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Freedom's Embrace

J. Melvin Woody

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To be free is to escape all limitations and obstacles--or so we think at first. But if we probe further, we discover that freedom embraces its own necessities, a set of conditions without which it could not exist. Freedom' Embrace explores these necessities of freedom.J. Melvin Woody surveys competing conceptions of freedom and traces debates about the nature and reality of freedom to confusions about knowledge, humanity, and nature that are rooted in some of the most fundamental assumptions of modern Western thought. The preemption of freedom as an exclusively human privilege with all nature relegated to mechanical necessity is a fatal error that renders both humanity and nature equally unintelligible. What distinguishes human beings from other animals is not freedom but the use of symbols, which vastly extends the range of available options and enables us to envision freedom as an ideal by which customary institutions and norms may be judged and transformed.By carefully surveying its necessary conditions and limitations, Woody reconciles the salient competing conceptions of freedom and weaves them together into a richer and broader theory that resolves old controversies and opens the way toward an ethics of freedom that can meet the challenges of relativism and nihilism that arise from recognizing the historicity and malleability of culture.

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