

Entering Finitude: A Teachable Cosmology of Mortality, Imperfection, and Human Expansion

Mario E. Martinez, PsyD
Biocognitive Science Institute
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bsi@biocognitive.com

Abstract

This paper proposes a teachable cosmological framework for living under epistemic uncertainty, in which coherence within lived experience may function as a criterion of validity in domains where external verification is not decisive.. Neither science nor theology provides conclusive evidence regarding ultimate reality, as both rely on unprovable assumptions. The individual is therefore tasked not with discovering a definitive cosmology, but with constructing one that is cognitively coherent, emotionally viable, and durationally stable.

The model reframes mortality and imperfection not as constraints, but as structural conditions enabling human expansion. A non-intervening, immanent conception of design situates suffering within a system that permits freedom, addressing tensions between agency and determinism without reliance on theological dependency or nihilism. Central to this framework is the capacity to engage life “as if” one were immortal and invincible—not as denial of finitude, but as a functional expansion of experiential horizons.

Drawing on biocognitive epistemology, the paper shows how meaning-making modulates perception, emotion, and physiology, allowing individuals to inhabit time without contraction. Awareness of finitude is thus repositioned as the condition under which human potential expands.

Keywords

finitude; mortality; imperfection; human expansion; cosmology; meaning-making; duration; self-valuation; biocognitive epistemology

Introduction: Cosmology Under Epistemic Uncertainty

In *The Phoenix Self: In Search of Methuselah* (Martinez, 2024), Martinez outlines a sequence of developmental "attainments"—not as fixed stages, but as disciplined orientations that organize how individuals engage uncertainty, meaning, and time. The first of these attainments is the construction of a cosmology under uncertainty. This is not a speculative exercise in metaphysical certainty, but a disciplined response to an unavoidable condition: neither science nor theology can provide conclusive evidence regarding the ultimate nature of reality. Science offers probabilistic models grounded in empirical observation yet remains silent on ultimate causation, while theology offers interpretive coherence grounded in faith traditions yet cannot provide verifiable proof of its claims. Both rest on assumptions that cannot themselves be proven. In this sense, both operate within frameworks requiring faith—science in the stability and intelligibility of natural laws, and theology in the existence and nature of a transcendent or immanent designer.

Given this limitation, the individual is not tasked with discovering a provable cosmology, but constructing a livable one. As established in *The Phoenix Self: In Search of Methuselah* (Martinez, 2024), this construction is not optional but foundational to psychological and existential organization. The question is not whether there is intelligent design, a designer, an afterlife, or intervention, but which configuration can be inhabited without fragmenting the self under uncertainty, suffering, and mortality. A cosmology must be cognitively coherent, emotionally viable, and durationally stable. It must not contradict lived experience, produce chronic fear or helplessness, or collapse meaning under finitude. This framework rests on the premise that awareness of finitude does not constrain human potential but constitutes the very condition under which it can expand.

Toward a Teachable Cosmology of Expansion

The cosmology proposed here assumes intelligent design while rejecting anthropomorphic representations of the designer. This is not a God in the image of man, nor a caricature constructed to comfort fear. As Meister Eckhart's apophatic formulation suggests, "I pray God to rid me of God," a stance that rejects anthropomorphic constructions of the divine in favor of a more fundamental, non-objectifiable ground (Eckhart, 1981). The designer does not intervene selectively, grant wishes, or suspend natural processes. Rather, it is understood as an immanent presence, a ground of order that is omnipresent yet non-coercive, consistent with Tillich's conception of God not as a being among beings but as the "ground of being," thereby removing the expectation of intervention while preserving ontological depth (Tillich, 1951).

Within this framework, suffering and injustice are not resolved through intervention but understood as structural consequences of a system that permits freedom. If agency is possible, error, unpredictability, and imperfection must also be possible. Natural catastrophes, moral evil, and asymmetries of fortune are not evidence of neglect but conditions inherent in a non-deterministic system. To eliminate them would eliminate freedom itself. This neither excuses nor sanctifies suffering; it situates it within a structure where imperfection is not a defect but a necessary feature.

A critical inversion follows. The designer does not make mistakes or die—not by limitation, but because these are properties of finite beings. Humans, by contrast, possess precisely these capacities. They err and are mortal. These are not deficiencies but conditions enabling learning, adaptation, and meaning-making. Error permits revision; mortality imposes urgency and value. Together, they constitute the conditions under which a meaningful life can be constructed.

Only under these conditions does a further stance become possible: to love as if immortal and to face challenges as if invincible. These are neither defenses against death nor Nietzschean

rationalizations. Against Nietzsche's reduction of such postures to life-preserving illusions, they are disciplined enactments grounded in full acknowledgment of finitude (Nietzsche, 1887/1997). When mortality is recognized and imperfection understood as structural, the self no longer contracts around anticipated loss. Love extends without calculation; action proceeds without paralysis. The "as if" is not illusion but functional expansion—a widening of the horizon that extends lived meaning beyond the anticipation of loss.

When mortality is no longer experienced as imminent subtraction but as structural condition, the organism ceases to contract around anticipated loss. What emerges is not resignation but an expanded capacity to inhabit time—duration—marked by courage in action and non-sentimental gratitude for being. In this state, finitude is not denied but reorganized, allowing awareness of death to coexist with expanded engagement in life. This reorganization reflects a biocognitive process in which meaning modulates perception, emotion, and physiology, stabilizing the organism under uncertainty (Martinez, 2001; Martinez, 2014; Martinez, 2024).

At this juncture, a further question becomes unavoidable: by what mode of knowing are such reorganizations of experience recognized, stabilized, and enacted?

Disciplined Interiority as Method: Convergent Epistemologies in Contemplative Psychology and Theology

The limitations of third-person inquiry in matters of meaning, mortality, and existential decision do not imply the absence of method, but rather the need to recognize alternative forms of disciplined observation. While empirical science has achieved extraordinary precision in the measurement of external phenomena, its methodological commitments constrain its capacity to evaluate domains in which the locus of validity is not external correspondence but internal coherence. In such cases, the question is not whether a decision can be verified against an

independent metric, but whether it is constituted within a mode of cognition that is itself stable, non-reactive, and free of internal contradiction.

Contemplative traditions have long addressed this domain through the systematic cultivation of interior observation. Within Buddhist contemplative psychology, as articulated by Han de Wit, attention is not treated as a passive faculty but as a trainable instrument (de Wit, 1991). Through disciplined practice, perceptual and affective reactivity are reduced, allowing experience to be observed with increasing granularity and decreasing distortion. What emerges is not intuition in the colloquial sense, but a refined mode of perception grounded in sustained attentional stability. Within the Catholic contemplative tradition, as developed in the work of Jack Finnegan, a parallel structure is evident in the practice of discernment. Here, interior movements are not taken at face value but are evaluated within a disciplined framework that distinguishes between transient impulse and enduring coherence (Finnegan, 2009). The criterion is not intensity of feeling, but the degree to which a given orientation remains internally unified over time and under consequence. Despite their distinct theological and philosophical commitments, these traditions converge on a critical epistemic claim: that interior experience, when subjected to disciplined training, can function as a disciplined domain of inquiry rather than a source of distortion. This convergence does not rest on shared doctrine, but on shared constraints. Both traditions require the stabilization of attention, the reduction of reactive interference, and the development of a form of observation capable of sustaining itself without fragmentation. Under these conditions, what is commonly referred to as intuition is reconfigured—not as spontaneous or pre-rational insight, but as a post-discursive mode of knowing that emerges from the refinement of perception.

This reframing allows for the articulation of a form of phenomenological confirmation distinct from both subjective preference and external validation. A decision formed within such a stabilized

field exhibits a distinctive signature: a non-reactive coherence that persists beyond the moment of choice and remains intact in the face of its consequences. The criterion is not the absence of uncertainty, nor the guarantee of favorable outcome, but the absence of internal contradiction once the decision is enacted. In this sense, validity is not inferred from success, but recognized in the structural integrity of the decision itself.

Within this framework, the role of contemplative discipline is not to replace empirical inquiry, but to extend its scope. Where third-person methods evaluate outcomes, first-person disciplined observation evaluates the conditions under which decisions are formed. The two are not in opposition but operate at different levels of analysis. It is at their intersection that a more comprehensive account of human knowing becomes possible.

The distinction proposed here between the contemplative scientist and the scientific contemplative emerges from this shared recognition. The former begins from disciplined interiority and allows its observations to inform hypotheses about human functioning and meaning. The latter begins from empirical rigor and incorporates contemplative practice as a means of refining perception and interpretive clarity. Both modes acknowledge that, in domains of existential significance, the validity of a decision cannot be fully adjudicated by external measures alone, but must also be understood in terms of the coherence from which it arises. *If a decision must be continually defended against oneself, it has not yet been decided.*

It is within this expanded understanding of disciplined observation that the embodied expressions of courage and internal alignment described below are not merely experiential, but epistemically grounded.

Embodiment, Courage, and Internal Alignment

Courage grounded in self-valuation rather than valor does not arise as a reaction to threat, but as a stable condition of engagement, and is therefore accompanied by serenity rather than existential dread. In this configuration, action is not driven by the need to overcome fear, but emerges from an internally regulated state in which the individual no longer organizes experience around anticipated loss. This distinction is critical: valor is episodic and contingent, often mobilized in response to perceived danger, whereas courage grounded in self-valuation is continuous and non-reactive. It reflects a reorganization of the organism in which threat no longer serves as the primary organizing principle of experience. As a result, engagement with the world becomes less defensive and more participatory, marked by steadiness rather than oscillation between fear and relief.

This distinction also carries epistemic implications. When experience is organized around threat, perception narrows, prioritizing signals of danger and reinforcing anticipatory contraction. In contrast, when courage is grounded in self-valuation, perception expands, allowing for a broader field of relevance in which novelty, ambiguity, and complexity can be tolerated without immediate reduction to risk. The individual is no longer compelled to interpret uncertainty as danger, and this shift alters not only behavior but the very structure of lived experience. Courage, in this sense, is not merely enacted but perceived—it reorganizes how the world appears to the individual.

Furthermore, this form of courage stabilizes temporal experience. When anticipation of loss no longer dominates, the individual is not pulled prematurely into projected futures defined by absence. Instead, time is inhabited more fully, allowing for continuity of engagement without the interruption of defensive forecasting. This temporal stabilization is central to the notion of duration: the capacity to remain present without contraction, even in the awareness of finitude. Courage grounded in self-valuation thus functions as both an ethical and temporal regulator, sustaining engagement across unfolding experience.

Biocognitive Regulation and the Stabilization of Experience

This embodied form of courage is inseparable from the biocognitive processes that underlie meaning-making. When the individual no longer anticipates loss as the defining feature of experience, physiological and emotional systems shift accordingly. The organism stabilizes, allowing for sustained attention, openness to novelty, and an increased tolerance for uncertainty. In this sense, courage is not merely an ethical stance but a regulatory achievement—an emergent property of a system that has reorganized itself around coherence rather than threat.

At the physiological level, this reorganization can be understood as a shift away from chronic stress activation toward a more balanced regulatory state. Anticipatory fear typically engages defensive cascades that narrow attentional bandwidth, increase vigilance, and prioritize survival-oriented responses. When this anticipatory structure is no longer dominant, these cascades diminish, allowing for a broader and more flexible engagement with the environment. Emotional tone shifts from vigilance to receptivity, and cognitive processes become less constrained by the need to resolve perceived threats immediately.

At the level of meaning-making, this shift reflects a transformation in how experience is interpreted and integrated. Meaning is no longer constructed primarily in relation to avoidance or protection, but in relation to participation and expansion. The individual becomes capable of assigning significance to experience without filtering it through anticipated loss, thereby expanding the range of what can be meaningfully engaged. This aligns with a biocognitive understanding in which perception, emotion, and physiology are reciprocally modulated through interpretive processes rather than operating as isolated domains.

Importantly, this regulatory reorganization is not achieved through suppression of fear, but through a reconfiguration of the conditions that generate it. Fear loses its organizing dominance not because

it is eliminated, but because it is no longer the central axis around which experience is structured. This distinction prevents the model from collapsing into denial or avoidance, preserving its grounding in the acknowledgment of finitude while altering its functional impact.

In this sense, stabilization is not stasis but coherence. The organism remains dynamic, responsive, and adaptive, but no longer oscillates between contraction and release. Instead, it maintains a continuous field of engagement in which variability can be accommodated without fragmentation. Courage, therefore, is not simply a virtue to be cultivated, but an emergent condition of a system that has achieved a higher degree of integrative organization.

Transcendence, Prayer, and Functional Coherence

Prayer is consequently redefined. It is not supplication directed outward but contemplative alignment with an internal field of coherence. The expectation is not intervention but access to implicate intelligence through stillness and attention. This understanding is reinforced by Pierre Hadot's conception of philosophy as a way of life, in which "spiritual exercises" function not to alter external conditions but to transform perception and the mode of being in the world, aligning closely with a non-suppliant, transformative account of prayer (Hadot, 1995). This aligns with traditions emphasizing inwardness over petition (Tillich, 1951; James, 1902/1985) and with cognitive science views of meaning as emerging from internal models shaped through interaction (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Friston, 2010). In this sense, prayer functions as a practical mechanism through which coherence is accessed and sustained, not by altering external reality but by reorganizing the interpretive conditions through which reality is experienced.

Within this framework, transcendence is not departure from the physical but an emergent property of complexity. Through recursive awareness and symbolic capacity, consciousness extends beyond immediate biological constraints. This does not imply a traditional immortal soul but the

capacity to inhabit time beyond the immediate present, consistent with non-reductive accounts of mind (Thompson, 2007; Seth, 2021). Transcendence, therefore, is not achieved by escaping embodiment but by deepening it—by expanding the range within which experience can be organized, interpreted, and sustained. In this expansion, the individual does not leave the conditions of finitude but engages them more fully, allowing temporal depth and symbolic extension to generate a form of lived transcendence continuous with embodied experience.

The guiding principle of this cosmology is functional coherence, not metaphysical certainty. It is adopted “as if” true in the Vaihingerian sense of a useful fiction enabling effective engagement (Vaihinger, 1911/2009). This is not arbitrariness; it is constrained by experience and consequence. A cosmology is evaluated not by correspondence to ultimate reality, but by its capacity to sustain agency, reduce maladaptive stress, and support ethical participation in life. In this sense, it aligns with James’s pragmatism, where truth is measured by lived effects (James, 1897/1979). In practical terms, this means that coherence is not an abstract criterion but a lived one: a cosmology proves itself through the stability it affords, the actions it enables, and the quality of engagement it sustains over time. Functional coherence operates as an organizing principle through which perception, emotion, and action are aligned, allowing the individual to navigate uncertainty without fragmentation. Rather than resolving metaphysical ambiguity, it renders such ambiguity livable by maintaining continuity of engagement across shifting conditions. In this way, coherence is not a static property but an ongoing achievement, continually enacted through the individual’s mode of participation in experience.

Conclusion: Entering Finitude Without Contraction

The purpose of this model is neither to excuse imperfection nor to blame a designer, but to offer a teachable framework through which individuals construct a cosmology that preserves dignity,

responsibility, and meaning under uncertainty. By reframing imperfection and mortality as structural conditions and relocating guidance from external intervention to internal alignment, it allows life without dependency on unverifiable claims while avoiding nihilism. What is proposed is not a resolution of metaphysical questions, but a disciplined orientation toward them—one that stabilizes the self in the absence of certainty while preserving openness to inquiry.

The task is not to resolve uncertainty through external validation, but to cultivate the conditions under which coherence can be recognized from within.

The first attainment, then, is not discovery of ultimate truth but disciplined construction of a cosmology that can be inhabited without contraction. In the absence of certainty, the self must choose—and this choice, when made with coherence and responsibility, becomes the foundation for all subsequent development (Martinez, 2024). This act of construction is neither arbitrary nor purely subjective; it is constrained by lived experience, by the organism's need for coherence, and by the consequences that follow from how reality is interpreted and enacted. A viable cosmology is therefore not merely believed, but embodied—reflected in patterns of perception, emotional regulation, and participation in the world.

To construct a cosmology is not to solve existence, but to enter it with fear replaced by self-valuation, inhabit time without contraction, and live fully in the paradox of being finite while acting as if one were not. In this sense, finitude ceases to function as a limiting boundary and becomes instead the condition that renders expansion possible. Mortality does not negate meaning; it intensifies it by imposing form, urgency, and value on experience. Likewise, imperfection does not undermine dignity but enables revision, learning, and the continuous reorganization of the self. What emerges from this framework is not transcendence as escape, but a form of grounded expansion in which the individual participates more fully in life precisely because its limits are

acknowledged. The “as if” stance is thus neither illusion nor denial, but a biocognitively coherent mode of engagement that extends the horizon of experience beyond anticipatory loss. Within this horizon, courage is no longer reactive, gratitude is no longer conditional, and action is no longer organized around fear.

Entering finitude, then, is not a concession to limitation but a reconfiguration of it. It is the movement from contraction to expansion, from dependency to alignment, and from existential threat to durational participation. Under these conditions, the individual does not resolve the uncertainty of existence but becomes capable of inhabiting it—fully, coherently, and without retreat.

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