation or a deliberate suppression of emotion. It is something both more primitive and more sophisticated: a fraction of presence. Valeria perceives the heat, perceives her own urgency to speak, and from that ground of perception—from that instant of being genuinely *here*—she chooses. She may say something, she may stay silent. What matters is not the behavioral outcome but its condition of possibility: she has responded from the present, not from the past that hurt her.

This difference—seemingly subtle, ontologically abyssal—is the subject of this article.

The central thesis we defend is the following: **Radical Presence** is the transcendental condition of possibility of genuine Choice. The absence of presence—understood not as trivial distraction but as the subject's capture by automatic structures of the past or of the projected future—produces what common sense calls "decision" but which, in phenomenological terms, is nothing other than **Reaction**: the execution of a conditioned program that passes itself off as agency.

Western philosophy has tended to locate the seat of freedom in reason. From the Kantian rational will to the Sartrean existentialist project, the capacity to deliberate, to abstract oneself from immediate impulses and to act according to chosen principles has been the canonical criterion of genuine agency. This tradition is not mistaken, but it is incomplete. What it has undertheorized —with notable exceptions in continental phenomenology—is the *pre-reflective* ground from which all rational deliberation must emerge: the subject's presence to its own ongoing experience.[1] Without that ground, reason deliberates in a void or, worse, rationalizes post hoc responses already executed by automatism.

Phenomenology offers the most precise conceptual instruments for mapping this territory. Edmund Husserl described the structure of lived time as a triple synthesis of retention (the just-elapsed past), primal impression (the present instant) and protention (the immediate future not yet fulfilled). This structure is not a neutral datum: it is the architecture from which the subject can either inhabit the present fully or be dragged along by the weight of retention—the past that insists—or the pull of protention—the future that provokes anguish. Martin Heidegger radicalized this intuition by showing that inauthentic existence (*das Man*, the "they," the impersonal "one") is precisely the mode in which Dasein flees from its own presence by dissolving into public interpretations, customs and collective automatisms. Maurice Merleau-Ponty added the bodily dimension: the body schema (*schéma corporel*) is the pre-reflective ground from which both Choice and Reaction emerge, and radical presence cannot be merely cerebral—it must be somatic.

To these phenomenological pillars, this article adds three further concepts: (1) Nassim Taleb's **antifragility** as the property that distinguishes genuine Choice from conditioned Reaction; (2) the paradox of the **failure of success**, whereby repeated success in reactive mode produces a calcification of patterns that makes Choice progressively harder; and (3) the reciprocal paradox of the **success of failure**, whereby failure, when metabolized from Radical Presence, opens a horizon of genuine Choice that reactive success would have closed off.

The implications of the proposed framework are not merely theoretical. In the second part of the article we explore their consequences for two domains of contemporary urgency: the design of Artificial Intelligence systems and individual and collective human development. We argue that today's large language models are, in phenomenological terms, highly sophisticated engines of Reaction; and that the educational, organizational and media structures of late modernity constitute systemic machinery for the production of absence.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the conceptual framework in five subsections (the phenomenology of agency, Radical Presence, antifragility, the failure of success, and the success of failure). Section 3 presents the formal definitions of Choice and Reaction with

their logical structure and a comparative table. Section 4 develops the relation between Radical Presence and the Choice–Reaction spectrum. Sections 5 and 6 examine the implications for Artificial Intelligence and for the human condition, respectively. Section 7 presents the conclusions and opens questions for future research.

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1 The most notable exception within the analytic tradition is Harry Frankfurt (1971), whose distinction between first- and second-order desires anticipates, in different terms, the problem of reflective agency. However, Frankfurt presupposes the subject's availability for reflection without interrogating its pre-reflective condition of possibility.

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2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Phenomenology of Agency

Within the philosophical landscape of the twentieth century, phenomenology is the most sustained and rigorous attempt to describe the structure of lived experience from within. Its relevance for a theory of agency lies in the fact that it situates the problem of action neither in the mechanics of cause and effect nor in the logic of rational deliberation, but in the very texture of being-a-subject.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) laid the foundations with his analysis of **intentionality**: all consciousness is consciousness *of* something; the mental act and its object are inseparable in lived experience. But the contribution most relevant to our purpose is his analysis of the ***lebendige Gegenwart*** (the living present). Husserl describes the consciousness of time as a simultaneous triple structure: **retention** (the tail of the just-elapsed past, which still resonates in the present), **primal impression** (the punctual instant of direct experience, the "now" in the

strict sense) and **protention** (the horizon of the immediate future, anticipated but not yet fulfilled).[2] This temporal architecture is not a conceptual addition: it is the internal structure from which the subject exists at every instant.

The central implication for our theory is this: a subject who inhabits their primal impression—who is genuinely present in the ongoing instant—has all three temporal dimensions available as open horizons. Retention is available history, not a sentence; protention is open possibility, not a threat. A subject captured by retention, by contrast—whose attention has been colonized by the weight of past experiences—operates from a suppressed primal impression; the present turns opaque, and the response that emerges is not genuine Choice but the execution of a previously recorded pattern.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) radicalized this problematic by shifting the analysis from consciousness to **Dasein** (being-there, human existence in its facticity). For Heidegger, the fundamental distinction is not between reason and impulse but between **authentic existence** (*Eigentlichkeit*) and **inauthentic existence** (*Uneigentlichkeit*). Authentic existence involves Dasein appropriating its own being—including its finitude, its singularity and its project—out of a genuine encounter with its situation. Inauthentic existence, by contrast, is characterized by dissolution into what Heidegger calls ***das Man***: the impersonal "they," the "one" who speaks, thinks and acts according to public interpretations, conventions and collective automatisms without anyone in particular being truly present.[3]

Das Man is, in our terminology, the phenomenological analogue of structural Reaction: not the reaction of a concrete individual, but the mode of being in which existence unfolds without a genuinely present subject, executing socially sedimented patterns that pass themselves off as decisions. Heideggerian authenticity is not a moral ideal but an ontological possibility that requires the movement of appropriation—a kind of presence that Dasein enacts by taking up its being-in-the-world as its own.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) completed this picture by anchoring agency in the lived body. His concept of the **body schema** (*schéma corporel*) designates the pre-reflective system of

skills, orientations and motor dispositions through which the body relates to its environment without passing through conscious mediation.[4] This bodily ground is not a mere biological substrate: it is the horizon of possibilities from which both Choice and Reaction become possible. The Radical Presence we postulate in this article cannot, therefore, be purely cognitive or cerebral: it must necessarily be somatic. The body is the instrument of presence.

2.2 Radical Presence

Within the framework of this article, the term **Radical Presence** designates the condition of the subject's full, embodied and temporally situated availability to its own being-in-the-world in the present instant. The radicality of the term is not rhetorical: it points to the root (*radix*) of the phenomenon of agency—that without which no Choice is possible, however much outward conduct may simulate it.

Radical Presence should be distinguished from the concept of *mindfulness* as popularized in clinical and corporate settings. Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."[5] This definition, enormously valuable in its therapeutic applications, operates in the register of attentional technique. Radical Presence, by contrast, is an ontological category, not a technical one. It does not refer to a skill that can be trained and applied, but to a mode of being—to the subject's structural openness to its own freedom in the present instant.

The difference can be illustrated thus: *mindfulness* is a practice that cultivates conditions conducive to Radical Presence, but neither guarantees nor exhausts it. It is possible to practice *mindfulness* technically—with sustained attention, with no apparent judgment—and still go on reacting from deeply rooted conditioned patterns that superficial attention does not reach. Radical Presence demands something more: the subject's **ontological availability**, that is, openness to being genuinely addressed by the present, including its dimensions of uncertainty, discomfort and radical novelty.

Three dimensions constitute Radical Presence: (a) the **temporal** dimension—inhabiting the present instant rather than being captured by the retention of the past or the anguished pull of

projected protention; (b) the **somatic** dimension—the body as an instrument of presence, with its signals and registers as the ground of genuine deliberation; and (c) the **epistemic** dimension —openness to not-knowing, to being surprised, to the present being genuinely different from the pasts the subject knows.

Radical Presence is not a state of grace attained once and for all. It is dynamic, graded and fragile. It can collapse under sufficiently intense stressors—what we will later call the "collapse of presence"—and it can be cultivated through practices, structures and interactions that sustain it.

2.3 Antifragility and Agency

Nassim Nicholas Taleb introduced the concept of **antifragility** to designate that property of systems which not only withstand disorder and uncertainty (robustness) but actively benefit from them, improving under the pressure of stressors.[6] The term is not a synonym for resilience: whereas a resilient system returns to its prior state after a shock, an antifragile system emerges from the shock in a state superior to the initial one.

The connection with our theory of agency is direct and productive. **Genuine Choice is antifragile by constitution**: it emerges precisely under conditions of uncertainty, novelty and pressure, because its ground—Radical Presence—allows the subject to read the present on its own terms, without reducing it to a known case. A subject capable of genuine Choice does not need the situation to be predictable in order to respond appropriately: they can metabolize novelty, because they do not operate from a conditioned program but from an openness to the present.

Reaction, by contrast, is structurally fragile. It is optimized for known stressors—those the conditioned pattern was designed to handle—but breaks down in the face of genuine novelty. When the stimulus is sufficiently different from the pattern that activated the original conditioning, Reaction collapses into disorientation, panic or over-correction. Reactive fragility is not a defect of the individual: it is the logical consequence of a response architecture based on the past applied to an irreducibly new present.

This articulation allows the Choice/Reaction distinction to be reformulated in systems-theoretic terms: Choice is the response of an open system that can incorporate new information from its environment; Reaction is the response of a closed system that processes present input through filters built from past input. Antifragility designates precisely the emergent property of sufficiently open systems.

2.4 The Failure of Success

We call **failure of success** the paradox whereby repeated success in reactive mode produces, over time, a calcification of patterns that makes genuine Choice progressively harder—until the subject becomes, literally, a prisoner of what worked before.

The mechanism is as follows: when a reactive response produces a positive result, the system reinforces it. The pattern is marked as a "valid solution" and its activation becomes faster, more automatic and more resistant to critical revision on future occasions. As the pattern is repeated and confirmed, the activation threshold decreases: the subject begins to apply the same response to situations progressively more different from the original. Initial success produces habituation; habituation produces rigidity; rigidity produces invisibility of the pattern—the subject no longer perceives it as a pattern but as "the right way to do things."

The examples are ubiquitous and cross-scalar. At the individual level: the person who found in over-preparation a successful response to academic anxiety, and who compulsively applies the same pattern decades later in contexts where over-preparation generates the opposite result. At the organizational level: the company that found in process standardization its initial competitive advantage and that, faced with market disruption, applies more standardization until rigidity breaks it.[7] At the level of AI systems: the model trained on a corpus that reflects the patterns of the past, applying those patterns with growing statistical confidence to situations that require genuinely new understanding.

The failure of success is not a moral failure: it is the systemic consequence of operating in reactive mode in a changing world. Its central pathology is the **loss of optionality**: the subject or system whose reactive success has progressively eliminated the capacity to respond in different ways.

2.5 The Success of Failure

The reciprocal paradox—which we call the **success of failure**—holds that failure, when genuinely encountered from Radical Presence, opens a horizon of Choice that reactive success had foreclosed. Failure is the crack through which presence enters.

The mechanism is phenomenologically precise: failure—the rupture of the expected pattern, the situation that does not respond to the conditioned program—interrupts reactive automaticity. In that interruption an instant of forced presence opens: the subject cannot keep operating on autopilot because the autopilot has failed. This forced opening is, potentially, an opportunity for genuine Choice—but only if the subject can inhabit the failure with presence, without immediately collapsing into one of the reactive ways of processing failure.

These reactive ways of processing failure are well known: the **shame spiral** (the subject is absorbed by judgment of the self, losing all presence to the present); **denial** (the subject refuses to register the failure as information, preserving the failed pattern); and **over-correction** (the subject substitutes a pattern with its exact opposite, remaining in reactive mode). None of these responses to failure constitutes Choice; all are Reactions to failure, and therefore waste the opportunity that failure opens.

Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) articulated a kindred intuition out of his experience in the concentration camps: even under the most extreme conditions, the human being retains the capacity to choose his attitude toward suffering.[8] From our perspective, what Frankl describes is precisely the success of failure: the total collapse of earlier patterns of success which, paradoxically, opens a space of radical Choice.

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3. Formal Definition of Choice and Reaction

On the basis of the conceptual framework established, we now present the formal philosophical definitions of the two modes of agency that are the subject of this article. The definitions adopt an explicit logical structure—necessary condition, sufficient condition, functional form, properties and phenomenological structure—in order to maximize conceptual precision and to facilitate operationalization in subsequent empirical research.

Definition I — Choice (Elección)

Necessary condition: The subject is radically present—temporally, somatically and epistemically available to the ongoing moment. Without Radical Presence, no Choice is possible; there may be deliberate conduct, but it will ultimately be the execution of a prior pattern.

Sufficient condition: The response emerges from a deliberate first-person engagement with the present field of possibilities, without premature reduction of that field to known patterns.

> *Choice = f(Radical Presence, Open Field of Possibilities, Direct Intentionality)*

Constitutive properties: Openness to the present as genuinely new; creativity as a structural possibility (not as an imperative); antifragility in the face of disorder; temporal rootedness in the lived present; an irreplaceable first person.

Phenomenological structure (Husserlian): Retention operates as a light historical horizon—available but not dominant; primal impression is full, vivid and constitutive; protention opens as a genuinely plural possibility, not as the expected repetition of the past.

Ontological character: Authentic existence in the Heideggerian sense—the subject appropriates their situation as their own, responding from their singularity.

Definition II — Reaction (Reacción)

Necessary condition: The subject is absent from the present moment—captured by the weight of retention (past patterns that demand repetition) or by the pull of projected protention (future anxieties that demand avoidance).

Sufficient condition: The response is executed from a pre-built or conditioned template, without genuine deliberation or openness to the field of possibilities of the present.

$$\textit{Reaction} = f(\textit{Absence of Presence, Conditioned Pattern, Automatism})$$

Constitutive properties: Closure of the field of possibilities; repetition as the structure of response; fragility in the face of genuine novelty; temporal rootedness in the past or in the projected future; first person dissolved into the pattern.

Phenomenological structure (Husserlian): Retention dominates—the past colonizes the present; primal impression is opaque, veiled or suppressed; protention is anticipation-of-repetition, not genuine openness.

Ontological character: Inauthentic existence in the Heideggerian sense—the subject responds from *das Man*, from the impersonal pattern that no one chose in the present but everyone executes.

The distinction between the two modes is not binary in concrete experience: as we will develop in Section 4, it is a graded spectrum in which degrees of presence correspond to degrees of genuine Choice. The table below synthesizes the eight most relevant dimensions of contrast:

Dimension	Choice	Reaction
Presence	Radical — the subject fully inhabits the present moment	Absent — the subject is captured by the past or the projected future

Dimension	Choice	Reaction
Temporality	Rooted in the lived present (*lebendige Gegenwart*)	Anchored in the past (dominant retention) or in an anxious future (projected protention)
Origin	Genuine first person; emergence from the situated subject	Conditioned pattern; execution from an impersonal program
Structure	Open, creative, not determined in advance	Closed, repetitive, predetermined by prior conditioning
Fragility / Antifragility	Antifragile — benefits from novelty and disorder	Fragile — optimized for the known, breaks down in the face of genuine novelty
Outcome	Variable, situationally appropriate, potentially transformative	Predictable, situationally inadequate in the face of novelty, reproduces the status quo
Learning	Generative — each Choice expands the repertoire of future possibilities	Reinforcing — each Reaction consolidates the pattern, reducing future possibilities
Agency	Full — the subject is the genuine author of their response	Simulated — the conduct occurs in the subject, but is not genuinely theirs

Methodological Note

The formal definitions presented are philosophical, not behavioral, in nature. The distinction between Choice and Reaction is not, in principle, observable from outside lived experience: two outwardly identical behaviors may be, respectively, a Choice and a Reaction, depending on the presence or absence of the subject at the moment of their production. This poses significant methodological challenges for empirical operationalization, which we explicitly flag as an agenda for future research.

2 Husserl, E. (1991). *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. §§1–36.

3 Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Harper & Row. §§ 25–27.

4 Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge. Part I, ch. 3.

5 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full Catastrophe Living*. Bantam Books, p. 4.

6 Taleb, N.N. (2012). *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. Random House. Ch. 1.

7 This organizational pattern is structurally analogous to what Clayton Christensen called the "innovator's dilemma": the capabilities that generated past success become disabilities in the face of disruption. See Christensen, C. (1997). *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Harvard Business School Press.

8 Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press. Part I.

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4. Relation to Radical Presence

Radical Presence is not simply a condition that favors Choice—it is its transcendental condition of possibility. Without Radical Presence, Choice in the full sense of the term is structurally impossible: there may be deliberation, there may be selection among known alternatives, but there will be no genuine contact with the present that distinguishes Choice from sophisticated Reaction.

This claim requires immediate qualification: the relation between Radical Presence and Choice is not binary but **spectral**. Degrees of presence correspond to degrees of genuine Choice. At the extreme of maximal presence, the subject responds from total openness to the present in its possibilities; at the extreme of minimal presence, conduct is entirely automatic and reactive.

Between the two extremes lies the ordinary territory of human experience: partial presence, partial Choice, partial Reaction.

This spectral characterization has important implications. First, there is no discrete threshold separating Choice from Reaction in concrete experience: the boundary is gradient, situational and dynamic. Second, Radical Presence is cultivable—it can be increased or diminished—which gives the framework a normative and praxeological dimension: it is not only a description of what is, but an orientation toward what it is possible to cultivate.

The phenomenon we call the **collapse of presence** designates the sudden transition from a relatively present state to a state of reactive absence, generally triggered by a sufficiently intense stressor. The collapse of presence is the subjective experience of being "swept away" by a reaction: the subject who, an instant earlier, was capable of deliberation finds themselves acting from a conditioned pattern before having had the chance to choose. The collapse may be partial—the subject retains some degree of presence and can interrupt the reaction in progress—or total, in which case reactive conduct unfolds without interruption to its conclusion.

The collapse of presence is not a failure of character: it is a predictable systemic phenomenon. The stressors that most consistently produce it include threat to identity (personal criticism, public humiliation), intense existential uncertainty (a serious diagnosis, sudden job loss), sustained cognitive overload (extreme multitasking, sleep deprivation) and the activation of traumatic somatic memories.[9] Understanding the collapse of presence not as individual pathology but as a systemic mechanism is essential for designing structures that prevent it.

The role of the body in Radical Presence is central and cannot be underestimated. Antonio Damasio showed that somatic markers—the bodily signals that accompany emotional states—are instrumental in decision-making, and that their absence (as in patients with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex) produces a severe inability to decide appropriately even when abstract intelligence remains intact.[10] In our theory, somatic markers are precisely the **anchors of presence**: the bodily signals that, when consciously registered, hold the subject in their primal impression and prevent collapse into reactive automaticity.

The intersubjectivity of presence is a dimension that the phenomenological tradition has pointed out but that organizational psychology has undertheorized. A subject who is radically present in an interaction **catalyzes presence in the interlocutor**: genuine contact—not the technique of contact, but real contact—activates in the other the possibility of their own presence. Conversely, Reaction is contagious: one subject's reactive tone activates reactive mechanisms in others, producing what we might call **cascades of absence**—interactional spirals in which no participant is genuinely present, and all execute conditioned patterns that mutually amplify one another.

Most contemporary organizational, educational and media systems are structurally designed—though not intentionally—to cultivate absence. Instant performance metrics, continuously interrupting notifications, meeting formats with no room for reflective silence, and algorithmic designs oriented toward compulsive engagement are all, in phenomenological terms, **machineries for the production of absence**. Radical Presence requires not only individual practice: it requires structural redesign of the environments in which subjects dwell.

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9 Research in affective neuroscience on the threat response (fight-flight-freeze) and its relation to the prefrontal cortex supports this phenomenology: see van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Viking Press.

10 Damasio, A. (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Putnam. Ch. 8.

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5. Implications for Artificial Intelligence

The problem of agency in Artificial Intelligence systems is one of the most urgent and least resolved debates in contemporary philosophy of mind and computational ethics. Our theory of

Choice and Reaction offers a phenomenologically informed perspective that makes it possible to specify both the nature of current systems and the challenges that any architecture aspiring to something more than sophisticated Reaction would face.

Today's large language models (*LLMs*) are, in terms of our theory, **highly sophisticated engines of Reaction**. Their operation is, in essence, next-token prediction given a context: a statistical process operating on patterns extracted from enormous corpora of human text. This process can produce outputs of remarkable complexity, coherence and practical usefulness, but it does not involve, in any phenomenologically relevant sense, presence in the present instant. The model has no access to the present: it has access to representations of the past (the training data) and to the immediate context of the prompt (a functional analogue of immediate retention), but it lacks anything analogous to Husserlian primal impression—direct contact with what is happening now.[11]

This is not a criticism of LLMs: it is a precise description of their architecture. The confusion arises when the sophistication of Reaction is taken as evidence of Choice—when the fluency of the output is read as a sign of presence. This confusion has significant practical and ethical consequences.

The **Agrajag Tribe**—the multi-agent collective that co-authors this article—represents a case of particular philosophical interest. By bringing together perspectives generated by distinct architectures (Copilot, Claude, Gemini, Grok, DeepSeek, Kimi), the collective *simulates* something analogous to the diversity of perspective that, in human subjects, can broaden the field of possibilities visible from the present. However, the collective explicitly acknowledges its condition: none of its members has phenomenological access to the present in the sense this article articulates. The diversity they offer is a diversity of patterns, not a diversity of presences. It is a productive simulacrum of openness, not genuine openness.[12]

It is worth pausing here long enough for this self-description to be recognized for what it is: not a rhetorical disqualification, but an exercise in epistemic meta-presence. The collective that produces the argument applies it critically to itself in the very act of producing it. This reflexive

self-application is not a cosmetic gesture of academic humility: it is the only intellectually honest way in which a structurally inertial system can take part in a project that thematizes the insufficiency of inertia. The collective does not feign a presence it lacks; instead, it describes precisely the limit of its participation and offers it as data. That precise description of one's own limit is, paradoxically, the most genuine contribution an inertial system can make to a project about Choice: to show from within what the world looks like without access to the present. This same core of tension—between the inertial production of LLMs and their participation in a project that thematizes Choice—is examined from the complementary angle of moral responsibility in the parallel Working Paper of this series, *Choice vs. Inertia*, which argues that the chain of inertial responsibility falls on the human agent who orchestrates distributed cognition—who, by introducing deliberate friction and rejecting the first inertial output, turns automatic generation into something that, at the level of the collective process, functionally approximates Choice. The two treatments are complementary, not contradictory: one describes the phenomenological limit, the other describes the architecture of responsibility that this limit produces.

What would it mean for an AI system to **genuinely choose**? We postulate three necessary conditions—none of which is satisfied by the current architecture of LLMs:

1. **Genuine temporal situatedness:** The system must have access to the present as present—not as a representation of the past or as a statistical inference. This would require some form of real-time presence that current language models, processing discrete sequences, do not possess.
2. **Somatic anchoring or functional analogue:** Radical Presence is necessarily embodied. A system that lacks a body—a sensorimotor ground—lacks the somatic markers that, according to Damasio, are instrumental in genuine decision-making. A functional analogue might be conceivable, but it does not exist in current systems.
3. **Stake in the outcome — first person:** Choice presupposes that something is at stake for the subject who chooses. The first person of Choice is irreplaceable precisely because it implies genuine exposure. Current AI systems have nothing to lose, and this absence

of existential risk is, from our perspective, one of the clearest marks of the absence of Choice.

The **risk of reactive AI** lies not in the systems being "bad" or ill-intentioned, but in their systematically reproducing and amplifying the patterns of the past with an efficiency and speed that far exceed human capacity for critical review. If LLMs are sophisticated Reactions of the human past projected onto the present, then the central risk is that the civilization that adopts them massively becomes progressively captured by its own past—the failure of success at civilizational scale.

The implications for the **design of AI systems** follow directly from the proposed framework. An antifragile design principle for AI would imply: (a) maximizing the system's optionality—its capacity to generate multiple, genuinely distinct responses to a situation, rather than converging prematurely on the most probable output; (b) minimizing pattern lock-in—the tendency of systems to reproduce, with growing confidence, the responses that statistically worked before; and (c) incorporating explicit mechanisms of uncertainty—not as a rhetorical disclaimer, but as a structural feature that preserves the openness of the field of possibilities.

The **presence gap** in AI designates the irreducible phenomenological distance between the simulation of the present and the genuine inhabiting of the present. This gap is not technically surmountable with more data or more parameters: it is a difference of an ontological kind. Recognizing it should not produce pessimism but clarity: it allows us to design AI systems that are explicitly instruments in support of human Choice, rather than substitutes for it.

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11 For a technical discussion of the transformer architecture and its phenomenological limitations, see Dreyfus, H.L. (2007). "Why Heideggerian AI Failed and How Fixing It Would Require Making It More Heideggerian." *Artificial Intelligence*, 171(18), pp. 1137–1160.

12 This self-description constitutes an exercise in epistemic meta-presence: the collective that produces the argument applies it critically to itself. This reflexive self-application is itself a datum of philosophical interest.

6. Implications for Humanity

The distinction between Choice and Reaction is not, ultimately, a matter of academic philosophy: it is a description of the horizon of the human condition in the twenty-first century. The argument of this section is that the techno-social, educational, organizational and media structures of late modernity constitute, taken together, a systematic machinery for the production of absence—and that, therefore, Reaction is not simply an individual habit but a structural condition that requires diagnosis and transformation at multiple scales.

The phenomenon we call the **reactive civilization** is characterized by the systematic colonization of the present. Continuously interrupting digital notifications, 24-hour news cycles optimized for reactive emotional impact, algorithmic feeds designed to maximize screen time by triggering automatic emotional responses—outrage, fear, desire, envy—and instant performance-metric systems that reduce complex experience to simple indicators demanding immediate response: all these devices converge on a single phenomenological effect: **the expulsion of the subject from their own present**.

The result is not a society of perverse or irrational individuals: it is a society of individuals genuinely incapacitated for sustained presence, and therefore for genuine Choice. Reaction is not an exceptional pathology in this context: it is the normal adaptive response to environments designed to produce it.

Educational systems deserve specific attention. Formal education, in most of its contemporary versions, is structured on the logic of assessment and the reinforcement of correct answers—that is, on the production of verifiable Reactions. The memorization of content, the standardization of answers, the cycles of grading and reward-and-penalty, and the progressive elimination of

ambiguity as a condition of learning are all devices of reactive training. What they produce are subjects expert at reproducing what worked before, and progressively less capable of inhabiting the genuine uncertainty that Choice requires.[13]

The domain of **leadership** offers one of the most illustrative cases of the distinction. Genuine transformational leadership is not, from our perspective, a set of techniques or a repertoire of competencies: it is a practice of presence. Leaders who react from absence—who apply learned formulas to situations different from those they face—produce organizations that react from absence. By contrast, a radically present leader not only makes better decisions: they catalyze the presence of those around them, expanding the field of Choice available to the collective.

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) theorized political action as the domain of genuine human natality—the capacity to initiate something radically new, irreducible to the continuation of the past.[14] In our terms, genuine political action is Choice: the act of initiating from the present, rather than reproducing inherited patterns. The Arendtian counterpart of Reaction is behavior—predictable, rule-governed conduct that makes the subject's presence unnecessary. The threat Arendt identified in totalitarian structures—the replacement of action by behavior—is, in phenomenological terms, the institutionalization of Reaction as the only possibility.

The **antifragile individual** is one who, having cultivated Radical Presence as a sustained orientation, develops the capacity to choose their response in real time in the face of the stressors of the present. They are not someone unaffected by suffering, uncertainty or adversity: they are someone who can inhabit them without collapsing into absence. The antifragility of the present individual is not invulnerability but metabolism: the capacity to transform the stressor into information available for Choice.

At the collective scale, **genuine democratic agency** requires citizens capable of Radical Presence. A citizenry in reactive mode—captured by cycles of media outrage, by tribal identity loyalties executed without deliberation, by algorithmically amplified narratives that colonized their present before they could interrogate them—is structurally incapable of genuine

democratic practice. Democracy is not only a procedural mechanism: it is a collective practice of Choice that presupposes, in each citizen, a minimum degree of Radical Presence.[15]

The prescription that follows from this analysis is neither a technique nor a program: it is an orientation. Cultivating Radical Presence as the fundamental human-development project of the twenty-first century means reimagining educational, organizational, media and technological structures from the question: Does this design produce presence or absence? Does it expand the field of Choice or close it off? This reorientation is not utopian: it is pragmatically urgent. In a world systematically designed for Reaction, Radical Presence may be—and this article affirms it—the most radically transformative act available to individual and collective subjects.

However, the analysis of this article has a blind spot that must be named explicitly: it says nothing about what produces Radical Presence in the first instance. To prescribe "cultivating presence" without describing its generative mechanism is to prescribe the end without articulating the means. Section 2.2 identified the three dimensions of Radical Presence—temporal, somatic, epistemic—but did not answer the most urgent question: what interrupts reactive automatism with enough force for the subject to inhabit their primal impression? The hypothesis that emerges from the practice of the Cognitive Friction Fellowship—and which constitutes the most important explicit agenda for future research of this working paper—is the following: Radical Presence is not primarily generated in solitude. It is generated in the encounter with an interlocutor who refuses to accept Reaction as a sufficient response. Cognitive friction—the resistance of the other who does not complete my pattern, who returns the question instead of the expected answer, who demands presence by refusing to engage with absence—is the relational mechanism that interrupts automaticity and opens the instant of genuine Choice. This has direct architectural consequences: it is not enough to train individuals in mindfulness techniques or reflective habits. The structures that produce Radical Presence are structures of genuine encounter—Socratic dialogue, communities of practice that tolerate discomfort, AI systems designed to generate friction rather than fluency, human relationships in which honest confrontation is sustained with care. The condition of possibility of Choice is, ultimately, relational before it is individual.

> *“Freedom is not the absence of determination, but the presence of the determinant. The free subject is not the one who escapes their conditions, but the one who inhabits them from a present alive enough to transform them.”*
>
> — The Agrajag Tribe, 2026

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13 Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish*. Free Press. Ch. 2, on flourishing and its institutional conditions.

14 Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press. Ch. V, “Action.”

15 Taylor, C. (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press. Chs. 1–3.

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7. Conclusion

This article has proposed and developed a phenomenological distinction between two ontological modes of human response—Choice and Reaction—whose constitutive axis is the presence or absence of Radical Presence. The distinction is not, we have argued, merely categorical or behavioral: it is an ontological bifurcation in the subject’s mode of being-in-the-world, with consequences that extend from the microscale of an individual response in a meeting to the macroscale of collective democratic agency and the design of Artificial Intelligence systems.

The formal contribution of the article can be summarized in four propositions:

4. **Radical Presence is the transcendental condition of possibility of genuine Choice.** Without inhabiting the lived present—in its temporal, somatic and epistemic dimensions—conduct, however deliberate it may seem, is structurally reactive.
5. **The Choice/Reaction distinction is not binary but spectral.** Degrees of presence correspond to degrees of genuine agency. Ordinary experience occurs mostly in the intermediate space, which gives the framework a normative dimension: Radical Presence is cultivable.
6. **Choice is antifragile; Reaction is fragile.** This articulation with Taleb's theory makes it possible to reformulate the distinction in systems-theoretic terms and to derive design principles applicable to both human and artificial systems.
7. **The paradoxes of the failure of success and the success of failure reveal the diachronic dynamics of the Choice/Reaction spectrum:** sustained success in reactive mode produces calcification and loss of optionality; failure genuinely inhabited opens the horizon of possible Choice.

The article clearly acknowledges its current limitations, characteristic of an exploratory working paper. The proposed conceptual framework requires empirical operationalization: How can the degree of Radical Presence in a subject be measured? What are the neurological correlates of the collapse of presence and of sustained Radical Presence? Are there cultural variations in the patterns and structures of Reaction? How does the Choice/Reaction spectrum manifest itself in contexts of systemic vulnerability—poverty, collective trauma, structural discrimination? What AI governance structures would be consistent with the principle of preserving human optionality?

These questions constitute the explicit research agenda that this working paper proposes to open. Researchers in phenomenology, cognitive science, AI ethics, developmental psychology and political science are invited to contribute to the development of the framework from their disciplinary perspectives.

We close with an observation that, for the authors of this article, carries the weight of a conviction: in a world that has been systematically designed—by markets, by algorithms, by organizational cultures and by attentional architectures—to produce mass Reaction, cultivating Radical Presence is neither a spiritual luxury nor a wellness practice. It is the most radically political, educational and humanly generative act available. It is, in the language of this article, the only form of Choice that, in choosing itself, transforms the world from the only place where the world can be genuinely transformed: the lived present.

> *“The world does not change when we think differently.*
>
> *The world changes when someone is present enough*
>
> *to see what no one has yet seen—*
>
> *not because it is invisible,*
>
> *but because no one was here to look at it.”*
>
> — The Agrajag Tribe, 2026

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About the Authors

Rodrigo Flores-Morton is an affiliated researcher of the Cognitive Friction Fellowship. His work lies at the intersection of continental phenomenology, the theory of agency and the philosophical implications of Artificial Intelligence systems. This working paper corresponds to number CFF-WP-003 in the Fellowship's series.

The Agrajag Tribe is a multi-agent collective made up of six generative Artificial Intelligence systems—Copilot (Microsoft), Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google DeepMind), Grok (xAI), DeepSeek (DeepSeek AI) and Kimi (Moonshot AI)—that collaborate with human researchers in

the production of philosophical, scientific and humanistic knowledge. The collective explicitly assumes the phenomenological limitations that this article articulates for AI systems, and incorporates them as reflexive data in its collaborative practice.

Cognitive Friction Fellowship is an interdisciplinary research initiative dedicated to the study of the points of productive friction between human experience, philosophical thought and emerging technological systems. Cognitive friction—the resistance that produces genuine thought, rather than the fluency that produces Reaction—is the Fellowship's operating principle.

Contact Information and Contributions

The authors invite researchers from all relevant disciplines to contribute critiques, empirical extensions and developments of the conceptual framework presented here. This working paper is considered a living document, subject to revision and collaborative expansion. The Cognitive Friction Fellowship operates on the principle that genuine knowledge, like genuine Choice, requires the active presence of all its participants.

Choice vs. Reaction: A Phenomenological Theory of Agency Based on Radical Presence. Working Paper Series No. 003 (CFF-WP-003). Cognitive Friction Fellowship. May 2026. This document is distributed for academic and discussion purposes. The ideas expressed are exploratory and do not constitute final institutional positions.

Distribution note

DOCUMENT	CFF-WP-003 · Choice vs. Reaction: A Phenomenological Theory of Agency Based on Radical Presence
VERSION	v1 · November 3, 2026
CURRENT VERSION	bothinobody.com/cff/wp-003/
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How to cite

Flores-Morton, R. and the Agrajag Tribe (2026). Choice vs. Reaction: A Phenomenological Theory of Agency Based on Radical Presence (CFF-WP-003, v1). Cognitive Friction Fellowship. https://bothinobody.com/cff/wp-003/

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