

ESSAY VII

Freedom, Determinism, and Human Agency

Conditioned Authorship and Degrees of Responsibility

METHOD: Compatibilist social theory, objection analysis, and legal case study

CONTRIBUTION: Socially expanded compatibilist model

CENTRAL CLAIM

Agency consists not in being uncaused but in possessing and exercising reasons-responsive capacities for understanding, regulation, revision, and answerability within causal and social conditions.

ABSTRACT

The free-will debate is reframed through authorship. A person need not create the body, language, history, or circumstances from which action emerges in order to be an author of conduct. Conditioned authorship extends reasons-responsive compatibilism by treating agency as a socially produced and institutionally vulnerable capacity. The essay addresses manipulation, bypassing, sourcehood, moral luck, severe psychopathology, addiction, coercion, and the difference between attributability and accountability. Juvenile sentencing doctrine in *Roper v. Simmons* and *Miller v. Alabama* provides a documented test of graded responsibility. The result preserves accountability while making explanation relevant to blame, punishment, and the design of institutions.

Keywords: freedom; determinism; agency; responsibility; compatibilism; manipulation; moral luck; authorship

Opening Problem

A delivery driver falls asleep at the wheel after working sixteen hours and injures another motorist. The company had threatened termination if the route was not completed. The driver had accepted extra shifts to prevent eviction. He knew he was dangerously tired and chose to continue. Was the act free?

A binary answer distorts the case. He was not physically forced to drive, yet his alternatives carried severe costs. Fatigue impaired judgment, but did not erase awareness. The company structured the pressure, but did not move his hands. The injured motorist still has a claim. Explanation neither fully excuses nor leaves responsibility untouched.

The case exposes the weakness of treating freedom as a metaphysical switch. Human agency is a capacity operating under conditions. It involves sensitivity to reasons, control over conduct, access to alternatives, and the ability to revise action when consequences become visible. Each element can be present in degrees.

This essay calls that structure conditioned authorship. A person authors action through materials not entirely chosen: body, language, habit, need, institution, history. Authorship is real when the person can organize those materials through reasons-responsive control. It contracts under coercion, addiction, incapacity, and deprivation. It expands through education, secure alternatives, practice, and institutional design (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).

Conditioned Authorship

Conditioned authorship rejects the demand that a free act must be uncaused. An uncaused event would not necessarily belong to the person; it might be random. What matters is whether the causal process runs through capacities that constitute agency: understanding, deliberation, inhibition, commitment, and responsiveness to reasons.

The model uses four dimensions. Cognitive access concerns whether the person understood the relevant facts and consequences. Regulatory control concerns the capacity to inhibit or redirect action. Alternative structure concerns whether meaningful options existed and what they cost. Reflective ownership concerns whether the action expressed commitments the person could identify, evaluate, and revise.

These dimensions permit graded judgment. Addiction may reduce regulatory control without eliminating all responsibility. Threat may transform an apparent choice into coerced compliance. Poverty can make formal alternatives practically unavailable. Education and stable institutions can expand agency by lowering the cost of refusal and increasing foresight.

Conditioned authorship is therefore both descriptive and political. It asks not only whether an individual acted, but what social arrangements cultivated or damaged the capacities by which action becomes genuinely theirs.

Position in the Literature

Conditioned authorship is closest to reasons-responsive compatibilism. Frankfurt distinguishes first-order desires from higher-order volitional identification, while Watson connects free agency with the relation between valuation and motivation (Frankfurt 1971; Watson 1975). Fischer and Ravizza define guidance control through a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism that the agent owns (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). Strawson shifts attention from metaphysical freedom to the reactive attitudes embedded in interpersonal life (Strawson 1962). Wolf links responsibility to the capacity to act according to reason and the True and the Good (Wolf 1990). Vargas develops a revisionist account that treats responsibility practices as socially constructive (Vargas 2013).

Conditioned authorship accepts much of this framework. Its additional claim is that ownership and reasons-responsiveness are not merely internal properties. They are developmentally and institutionally produced. Education, trauma, poverty, addiction, coercive relationships, labor conditions, information systems, and legal structures can build, distort, bypass, or deplete the capacities through which reasons guide action. The model is therefore a social compatibilism: responsibility tracks control, but control is partly an achievement of environments and institutions for which others may also be responsible.

This expansion does not solve the traditional sourcehood objection. No agent is ultimately *causa sui*. Nor does reasons-responsiveness by itself answer manipulation cases, where an implanted evaluative structure may respond coherently to reasons while failing to belong to the person in the relevant historical sense (Pereboom 2001; Mele 2014). The revision therefore adds historical integration, non-bypassing, and opportunities for reflective correction to the conditions of authorship. It also separates attributability - whether an action expresses the agent's evaluative standpoint - from accountability - whether blame or sanction is justified given knowledge, control, alternatives, coercion, and the purpose of the response.

Manipulation, Sourcehood, and Bypassing

Reasons-responsiveness is necessary for agency but not sufficient. A person can respond coherently to reasons through an evaluative system produced by manipulation. If a controller implants values, desires, or dispositions that operate without the person's historical participation, the resulting mechanism may be internally rational while failing to belong to the agent in the relevant sense. Manipulation cases therefore challenge any account that identifies freedom solely with present psychological structure (Pereboom 2001; Mele 2014).

Conditioned authorship adds three requirements. Historical integration asks whether the governing capacities developed through processes in which the person could gradually understand, contest, and appropriate them. Non-bypassing asks whether action flowed through the person's capacities for attention, evaluation, and inhibition rather than around them through seizure, threat, compulsion, or direct control. Corrective access asks whether the person had meaningful opportunities to encounter alternatives, revise the evaluative structure, and receive feedback about consequence.

These requirements do not create ultimate sourcehood. No one chooses the first conditions of character. They distinguish formation from takeover. Ordinary socialization influences agents, often deeply, but it typically leaves multiple channels of reflection, conflict, and revision. Manipulation is responsibility-undermining when it intentionally or functionally closes those channels while preserving only the appearance of authorship.

Moral Luck and the Limits of Attribution

Moral luck complicates responsibility because outcomes depend upon factors outside control. Two equally reckless drivers may differ only because one encounters a pedestrian. A negligent official may be exposed by catastrophe while another benefits from chance. Character, circumstance, and consequence all contain luck (Nagel 1979; Williams 1981).

Conditioned authorship separates the quality of agency from the total result. Attributability concerns what the action expresses about the agent's evaluative standpoint. Accountability concerns whether blame, sanction, or demand for repair is justified given control, knowledge, alternatives, role, and consequence. Liability and repair may track harm even when blame does not rise proportionately. Conversely, serious culpability can exist before catastrophe when the agent knowingly accepts unjustifiable risk.

The distinction prevents outcome alone from governing judgment. It also prevents an appeal to luck from erasing the real effects that others must bear. Responsibility is distributed across intention, control, risk creation, role obligation, institutional design, and actual harm.

Severe Psychopathology and Graded Responsibility

Severe psychopathology can disrupt reality testing, impulse control, practical understanding, or the ability to recognize reasons. Diagnosis alone does not decide responsibility. The relevant question is functional: which capacities were impaired, to what degree, and in relation to which action? A person may understand factual circumstances but lack substantial control; another may possess control while acting under delusional interpretation; a third may retain both capacities despite diagnosis.

This functional approach avoids categorical stigma and categorical excuse. It also supports differentiated responses. Treatment, containment, restitution, blame, and punishment serve different purposes and require different justifications. Accountability should not exceed the capacities that were operative, but public protection may remain necessary even where blame is reduced.

Documented Case: Youth, Culpability, and Sentencing

In *Roper v. Simmons*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that the Eighth Amendment prohibits capital punishment for crimes committed by persons under eighteen. The Court emphasized adolescents' comparative immaturity, susceptibility to external influence, and greater capacity for change. *Miller v. Alabama* later held that mandatory life-without-parole sentencing for juvenile homicide offenders is unconstitutional because a sentencing process must consider youth and its attendant characteristics (*Roper v. Simmons* 2005; *Miller v. Alabama* 2012).

These decisions do not deny that juveniles act or that grave harm requires response. They reject a binary model in which legal responsibility appears fully formed at the moment a person crosses the threshold of criminal liability. Developmental conditions alter foresight, impulse control, peer sensitivity, and identity stability. The law therefore distinguishes attribution from the most severe forms of punishment.

Conditioned authorship explains the structure without converting neuroscience into moral command. Empirical evidence informs which capacities are typically developed or vulnerable. Normative judgment determines what punishment is proportionate, what individualized assessment is owed, and how the possibility of change should affect finality. The case supports a graded account: responsibility can be real while diminished, and institutions can remain protective while refusing to treat developmental limitation as permanent essence.

Conditioned Authorship

Freedom and Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the power to make final decisions within a domain. Personal freedom may be understood as limited sovereignty over one's body, commitments, attention, labor, and identity. But personal sovereignty is not absolute. Every person inhabits shared space, depends upon others, and produces external consequences. The individual has authority over self-regarding matters to a substantial degree. That authority weakens where conduct imposes serious unchosen harm. Freedom therefore requires jurisdictional boundaries. No one is sovereign over another person merely because their own project demands it. Self-authorship stops where another's authorship is annexed without justification.

Freedom as Refusal

One of the clearest expressions of agency is refusal. The person says no to a desire, command, role, expectation, institution, or inherited identity. Refusal interrupts causation that would otherwise continue automatically. It does not occur outside causes. The refusal may be supported by education, anger, solidarity, or prior discipline. What matters is that the person does not merely transmit the force acting upon them. They evaluate and deny its jurisdiction. Refusal is therefore central to freedom. A society that permits nominal choice but punishes every meaningful refusal does not support agency. The practical test of consent is whether no can be spoken without catastrophic retaliation.

Freedom as Revision

Authorship includes the capacity to revise. A person changes belief when evidence changes. They alter commitment when consequences reveal defect. They leave a role that no longer deserves authority. They repair a rule that repeatedly fails. A system that treats consistency as never changing misunderstands agency. Blind persistence can be another form of determination. Revision demonstrates that the person can place prior self-authorship under present judgment. This capacity protects freedom from becoming imprisonment by earlier choice. The past self deserves continuity. It does not possess absolute sovereignty.

Freedom as Answerability

Freedom without answerability becomes arbitrary power. An agent must be capable of explaining conduct through reasons and accepting consequences when those reasons fail. Answerability includes:

- stating what was intended
- identifying what was known
- acknowledging foreseeable risk
- hearing the account of those affected
- distinguishing explanation from excuse
- repairing harm where possible
- changing procedure after failure. Responsibility is not merely the imposition of punishment from outside. It is the agent's

willingness to recognize the act as their own. The person who claims freedom while refusing all answerability wants power without authorship.

The Conditions of Authorship

An individual can be treated as the author of an action to the extent that several conditions are present. Knowledge The person understood the relevant nature and likely consequences of the action. Control They possessed sufficient capacity to guide behavior according to judgment. Access to reasons They could recognize and evaluate relevant considerations. Meaningful alternatives At least one practically accessible alternative existed, or the action expressed an endorsed will without bypass. Freedom from illegitimate pressure No coercion, manipulation, or disabling dependency defeated meaningful refusal. Reflective ownership The conduct expressed motives or principles the person could identify as their own after adequate examination. Temporal continuity The decision was not merely a transient state radically disconnected from the person's standing commitments. Capacity for revision The person could learn from consequence and alter future conduct. These conditions do not need to be perfect. They must be sufficiently present for proportionate attribution.

Conditioned Authorship

The concept of conditioned authorship provides a middle position between absolute freedom and total determination. The person does not create the initial materials. They inherit body, language, culture, temperament, memory, social position, and circumstance. These materials influence every act. Yet the person may develop capacities for:

- interpretation
- comparison
- inhibition
- planning
- commitment
- refusal
- self-modification
- repair. The self becomes an author by arranging inherited causes into a governed form. This authorship is never complete. It

can grow. It can collapse. It can be supported or attacked by institutions. It can be divided internally. It can be compromised by misinformation, addiction, fear, and domination. Conditioned authorship therefore supports graded responsibility and political obligations to cultivate agency.

Can the Individual Be the Author of Action?

The answer depends upon what authorship means. If authorship requires creation from nothing, the answer is no. No individual creates the body, language, history, temperament, or world from which action emerges. If authorship requires complete independence from causation, the answer is also no. Every act belongs to a network of causes. But authorship in every meaningful domain is constrained. An author does not invent the existence of language. A composer does not create the physics of sound. An architect does not create material law. They produce form through conditions they did not originate. Human agency operates similarly. The individual becomes an author when inherited forces are not merely repeated but organized through reflection, refusal, commitment, and revision. The action belongs to the person because the person's evaluative capacities participate in producing it. Authorship is therefore real but non-absolute. It is conditional, partial, and achieved.

Objections to Conditioned Authorship

Several objections remain. Objection 1: Reflection is also determined. If reflection is caused, how can it create freedom? The answer is that freedom does not require causeless reflection. It requires that reflection function as part of the agent's governing mechanism. A caused capacity can still distinguish reasons, inhibit impulse, and alter conduct. Objection 2: The self did not choose its capacity for reflection. Correct. This defeats ultimate self-creation, not

every form of authorship. Responsibility begins from the capacities available, not from impossible authorship of one's own origin. Objection 3: Social conditioning penetrates every level. Also correct. No reflective standpoint is perfectly independent. Freedom therefore exists by degree and requires continued exposure to criticism, alternatives, and revision. Objection 4: Graded freedom makes responsibility vague. Human realities are often graded. Precision does not require false binaries. Law and ethics already distinguish intention, negligence, coercion, and incapacity. Objection 5: Conditioned authorship is merely determinism renamed. It accepts causal determination as possible but identifies genuine differences among causal processes. Action produced through informed self-regulation differs normatively from action produced through seizure, threat, or manipulation. The distinction is not linguistic. It determines whether the person's capacities were operative or bypassed.

The Metaphysical Dispute

The Concepts of Freedom and Agency

The vocabulary of freedom contains several distinct ideas.

Freedom of action concerns whether a person can do what they decide to do. A prisoner may want to leave but be physically prevented. A person threatened with violence may comply despite contrary preference. An individual with severe paralysis may form an intention without possessing the capacity to execute it. Freedom of action therefore depends upon external opportunity and practical ability.

Freedom of will concerns whether the person governs the formation of intention itself. A person may act according to desire while questioning whether the desire is genuinely their own. Addiction, compulsive behavior, manipulation, indoctrination, and severe psychological dependence make this distinction visible. Doing what one wants is not sufficient if one cannot govern what one wants.

Negative freedom is freedom from interference. A person is free to the extent that others do not obstruct their action. This conception protects private choice and limits political authority. Its weakness is that formal noninterference may coexist with material incapacity. A person may be legally free to refuse employment while lacking any realistic means of survival.

Positive freedom concerns self-government: the ability to act according to reflectively endorsed purposes rather than immediate impulse or external command. Positive freedom recognizes that a person can be enslaved by appetite, fear, ignorance, or dependency even when no one physically restrains them. Its danger is political paternalism. Authorities may claim to know a person's "real" interests and coerce them in the name of liberation.

Autonomy means living under laws or principles one can recognize as one's own. Autonomy does not require isolation from all influence. It requires that influence be capable of examination, acceptance, revision, or refusal.

Agency is the capacity to initiate, guide, and take responsibility for action. An agent does not merely move. The agent acts for reasons, understands conduct as their own, and can

participate in explaining or revising it.

Moral responsibility concerns whether praise, blame, obligation, punishment, gratitude, resentment, or demands for repair are appropriate responses to conduct. Freedom and responsibility are connected but not identical. A person may freely perform an action that carries little moral significance. Another may cause serious harm without sufficient agency to deserve blame. These distinctions prevent a single word - freedom - from carrying several arguments at once.

The Determinist Challenge

Determinism is the thesis that every event is necessitated by prior conditions together with the laws governing the relevant system. If the state of the universe at one moment and the laws of nature were completely fixed, only one subsequent future would be possible. Under strict causal determinism, every human decision belongs to the same causal order as every other event. A choice occurs because prior brain states, genetic factors, memories, perceptions, desires, and environmental conditions produce it. The person experiences deliberation. The deliberation itself is caused. The person experiences a decision. The decision follows from conditions already operating. This creates the classical challenge: If the person could not have acted otherwise, how can the action be free? The challenge gains force from several directions. Physical causation Human bodies belong to the physical world. Neural activity accompanies thought, intention, emotion, and movement. If physical events are governed by causal processes, human choice appears included within them. Biological inheritance Temperament, impulse control, sensitivity to reward, aggression, fear, and vulnerability to addiction are influenced by biological constitution. Psychological formation Childhood experience, attachment, trauma, education, reinforcement, and learned expectation shape adult conduct. Social causation Class, race, gender, family structure, institutional access, neighborhood conditions, and cultural norms influence which choices appear available or credible. Economic constraint A formal choice between alternatives may conceal severe asymmetry. The person may “choose” the only option compatible with survival. Linguistic mediation Individuals deliberate through concepts they inherit. The possible reasons they can formulate depend partly upon the available language. The determinist therefore argues that the self is not an independent origin. It is a location through which prior causes continue.

Hard Determinism

Hard determinism accepts determinism and concludes that genuine free will does not exist. Under this view, human beings may deliberate and act, but their deliberations and actions are causally necessitated. The belief that one could have done otherwise arises from ignorance of the causes. Responsibility must therefore be reconsidered. Retributive punishment becomes difficult to justify. If the offender’s conduct followed inevitably from prior conditions, inflicting suffering because the offender “deserves” it appears irrational. Hard determinists may still support social responses to harmful conduct. A dangerous person may be restrained. Behavior may be deterred. Rehabilitation may alter future causal patterns. Institutions may protect the public. The justification is prospective rather

than retributive. The offender is not punished because they metaphysically authored themselves and chose evil from outside causation. They are managed because conduct has consequences and future causes can be changed. This approach possesses ethical force. It challenges moral hatred, humiliation, and excessive punishment. It encourages attention to prevention, social causes, mental health, education, and rehabilitation. Yet hard determinism encounters several difficulties. First, deliberation appears difficult to explain as wholly irrelevant. Human beings respond to reasons. They alter conduct when presented with evidence. Laws, education, and criticism operate precisely because reasoning participates in causation. Second, abandoning responsibility may weaken the distinction between treating persons as agents and treating them as objects of management. Third, the hard determinist still argues that people should revise punishment. This normative language presupposes that reasons can appropriately govern action. Fourth, ordinary practices of promise, trust, apology, and repair become difficult to sustain if no action meaningfully belongs to anyone. Hard determinism correctly denies absolute self-creation. It may go too far when it denies every form of authorship.

Libertarian Free Will

Libertarianism holds that at least some human choices are not determined by prior causes and that genuine responsibility requires this indeterminacy. The agent faces several possible actions. More than one is genuinely available. The final choice is not necessitated by the past. This model preserves the intuition that the person could have acted otherwise under exactly the same prior conditions. Libertarian theories take several forms. Agent causation The agent, rather than an event within the agent, originates the action. The person is a substance capable of initiating a new causal sequence. Event-causal libertarianism Prior events influence but do not fully determine choice. Indeterminacy within deliberation leaves room for alternative action. Non-causal theories Some choices may be understood through reasons without requiring a causal relation that determines the act. Libertarianism protects strong moral authorship. The person is not merely a conduit of prior conditions. They possess the power to originate action. Yet the theory faces the problem of randomness. If a decision is not determined by reasons, character, desire, or prior state, what makes it the agent's decision rather than an accidental event? An uncaused movement is not necessarily free. A seizure is not free because it is not intentionally chosen. A random neural event would not create authorship. The libertarian must explain how an action can be undetermined without becoming arbitrary. A second problem concerns the relation between character and responsibility. If a good person chooses well because of developed character, the action appears partly determined by that character. If choice must remain independent of character, moral formation loses significance. A third problem concerns self-creation. Even if a moment of choice is undetermined, the agent did not create the values, capacities, and circumstances entering deliberation. Libertarianism preserves an important intuition about alternative possibility. It struggles to explain how indeterminacy generates control.

Compatibilism

Compatibilism holds that freedom can exist even if determinism is true. The central insight is that freedom should not be defined as exemption from causation. It should be defined according to the kind of cause producing the action. A person acts freely when conduct issues from their own motives, values, reasoning, and character without coercion or disabling compulsion. Suppose a person leaves a room because they want to leave. The act may have causes. It remains free if the person was not forced, manipulated, incapacitated, or physically prevented from acting according to judgment. David Hume presents a classical compatibilist account. Liberty consists not in the absence of necessity but in the power to act according to the determinations of the will. The contrast is not between caused and uncaused action. It is between action caused through the person's will and action caused by external constraint. Compatibilism explains why causation does not automatically eliminate agency. A person's reasons can cause action. Indeed, an action disconnected from the person's reasons would appear less free. If someone acts because they judge the action right, and that judgment causes the behavior, the causal relation supports authorship. Compatibilism also fits ordinary responsibility practices. People are excused when action results from coercion, ignorance, incapacity, or compulsion - not merely because the action had causes. The difficulty lies in defining which internal causes genuinely belong to the person. An addict may act according to desire. A manipulated person may act according to implanted belief. An indoctrinated individual may sincerely identify with a doctrine. If freedom means doing what one wants, these cases may count as free even when the person's capacity to govern desire has been compromised. Compatibilism therefore requires a deeper account of identification, reflection, and control (Hume 2000a).

Hierarchical Accounts of the Will

Harry Frankfurt develops a hierarchical theory distinguishing first-order desires from higher-order desires. A first-order desire concerns action. The person wants to consume a substance. A second-order desire concerns which desire the person wants to govern. The person may want not to want the substance. Freedom of will arises when the desire producing action is one with which the person identifies at a higher reflective level. This explains the experience of internal division. The unwilling addict acts upon a desire they reject. The movement belongs physically to the person but does not fully express the will they endorse. The willing addict identifies with the desire and acts accordingly. Frankfurt's approach shifts freedom from alternative possibilities to identification. A person may act freely even if only one option is available, provided the action expresses the will they endorse. This insight challenges the principle that moral responsibility always requires the ability to do otherwise. In Frankfurt-style cases, a hidden controller would intervene if the person chose differently, but the person acts independently in the desired direction. The alternative was unavailable, yet the actual choice appears to belong to the agent. Hierarchical theories improve upon simple desire-based compatibilism. Yet they raise a further question: Why should higher-order desires possess final authority? A person can be alienated from reflective commitments as well as immediate impulses. Social conditioning can operate at every level. One may sincerely endorse values produced through manipulation or domination. The hierarchy of desire requires a standard for determining when reflective identification

is sufficiently independent and informed (Frankfurt 1971).

Reasons-Responsive Agency

Reasons-responsive theories define agency through the capacity to recognize and act upon reasons. A mechanism of action is free when it would respond appropriately to relevant changes in reasons across a sufficient range of possible

circumstances. The person need not have been able to do otherwise in the exact situation. They must possess a general capacity for rational guidance. This approach explains why certain conditions reduce responsibility. A person experiencing psychosis may be unable to recognize the relevant reasons. A young child may lack mature evaluative capacity. A coerced person may recognize reasons but face an unacceptable threat structure. An intoxicated person may have impaired judgment. An addict may recognize reasons while possessing weakened control. Reasons-responsiveness treats agency as a functional capacity rather than a metaphysical exception. The person acts freely when conduct is guided through a mechanism capable of understanding, evaluating, and adjusting to reasons. This model accommodates causal explanation. Reasons themselves can function as causes. Education, criticism, law, and moral conversation matter because agents can respond to them. The model also permits degrees of agency. A person may retain some rational capacity while suffering significant impairment. Responsibility can therefore be reduced without disappearing entirely. Its weakness is that responsiveness can be shaped by unjust structures. A person may rationally respond to reasons generated by coercive institutions. The capacity is functioning, but the field of available reasons is distorted. Agency must therefore be situated socially as well as psychologically (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).

Freedom as Self-Government

A stronger conception defines freedom as self-government. The person is free when action is governed by principles, commitments, and reasons that have passed through reflective examination and can be recognized as their own. Self-government contains several capacities:

- awareness of motives
- comprehension of alternatives
- anticipation of consequences
- resistance to immediate impulse
- ability to revise belief
- capacity to refuse external command
- ability to sustain a chosen commitment
- willingness to answer for the result. This conception avoids the fantasy of causelessness. The person's governing principles have

causes. They developed through upbringing, culture, education, experience, and reflection. Agency analysis asks whether the person can participate in their revision. Self-government

does not require the self to have created its starting material. A writer does not create language but can author a text through it. A builder does not create gravity or material but can construct within their limits. An agent does not create every motive but can organize, refuse, redirect, or endorse them. Freedom is therefore editorial before it is originary. The person becomes an author by acquiring jurisdiction over inherited material.

Traditions of Freedom

Aristotle and Voluntary Action

Aristotle's analysis of voluntary and involuntary action remains foundational. An action is involuntary when produced by force or ignorance under conditions that generate regret. Voluntary action originates in the agent with knowledge of the relevant circumstances. Aristotle also distinguishes action from character. People become just by performing just actions and courageous by performing courageous actions. Habit forms disposition. Character then influences future choice. This creates a complex model of responsibility. A person's current conduct may flow from character, but character itself was formed through repeated action and social education. The agent is both product and producer. Aristotle recognizes that moral responsibility develops over time. The person is not born with completed virtue. Agency is cultivated through practice, instruction, law, and community. This account avoids treating freedom as an isolated moment of choice. The ability to choose well depends upon prior formation. It also raises questions of unequal moral education. If society forms citizens badly, how fully responsible are they for the characters produced? Aristotle's framework suggests that political institutions share responsibility for the agency they cultivate. A society cannot neglect formation and later treat every failure as entirely private (Aristotle 1984).

Kant: Autonomy and Rational Law

Kant gives freedom a distinctly moral form. To act freely is not to follow every desire. It is to act according to a law one gives oneself through reason. Desire may be causally determined by appetite, inclination, and circumstance. Autonomy arises when the person acts from duty according to principles capable of universal application. Freedom is therefore not lawlessness. It is self-legislation. The autonomous person asks whether the principle of action can be willed as a law for every rational agent. This prevents private exception. A person who lies for convenience cannot coherently will a universal practice of lying because the institution of truthful assertion would collapse. Kant also insists that persons must be treated as ends rather than merely as means. Rational agency gives each person moral standing. This model connects freedom with

dignity and responsibility. Its strength lies in rejecting the identification of freedom with appetite. A person controlled by desire is not fully self-governing merely because the desire is internal. Its weakness lies in abstraction. Human beings are not pure rational wills. They are embodied, dependent, socially situated, emotionally structured, and unequally empowered. Formal universalization may fail to reveal material injustice if the principle is

described too abstractly. Kantian autonomy remains indispensable, but it must be joined to attention to actual conditions of agency (Kant 2012).

Spinoza: Freedom Through Understanding

Spinoza rejects free will understood as exemption from causation. Human beings believe themselves free because they are conscious of desire but ignorant of the causes producing it. The person who understands necessity becomes freer, not because causation disappears, but because passive emotion is transformed through adequate knowledge. Freedom is the movement from being acted upon blindly to acting from understanding. This produces a powerful alternative to libertarianism. Ignorance does not create freedom. Knowledge of cause expands control. A person who understands the sources of anger may regulate it more effectively. A person who recognizes manipulation may resist it. A person who understands addiction may construct conditions reducing its power. Causal knowledge is therefore not the enemy of agency. It can be the instrument of agency. Spinoza's account also reframes self-mastery. The free person does not command the world through pure will. They understand their place within a larger order and act through the capacities genuinely available. The limitation is that understanding alone may not overcome material constraint. Knowledge of oppression does not automatically provide power to escape it. Freedom requires both comprehension and practical capacity.

Beauvoir and Situated Freedom

Simone de Beauvoir develops a more socially and ethically grounded existentialism. Human freedom is situated. Individuals act within conditions that enable or obstruct transcendence - the movement toward projects, creation, and future possibility. Oppression is wrong not only because it causes pain but because it confines persons to imposed roles and denies their capacity to author projects. Freedom is therefore relational. My freedom depends partly upon a world in which others can also act as agents. A person who pursues freedom through domination undermines the conditions that give freedom ethical meaning. Beauvoir rejects both absolute determinism and abstract voluntarism. Individuals are neither pure products of circumstance nor sovereign creators outside history. This framework is especially important for political theory. Agency is not merely an internal faculty. It requires external conditions:

- education
- bodily security
- economic possibility
- legal standing
- access to information
- freedom from domination
- recognition as a person capable of judgment. A society that denies these conditions cannot later attribute complete

responsibility for the resulting conduct (Beauvoir 1948).

Inside the Acting Organism

Neuroscience and the Timing of Decision

Modern debates about free will often appeal to neuroscience. Experiments associated with Benjamin Libet appeared to show neural activity preceding conscious awareness of a decision to move. Later studies attempted to predict choices from brain activity before participants reported conscious intention. These findings have been interpreted as evidence that the brain decides before the conscious self becomes aware. The conclusion is often overstated. First, the experiments typically involve simple, arbitrary movements with little moral or personal significance. Second, readiness potentials may reflect general preparation rather than a completed decision. Third, the timing of reported conscious intention is difficult to measure precisely. Fourth, complex action develops through long-term reasoning, planning, habit, and self-regulation, not only a final conscious instant. Even if neural processes precede conscious awareness, this does not establish that the action occurred outside the person. The brain is not an external entity controlling the self. It is part of the embodied system through which agency operates. Agency analysis asks not whether neurons are involved. They must be. The question is whether the person's integrated capacities for reasoning, valuation, control, and revision participate in producing action. Neuroscience can reveal mechanisms. It cannot settle the normative meaning of authorship by timing one signal (Libet 1985).

The Brain Is Not an External Tyrant

Popular discussions often say, "The brain made the decision before the person did." This language creates a false division. The person is not a ghost separate from the brain. If neural processes integrate memory, value, anticipation, and intention, their operation may constitute rather than defeat agency. The fact that digestion occurs unconsciously does not make it voluntary. The fact that much deliberation occurs beneath conscious awareness does not automatically make it involuntary. Agency does not require that every causal stage appear in consciousness. Skilled action often depends upon automatic processes. A musician does not consciously command every finger movement. A speaker does not deliberately select every grammatical rule. A driver responds to road conditions through learned patterns. Automaticity can represent developed agency rather than its absence. The issue is whether the automatic process remains integrated with the person's broader commitments and capable of reflective correction.

Unconscious Motivation

Psychoanalytic and psychological traditions challenge the belief that individuals fully understand their motives. A person may provide reasons that conceal deeper causes. Aggression may be interpreted as principle. Dependency may be interpreted as love. Fear may be interpreted as discernment. Ambition may be interpreted as service. The existence of

unconscious motivation limits self-certainty. It does not eliminate agency. A person can become more aware of recurring patterns, defensive structures, and hidden incentives. Reflection, therapy, relationship, and consequence can expand self-knowledge. Agency therefore includes the capacity to investigate the self. The individual is not initially transparent to themselves. Authorship requires audit. A person who refuses every inquiry into motive remains governed by causes they cannot name.

Habit and Automatic Conduct

Much of human life is habitual. People wake, travel, speak, work, eat, react, and judge through patterns that require little active deliberation. Habit conserves cognitive resources. Without it, ordinary life would become impossible. Habit also creates a domain in which agency becomes sedimented. Past choices become present automaticity. A repeated response eventually appears natural. This has two implications. First, freedom is not located only in immediate decision. Earlier acts, environments, and practices shape later capacity. Second, responsibility may concern the maintenance of conditions under which future action occurs. A person who knows that intoxication produces violence bears responsibility for repeatedly entering the condition even if control is reduced during the event. A person who designs routines reducing temptation exercises agency indirectly. Freedom can be prospective. One may govern the future self by arranging present architecture.

Addiction and Divided Agency

Addiction exposes the inadequacy of binary models. The addicted person is neither fully free in the ordinary sense nor wholly devoid of agency. Craving can narrow attention, alter valuation, produce withdrawal, and weaken control. The person may sincerely want to stop while repeatedly acting otherwise. Responsibility must therefore be graded. Blame that ignores impairment is unjust. Exculpation that denies every remaining capacity may also be harmful. Agency may persist in limited forms:

- seeking treatment
- avoiding triggers
- disclosing risk
- accepting structure
- repairing harm
- building alternative routines. These capacities vary across persons and stages of addiction. A just response combines protection,

treatment, accountability, and recognition of impairment. The language of pure choice stigmatizes. The language of pure disease can erase participation. Addiction demonstrates that agency is architectural. It depends upon internal capacity, external support, environment, timing, and access to alternatives.

Illustrative Scenario: Responsibility in the Delivery Case

The driver's responsibility can be divided rather than transferred whole. He retained enough understanding to know the danger and therefore bears responsibility for continuing. The employer created incentives that made refusal costly and bears institutional responsibility. Housing precarity narrowed the alternatives. Fatigue diminished regulatory control. The injured motorist's claim to repair remains regardless of how blame is distributed.

A just response would therefore differ from both pure punishment and total exculpation. It could include compensation, licensing review, limits on mandatory hours, employer penalties, and treatment of fatigue as a systemic safety condition. The aim is not to dissolve agency into structure. It is to locate every causal source capable of correction.

The case demonstrates the practical value of conditioned authorship. Responsibility becomes a map of control, contribution, and repair rather than a ritual search for one isolated origin.

Coercion and Social Formation

Coercion

Coercion occurs when one person structures another's options through threat. The coerced person may still make a choice. The choice is not fully free because the coercer has illegitimately altered the cost of refusal. A person who hands over property under threat of death acts intentionally. They understand the act and physically perform it. Yet responsibility for the transfer belongs principally to the coercer. Coercion demonstrates that choice and freedom are not identical. A choice can occur within an unacceptable field of alternatives. The severity of coercion depends upon:

- credibility of the threat
- magnitude of threatened harm
- availability of escape
- immediacy
- dependency
- vulnerability
- proportionality of demanded action. Not every pressure is coercion. Social disapproval, economic incentive, persuasion, and

legal penalty can influence without fully defeating agency. The philosophical task is to determine when influence crosses into unauthorized control.

Economic Constraint and Formal Choice

Modern institutions often equate contract with consent. The person signed. The worker agreed. The borrower accepted. The consumer chose. Formal agreement is relevant. It is not conclusive. A contract may be entered under severe economic necessity, informational inequality, dependency, or lack of alternatives. The weaker party may understand the terms yet possess no realistic capacity to refuse. This qualification does not imply that every unequal contract is invalid. It means that freedom must be evaluated materially as well as formally. A person choosing between undesirable options still exercises agency. The degree of authorship depends upon how the options were structured. Political and economic institutions often create conditions and then attribute the resulting choice entirely to individuals. This transfers responsibility away from architecture. A complete account asks both: Why did the person choose this? Who designed the field in which the choice occurred?

Manipulation

Manipulation differs from coercion. The manipulator does not necessarily threaten. They alter perception, emotion, information, or desire so that the target chooses in a direction serving the manipulator. Advertising, propaganda, grooming, deceptive persuasion, psychological exploitation, and algorithmic targeting can operate this way. Manipulation is philosophically difficult because the person may act according to internal desire. The desire has been engineered through concealed influence. Agency is weakened when:

- relevant information is withheld
- vulnerabilities are deliberately exploited
- alternatives are misrepresented
- emotional states are induced to bypass reflection
- the source's purpose is concealed
- the target cannot recognize the mechanism. Not every influence is manipulation. Education also shapes belief. Advice

influences choice. Art changes perception. The distinction concerns transparency, purpose, accuracy, reciprocity, and respect for the other's capacity to judge. Legitimate persuasion offers reasons. Manipulation manages the person.

Indoctrination and Deep Identification

Indoctrination creates a deeper challenge. The person may endorse the very system that limits their agency. They may identify sincerely with beliefs implanted through isolation, repetition, authority, punishment, or restricted access to alternatives. If freedom depends solely upon reflective endorsement, the indoctrinated person may appear free. Yet their reflective framework was designed to prevent genuine revision. Agency requires not only identification but access to contestation. A belief system becomes autonomy-defeating when it:

- forbids questioning

- isolates members from contrary evidence
- punishes doubt
- controls language
- equates dissent with moral corruption
- makes departure materially or psychologically catastrophic. Freedom requires the possibility of appeal. A principle cannot

count as fully self-authored when the system prevents the person from examining or refusing it.

Trauma and the Contraction of Choice

Trauma can alter perception, emotional regulation, memory, threat detection, and future expectation. The traumatized person may respond to present events through patterns formed under past danger. A reaction may appear disproportionate when viewed without the history that organized it. Causal explanation is necessary. It prevents moral simplification. Yet trauma does not make every action ethically neutral. Harm caused under trauma remains harm. Others retain the right to protection and boundary. A responsible account distinguishes explanation, blame, and repair. The person may deserve reduced blame because control was impaired. They may still bear responsibility for seeking treatment, accepting safeguards, or repairing damage where capacity permits. Trauma is not guilt. It is not permanent exemption. It is a condition that changes the architecture of agency (Herman 1992).

Mental Incapacity

Law and morality recognize that certain mental conditions reduce or eliminate responsibility. A person may lack the ability to understand the nature of the act, distinguish right from wrong, appreciate consequences, or control behavior. Agency analysis is functional, not merely diagnostic. Two people with the same diagnosis may possess different capacities. Responsibility should therefore depend upon:

- understanding
- reality testing
- intention
- control
- awareness of consequence
- ability to respond to reasons. The purpose of recognizing incapacity is not to deny personhood. It is to avoid attributing

authorship where the necessary capacities were absent. At the same time, incapacity can be abused as a justification for excessive control. Institutions may treat people as perma-

nently incompetent when capacity is partial, contextual, or recoverable. Agency should be supported wherever possible. Protection must not become annexation.

Childhood and Developing Agency

Children possess agency, but it is developing. They form intentions, express preference, understand rules, and act for reasons. Their capacity for long-term judgment, impulse regulation, and consequence assessment remains incomplete. This justifies differential responsibility. It also creates adult obligations. Parents, schools, and institutions do not merely manage children. They construct the conditions under which future agency develops. A child repeatedly denied meaningful choice may struggle to govern themselves later. A child given unrestricted choice without structure may fail to develop discipline. The task is graduated authorship. The child should receive increasing jurisdiction as capacity develops. This model applies beyond childhood. Agency is cultivated through practice, responsibility, feedback, and protected opportunity to make reparable errors. Freedom is learned.

Socialization and the Formation of the Self

Every self is socially formed. Language, norms, roles, expectations, and identities are learned through interaction. This does not make the self unreal. It makes agency relational. An individual cannot become autonomous without first receiving structures from others. They learn reasoning through education, self-control through care and discipline, and moral language through community. Autonomy is therefore not the rejection of every external influence. It is the capacity to examine inherited influence. Socialization can enable freedom. It can also suppress it. A society that teaches obedience without criticism forms compliant subjects. A society that teaches only private preference forms individuals unable to sustain shared obligation. The quality of agency depends upon what forms of reflection, dissent, and responsibility socialization permits.

Structural Constraint

Structural constraint refers to limits produced not by one identifiable coercer but by institutions and social arrangements. Housing markets, educational access, policing, labor conditions, healthcare systems, inherited wealth, discrimination, and geographic location shape practical possibility. No single actor may issue a threat. The field remains unequal. Structural accounts are sometimes criticized for denying individual responsibility. That criticism is justified when structure is treated as total determination. Yet ignoring structure creates another distortion. Individuals are judged as though they entered the world with equal resources, risks, and alternatives. A mature account treats agency and structure as mutually relevant. Persons act within structures. Their actions reproduce, resist, or modify those structures. Structures influence probability without making every outcome inevitable. The existence of exceptional individuals who overcome severe constraints does

not prove that the constraints are unreal. It proves that determination is not total. Public policy should not be designed around exceptional survival.

Oppression and Agency

Oppression restricts agency through systematic domination. It can limit movement, education, property, employment, bodily autonomy, political voice, or social recognition. Oppressed persons still act. Indeed, resistance demonstrates agency under constraint. The existence of agency does not excuse oppression. A person's capacity to survive a system does not legitimize the system. Two opposite errors must be avoided. The first portrays oppressed persons as passive objects without judgment or initiative. The second uses their remaining agency to attribute complete responsibility for outcomes produced under domination. Situated agency recognizes both resistance and constraint. The person is neither helpless material nor unrestricted author.

Consent and Political Legitimacy

Political theories often ground legitimacy in consent. Yet most citizens never explicitly consent to the state under which they are born. Tacit consent is often inferred from residence, use of public services, or failure to leave. This inference is weak when exit is costly or unrealistic. Legitimacy must therefore depend upon more than fictional agreement. It may require:

- fair participation
- equal legal status
- protection of basic rights
- public justification
- procedural accountability
- realistic capacity for reform
- limits on coercive power. Consent remains important, but political authorship is institutional rather than momentary

Citizens need not have individually written every law. They must inhabit a system in which law remains contestable and power answerable.

Responsibility in Law and Morality

Legal Responsibility

Criminal law distinguishes intentional action, recklessness, negligence, accident, incapacity, duress, and compulsion. These distinctions reflect degrees of authorship. **Intention** The person aims at the prohibited result or acts knowing it will occur. **Recklessness** The person consciously disregards a substantial risk. **Negligence** The person fails to recognize a risk they should have recognized. **Strict liability** Responsibility may be imposed without proving a guilty mental state, usually for regulatory purposes. These categories show that law does not attribute responsibility merely because a body caused harm. Mental relation matters. Yet

legal systems can oversimplify. They may ignore developmental history, addiction, trauma, economic coercion, or systemic conditions. Conversely, excessive causal explanation may weaken protection for victims. The task is proportional responsibility. The law should neither treat every cause as an excuse nor every voluntary movement as full authorship.

Punishment

Punishment is often justified through desert. The offender freely chose wrongdoing and therefore deserves suffering proportionate to the offense. Determinist critiques challenge this account. If conduct emerged from causes the offender did not choose, retributive suffering appears morally suspect. Alternative justifications include:

- deterrence
- incapacitation
- rehabilitation
- public condemnation
- restoration
- protection of rights. Each has limits. Deterrence can instrumentalize the offender. Incapacitation can become indefinite

control. Rehabilitation can become paternalistic. Condemnation can become humiliation. Restoration may be impossible or unwanted by the victim. A defensible system should treat punishment as constrained public action rather than moral vengeance. Responsibility justifies demands for answer, repair, and proportionate consequence. It does not justify cruelty. The state must preserve the offender's personhood even while restricting liberty.

Praise, Blame, and Moral Formation

Praise and blame do more than describe responsibility. They shape future conduct. A person learns which actions are recognized, condemned, trusted, or rejected. This formative role supports compatibilist accounts. Moral practices become part of the causal architecture through which agency develops. Yet praise and blame can be unjust. People are praised for advantages they inherited. They are blamed for limitations produced through deprivation. Success is attributed to character. Failure is attributed to personal defect. The social causes of both are concealed. A responsible practice should ask: What capacity did the person exercise? What constraints were present? What did the person know? What alternatives were realistic? What response will support repair and future agency? Blame should identify responsibility. It should not reduce a person to one act.

Moral Luck

Moral luck occurs when factors beyond an agent's control influence moral judgment. Two drivers behave equally recklessly. One reaches home without incident. The other strikes a pedestrian who unexpectedly enters the road. The conduct was similar. The outcome differs. The second person is judged more harshly because actual harm occurred. This reveals

tension between control and consequence. If responsibility depends only upon what the agent controlled, the two should be judged similarly. If consequence matters, luck affects blame. Moral luck appears in several forms:

- outcome luck
- circumstance luck
- character luck
- causal luck. The person did not choose the circumstances presenting temptation, the traits making resistance difficult, or the

consequences beyond prediction. Complete elimination of moral luck may be impossible. A balanced account distinguishes culpability from liability for repair. The person whose action caused greater harm may owe greater repair even if underlying fault was similar. Responsibility has more than one dimension.

Intention and Consequence

Agency is often evaluated through intention. A harmful consequence produced accidentally differs from one deliberately sought. Yet intention does not settle everything. A person may intend a good outcome while acting negligently. They may ignore foreseeable harm. They may use noble intention to conceal recklessness. Conversely, an action undertaken for mixed motives may produce genuine good. Responsibility requires analysis of:

- intended result
- foreseen risk
- available information
- alternatives
- actual consequence
- response after harm. Authorship extends beyond the moment of decision. The agent's reaction to consequence - denial,

repair, learning, repetition - reveals the continuing structure of responsibility.

Explanation Is Not Exculpation

One of the most important distinctions in the philosophy of agency is between explanation and excuse. To explain an action is to identify causes, motives, conditions, and mechanisms. To excuse an action is to reduce or eliminate blame. Explanation may support excuse when it reveals incapacity, coercion, unavoidable ignorance, or lack of control. It may also increase responsibility. Evidence that a person planned, concealed, repeated, and benefited from an act explains conduct in a way that strengthens culpability. Causal understanding should therefore be treated as neutral until connected to standards of agency. The claim "Trauma caused the reaction" does not alone determine responsibility. The questions remain: What

control was available? What did the person know? What safeguards could have been used? What harm occurred? What repair is now possible? Explanation expands judgment. It should not replace it (Herman 1992).

The Ability to Do Otherwise

Many theories hold that responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise. This principle captures an important intuition. It seems unjust to blame someone for failing to perform an action that was impossible. Yet the principle is ambiguous. Could the person have acted otherwise under exactly the same conditions? Could they have acted otherwise if they had judged differently? Did they possess a general capacity to respond differently? Could they have avoided entering the condition that removed later control? The strictest interpretation requires metaphysical alternative possibility. Compatibilist interpretations require conditional capacity. A person could have acted otherwise if they had wanted or judged otherwise, and the formation of judgment belonged sufficiently to their agency. Frankfurt-style cases suggest that responsibility may sometimes exist without accessible alternatives. What matters is why the person acted as they did. The deeper principle may therefore be: Responsibility requires that the action issue through the person's evaluative capacities in a manner not bypassed by coercion, manipulation, or incapacity. Alternative possibility matters because it often indicates control. It may not be the only form of control (Frankfurt 1971).

Ultimate Responsibility

Some philosophers argue that moral responsibility requires ultimate responsibility. To be truly responsible for an action, the person must be responsible for the character from which it arose. But to be responsible for that character, the person must have formed it through prior choices. Those choices arose from an earlier character. The regress continues. No one can be ultimately responsible for becoming the person they initially were. This argument strongly undermines absolute desert. No one authored their genes, childhood, initial temperament, or earliest moral formation. Yet ordinary responsibility may not require ultimate self-creation. A person can become responsible for how they govern inherited conditions once sufficient capacity develops. Ownership can be acquired over time. The fact that one did not build the original structure does not eliminate responsibility for knowingly maintaining, using, or refusing to repair it. Ultimate responsibility may be impossible. Proximate authorship remains meaningful.

Degrees of Freedom

Freedom should be treated as graded. A person may possess:

- full understanding but limited options
- many options but impaired judgment
- strong intention but weak control
- adequate control but false information

- reflective endorsement produced through manipulation
- formal choice under material coercion. Binary classification obscures these differences. Degrees of agency depend upon several

dimensions: Cognitive capacity Can the person understand facts, reasons, and consequences? Volitional control Can they regulate action according to judgment? Informational access Do they possess sufficiently accurate knowledge? Alternative availability Are meaningful options realistically available? Freedom from coercion Can refusal occur without illegitimate threat? Reflective identification Does the action express values the person can recognize as their own? Temporal continuity Can the person sustain intention beyond immediate impulse? Social support Do external conditions permit the capacity to function? Responsibility should be calibrated across these dimensions.

Freedom as Capacity, Not Possession

The language of “having free will” suggests that freedom is an object present or absent in every adult. A better model treats freedom as capacity. Capacities can be developed, impaired, restored, supported, or destroyed. Literacy is a capacity. Musical skill is a capacity. Emotional regulation is a capacity. Agency is similarly cultivated. It depends upon education, health, security, practice, and institutional conditions. This model changes political responsibility. A society committed to freedom must do more than remove direct restraint. It must support the capacities required for self-government. Formal liberty without functional capacity is incomplete. The person may be legally free and practically governed by ignorance, debt, illness, fear, or dependence. Freedom requires architecture.

How Capacity Is Built or Depleted

Education as the Construction of Agency

Education should not merely transmit information. It should develop agency. A person becomes more capable of self-government when they can:

- evaluate evidence
- recognize manipulation
- articulate reasons
- understand institutions
- regulate attention
- compare alternatives
- anticipate long-term consequence
- revise belief
- communicate refusal

- cooperate without submission. An education organized solely around compliance may produce effective workers while

weakening citizens. An education organized solely around self-expression may fail to develop discipline and accountability.

Agency requires both critical independence and capacity for sustained obligation. Education is therefore political. It determines what kinds of authors a society permits its members to become.

Poverty and the Cost of Choice

Poverty restricts agency not only by limiting consumption but by altering time, attention, risk, and cognitive bandwidth. The person facing immediate scarcity must prioritize urgent needs. Long-term planning becomes difficult when one crisis can destroy the entire plan. Choices made under scarcity may appear irrational from a secure position while being locally rational within severe constraint. This does not eliminate personal responsibility. It changes the field against which responsibility must be judged. A wealthy person and a poor person may face the same formal rule while bearing radically different costs of compliance. Freedom should therefore be measured partly by the cost of refusal. An option that exists only at catastrophic cost is not equivalent to an accessible alternative.

Labor and the Sale of Agency

Employment requires the temporary transfer of decision-making authority. The worker agrees to perform tasks under organizational direction. This qualification does not imply that the employer acquires total jurisdiction over the person. The contract has boundaries. Labor becomes domination when economic dependency is used to control speech, body, time, or identity beyond legitimate scope. The language of voluntary contract can conceal this expansion. A person may accept employment. They do not thereby consent to harassment, unsafe conditions, arbitrary surveillance, humiliation, or indefinite availability. Freedom within labor requires:

- clear terms
- reasonable exit
- material safety
- limits on command
- due process
- protection from retaliation
- recognition of the worker as more than an input. The worker remains an agent while performing a role. The institution does

not become the author of the whole person.

Technology and the Delegation of Choice

Technology increasingly shapes decisions. Recommendation systems select information. Navigation systems select routes. Automated platforms rank applicants. Algorithms determine visibility, credit, risk, and access. Delegation can expand agency by reducing cognitive burden. It can also weaken agency when criteria become opaque and users lose the capacity to understand or challenge outcomes. A person may technically choose from options already filtered by an invisible system. The architecture governs before the choice occurs. Technological freedom therefore requires:

- transparency of significant criteria
- meaningful alternatives
- ability to override
- explanation of high-stakes decisions
- protection against manipulative design
- human accountability. Automation should support judgment. It should not make judgment disappear behind procedure

Artificial Intelligence and Agency

Artificial intelligence raises two distinct questions. Can artificial systems possess agency? Can their use alter human agency? Current computational systems can generate outputs, optimize objectives, and adapt behavior. Whether this constitutes genuine agency depends upon the required criteria. If agency requires consciousness, moral understanding, self-authored ends, and responsibility, sophisticated output alone is insufficient. A system may behave purposively because humans designed an objective function. The appearance of intention does not establish lived authorship. The second question is more immediate. Humans may delegate analysis, writing, selection, and decision to systems whose operation they do not understand. This can increase capacity while reducing ownership. When a person adopts an automated recommendation without comprehension, who authored the action? Responsibility cannot simply be transferred to the machine. Designers, deployers, institutions, and users retain differentiated responsibility according to control, knowledge, and foreseeable consequence. The machine may participate causally. It does not automatically absorb moral jurisdiction.

Lived Forms of Agency

Freedom and Desire

A common definition says freedom is the ability to do what one wants. This is incomplete. Desire can be manipulated, compulsive, self-destructive, contradictory, or uninformed. A person may intensely want what undermines their deeper commitments. Freedom therefore requires a distinction between desire and authorization. Which desires should govern?

What reasons support them? What future do they create? Can the person resist them? The goal is not to eliminate desire. Without desire, action lacks motive. The goal is to place desire within an order of judgment. A free person is not one without impulse. A free person is one whose impulses do not automatically become law.

Freedom and Discipline

Discipline is often treated as the opposite of freedom. External discipline can indeed become domination. Self-discipline can expand freedom. The person who cannot regulate attention, appetite, anger, time, or expenditure becomes governed by immediate forces. Discipline creates future options. Training allows the musician to play. Saving creates economic flexibility. Emotional regulation preserves relationship. Habit reduces dependence upon fluctuating motivation. Yet discipline can become compulsive or punitive. The individual may worship control and treat every need as weakness. Legitimate discipline serves a chosen purpose, remains proportionate, and permits recovery. Freedom requires structure. The argument does not require self-cruelty.

Freedom and the Body

Human freedom is embodied. Fatigue narrows judgment. Pain alters attention. Hunger changes priority. Illness restricts possibility. Hormones, medication, injury, and age influence conduct. The body is not a prison containing a free mind. It is the medium through which agency exists. This recognition has ethical implications. Institutions that destroy sleep, safety, nutrition, or health also damage agency. A person may possess formal freedom while bodily conditions make reflection and self-control difficult. Care for the body is therefore not external to freedom. It is part of the maintenance of the capacity to choose.

Freedom and Emotion

Emotion is often portrayed as an enemy of reason and freedom. Emotions can narrow judgment, but they also disclose value. Fear identifies perceived danger. Anger identifies perceived violation. Grief reveals attachment. Shame reveals a threatened moral or social identity. The free agent does not suppress every emotion. They interpret emotional testimony. An emotion may be accurate concerning significance and mistaken concerning cause. Anger may correctly indicate that a boundary matters while incorrectly identifying the person responsible. Agency lies in the interval between emotion and authorized action. The feeling occurs. The person determines what jurisdiction it receives.

Freedom and Promise

The ability to make a promise is one of the clearest forms of agency. A promise extends present intention into the future. The person binds a future self who may possess different desires. This is not a loss of freedom. It is an exercise of temporal self-government. Without such binding, stable relationship and cooperation become impossible. Yet promises can become illegitimate when circumstances change radically, the original commitment was coerced, or continued performance produces severe unjustifiable harm. The freedom to bind

oneself must include procedures for revision, release, and repair. Otherwise, past authorship becomes permanent rule over the present self.

Regret

Regret expresses the belief that one's action belonged to oneself and should have been different. It is therefore central to agency. The deterministic challenge asks whether regret is rational if the person could not have acted otherwise. Regret can remain rational even without metaphysical alternative possibility. It identifies a conflict between the action and the person's present values. It motivates learning, repair, and future change. The statement "I should have acted differently" may mean: The action violated a standard I accept. I failed to use capacities I possessed. I must alter the conditions that produced the failure. Regret becomes destructive when it demands impossible self-creation. A person may condemn themselves for lacking knowledge or capacity they could not have possessed at the time. Responsible regret distinguishes fault from tragedy.

Forgiveness and Agency

Forgiveness presupposes agency because it responds to wrongdoing attributable to a person. Yet forgiveness also recognizes that the person is not reducible to the act. A deterministic perspective can support forgiveness by revealing the causes that

shaped conduct. Understanding can reduce hatred. It should not erase the need for accountability. Forgiveness becomes coherent when the offender acknowledges authorship, attempts repair, and demonstrates changed governance. The person says: The action came through me. I understand more of its causes. Those causes do not remove the harm. I am altering the conditions under which I act. This is a mature form of agency. It neither claims absolute self-origin nor hides behind causation.

Responsibility for Character

A person may not have chosen their initial character. At some point, however, they may become aware of recurring patterns. Knowledge changes responsibility. The first uncontrolled reaction may arise from ignorance. The fiftieth repeated reaction after clear warning carries a different status. Responsibility expands when a person knows:

- what pattern exists
- whom it harms
- what conditions trigger it
- what alternatives are available
- what support is needed. The person may not be responsible for having received the wound. They can become responsible for

how the wound is permitted to govern others. This qualification does not imply that change is easy or always possible. It means that awareness creates jurisdictional obligation.

Institutional Responsibility

Institutions frequently attribute failure to individuals while treating systemic design as neutral. The employee made an error. The patient failed to comply. The borrower defaulted. The student lacked discipline. These statements may identify real individual conduct. They may also hide patterns produced by institutional incentives, impossible workloads, inaccessible procedures, or defective information systems. Institutional responsibility arises when the architecture predictably generates the behavior later condemned. An organization becomes responsible when it:

- creates conflicting directives
- rewards harmful conduct
- conceals relevant risk
- makes compliance practically impossible
- punishes disclosure
- fragments responsibility
- continues after repeated warning. The individual remains an agent. The institution also acts through the field it constructs

Responsibility should follow causal and governing power upward as well as downward.

The Politics of Blame

Blame is politically distributed. Powerful actors often describe their own conduct as necessity while describing subordinate conduct as choice. A corporation closes a factory because of market forces. The displaced worker fails because of poor decisions. A government imposes austerity because no alternative exists. The citizen suffers because they did not adapt. Institutional action is naturalized. Individual action is moralized. This asymmetry protects power. A serious philosophy of agency asks who had the greatest capacity to shape the field. Responsibility should generally increase with:

- knowledge
- power
- control
- access to alternatives
- foreseeability
- benefit from the arrangement. Those with greater structural authorship bear greater responsibility for the resulting order

Limits and Expansion

The Burden of Freedom

Freedom is often desired abstractly and avoided practically. To be free is to lose certain excuses. The person must choose without complete certainty. They must accept that inaction is also action. They must bear the cost of refusing inherited roles. They must recognize when appetite has been permitted to govern. They must repair what their choices produce. This burden explains why people may seek external command. A rigid institution, ideology, relationship, or identity can remove the anxiety of authorship. The person obeys and transfers responsibility upward. But obedience does not always

eliminate responsibility. The question remains whether the authority deserved recognition. Freedom includes responsibility for what one allows to govern.

The Limits of Freedom

A mature philosophy of agency must state the limits clearly. Human beings are not omnipotent. They cannot choose every circumstance. They cannot revise every trait. They cannot prevent every reaction. They cannot fully know their motives. They cannot escape all social formation. They cannot guarantee outcomes. They cannot indefinitely resist conditions designed to break agency. Freedom should not be used as a weapon against those who fail under extreme constraint. The language of choice becomes cruel when it ignores structure. Yet limitation does not imply nullity. A narrow capacity remains a capacity. A small refusal can interrupt a large system. A partial understanding can begin revision. The task is neither to exaggerate nor erase the available jurisdiction.

The Expansion of Freedom

Freedom can be expanded through deliberate construction. At the individual level:

- learning increases informational capacity
- routine protects intention
- therapy can expose hidden causes
- financial reserves increase exit options
- bodily care supports judgment
- community provides correction and support
- boundaries reduce coercive access
- written commitments stabilize future action. At the institutional level:
- education expands rational capacity
- healthcare preserves bodily agency
- labor protections improve meaningful consent
- due process limits arbitrary control
- public information supports political judgment

- economic security widens alternatives
- anti-discrimination measures correct denied agency
- transparent algorithms permit appeal. Freedom is therefore not merely defended. It is built

Conclusion

The individual can be an author of action without being the author of every condition that made the action possible. That distinction preserves agency in a causal world.

Conditioned authorship replaces the impossible image of an uncaused self with a more exact account of control. Freedom increases where persons understand what they are doing, can regulate impulse, possess meaningful alternatives, and can revise themselves through reasons. It decreases where coercion, manipulation, addiction, incapacity, deprivation, or structural domination compromise those capacities.

This account changes responsibility. Explanation becomes relevant because it identifies which capacities were present and which were damaged. It does not automatically excuse. Blame and punishment should be proportionate to control, and institutions should be judged by whether they expand or contract the agency of those subject to them.

Freedom is therefore not a possession hidden inside the person. It is an achieved and socially conditioned power of authorship. The ethical task is twofold: require agents to answer where control was real, and build conditions in which control can become more real.