COMMITMENT AND SELF-DETERMINISM

Applying Wisdom in Action

A Book Proposal

Michael A. Surkes, PhD
Independent Scholar | Rawdon, Quebec, Canada
mike.surkes@mail.mcgill.ca | www.michaelasurkes.com

Overview

Most of the time, most of us operate according to beliefs formed in childhood. Our ideas and commitments were shaped by the fear or approval of other people; our self-concepts were assembled from their judgments. Our lives were shaped by commitments we never chose.

This is not a judgment; it is the normal condition for human development. What varies is whether we've ever examined it.

Commitment and Self-Determinism is a book about what happens when we intentionally focus on those inherited perspectives. It argues that agency is enacted through sets of ideas which can be examined and revised, and it shows how that practice produces a more deliberate, more coherent, and more morally engaged life.

The book does not offer a therapeutic model or a motivational program. It offers a philosophical framework and it describes the operational skills to apply it.

The question driving every chapter is the same: given that we are shaped by what we have learned, how do we take responsibility for our self-development? The twelve chapters present a comprehensive framework for examining human agency, moving from the formation of identity to the philosophical basis of human rights, building a

unified line of reasoning in accessible and precise prose, anchored throughout by original case studies.

The Argument

The book's central claim is that self-determination is not a personality trait but a practice, and that the practice has identifiable components: the willingness to examine one's commitments, the cognitive flexibility to revise them, the emotional intelligence to understand what is driving them, and the social scaffolding to sustain the work of revision over time.

The evaluative framework consists of three criteria: coherence (logical integration of beliefs and actions), utility (practical effectiveness for oneself and others), and morality (active care for the wellbeing of others). These criteria replace correspondence-based evaluation with a pragmatic alternative that is rigorous without being dogmatic.

The framework draws on Kant's limits of understanding, Popper's fallibilism, Rawls's reflective equilibrium, Rorty's postrealism, and Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

The philosophical lineage of the argument runs through Aristotle on virtue and practical reason, Taylor on qualitative self-evaluation and identity, Frankfurt on second-order desires and commitment, Wolf on responsibility and self-correction, and Gewirth and Shue on rights as social guarantees for the conditions of agency. An appendix presents this scholarly foundation in full for readers who want to examine it.

The Market

The book is written for educated general readers who want a serious account of how to live more deliberately. It assumes no prior knowledge of philosophy or psychology. The audience includes readers of practical philosophy, readers of moral psychology, and the growing readership for books that take ideas seriously without requiring specialist preparation.

The market for serious nonfiction that bridges philosophy and practical life has been established and expanded by a series of major commercial successes over the past fifteen years. Commitment and Self-Determinism addresses readers who have moved through that literature and are looking for a unified framework rather than a collection of insights.

A secondary audience exists among educators, counselors, coaches, and others whose professional work involves supporting people in developing greater self-awareness and self-direction. The book's chapter structure and diagnostic exercises make it well suited to professional development contexts and to use as a course text in philosophy, psychology, and education programs.

Comparable Titles

Agnes Callard, Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming (Oxford University Press, 2018)

A philosopher's account of how people deliberately transform themselves through the active pursuit of new values. The overlap with Commitment and Self-Determinism is direct: both books treat self-development as a philosophical problem with identifiable structure rather than a motivational one. Callard's book crossed from academic philosophy into wider readership and established that there is an audience for serious philosophical accounts of agency written without condescension.

Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life (Simon and Schuster, 2016)

A Harvard philosopher writing for general readers about how examining inherited assumptions enables more deliberate living. The framing of inherited frameworks, examined life, and practical application maps closely onto this book's structure. The Path became a genuine trade success, demonstrating that philosophical frameworks for self-examination reach well beyond academic audiences when written accessibly.

Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, Practical Wisdom (Riverhead, 2010)

The closest predecessor in spirit and subject. Schwartz and Sharpe argue that practical wisdom is the master virtue that guides the application of all others, and that modern

institutions have systematically undermined it. Commitment and Self-Determinism picks up where their argument ends: rather than diagnosing the problem at the institutional level, it develops the operational practice at the individual level.

Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind (Pantheon, 2012)
Established the market for serious moral psychology for general readers. Haidt's concern is how moral intuitions function in social and political life; this book's concern is how to develop the reflective capacity to examine and revise those intuitions.

Charles Duhigg, The Power of Habit (Random House, 2012)
Demonstrated the commercial appetite for books that explain the mechanisms of behavioral change in accessible, research-grounded prose. Commitment and Self-Determinism addresses the same readership with a more philosophically developed account of why habits form and what examining them requires.

Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)
The gold standard for making cognitive science accessible to general readers. This book operates in the same register but focuses on the practical and moral dimensions of self-knowledge rather than the cognitive science of decision-making.

Author Platform

Michael A. Surkes is an independent scholar whose work on practical wisdom has been recognized at the institutional and competitive level. He holds a publication through the University of Chicago Center for Practical Wisdom, one of the leading research centres on the subject in North America, and his previous book, Developing Practical Wisdom (Austin Macauley, 2025), was runner-up at the San Francisco Book Festival. He maintains active research profiles on PhilPeople and PhilPapers and websites at michaelasurkes.com and developingpracticalwisdom.com. He holds advanced degrees in physiological psychology (McGill), neurobiology (Caltech), philosophy (Concordia, W.R. Fraser Medal), and educational technology (PhD, Concordia), and has spent more than fifty years developing the framework underlying this book. A secondary platform exists among educators, counselors, and coaches for whom the book's chapter

structure and diagnostic exercises make it directly applicable to professional development and course use.

Author Bio

Michael A. Surkes is an independent scholar based in Rawdon, Quebec, Canada. He holds degrees in Physiological Psychology (McGill University), Neurobiology (Caltech), Philosophy (Concordia University, W.R. Fraser Medal, under Professor Kai Nielsen), and Educational Technology (PhD, Concordia University). His previous book, Developing Practical Wisdom (Austin Macauley, 2025), was runner-up at the 2024 San Francisco Book Festival. He has been developing the philosophical framework underlying the present book for more than fifty years.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Identity and Commitment
Examines how identity is formed through the convergence of interpersonal feedback, institutional structures, and inherited language. Introduces the book's core distinction between passive commitment, the commitments we absorb without examination, and intentional commitment, those we form through deliberate reflection. Establishes that revision is possible but requires a specific kind of disruption: the recognition that what felt like fact was always interpretation.

Chapter 2: Cognitive Flexibility
Develops the case for cognitive flexibility as the foundational skill of self-determination: the capacity to hold one's beliefs lightly enough to examine them. Distinguishes intellectual humility from uncertainty, and shows how the habit of self-evaluation, rather than the content of any particular belief, enables deep learning.

Chapter 3: Understanding Others
Argues that the interpretation of other people is a skill with the same structure as the interpretation of oneself: it can be examined, corrected, and developed. Introduces the ethical dimension of interpretation: because interpretations guide action, and action has consequences, the quality of our interpretive habits is a moral matter.

Chapter 4: Motives
Examines how motives shape perception, and why the reasons we give for our behavior are often post hoc rather than causal. Draws on cognitive science and philosophy of mind to show why self-knowledge about motives is both necessary and genuinely difficult, and what practices make it more reliable.

Chapter 5: Emotional Intelligence
Develops the argument that emotional reactions contain information but do not provide self-interpreting guidance. Distinguishes emotional suppression from emotional awareness, and shows why the capacity to act in the presence of emotion, rather than in avoidance of it, is what emotional intelligence actually requires.

Chapter 6: Relating to Others
Examines how the judgments we form about other people function as action constraints: they determine what we try, what we avoid, and what we allow ourselves to imagine is possible in a relationship. Argues that replacing fixed-trait attribution with behavioral description is not optimism but precision.

Chapter 7: Worldview
Examines the role of worldview as the largely invisible framework within which all interpretation occurs. Argues that the examined life requires scrutinizing not only our individual beliefs but the evaluative architecture that organizes them, and that this examination is the work of a lifetime rather than a single event.

Chapter 8: Integrity
Defines integrity operationally as the alignment between stated commitments and enacted behavior. Distinguishes integrity from consistency, and shows why the willingness to acknowledge gaps between intention and action, rather than rationalize them, is what makes integrity a practice rather than a trait.

Chapter 9: Planning
Argues that planning is the operational form of self-determination: the practice of deciding, deliberately and in advance, who we intend to become and what we are willing to do to get there. Distinguishes emotional self-knowledge, required to understand what is actually driving behavior, from operational self-knowledge, required to assess one's

actual capabilities, and shows that planning collapses at whichever layer is unexamined.

Chapter 10: Effectiveness
Examines self-correction as a learnable practice: the willingness to ask which of one's current methods are producing results and which are producing the feeling of effort without the substance of progress. Argues that effectiveness deteriorates when strong emotional reactions override reflective judgment, and develops the connection between language, responsibility, and the capacity for self-correction.

Chapter 11: Practice
Addresses the social and psychological conditions under which the practices described in the book become sustainable. Argues that support is not an accessory to practice but one of the conditions that makes it possible, and that the self-concepts we hold about ourselves and others function as action-space regulators, not descriptions: they determine what we try, what we avoid, and what we allow ourselves to imagine.

Chapter 12: Moral Agency
Grounds the book's account of self-determination in a philosophical theory of rights and moral education. Argues that agency grounds the rights of self-determination, while personhood grounds the basic moral standing of every person, and that moral education fails not at the level of principles but at the level of practical competence: the ability to apply moral reasoning in cases where competing values create genuine difficulty.

Appendix: The Philosophical Bases of Morality and Self-Determinism
Presents the scholarly foundations of the book's framework for readers who wish to examine them, drawing on Aristotle, Hobbes, Gewirth, Shue, Dworkin, Taylor, Frankfurt, Wolf, and Feinberg. Situates the book's argument within the traditions of moral philosophy, moral psychology, and practical ethics.

Manuscript

The complete manuscript is available upon request. It consists of twelve chapters, an appendix, and case studies throughout. The total length is approximately 55,000 words.