

Freedom of Spirit in Research: The Moral Compass of Intellectual Progress in a Divided World

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Abstract

Freedom of Spirit represents an individual's inner state of liberation and peace, independent of external circumstances. In the realm of research, this serves as an essential attribute, as it enables the researcher to question and explore the unknown, which is solely driven by their own curiosity and willingness, and not by personal motives or gains.

However, in today's divided world, this freedom of spirit in research stands at a crossroads. Current-day researchers are facing immense pressures from various sources, including geopolitical disparities, access to digital technologies, diverse ideological perspectives, and funding biases. Most often, these pressures stem from external sources that are beyond the immediate control of researchers but are increasingly influencing every aspect of the research work.

These external pressures and oppressions are not a completely new phenomenon, and they have existed in the past as well. But what is alarming today is that, with the societal advancement and the rise in digital technologies, these pressures have evolved and taken new forms. They have now entered the inner world of researchers, bringing in new challenges to the research environment.

The researcher's mind, once regarded as a place for sovereign self, is increasingly becoming a contested territory. Researchers now find themselves caught in a web, struggling to balance external forces and internal conflicts to maintain the integrity of their work. While the external factors, such as third-party interference, paywalled publishing, algorithmic biases, and institutional pressures, distort the authentic research conditions and push them to focus on commercial or politically safe topics, the internal grappling with pressure to publish, and balancing their dreams with reality, while striving to maintain their own ideas, amid the systemic demands, keeps them constantly under pressure.

Altogether, they collectively erode the ability to question, think freely, and explore the unknown. Thus, the contemporary research ecosystem exerts a continuous threat to

the freedom of spirit in research. Protecting and safeguarding this freedom becomes a timely necessity for the betterment of society.

This essay delves into the current state of freedom of spirit in research by thoroughly analyzing the prevailing external and internal challenges. It critically examines how these challenges were handled in the past, and, with insights from Chardin, provides steps to navigate the obstacles, if any, and safeguard the researcher's inner space from external influences. By doing so, it aims to create an environment where researchers can engage wholeheartedly in their work, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of societal trust in research and the betterment of humanity.

Introduction

Freedom of Spirit is an innate ability that guides individuals to live authentically in alignment with a higher purpose. In simple terms, it is being true to oneself and not being constrained by external forces or expectations. It is rooted in two distinct concepts: *freedom* and *spirit*. The term “freedom” signifies a state of free will or emancipation, and “spirit” represents the unseen force within humans, often perceived as the source of energy that makes life purposeful.

When these two elements combine, they embody a noble quality in which one's thoughts, actions, and sense of purpose flow from within, rather than being shaped by external approval or pressure. In research, this quality serves as an essential foundation enabling researchers to align their mind, heart, and soul with the pursuit of truth, free from limitations imposed by external factors. Indeed, many of the scientific and transformative breakthroughs in history have emerged from researchers who uphold this inner freedom, even under difficult circumstances. Their courage to remain faithful to their inquiry, even in the face of authority or convention, has often been the driving force behind significant scientific progress.

While Freedom of Spirit in research has long been a catalyst behind the progression of society, the modern world presents a new and complex challenge to its state. According to the 2025 World Economic Forum's report, the current global society is becoming increasingly divided, marked by geopolitical tensions, economic inequality, and ideological divisions. This atmosphere of uncertainty within the global ecosystem has inevitably seeped into the field of research, reshaping the environment in which inquiry takes place.

Today, many researchers find themselves navigating a complex maze of external pressures that stem from political, economic, ideological, or digital factors and challenge their intellectual independence. More often, these forces influence

everything from the choice of topic selection to the interpretation and presentation of their research findings. Due to this, researchers' inner sovereign space faces an unprecedented dilemma and is constantly under strain.

This reality raises a pressing question: **What is the state of freedom of spirit in research today?**

This essay seeks to explore this question by examining how external pressures and internal conflicts challenge the freedom of spirit in research in this age of deepening division. It critically examines how these external pressures have evolved into internal struggles within researchers, threatening the very essence of inquiry. By reflecting on the life and work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, this essay proposes strategies for researchers to reclaim their freedom of spirit in the era of deepening division, while preserving the integrity of scientific inquiry.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin & his view on Freedom of Spirit in Research

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit Priest, Paleontologist, and a Visionary thinker who viewed scientific investigation as a spiritual pursuit. He believed that when a researcher engages deeply with the material world to uncover its secrets, they contribute to the evolution of consciousness. For Chardin, **freedom of spirit in research is not an escape from the material world but an active, loving immersion in it.**

In his seminal work, "The Phenomenon of Man", Chardin proposed his vision of evolution as both a biological process and a spiritual ascent, a convergence of consciousness toward a unified truth. However, his idea was too radical for that time, and he faced skepticism and criticism. Many scientists find them too mystical, and many theologians consider them too scientific. As a result, Chardin was systematically silenced, and his work was banned from publication during his lifetime. But despite these obstacles, Chardin's vision continues to resonate today.

I believe the work, "The Phenomenon of Man", by itself is a profound example of the topic under discussion, as it illustrates the enduring importance of freedom of spirit in inquiry amidst numerous obstacles.

Contemporary Research: A Paradoxical State

Research is not just about data and discovery; it's a moral and intellectual journey. At its heart, it represents a deeply human endeavor driven by the desire to understand the

world, to explore the unknown, and to imagine what lies beyond what we know. It embodies a **quiet rebellion against ignorance and a steadfast commitment to truth.**

Throughout history, research has stood as one of humanity's most noble pursuits, carrying both intellectual and moral responsibility. Every researcher bears an obligation to advance knowledge guided by honesty and integrity rather than personal motives. Indeed, history remembers the individuals who upheld their freedom of spirit in their pursuit, even at great personal cost. Their integrity and courage allowed knowledge to flourish despite the constraints imposed by social, religious, or political forces.

However, in today's increasingly fragmented and polarized world, shaped by divergent ideologies, economic disparities, and unequal access to digital technologies, something has shifted. The prevailing global ecosystem operating within a tangled web of geopolitical and technological influences offers a new and complex challenge to the research environment. In this environment, the external pressures of the past have not disappeared, but they have been internalized and are shaping how we define success, value originality, and even our understanding of truth. Although these oppressions often come from visible external authorities, the other side of it exerts subtler, psychological forms of control that directly impact the researcher's inner world, quietly eroding the freedom of spirit.

Therefore, to fully understand the current state of freedom of spirit in research, it is necessary to examine the prevailing research landscape through a two-fold lens:

- i. External forces that come from the outer world
- ii. Internal conflicts that arise within researchers

These two dimensions are deeply interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and amplifying each other. By critically analyzing them, we can gain a clear understanding of the current state of freedom of spirit in research. Furthermore, this analysis will reveal the complex interplay of how external pressures infiltrate the inner world of researchers and influence them.

i. External Forces

External pressures in research arise from various sources outside the researcher's immediate control. These pressures are multifaceted, originating from the broader academic, political, and economic landscape. They influence research at every stage, from the choice of topic selection to the final reporting of the work results. The key

external factors that restrict the freedom of spirit in the contemporary research environment are outlined below:

1. **Funding conflicts [1]:** Many research projects rely on funding from governments, corporations, or private donors. Sometimes, these donors have specific agendas or profit motives that can influence the direction of research. Consequently, researchers receiving such funding may feel pressured to produce results that align with the donor's interests, which restricts intellectual freedom and creates conflicts of interest. Moreover, these pressures can create biases, limiting true scientific exploration. This can lead to the sidelining of socially vital but economically nonviable work and direct research toward outcomes with market potential. In this way, the pursuit of truth can be replaced by the pursuit of profit.
2. **Third-party interference [1,2]:** In many regions, private funding bodies exert direct or indirect control over research agendas through funding decisions, regulatory frameworks, and ideological interventions. This interference may have a potential impact on the independence of research and its role in promoting humanity, as sometimes these entities may try to suppress or manipulate research findings for their own agendas. This shift is critical as it influences researchers' risk-taking behavior and narrows the scope of inquiry.
3. **Copyright Law/Paywalled Academic Publishing [3]:** Copyright law restricts scholarly knowledge sharing, hindering research, and much of the world's scholarly knowledge is restricted by expensive paywalls, hindering open access for institutions with limited resources. Due to these factors, researchers may encounter difficulties in accessing relevant literature, thereby limiting their ability to build upon existing knowledge, collaborate widely, or advance their research.
4. **Algorithmic mediation and digital fragmentation [4,5]:** In today's digital landscape, research outputs are scattered across numerous platforms, databases, and formats, resulting in a fragmented environment. In this environment, algorithms play a crucial role in determining which studies are highlighted or easily accessible, thereby introducing biases in the most visible research. In such environments, important studies might be buried or overlooked. Additionally, the fragmented nature of the digital landscape makes literature reviews and data gathering more challenging and time-consuming. These factors influence how research is discovered, accessed, and shared.
5. **Pressure of Quantity over Quality [6]:** It's becoming more common for researchers in academic settings to feel pressure to show they're productive in ways that can be easily measured, like getting their work published, having a high impact factor, getting patents, or securing funding. While these goals are meant to promote excellence, they can sometimes push researchers to focus more on producing a lot of work rather than doing it well. In this race for recognition and career security, genuine curiosity-driven exploration is stifled.

The external factors discussed above are beyond the immediate control of researchers. They not only interfere with research methodology but also distort the very conditions under which knowledge is produced and shared. Analyzing these factors reveals that the commercialization and politicization of knowledge are done through corporate interference and funding competition. Additionally, the algorithmic mediation creates isolated information bubbles and results in fragmentation. Altogether, these dynamics compromise the integrity and objectivity of the research, distort public understanding, erode trust in research, and deepen the gap between science and society.[7]

ii. Internal Conflicts

While external forces are visible and limit the conditions under which research is done, internal conflicts within the researchers are even more insidious. They are more damaging as they manifest as disillusionment and psychological strain, gradually eroding the intellectual autonomy in research. Below are the primary internal conflicts and pressures that are predominantly observed within the research community today:

1. **Publish-or-Perish Environment [8, 9]:** The academic environment has become increasingly competitive and metric-driven. Researchers are now evaluated based on how many papers they publish, how often they're cited, and how is the impact factor of their journals. This "Publish or Perish" culture breeds anxiety and creates immense personal stress upon researchers, often leading to ethical compromise. They face a difficult internal struggle, trying to balance the need to produce a lot with the importance of doing good work. The relentless emphasis on output over insight undermines the values of curiosity, intellectual honesty, and integrity in research.
2. **Reputational Anxiety [10]:** In an increasingly polarized and digitalized environment, researchers often worry about getting into trouble online, damaging their reputation, or facing consequences from their institutions. Because of this fear, many scholars opt for neutral or safe topics that are less likely to provoke opposition. These self-imposed constraints or self-censorship of topics, over time, contribute to the homogenization of ideas and limit the diversity of thought.
3. **Aspirations Vs Reality [11,12]:** Many young scholars enter academia with a genuine passion for discovery and a desire to contribute to human knowledge. However, they may find themselves navigating a system with administrative burdens, grant writing, and hierarchical structures, over fostering innovation and independent thinking. This creates an internal conflict, as researchers struggle to cope with their personal aspirations and professional realities of the academic system. Over time, this tension leads to burnout, a loss of interest, and a profound

questioning of the meaning and value of their work, challenging their motivation and commitment to the academic pursuit. This occurs mostly among early-career researchers.

4. **Intellectual Autonomy vs Systemic Conformity [13]:** The tension between intellectual autonomy and systemic demands results in moral injury, impacting everything from individual creativity and well-being to organizational performance and research ethics. Because of this, scholars are forced to choose between their core values and survival within the system. Over time, this compromise leads to the loss of true intellectual freedom and mere survival within the system.
5. **Modern Research Funding [14, 15]:** The current funding model mostly works with institutional grant acquisition, publication metrics, and journal impact factors. Consequently, risk-averse, short-term, and incremental research is often prioritized over bold or exploratory work. This may lead to less favoritism for interdisciplinary research, as it deviates from standardized evaluative frameworks. As a result, researchers may be discouraged from pursuing high-risk, long-term, and high-resource-consuming projects and prioritize safer, incremental research to secure consistent funding. This environment can lead to frustration, compromised creativity, and diminished freedom of spirit, as researchers must choose between pursuing their own innovative passions and meeting the more conservative goals of funding bodies and institutions to secure their livelihoods.

All the above-mentioned internal conflicts are not merely a professional concern, but a deeply ethical one. These internal conflicts reflect a crisis that affects not just individuals but also a system that erodes the curiosity, courage, and joy in inquiry.

As external pressures infiltrate the mind, researchers might find themselves losing the very freedom that fuels their quest for knowledge. This erosion poses a threat not only to their well-being but also to the moral foundation of research itself. If research is to remain a path toward truth and knowledge, then reclaiming the freedom of spirit should be our utmost priority. By addressing both the external systems and the inner world of researchers, we can restore the freedom of spirit in research and strengthen the bond between knowledge and humanity.

Path Ahead: Reclaiming the Inner Dimension

According to Chardin, research is the highest function of the human soul. He firmly believed that true research, whether scientific or spiritual, requires freedom of spirit. For Chardin, authentic research must be free from dogma, ideological control, and institutional limitations. He strongly believed that research is an ongoing process of evolution toward a more profound understanding of the universe. Chardin saw research

as a journey to seek the truth, which ultimately connects the individual to the divine power.

However, in the contemporary world, characterised by significant fragmentation and unprecedented pressure, sustaining the freedom of spirit in the research has become profoundly challenging. The researcher's mind, once regarded as a sovereign space for open-ended inquiry, now resembles a contested territory, subject to external expectations and internal anxieties. Nevertheless, within this tension lies an opportunity; the chance to reaffirm the values that first drew us to the pursuit of knowledge.

When I delved into the life and work of Chardin, I was struck by his resilience in the face of external oppressions while advocating for his vision of consciousness evolution. Despite the consequences, he remained steadfast in his commitment to his beliefs, defying the bureaucratic system. And throughout history, we can see many great researchers who have worked for the advancement of knowledge in the pursuit of truth without recognition during their lifetime. These insights led me to realize that preserving the freedom of spirit in research is not solely dependent on external reforms but also on the researchers themselves.

As a researcher myself, I have encountered challenging circumstances and experienced feelings of difficulty. During those tough times, I question myself: What factor pulled me first towards this pursuit? Am I genuinely adhering to the path of inquiry I envisioned, or am I merely conforming to a system that quantifies my worth based on publications and metrics? These self-questions helped me to overcome pressure, think critically, and gain clarity. They have empowered me to remain steadfast in my inquiry path. I believe these questions are not exclusive to me, and they resonate with the silent struggle of countless scholars across diverse disciplines who are trying to find the right balance between curiosity and conformity.

Inspired by Chardin, I have identified seven essential qualities that can serve as a moral compass for measuring the freedom of spirit in the age of deepening division. It requires cultivating a strong inner discipline, both ethical and spiritual, that must be consciously nurtured and protected within, especially when external pressures become overwhelming. If every researcher embodies these qualities, they act as a shield for their work, safeguarding their freedom of spirit and helping them maintain their focus even in challenging circumstances. The qualities are:

1. **Commitment to Intellectual honesty** - A dedication to truth-seeking over personal gain or recognition, allowing one to be free from inner limitations.
2. **Freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression without censorship** - The ability to think independently, to question the norms and dogmas, to explore ideas without internal or external constraints.
3. **Unyielding curiosity** - A sincere desire to explore, guided by curiosity and integrity, and not by validation or approval.
4. **Authenticity** - Aligning with their true self and not being limited by external agendas or other motives.
5. **Embrace of uncertainty and ambiguity** – Recognizing doubt as an integral to the process of discovery.
6. **Moral Courage** – The strength to uphold ethical standards, even when they conflict with popular opinions.
7. **Resilience** - The ability to persevere through criticism, isolation, or failure, without surrendering integrity and creativity.

These individual qualities, when combined, create the inner essence of freedom of spirit. In my opinion, these qualities are not merely philosophical ideals but practical essentials that keep research authentic, rigorous, and focused on its true goal. They clarify purpose and transform research from a race for recognition into a peaceful act of dedication.

Thus, addressing the state of freedom in research demands a dual response from researchers: inner resilience and outer navigation. Externally, researchers should navigate the complexities by engaging with institutions, technologies, and global collaborations, not as passive participants but as conscious stewards of knowledge. By doing so, they transform potential threats into opportunities for growth. Internally, researchers must cultivate mental strength, remembering their responsibility not only to their disciplines but also to the legacy of human inquiry itself. They must guard their mental sovereignty, ensuring that external influences, whether technological, political, or institutional, do not undermine the integrity of their work.

Firmness in action is (simply) one's firmness of mind; all other (abilities) are not of this nature.

This verse from *Thirukkural* reminds us that all true strength begins in the mind. To remain steadfast in the pursuit of truth, one must first cultivate firmness within. Researchers who master this inner stability can withstand the storms of criticism, competition, and uncertainty without losing direction.

Conclusion

The future belongs to those who provide the next generation with the reason for hope.

-Chardin

Research is a noble pursuit that combines intellect and spirit. History reminds us that when inquiry is silenced, society stagnates. Throughout history, the quest for knowledge and truth has been met with many challenges. Despite those obstacles, research remains vital because of the researchers who embody the freedom of spirit in their work, thereby highlighting its significance. The scientific advances we enjoy today were built by individuals who often labored in anonymity, guided only by conviction and curiosity. Their examples remind us that surrendering the intellectual freedom for short-term rewards, whether financial, political, or reputational, diminishes not only the pursuit of inquiry but the soul of humanity. **The true reward of research lies not in immediate recognition but in contributing to the enduring progress of knowledge and collective understanding.**

In today's world, the freedom of spirit in research is tested daily not by external systems but by the temptation of conformity and fear within. Hence, the need to defend this freedom becomes not only an intellectual task but an existential necessity. Now, more than ever, researchers must recommit to the inner dimension of freedom of spirit that has always given life to a scientific endeavor. They should remember that most profound insights often arise not from external validation but from quiet moments of inner conviction. When curiosity is allowed to speak freely, it becomes a form of self-realization, a dialogue between the mind and the mystery it seeks to understand. In the continuation of research, one should commit to upholding the qualities of freedom of spirit, ensuring that no external forces stop them from pursuing the inquiry they envisioned.

I understand that the challenges confronting research today cannot be solved in an instant, but they can be met, step by step, with clarity, courage, and conviction. The future of research and perhaps of humanity itself depends on our willingness to walk this path with integrity and purpose. I firmly believe that through mental courage we can safeguard the freedom of the spirit, not only for research but also for the advancement of humanity.

The vast and dense outer world can induce the mind to wander in confusion.

But the self must be realized through effort by the seeker of truth.

External pressures can create trance, even fear.

But our focus should stay on what our spirit desires.

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