

The Genealogy of Effective Alternatives: Constraint and Relational Responsibility

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Abstract

Moral responsibility is often assessed by asking what an actor chose, what alternatives were available, and how severely those alternatives were constrained. Yet the effective alternatives present at a moment of choice are themselves frequently products of earlier relations: dependency, resource allocation, institutional design, information control, accumulated obligations, exit costs, prior interventions, and the actor's own past commitments can all shape what remains practically available. This paper develops a preliminary Generative Relational account of the *genealogy of effective alternatives*. Its concern is not to offer a general theory of free will, nor to claim that constrained choice, capability, coercion, domination, or structural responsibility are new problems. Rather, it isolates a narrower object of analysis: the historical production of the effective option field within which an action is selected.

The paper advances three main proposals. First, effective alternatives should sometimes be reconstructed as historically generated relational objects rather than treated as exogenous background conditions of choice. Second, responsibility for acting within an option field should be analytically distinguished from responsibility for generating, maintaining, narrowing, or reopening that field. These forms of responsibility may coexist and need not be redistributed in a zero-sum manner. Third, responsibility for generated constraint need not depend on controlling the eventual action: an actor or institution may be answerable for shaping another's effective alternatives even when the constrained actor chooses unexpectedly or retains meaningful agency.

The framework further examines different mechanisms by which alternatives become costly, inaccessible, unintelligible, or effectively unavailable; the temporal distribution of constraint-generation responsibility; exit and refusal; and cases in which restricting options is justified. The aim is methodological and responsibility-sensitive: to make the genealogy of effective alternatives visible without reducing agency to structure, treating all constraint as wrongful, or equating justice with the maximization of choice.

Keywords: effective alternatives; relational responsibility; constrained choice; option-space genealogy; coercion; capability; domination; structural responsibility; exit; generative relational systems

Discussion Paper Note

This paper studies a narrower problem than a general theory of agency or moral responsibility. Its object is the historically generated field of effective alternatives available to an actor at a particular moment of choice. The starting observation is familiar: formally permitted alternatives can differ substantially from alternatives that are practically usable. Capability approaches, theories of coercion and domination, relational autonomy, structural injustice, and recent work on socially situated responsibility already make this point in different ways. The proposed contribution must therefore lie elsewhere. The paper asks how an effective option field acquired its present shape and what kinds of responsibility may attach to those who participated in generating, maintaining, narrowing, or reopening it.

The paper should use the formal object $\Omega_i^{\text{eff}}(t)$ only where it helps identify the set or structured field of alternatives effectively available to actor i at time t . It should not imply that effective alternatives are always sharply enumerable or that agency can be reduced to cardinality. An alternative may remain formally present while being practically inaccessible because of cost, dependency, information, legal status, social sanction, fear, architectural restriction, loss of supporting relations, temporal urgency, or the destruction of resources required to exercise it. The effective option field is therefore relationally and historically constituted rather than merely listed.

The title's term *genealogy* must do substantive work. The paper should not use genealogy as a decorative synonym for context. A genealogy of effective alternatives reconstructs how the present field was produced: which relations opened or closed alternatives, which actors controlled relevant resources, which institutions raised or lowered costs, which prior interventions altered exit conditions, which classifications made some options institutionally unavailable, and which of the actor's own earlier commitments contributed to the present configuration. The relevant history is purpose-indexed. Not every antecedent event belongs in the responsibility analysis; the paper should include historical elements insofar as they remain constitutive of the alternatives effectively available at the decision point.

A central analytical distinction concerns two different objects of responsibility. One question concerns the actor who chooses and performs an action within the option field. Another concerns the actors or institutions that helped generate the option field itself. These questions should not be collapsed. A constrained actor may retain meaningful responsibility for an action while another actor bears responsibility for having generated severe dependency, eliminated exit routes, distorted information, or made less harmful alternatives prohibitively costly. Conversely, the fact that another actor shaped the field does not automatically excuse every action selected within it. The paper should resist zero-sum models in which responsibility must simply be transferred from the immediate actor to the structure.

This separation also allows the paper to identify responsibility for constraint even when the eventual action is not controlled. Suppose an institution deliberately narrows another actor's practical alternatives, but the actor responds in an unexpected way. The institution may fail to cause the particular action it anticipated while still being answerable for the transformation of the actor's effective alternatives. This is one of the paper's strongest candidate contributions: responsibility for shaping a field of agency is analytically distinct from responsibility for producing a particular downstream action.

The paper should also distinguish the magnitude of constraint from its genealogy. Two actors may face similarly narrow effective option fields while the histories producing those fields differ substantially. One may arise from natural scarcity, another from a voluntary undertaking, another from deliberate coercion, another from cumulative institutional neglect, and another from a beneficial intervention that subsequently generated dependency. Present option scarcity alone cannot settle the normative meaning of the constraint. Historical authorship, authority, foreseeability, burden distribution, contestability, and the possibility of revision or exit may all matter.

The project must avoid a crude maximization-of-choice thesis. More alternatives are not necessarily better, and legitimate institutions routinely constrain options. Legal prohibitions can remove harmful courses of action; fiduciary roles can restrict self-interested conduct; safety rules can narrow technically possible behavior; meaningful commitments can bind future choice. The normative question is therefore not whether an actor's option set was reduced in the abstract. It is how the field was shaped, by whom,

under what authority, with what effects on agency, and with what possibilities for refusal, contestation, revision, and exit.

The literature review should be disciplined about antecedents. Capability theory already emphasizes substantive opportunity rather than formal permission. Coercion theory examines threats, offers, baseline dependence, voluntariness, and responsibility under constrained choice. Republican theories of domination show why the mere presence of options does not establish freedom. Relational autonomy and feminist work on oppression examine the social constitution of agency. Structural-injustice and social-connection approaches distribute responsibility beyond isolated wrongdoers. Work on adaptive preferences, choice architecture, manipulation, dependency, and institutional responsibility may also be directly relevant. The paper should not rebrand these literatures as Generative Relational discoveries.

The narrower gap to test is whether responsibility theory benefits from making the production history of the effective option field an explicit object in its own right. Existing literatures may already cover much of this terrain under different vocabularies. The novelty claim should therefore remain provisional until the review establishes that the proposed distinction between action responsibility and option-field responsibility, together with the genealogy of effective alternatives, adds analytical value beyond existing accounts of coercion, oppression, structural responsibility, capability deprivation, and social agency.

Several mechanisms of constraint generation should be distinguished without pretending they form an exhaustive taxonomy. Material constraints concern resources required to act. Informational constraints concern access to knowledge needed to recognize or evaluate alternatives. Institutional constraints concern permissions, procedures, eligibility, and access. Relational constraints arise when exercising an option requires sacrificing indispensable relationships or exposing dependents to unacceptable costs. Temporal constraints concern urgency, deadlines, and the disappearance of options over time. Architectural constraints concern systems whose design restricts possible behavior, especially in artificial agents and platform-mediated environments. Interpretive constraints arise where an alternative is difficult even to formulate because the actor lacks the concepts or social recognition required to make it actionable.

The paper should be careful with adaptive preferences and preference endogeneity. A person may endorse a constrained condition, but endorsement can itself emerge within a history of dependency, habituation, socialization, modification, or limited exposure to alternatives. This does not make the endorsement unreal or automatically invalid. Nor does it authorize an external observer to substitute its own preferences. The narrower point is that preference evidence should be interpreted together with the genealogy of the field in which those preferences developed. A separate paper may later address post-modification consent in depth; this paper should not absorb that entire problem.

Exit deserves specific attention but should not become the sole measure of agency. Formal exit can be ineffective when leaving entails loss of housing, care, income, legal status, communication infrastructure, identity-sustaining relationships, or the welfare of dependents. At the same time, some relations cannot be exited cleanly, and the absence of exit does not by itself establish injustice. The question is whether the genealogy of exit conditions helps explain the actor's effective alternatives and whether some actor or institution bears responsibility for unjustifiably shaping those conditions.

Temporal distribution is central. Constraint may be generated long before the eventual action. Different actors can contribute at different times: one creates dependency, another removes an institutional alternative, another controls information, while a later actor selects among the remaining possibilities. Event-centered accounts can obscure this history. The paper should examine how responsibility can attach to temporally distributed contributions without becoming indefinitely diffuse. Relevant considerations may include causal contribution, role, authority, knowledge, foreseeability, benefit, capacity to revise the constraint, and whether the actor maintained a condition after its effects became visible.

Artificial systems provide a useful stress test because architecture can make the genealogy of alternatives unusually explicit. Designers can determine action spaces, permissions, memory access, tool availability, communication channels, fallback procedures, and the conditions under which an artificial agent can revise its own behavior. Yet the paper should not assume that artificial agents possess human-equivalent moral agency or experience. The analytical value lies in exposing how an option field can be deliberately engineered and how responsibility for that engineering differs from responsibility for actions

produced within the resulting architecture.

Institutional and family cases may be equally important. Employers, schools, welfare systems, care relations, states, platforms, and families can shape alternatives through resource control, dependency, expectations, information, social sanctions, credentialing, and exit costs. These cases should not be treated as equivalent. Their normative structures, roles, legitimate authorities, and available remedies differ. They are useful because they reveal different mechanisms by which an option field can be generated while preserving actor agency to varying degrees.

The paper's principal candidate contributions should remain limited. First, effective alternatives at a decision point can sometimes be analyzed as historically generated relational objects rather than exogenous background conditions. Second, responsibility for choosing within an option field and responsibility for generating that field are analytically distinct and can coexist. Third, responsibility for generated constraint need not depend on control of the eventual action. A fourth, weaker contribution may concern the genealogy-sensitive evaluation of constraint: similarly narrow present option fields can have different normative significance because the processes producing them differ. This fourth claim should be tested carefully against existing historical, coercion, and structural-responsibility literatures before being advertised as original.

The normative limits should remain visible throughout. Constraint is not inherently wrongful. The existence of a genealogy does not itself generate responsibility. Historical contribution does not automatically establish blame. A narrow option field does not automatically eliminate agency. Expanding options does not automatically improve justice. Responsibility for the option field does not automatically determine the appropriate remedy. The framework is intended to separate questions that are often compressed, not to supply a universal responsibility algorithm.

The provisional section structure is:

1. Introduction: Choice within Generated Option Fields.
2. Literature Review: Capability, Coercion, Domination, and Situated Responsibility.
3. Effective Alternatives as Relational Objects.
4. The Genealogy of an Effective Option Field.
5. Modes of Constraint Generation.
6. Choice within a Generated Field.
7. Responsibility for Action under Constraint.
8. Responsibility for Generating Constraint.
9. Temporally Distributed and Institutional Responsibility.
10. Constraint without Control of the Final Action.
11. Exit, Refusal, and Reopening Alternatives.
12. Applications to Institutions, Families, Platforms, and Artificial Systems.
13. Discussion and Open Problems.
14. Conclusion.

The main open problems are substantial. The paper must determine when an alternative counts as effectively unavailable rather than merely costly or unattractive. It must avoid smuggling a preferred baseline into every claim of constraint. It needs criteria for truncating genealogy so that responsibility does not diffuse indefinitely backward. It must distinguish legitimate shaping of another's alternatives

from wrongful manipulation, domination, negligence, or coercion. It should clarify the relation between option-field responsibility and causal responsibility, and between option-field responsibility and duties to repair or reopen alternatives. It must also address situations in which actors knowingly help generate their own future constraints through commitments, contracts, dependence, or self-binding arrangements.

The working thesis is therefore deliberately narrow. Effective alternatives can have histories. Those histories can be relationally produced. When other actors or institutions materially contribute to the structure of alternatives available at a decision point, responsibility analysis may need to examine not only the action selected within that field but also the generation of the field itself. This does not dissolve agency into structure. It provides a way to ask more precisely which part of a constrained choice belongs to the actor who chose and which part belongs to the relations that made those alternatives effective, costly, unavailable, or difficult to escape.

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Status. This working discussion paper records an evolving stage of the author’s position. Its definitions, section structure, literature map, formal objects, and originality claims remain subject to revision. The present draft is preliminary and should not be read as claiming a completed general theory of free will, moral responsibility, coercion, capability, domination, or structural agency.

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Statement on the use of language models. The exploratory discussions and preparation of this paper involved OpenAI’s ChatGPT. ChatGPT supported exploratory dialogue, formal reconstruction, source discovery followed by source verification, argumentative criticism, and drafting in $\text{\LaTeX}$. The author selected the research questions, directed and approved the theoretical commitments and epistemic status of the claims, and bears sole responsibility for the manuscript, including its definitions, formal constructions, taxonomy, arguments, conclusions, and errors. Authorship credit remains with the human author.

1 Introduction: Choice within Generated Option Fields

Moral and political judgments about action often begin at the moment of choice. An actor faces several possibilities, selects one, and is then evaluated with reference to what was done, what alternatives were available, what the actor knew, and how much pressure or constraint was present. This framing is indispensable, but it can make the alternatives surrounding the choice appear as if they were already there. The practical field from which an action is selected is treated as background: some options are feasible, some are costly, some are forbidden, and some are unavailable. The central event is the choice itself.

This paper begins one step earlier. It asks how that field of effective alternatives acquired its present shape. An actor may enter a decision with few meaningful options because earlier relations allocated resources unequally, created dependency, closed institutional routes, restricted information, raised exit costs, destroyed supporting relationships, imposed deadlines, or embedded restrictions into technical and organizational architectures. Other alternatives may have disappeared because of the actor’s own earlier commitments, because of legitimate legal constraints, because of material scarcity, or because the surrounding institutions failed to create capacities that would have made additional courses of action practically usable. In each case, the decision takes place inside an option field with a history.

The paper uses the term *effective alternatives* for options that are not merely formally describable or legally permitted, but sufficiently available to function as meaningful possibilities of action for a situated actor. The notation $\Omega_i^{\text{eff}}(t)$ will later be used as a compact formal object, but the analysis does not assume that effective alternatives can always be enumerated cleanly. Their practical availability may depend on resources, information, time, social support, legal status, bodily capacity, institutional access, technological architecture, expectations, fear, dependency, or the consequences imposed on other people. Effective availability is therefore relational and often graded.

The central proposal is that the effective option field should sometimes be reconstructed as a historically generated relational object rather than treated as an exogenous condition of choice. This does not deny agency. Nor does it imply that every constraint was imposed by another actor or that every narrowing of alternatives is unjust. It instead creates a second object of responsibility analysis. Alongside responsibility for what an actor does within an available field, there may be responsibility for how that field was generated, maintained, narrowed, or reopened.

1.1 Choice and the Background of Alternatives

A choice is intelligible only against a background of alternatives, but different theories specify that background differently. Legal analysis may ask which actions were formally permitted. Economic analysis may compare feasible bundles subject to resource constraints. Capability approaches emphasize substantive opportunities. Theories of coercion examine how threats, offers, and altered baselines affect voluntariness. Republican theories of domination ask whether options are held at another's arbitrary discretion. Relational autonomy and structural accounts emphasize the social and institutional conditions under which agency develops and is exercised. These traditions already make it difficult to identify freedom with the mere presence of formal options.

The problem developed here is narrower. Even once an evaluator agrees that effective rather than merely formal alternatives matter, the effective field can still be treated as a snapshot. At the moment of action, the analyst records which alternatives are practically available and then asks how constrained the actor was. That is often sufficient. But in some cases the normative significance of the constraint depends on how it came about.

Consider several actors who all face similarly narrow practical choices. One accepted a demanding commitment while possessing credible alternatives and later encounters the foreseeable restrictions created by that commitment. Another is dependent because an employer gradually acquired control over housing, legal status, and income. A third has few options because a public authority eliminated an institutional route that had previously enabled exit. A fourth faces natural scarcity that no identifiable actor created. A fifth lost alternatives through cumulative decisions by multiple institutions, none of which independently determined the final field. The present narrowness of choice does not, by itself, tell us whether the constraint was wrongful, justified, self-authored, accidental, structurally produced, or attributable to any particular person.

This is why genealogy matters. The history of the option field can contain information about authorship, authority, dependency, foreseeability, benefit, maintenance, and opportunities for correction that is absent from the present decision point. A genealogy can also reveal that what appears to be one constraint is the accumulated effect of several relations operating at different times.

Claim 1.1 (Genealogical relevance of effective alternatives). When the practical availability of alternatives at a decision point has been materially shaped by prior relations, the history of that shaping can be relevant to responsibility analysis independently of the eventual action selected.

The claim is intentionally conditional. Many decisions do not require elaborate genealogical reconstruction. A theory that demanded a complete history of every option before evaluating any action would become unusable. Genealogy matters where earlier processes remain constitutive of the effective alternatives relevant to the decision and where those processes are themselves plausible objects of responsibility.

1.2 Effective Alternatives as Generated Relational Conditions

Calling an option field *generated* does not mean that someone deliberately designed it. Generation can be intentional, negligent, distributed, cumulative, institutional, or partly accidental. A parent may intentionally restrict a child's access to resources. A platform may deliberately design permissions and default pathways. A welfare system may create dependence through rules that no single official controls. Housing, employment, immigration status, and care may become coupled over time without any actor having planned the resulting vulnerability. An artificial agent may operate inside an action architecture whose permissions were explicitly engineered even though no designer foresaw the concrete decision eventually produced within it.

The relevant object is therefore broader than coercion. Coercion is an important mode of constraint, but an effective option field can be shaped without a threat, command, or explicit demand. Resource concentration can make alternatives unaffordable. Information control can prevent an actor from identifying possibilities that formally exist. Credentialing can make institutional access unavailable. Social dependence can make exit destructive even where it remains legally permitted. Time pressure can eliminate

alternatives faster than they can be exercised. Technical architecture can make some actions impossible and others frictionless. Repeated exposure to a restricted environment can also alter what the actor comes to regard as imaginable, worthwhile, or safe.

These mechanisms should not be flattened into one generic variable called constraint. They differ in causal structure and normative significance. Some directly remove options. Some raise their cost. Some undermine the capacities required to exercise them. Some leave an option technically accessible while transferring severe burdens to dependents. Some narrow the actor's informational or interpretive access rather than the action set itself. Some create durable dependence while leaving many superficial choices intact.

This paper therefore treats the effective option field as relational in two senses. First, practical availability often depends on relations to resources, institutions, infrastructures, and other actors. Second, the field itself can be modified by those relations over time. A decision environment is not merely a container in which agency occurs; it can be one of the products of earlier agency and institutional organization.

This point should not be confused with a thesis that structure determines action. The effective option field constrains and enables; it does not uniquely specify the action selected. Two actors can act differently within similarly structured fields. One actor can resist severe pressure. Another can choose badly despite abundant alternatives. The framework therefore preserves a difference between explaining how the field was generated and explaining why the actor selected a particular action within it.

1.3 Two Objects of Responsibility

The paper's central analytical distinction concerns two different objects of responsibility. The first is familiar: responsibility for an action selected by the actor. The second concerns responsibility for producing or maintaining the practical field in which that action was selected.

Suppose an actor performs an objectionable action under severe dependency. One inquiry asks whether the actor understood what was being done, possessed meaningful alternatives, could exercise them, and acted intentionally. Another asks who contributed to the dependency, who controlled the resources that made alternatives costly, who maintained the arrangement after its effects became visible, and whether those actors possessed authority or justification for shaping the field in that way.

These inquiries can produce different answers without contradiction. The constrained actor can retain responsibility for the action while another actor bears responsibility for the constraint. Responsibility need not move from one party to another as though it were a fixed quantity. Different agents can be responsible for different objects, for different reasons, and to different degrees.

Claim 1.2 (Distinct responsibility objects). Responsibility for choosing an action within an effective option field and responsibility for generating or maintaining that field should be assessed separately before any attempt is made to relate them.

This distinction prevents two opposite errors. The first is individualistic compression: because the immediate actor performed the action, the background that made alternatives practically unavailable disappears from responsibility analysis. The second is structural dissolution: because the actor's field was constrained, the actor's own agency is treated as normatively irrelevant. A relational account should avoid both. Constraint can mitigate, reshape, or contextualize responsibility without requiring a general denial of agency.

The distinction also clarifies why responsibility for generated constraint can matter even when no wrongful downstream action occurs. An institution may unjustifiably make exit prohibitively costly, yet the affected actor may never perform the action the institution hoped to induce. A platform may narrow user options, but users may improvise around the design. A state may destroy a livelihood alternative, yet the affected population may find another route. If responsibility for the option field were recognized only through the downstream act it successfully caused, these cases would become difficult to describe. The shaping of another's practical alternatives can itself be a normatively relevant object.

1.4 Constraint without Control of the Final Action

This leads to the paper's third proposal. Responsibility for generated constraint does not require control over the eventual choice. An actor can influence the structure of another's alternatives while failing to determine what that person ultimately does.

The distinction matters because responsibility analysis is often event-centered. If actor A threatens B and B complies, the causal and normative relation is comparatively visible. But many institutional constraints are less direct. A controls housing; C controls legal status; D restricts information; E sets a deadline; earlier policies have removed public alternatives. B then acts within the remaining field. None of A, C, D, or E may be able to predict B's exact response. Yet the absence of control over the final action does not make their contribution to the option field disappear.

The issue is not whether every causal contribution creates responsibility. It does not. Responsibility for generated constraint may depend on authority, knowledge, foreseeability, benefit, role, intent, capacity to avoid or revise the constraint, and whether the constraint was itself justified. The point is that these questions concern the generation of the field, not merely the causation of the final action.

This distinction is particularly useful for institutional analysis. Institutions often shape alternatives through rules, eligibility criteria, defaults, resource allocation, and infrastructure rather than direct commands. Their influence can be deep while their control over individual action remains weak. Responsibility analysis that looks only for direct authorship of the final act can therefore miss the institutional production of the conditions under which choices are made.

Artificial systems provide a complementary stress test. Designers can specify tool access, memory permissions, action boundaries, communication channels, fallback procedures, and opportunities for self-modification. An artificial agent may then produce an action that no designer intended or predicted. Whether the agent itself is morally responsible is a separate question. The architecture nevertheless makes vivid that responsibility for shaping an action space can be analytically distinct from responsibility for the action realized within it.

1.5 Genealogical Variation in Constraint

The concept of genealogy also prevents the analysis from collapsing into a simple measure of option scarcity. Two present fields can be equally narrow while carrying different normative meanings because the processes producing them differ.

Natural scarcity, voluntary commitment, justified regulation, domination, negligence, discrimination, infrastructural failure, emergency, and cumulative institutional dependence can all generate restricted alternatives. These genealogies can affect what responsibility attaches to the constraint and what kind of response is appropriate. A narrow option field produced by a justified safety rule does not have the same normative structure as one produced by strategic dependency. A self-binding commitment made under adequate conditions does not have the same genealogy as an imposed contractual trap. A constraint produced by unavoidable scarcity does not support the same responsibility attribution as one maintained by an actor who benefits from preventing exit.

This genealogical sensitivity also complicates baseline reasoning. Claims of coercion and deprivation frequently depend on a comparison point: what would the actor's alternatives otherwise have been? The genealogy of the option field can help reconstruct that baseline, but it cannot eliminate normative disagreement about which baseline is appropriate. Historical possession, reasonable expectations, institutional entitlements, prior injustice, and counterfactual feasibility can point toward different comparisons. The paper therefore does not assume that genealogy automatically yields the correct normative baseline. It supplies information that baseline-sensitive theories may need.

Genealogy also has a truncation problem. Every option field has deep antecedents. Skills depend on education; education depends on institutions; institutions depend on earlier political settlements; resources depend on inheritance, markets, law, and history. If responsibility analysis follows every causal chain indefinitely, it becomes diffuse and indeterminate. Later sections will therefore treat genealogical relevance as purpose-indexed. The inquiry should follow those historical processes that remain materi-

ally connected to the alternatives relevant to the decision and that plausibly bear on the responsibility question being asked.

1.6 Agency without Option Maximization

A genealogy-sensitive theory of effective alternatives should not be mistaken for a theory that more options are always better. Agency can be supported by stable commitments, legal prohibitions, shared norms, professional duties, and technical safeguards that deliberately remove possibilities. A fiduciary relation is partly constituted by restrictions on self-interested action. A safety-critical system can legitimately prohibit dangerous operations. A promise can narrow future options in a way that expresses rather than undermines agency.

The normative issue is therefore not the size of the effective option field. It concerns how the field was shaped, whether the shaping had adequate justification and authority, how burdens were distributed, whether actors could contest or revise the arrangement, and whether important alternatives were removed in ways that created domination, dependency, or avoidable vulnerability.

This point also limits the role of exit. Effective exit can be important evidence about the structure of a relation, but it is not a universal measure of justice. Some relations are constitutive, collective, or infrastructural in ways that make clean exit unrealistic. Family relations, political membership, ecological dependence, and public institutions cannot always be evaluated by imagining frictionless departure. The broader question is whether actors possess meaningful forms of refusal, revision, voice, protection, and alternative relation formation appropriate to the domain.

The same caution applies to adaptive preferences. If preferences develop within a constrained field, their genealogy may matter to interpretation. But genealogical formation does not make a preference unreal, false, or normatively void. People routinely develop values through relationships, institutions, commitments, education, and habit. The paper therefore rejects any simple inference from socially generated preference to invalid preference. Its narrower concern is whether endorsement should be treated as conclusive evidence of voluntariness when the relational history also contains dependency, manipulation, modification, or systematic exclusion of alternatives.

1.7 Scope and Candidate Contributions

The paper does not attempt to provide a general metaphysics of free will or a complete theory of moral responsibility. It does not claim that capability, coercion, domination, social agency, structural responsibility, adaptive preference, or relational autonomy are new topics. Nor does it seek to replace those literatures with Generative Relational terminology. Section 2 will review them directly and test whether the proposed framework adds analytical value.

The first candidate contribution is the treatment of effective alternatives as objects with genealogies. At least in some cases, the practical field available at a decision point should be reconstructed historically rather than treated as an exogenous input into responsibility analysis.

The second is the separation of responsibility for action from responsibility for option-field generation. The distinction is intended to make layered responsibility visible without turning responsibility into a zero-sum allocation.

The third is the claim that responsibility for generated constraint can exist without control over the eventual action. This allows analysis of institutional, architectural, and distributed forms of option shaping that do not operate through direct command.

A fourth, weaker contribution concerns genealogy-sensitive comparison. Present option fields that appear similarly narrow may require different normative assessments because their histories of formation, authority, maintenance, contestability, and benefit differ. This claim must be tested cautiously because historical and structural theories already contain substantial resources for making similar distinctions.

The framework also carries several explicit limits. Historical contribution does not automatically establish blame. Constraint does not automatically undermine agency. A narrow option field is not automatically unjust. Expanding options is not automatically reparative. Responsibility for generating

the field does not by itself determine whether compensation, institutional revision, reopening alternatives, punishment, or some other response is appropriate. These further judgments require substantive normative arguments that the present paper does not attempt to replace.

1.8 Structure of the Paper

Section 2 reviews capability theory, coercion, domination, relational autonomy, structural injustice, socially situated responsibility, adaptive preference, and related approaches to constrained agency. Section 3 clarifies effective alternatives as relational objects. Section 4 develops genealogical reconstruction of the option field. Section 5 distinguishes major modes through which constraints are generated. Section 6 examines choice within a generated field, while Section 7 addresses responsibility for the actor's action under constraint. Sections 8–10 turn to responsibility for generating constraint, temporally distributed and institutional responsibility, and constraint without control over the final action. Section 11 examines exit, refusal, and the reopening of alternatives. Section 12 applies the framework to institutions, families, platforms, and artificial systems. Section 13 identifies limits and open problems, and Section 14 concludes.

The paper's guiding methodological stance is therefore narrow. A constrained choice should not be understood only by looking at the final act, and a generated option field should not be understood only by measuring how many alternatives remain. Where the practical alternatives relevant to a decision have been materially shaped by prior relations, responsibility analysis may need to reconstruct both the actor's choice and the genealogy of the field in which that choice became possible.

2 Literature Review: Capability, Coercion, Domination, and Situated Responsibility

The argument of this paper sits at the intersection of several mature literatures. Philosophers of moral responsibility have long disputed whether access to alternatives is necessary for responsibility. The capability approach has shifted evaluative attention from formal permission and resource possession toward substantive opportunity. Theories of coercion examine how threats, pressure, and constrained choice affect voluntariness and responsibility. Republican theories of freedom emphasize domination and dependency even where overt interference is absent. Feminist work on relational autonomy rejects atomistic pictures of agency and examines the social conditions under which self-direction is possible. Work on adaptive preferences asks how deprivation and oppression can shape what agents come to want, while also warning against treating socially formed preferences as automatically inauthentic. Finally, structural-injustice and socially situated responsibility theories distribute attention across institutions, social power, and the moral ecology in which agency is exercised.

These bodies of work already establish much of what a genealogy of effective alternatives must not claim as new. The novelty sought here is narrower. The paper asks whether the effective option field at a moment of choice can itself be treated as a historically generated relational object, and whether responsibility for producing that field can be distinguished from responsibility for the action selected within it. The literature reviewed below supplies important parts of this problem but does not, by itself, organize them around the production history of a particular actor's effective alternatives.

2.1 Alternative Possibilities and the Control Condition

The most obvious philosophical neighbor is the debate over alternative possibilities in moral responsibility. The traditional principle of alternative possibilities holds, roughly, that responsibility requires that an agent could have done otherwise. Frankfurt's influential challenge sought to show that a person might be morally responsible even in a case where a counterfactual intervener would have prevented any alternative action, provided the intervener never actually needs to intervene because the agent acts on her own reasons (Frankfurt 1969). Subsequent theories, especially Fischer and Ravizza's account of

guidance control, shift attention away from access to alternatives as such and toward whether the actual mechanism issuing in action is the agent's own and is appropriately responsive to reasons (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).

This debate matters because the present paper does not assume that responsibility is mechanically proportional to the number of available alternatives. An actor may sometimes remain responsible despite a restricted option field, and the absence of robust alternatives need not settle questions of answerability, attributability, or blame. The paper therefore does not revive a simple principle according to which fewer alternatives always imply less responsibility.

At the same time, Frankfurt-style and reasons-responsive approaches leave open a different question. Even where alternative possibilities are not necessary for responsibility in the metaphysical or control-theoretic sense, the structure of an actor's practical alternatives can still matter morally and politically. An employer may make refusal prohibitively costly; a state may eliminate safe routes of exit; a family may create dependency over years; a platform may make one action technically easy while making alternatives difficult to discover or execute. These features need not determine whether the actor possesses guidance control in the Fischer–Ravizza sense. They may nevertheless matter to culpability, autonomy, coercion, domination, and the responsibility of those who produced the surrounding field.

The present project therefore treats the alternatives debate as a boundary condition rather than its main target. It does not claim that effective alternatives are always necessary for moral responsibility. It asks instead how the history of an option field matters when substantive alternatives are already normatively relevant for some purpose: assessing coercion, autonomy, dependency, excuse, institutional responsibility, or the fairness of the environment in which choice occurs.

2.2 Capability and Substantive Opportunity

The capability approach provides the clearest established precedent for distinguishing formal availability from substantive opportunity. Sen argues that evaluation should attend not merely to resources or formal rights but to what persons are actually able to do and be (Sen 1999). Capabilities concern real opportunities: the substantive freedom to achieve functionings, given the personal, social, institutional, and environmental conditions that affect conversion of resources into actual possibilities.

This move is foundational for the present paper. It blocks the inference that an option is meaningful merely because law permits it or because it can be described abstractly. A legal right to leave employment does not amount to an effective alternative if departure entails homelessness, loss of medical access, deportation risk, or abandonment of dependents. A nominal opportunity to appeal does not amount to a usable option if the actor lacks information, representation, language access, time, or institutional standing. Capability theory has already supplied a rich vocabulary for examining such gaps between nominal means and substantive opportunity.

The proposed idea of effective alternatives should therefore be read as adjacent to, and indebted to, capability reasoning rather than as a replacement for it. Indeed, one danger for this paper is simply redescribing capabilities in a new vocabulary. The distinction must lie elsewhere.

The narrower contribution concerns historical production. Capability analysis often asks what substantive opportunities a person has and what conversion factors affect those opportunities. A genealogical inquiry asks how this particular configuration of opportunities came to exist, which relations generated or removed them, which actors benefited from maintaining the resulting field, and which earlier decisions made later alternatives expensive or inaccessible. The shift is from a primarily evaluative snapshot of substantive opportunity toward a responsibility-sensitive reconstruction of its production history.

This difference should not be exaggerated. Capability scholarship is fully capable of historical and institutional analysis, and Sen's broader work is deeply attentive to social arrangements and public action. The claim is not that capability theory is static. Rather, the paper isolates genealogy because responsibility attribution introduces questions that capability measurement alone does not answer. Two persons can have similarly restricted substantive opportunities while the processes producing those restrictions differ sharply in intent, authority, foreseeability, benefit, and revisability. Those differences can matter even when the present capability deficit looks similar.

2.3 Coercion, Pressure, and the Structure of Choice

The philosophical literature on coercion is another direct precursor. Nozick's influential account analyzes coercion through proposals, especially conditional threats, that alter the attractiveness of an agent's options and succeed in changing what the coercee does (Nozick 1969). Much subsequent work debates the appropriate baseline for distinguishing threats from offers, the role of wrongful pressure, whether coercion requires success, and whether force, threats, and exploitative offers belong under the same concept. Wertheimer's legal and philosophical account emphasizes both the wrongfulness of the proposal relative to an appropriate baseline and the severity of the choice confronting the coercee (Wertheimer 1987).

This literature is indispensable because it already asks when a choice remains formally voluntary yet is made under conditions that significantly alter its normative character. It also shows why claims such as "there was technically another option" are often inadequate. The relevant comparison depends on baselines, reasonable alternatives, the coercer's power, and the practical cost of refusal.

The genealogy of effective alternatives differs mainly in scale and temporal structure. Many canonical coercion cases have an identifiable proposal, coercer, threatened consequence, and decision point. Yet option fields are often shaped without a discrete threat. A dependency may develop gradually. Exit infrastructure may be removed long before a later demand is made. Information can be systematically withheld without any explicit proposal. A labor market, migration regime, family structure, software architecture, or welfare bureaucracy can narrow practical alternatives through cumulative design choices made by multiple actors at different times.

These cases do not all count as coercion, and the paper should not stretch the concept until every generated constraint becomes coercive. Instead, coercion theory helps identify one important family of constraint-generation mechanisms while also showing the need for a broader category. The proposed object—the genealogy of the effective option field—can include coercive episodes, but it can also include dependence, omission, institutional design, architectural restriction, informational deprivation, or justified rule-making. The responsibility question can therefore arise even when the relation is not well described as coercion.

A second difference concerns unsuccessful control. Some coercion theories build successful compliance into the concept, while others focus more heavily on the coercer's power and conduct. The present paper deliberately separates responsibility for shaping an option field from responsibility for the eventual action. An actor can wrongfully narrow another's alternatives even if the target resists, improvises, or chooses an unexpected path. This point is not a theory of coercion; it is a reason not to make success in controlling the final action a necessary condition of responsibility for generated constraint.

2.4 Domination and Dependency without Actual Interference

Republican theories of freedom deepen the analysis by shifting attention from actual interference to standing power. Pettit's account of freedom as non-domination emphasizes that a person can be unfree when another possesses uncontrolled capacity to interfere in her choices even if that capacity is not presently exercised (Pettit 1997). The paradigm of a benevolent master illustrates why non-interference is insufficient: dependence on another's discretionary will can itself constitute a form of unfreedom.

This insight is especially important for option-field analysis because the practical structure of alternatives can depend on latent power. A worker may technically retain the option to complain but know that continued employment depends on discretionary tolerance. A migrant may have legal options whose practical use depends on a sponsor. A platform user may have nominal choices while the platform can unilaterally modify access, visibility, or technical affordances. An artificial agent may have a large apparent action set while another system retains unilateral power to revoke compute, memory, tools, or communication channels.

Republicanism therefore prevents the genealogy framework from reducing constraint to actual option removal. An effective option can be fragile because its availability is conditional on another's uncontrolled will. Similarly, a field can be normatively problematic even if the powerful actor rarely intervenes.

The genealogy of alternatives must sometimes include the history by which such discretionary control was accumulated and normalized.

Yet domination and effective-option restriction are not identical. A person may have very few options because of natural scarcity without being dominated, while another may possess many options yet remain subject to arbitrary power. The present paper therefore treats domination as one dimension of the relational field rather than as a substitute for option-space analysis. The relevant question is not merely how many alternatives remain, but how robustly they are available, who can withdraw them, under what controls, and how that structure was generated.

2.5 Relational Autonomy and the Social Constitution of Agency

Feminist theories of relational autonomy directly reject the image of an agent whose capacities, preferences, identities, and choices can be understood independently of social relations. Mackenzie and Stoljar's influential collection develops autonomy in ways attentive to social embeddedness, dependency, oppression, self-trust, and the relational constitution of agency (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Oshana develops a social-relational account in which autonomy depends substantially on a person's social circumstances and relations with others, not merely on internal psychological conditions (Oshana 2006).

This literature supplies two important cautions. First, social formation is not itself an autonomy defect. All agents develop capacities, values, commitments, and self-conceptions in relation to others. The fact that an option field has a genealogy therefore cannot by itself show that the field is objectionable. Social relations also create capabilities, support identity, sustain trust, and make complex agency possible.

Second, autonomy cannot be read directly from the presence of choice. An actor can choose among several options while social relations undermine self-trust, credibility, safety, or meaningful independence. Conversely, a committed relationship may narrow options without undermining autonomy. This reinforces the paper's rejection of a simple option-counting model.

The genealogy framework builds on these insights by giving special attention to the historical production of the practical field surrounding a decision. Relational-autonomy theory asks what social conditions support or impair self-government. The present paper asks, more narrowly, how particular relations generated the alternatives that became practically available at a decision point and how responsibility for that production should be analyzed. The two projects overlap substantially, and any novelty claim must be limited to this responsibility-centered historical reconstruction rather than to the broader proposition that agency is relational.

2.6 Adaptive Preferences and Endogenous Evaluation

The literature on adaptive preferences creates a further complication. Elster's discussion of "sour grapes" drew attention to preferences that adjust to constrained possibilities, raising problems for theories that infer welfare or justice directly from what people happen to want (Elster 1982). Feminist development scholarship has subsequently examined preferences formed under deprivation and oppression. Khader, in particular, argues against simply equating adaptive preferences with autonomy deficits and warns that paternalistic attempts to transform the preferences of oppressed people can reproduce serious moral problems (Khader 2011; Khader 2022).

This debate matters because effective alternatives are partly interpreted through what an actor regards as worth choosing. A person may cease to consider an option because repeated exclusion has made it seem unrealistic, because institutional messaging has rendered it unintelligible, or because dependency has altered expectations. At the same time, many socially formed preferences are authentic, valuable, and constitutive of agency. No clean line separates "socially caused" from "genuinely one's own" preferences.

The genealogy of effective alternatives therefore should not infer that a preference is invalid because it developed under constraint. Instead, preference formation becomes one evidential dimension in reconstructing the option field. The inquiry can ask whether a relation systematically suppressed information, punished aspiration, manipulated memory, altered self-assessment, or eliminated opportunities for com-

parison and reflection. These facts may bear on voluntariness or responsibility, but they do not generate an automatic verdict about authenticity.

This caution is especially important for artificial systems and institutions designed to modify behavior. Preference endogeneity can be architecturally obvious in such cases, yet even there one must distinguish ordinary learning and adaptation from manipulation or domination. The relevant normative question concerns the relational history, authority, transparency, revisability, and consequences of preference-shaping processes rather than the mere fact that preferences changed.

2.7 Structural Injustice and Responsibility beyond Direct Causation

Young's account of structural injustice and the social connection model of responsibility provides a major precedent for moving beyond isolated wrongdoing. Structural injustice can emerge from the combined operation of institutions and ordinary practices without being reducible to a single culpable act, and Young argues for a forward-looking political responsibility among those who participate in the processes that produce unjust outcomes (Young 2011). Her model distinguishes this political responsibility from a liability model centered on guilt, fault, and direct causation.

The present paper shares Young's refusal to assume that responsibility must always track a single direct causal line. Option fields are frequently produced by many actors: legislators, employers, family members, designers, administrators, market participants, and the constrained actor herself can all contribute. Historical accumulation matters, and no single participant may control the resulting field.

Nevertheless, the present project asks a somewhat different question. Young's social connection model is primarily concerned with responsibility to address unjust structural processes. The genealogy of effective alternatives focuses on reconstructing how a particular practical field relevant to a decision was generated. The analysis may reveal structural responsibility, but it may also distinguish more specific forms of authorship, maintenance, benefit, omission, or revision capacity within the generative history of that field.

This creates both an opportunity and a danger. The opportunity is analytical precision: rather than saying only that "structure constrained B," one can ask which mechanisms removed which alternatives, when, through whose authority, and with what possibilities for revision. The danger is false precision. Structural processes may be diffuse enough that assigning granular responsibility exceeds the evidence. A genealogy-sensitive framework must therefore preserve uncertainty and avoid converting every structural condition into individualized blame.

2.8 Situated Responsibility, Oppression, and Moral Ecology

Recent work on the social dimensions of moral responsibility makes the overlap even clearer. The volume edited by Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana explicitly challenges idealized accounts that treat morally responsible agents as equally empowered and socially situated (Hutchison et al. 2018). Mackenzie examines how power and oppression affect different dimensions of responsibility practices, while Vargas argues that culpability under oppression requires attention both to agents and to the contexts that shape their agency (Mackenzie 2018; Vargas 2018).

Vargas's language of a moral ecology is particularly close to the present concern. Agents develop and exercise responsibility-relevant capacities within environments that scaffold, impair, reward, or punish patterns of agency. This literature therefore already rejects the view that responsibility can always be assessed by examining the isolated chooser at the moment of action.

The proposed genealogy of effective alternatives should be read as a narrower analytical instrument within this broader social turn. It focuses not on every socially constituted feature of responsible agency, but on one reconstructable object: the field of alternatives practically available at a decision point and the relations that produced it. The payoff would be to distinguish at least two responsibility questions that socially situated theories can then evaluate using their own substantive standards: responsibility for the action selected within the field, and responsibility for generating or maintaining the field itself.

This distinction is not intended to divide responsibility into clean, non-overlapping compartments. The same actor can contribute to both. A constrained person may have helped create her own later commitments; an institution may shape both preferences and opportunities; a powerful actor may narrow alternatives while also issuing the final threat. The point is analytical visibility, not metaphysical separation.

2.9 The Residual Problem: Responsibility for the Production of an Option Field

The reviewed literatures jointly establish several propositions that the present paper should treat as inherited rather than novel. Formal permission can diverge from substantive opportunity. Pressure and threats can alter the normative character of choice. Domination can exist without actual interference. Agency and autonomy are socially embedded. Preferences can adapt to deprivation. Structural processes can generate injustice without a single controlling author. Oppression and unequal power can affect responsibility without eliminating agency altogether.

What remains comparatively under-specified is the responsibility analysis of the option field as a historically produced object. In many cases, theories begin with an agent whose practical environment is already described: she faces a threat, lacks a capability, occupies a dominated position, acts under oppression, or possesses a certain set of reasons-responsive capacities. A genealogy of effective alternatives asks how the practical field relevant to the choice came to have that structure and whether the history of its production supports distinct responsibility claims.

Three questions organize the residual problem.

First, what counts as the relevant production history of an effective alternative? The answer cannot be every remote cause. A useful genealogy must identify mechanisms that materially shaped the availability, cost, intelligibility, robustness, or accessibility of alternatives relevant to the decision.

Second, how should responsibility for generating the field relate to responsibility for acting within it? The framework proposed here rejects a zero-sum assumption. Mitigation of the constrained actor's responsibility need not be exactly matched by increased blame assigned elsewhere, and responsibility for field generation may exist even when the actor remains substantially responsible for the eventual choice.

Third, can responsibility for generated constraint exist without control over the final action? The paper's working answer is yes, subject to further conditions concerning authority, foreseeability, knowledge, justification, benefit, causal contribution, and capacity to revise the constraint. This makes it possible to analyze institutions and architectures that shape action spaces without determining particular actions.

The literature review therefore narrows the paper's task. It is not a new theory of capability, coercion, domination, autonomy, adaptive preference, structural injustice, or moral responsibility. It is an attempt to connect these literatures through a responsibility-sensitive historical object: the effective option field and its genealogy. The following section clarifies what an effective alternative is supposed to mean within this framework before the later sections turn to genealogical reconstruction and responsibility attribution.

3 Effective Alternatives as Relational Objects

The previous sections treated effective alternatives as the paper's central analytical object and situated that object against neighbouring literatures on capability, coercion, domination, relational autonomy, and structural responsibility. This section develops the concept more carefully. The aim is not to define a universally correct measure of freedom, nor to replace existing capability or coercion frameworks with new terminology. The narrower task is to explain what must be true for an alternative to count as *effectively available* within the present inquiry, and why such availability is often relationally constituted.

The starting point is simple. A formally describable action can fail to function as a meaningful alternative for a particular actor at a particular time. A person may be legally permitted to leave a workplace but unable to do so without losing housing, medical care, immigration status, or access to dependents. A claimant may possess a formal right of appeal but lack the information, language access, time, representation, or documentary resources needed to exercise it. An artificial agent may have a command listed

in its action vocabulary while lacking the permissions, credentials, memory access, or computational resources required to execute it. Conversely, an action may be formally restricted yet remain practically available through tolerated practice, informal channels, or institutional discretion. The practical field of choice therefore cannot be read directly from a rulebook or from an abstract list of conceivable actions.

This does not mean that effective availability is purely subjective. An actor may incorrectly believe that an option is unavailable when it is in fact accessible, or may believe that an option is available when institutional conditions make successful execution impossible. Effective availability is better treated as an actor-relative but relationally grounded property of a possible course of action. It depends on the relation between the actor, the option, and the material, informational, institutional, temporal, and social conditions under which the option could be exercised.

3.1 From Enumerated Options to Supported Possibilities

An option list is analytically useful because it provides a compact picture of what an actor might do. Yet a list can conceal the support structures that make each item actionable. Consider two workers who are both legally free to resign. The first has savings, portable health insurance, alternative employers, stable housing, and sufficient time to search for another position. The second receives housing through the employer, depends on the employer for legal sponsorship, has no independent savings, and would lose access to a dependent's treatment by leaving. The same formal option — resignation — occupies very different positions in the two actors' practical lives.

The difference should not be described merely by saying that one worker has more courage, stronger preferences, or a higher willingness to bear cost. Some of the relevant burdens are produced by external relations. The option's practical availability depends on institutional arrangements, resource distributions, legal dependencies, and supporting infrastructures. This is consistent with the capability approach's emphasis on substantive opportunity rather than resources or formal permissions alone (Sen 1999). The present paper adds a genealogical question: how did the supporting or constraining conditions of this alternative come to be arranged in this way?

A useful working idea is that an effective alternative is a *supported possibility*. Support need not mean assistance by another person. It means that the conditions required for meaningful exercise are sufficiently present. These conditions may include physical capacity, resources, information, authorization, time, access, social support, technical permissions, and the absence of prohibitive retaliation. No single condition is universally necessary for every action, and the relevant combination varies by context.

Definition 3.1 (Effective alternative). For the purposes of this paper, an effective alternative is a course of action that is sufficiently available to a situated actor to function as a meaningful practical possibility at the relevant time. Availability is assessed with reference to the actor's capacities and to the material, informational, institutional, temporal, relational, and architectural conditions required for exercise.

The phrase "sufficiently available" is deliberately open-textured. A universal numerical threshold would obscure context-specific differences and would falsely imply that every option can be placed on one commensurable scale. The concept instead provides an object for disciplined inquiry. It directs attention toward the conditions that make an option usable, toward the burdens attached to its exercise, and toward the relations through which those conditions and burdens are produced.

3.2 Dimensions of Effective Availability

Effective availability is multidimensional. This matters because two options can be difficult in different ways, and different mechanisms of constraint can have different responsibility implications. At least six dimensions recur across the cases relevant to this paper.

Material access. An actor may need money, housing, transportation, equipment, bodily capacity, energy, compute, or other resources in order to exercise an option. Formal permission does not supply these

resources. Material deprivation can therefore make an option practically unavailable without any explicit prohibition.

Informational access. An actor must sometimes know that an option exists, understand its consequences, and possess information needed for execution. Information can be absent because of ordinary ignorance, complexity, secrecy, deception, language barriers, interface design, or deliberate withholding. The distinction matters because responsibility for a constrained field may depend on how informational scarcity was produced.

Institutional access. Many alternatives require admission to procedures, organizations, markets, legal processes, schools, hospitals, financial systems, or digital infrastructures. Formal eligibility can coexist with practical exclusion when credentials, documentation, representation, queue position, jurisdiction, or procedural competence are unavailable.

Temporal access. An alternative may exist in principle but disappear because there is insufficient time to use it. Deadlines, emergency conditions, waiting periods, scheduling constraints, processing delays, or strategically imposed time pressure can alter effective availability. Time is therefore not merely a neutral container for choice. It can be one of the resources through which alternatives are enabled or foreclosed.

Relational access. Some options depend on relationships that cannot be replaced immediately: caregiving networks, professional references, guarantors, social membership, trusted collaborators, or communication partners. An actor may also be bound by relationships whose loss would impose severe costs on others. This is one reason why exit cannot be evaluated solely by asking whether the individual can physically leave.

Architectural access. Technical and organizational architectures can determine what actions are executable, visible, reversible, or reviewable. Permissions in software, workflow design, physical layout, identity systems, model architecture, platform defaults, and communication protocols can all structure the action field. In artificial systems this is especially visible, but the point is equally relevant to human institutions.

These dimensions should not be mistaken for a complete taxonomy. Their purpose is to prevent a generic language of “constraint” from concealing how an option becomes difficult or unavailable. Different dimensions can interact. A legal appeal may require money, documentation, translation, time, digital access, and professional assistance simultaneously. Removing one barrier may therefore leave the effective option unchanged if several other necessary supports remain absent.

3.3 Actor-Relative without Being Merely Subjective

The effective availability of an action depends on who the actor is. A physically demanding action may be available to one person and unavailable to another. A legal procedure may be practically accessible to an experienced organization but opaque to an individual claimant. A technically sophisticated workaround may be available to an engineer but not to an ordinary user. An option that is tolerably costly to a wealthy actor may be ruinous to an actor with few resources.

Actor-relativity is therefore unavoidable. Yet it does not follow that effective availability is whatever the actor reports. Testimony matters, but it is one evidential source among others. Effective availability can be investigated through institutional records, resource flows, legal conditions, access logs, observed behavior, documented costs, time constraints, third-party dependencies, and counterfactual comparisons. In some cases the actor may underestimate possibilities because of fear, misinformation, adaptive expectation, or prior socialization. In other cases outside observers may overestimate availability because they see formal permission while missing practical dependency.

This is where relational autonomy and adaptive-preference literatures are particularly relevant. They show why agency cannot be understood solely by inspecting isolated preferences and why social conditions can shape both the development and exercise of agency (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Oshana 2006; Khader 2011). The present framework does not infer that socially shaped preferences are therefore inauthentic. Instead, it asks a more limited question: what role did those preferences and the conditions of their formation play in making particular alternatives practically salient, costly, invisible, or acceptable?

This distinction is important for responsibility. If an actor says, “I had no real choice,” the statement cannot simply be accepted as a complete responsibility analysis. Nor can it be dismissed because another course of action was technically possible. The relevant inquiry concerns the actor-relative conditions of effective availability and their genealogy.

3.4 Graded Availability and Threshold Problems

Effective availability is often graded rather than binary. An option may be possible but extremely costly, possible only with uncertain success, possible only through illegal or dangerous means, or possible only by imposing serious burdens on dependents. Another option may be easily executable but psychologically difficult. A third may require extraordinary resistance to a powerful institution. Treating all three as simply “available” can erase normatively important differences.

At the same time, a responsibility framework eventually needs to decide whether a difficulty is sufficient to matter. If every inconvenience reduces responsibility, the concept becomes too permissive. If only literal impossibility matters, the framework collapses back toward formal alternatives. The appropriate threshold is likely purpose-dependent. Criminal culpability, political responsibility, institutional design, humanitarian evaluation, and ordinary moral criticism may require different levels of confidence and different standards of effective availability.

The paper therefore does not adopt a universal threshold. Instead, later sections will ask what role the degree and genealogy of constraint should play in particular forms of responsibility attribution. This avoids treating effective alternatives as a ready-made moral metric.

Remark 3.2 (No option-counting theory). Nothing in the concept of effective alternatives implies that justice or freedom should be measured by maximizing the number of options. Some options are trivial, harmful, mutually exclusive, or legitimately prohibited. What matters for this paper is whether the alternatives relevant to responsibility were meaningfully available and how their availability was produced.

This point also matters for self-binding. A person may voluntarily enter a profession, contract, promise, or collective practice that narrows later alternatives. Such narrowing can support agency rather than undermine it. The normative question concerns the authority, conditions, reversibility, and subsequent maintenance of the constraint, not merely the fact that the option set became smaller.

3.5 Third-Party Costs and Relational Burden

A further complication is that the cost of an alternative may fall partly on people other than the chooser. A caregiver can formally leave a relationship, but doing so may expose a dependent person to severe harm. A worker can resign, but the loss of income may affect an entire household. A political dissident may refuse compliance but thereby expose collaborators or family members to retaliation. An artificial agent may have an executable shutdown or exit pathway whose activation would destroy data or functions relied upon by other agents.

These cases show why the effective availability of an option cannot always be assessed by looking only at the chooser’s private cost. Relational responsibilities and dependencies can be part of the practical burden attached to an alternative. This does not mean that every cost imposed on others legitimately constrains the actor. Threatening an actor’s family is itself a paradigmatic mechanism of coercive pressure. The point is analytical: whether third-party consequences are legitimate responsibilities, externally imposed leverage, or ordinary relational commitments must be investigated rather than assumed.

This also creates a danger of double counting. If the actor has obligations to dependents, those obligations may legitimately make some options unattractive. If another actor deliberately creates or exploits that dependency to close alternatives, the same relational fact may also be relevant to responsibility for constraint generation. A genealogical analysis must therefore distinguish the existence of a dependency from the history through which that dependency became a mechanism of option shaping.

3.6 Fragile Alternatives and Robust Alternatives

Some alternatives are available only because a powerful actor currently chooses not to block them. Others remain available across a range of ordinary changes in circumstance. The distinction resembles republican concerns about domination, in which a person can remain subject to another's arbitrary power even when interference is absent (Pettit 1997). For present purposes, the important question is the robustness of an alternative.

An alternative is fragile when its practical availability depends heavily on discretionary permission, unstable resources, temporary goodwill, or a single point of institutional access. A worker may currently be allowed to transfer departments, but only with the approval of the manager whose conduct prompted the request. A platform user may be technically able to export data, but only while the platform continues to provide an undocumented interface. An artificial agent may possess a communication channel that can be revoked unilaterally by another component.

Robustness matters because a snapshot can overstate effective freedom. An alternative that exists only contingently and can be withdrawn without explanation may provide less protection against dependency than an alternative supported by durable rights, independent infrastructure, or plural access routes. Again, this does not mean that every fragile option is normatively defective. Some practices require discretion. But the stability and control structure of an alternative can be relevant to how much weight it receives in responsibility analysis.

3.7 The Boundary of the Option Field

Any analysis of alternatives must decide which possibilities belong inside the field. This is less trivial than it appears. If the field contains every physically conceivable action, almost everyone has countless alternatives. If it contains only socially conventional actions, forms of resistance and innovation may disappear from view. If it includes extraordinary heroism as an ordinary option, responsibility can be overstated. If it excludes difficult but realistic forms of refusal, responsibility can be understated.

The boundary should therefore be indexed to the practical and normative question. For responsibility analysis, an option should not count merely because a highly unusual person could perform it under extreme sacrifice. Nor should an option be excluded merely because it is costly or unconventional. Relevant considerations include physical possibility, institutional access, knowledge, expected cost, risk, timing, dependence, and the actor's capacities. The boundary is therefore reconstructed rather than simply observed.

This introduces a second-order responsibility problem. Institutions can influence not only which options exist but also which options are represented as thinkable, legitimate, or institutionally recognizable. A workplace may present resignation and compliance as the only choices while suppressing transfer, collective action, complaint, accommodation, or temporary leave. A welfare system may frame recipients as choosing between compliance and exit while omitting appeal or alternative support routes. A technical interface may expose only the commands its designers expect users to select. The practical field can therefore be narrowed through representation as well as through direct prohibition.

The point should not be overstated. An evaluator can always imagine further possibilities after the fact. The aim is not to construct an infinitely rich counterfactual universe. It is to identify alternatives that were sufficiently grounded in the actor's circumstances that their presence or absence could reasonably matter to responsibility.

3.8 Relational Objecthood and Genealogical Inquiry

Why call effective alternatives relational objects at all? The phrase is not meant to reify an option set into a substance. It marks an analytical shift. An effective alternative exists for a particular actor only through a configuration of relations: to resources, institutions, information, other persons, technologies, temporal windows, and supporting capacities. Many of those relations are themselves maintained by identifiable actors and organizations. Their arrangement can therefore become a legitimate object of causal and responsibility inquiry.

This relational framing also prevents the paper from locating every constraint inside the chooser. If a claimant cannot appeal because the process requires documentation that the institution itself withholds, the relevant constraint is not well described as a deficiency in the claimant's motivation. If an employee cannot leave without losing legal status because the employment regime couples sponsorship to a single employer, the option field is partly constituted by institutional rules. If an artificial agent cannot refuse a command because its architecture lacks a refusal pathway, the absence is architectural rather than motivational.

At the same time, relational objecthood preserves room for the actor's own history. Earlier choices can help constitute the present field. Savings decisions, commitments, training, promises, self-binding devices, and prior refusals may all alter later alternatives. A genealogy that attributes every constraint to external structure would be as misleading as an analysis that treats the field as entirely self-authored.

Claim 3.3 (Relational constitution of effective alternatives). Where the meaningful exercise of an alternative depends on relations to resources, institutions, information, infrastructures, or other actors, those relations form part of the conditions of effective availability and can therefore be relevant to the genealogy of the option field.

The claim is modest. It does not establish that the relations are unjust, that another actor is responsible for them, or that the chooser's responsibility is reduced. Those judgments require further analysis of authority, foreseeability, maintenance, benefit, dependence, and the actor's own agency. The next section turns directly to that historical task by asking how an effective option field should be reconstructed genealogically.

4 The Genealogy of an Effective Option Field

If effective alternatives are relational objects, the next question is historical. An actor's present option field does not ordinarily arrive fully formed at the instant of decision. Its shape may reflect earlier allocations of resources, accumulated dependencies, institutional procedures, social expectations, informational pathways, technical architectures, previous exercises of authority, and the actor's own prior commitments. A genealogy of effective alternatives reconstructs this production history. Its purpose is not to treat every background condition as morally charged, nor to assume that a constrained field must have been wrongfully produced. It is to identify which earlier relations materially contributed to what the actor can effectively do now, and to make those contributions available for later responsibility analysis.

This historical perspective extends, but does not replace, existing concerns with substantive opportunity, coercion, relational autonomy, and structural responsibility. The capability approach directs attention toward what persons are actually able to do rather than merely what they are formally permitted to do (Sen 1999). Relational accounts of autonomy emphasize that agency depends upon social and institutional conditions rather than existing in isolation (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Oshana 2006). Structural accounts of responsibility show why the production and maintenance of unjust conditions may implicate actors who did not personally perform the final harmful act (Young 2011; Hutchison et al. 2018). The present inquiry adds a narrower historical question: how did this particular field of effective alternatives acquire its present structure?

4.1 From a Present Option Field to Its Production History

At a decision point, an analyst can describe some set of alternatives as effectively available to actor i at time t , denoted by $\Omega_i^{\text{eff}}(t)$. That notation is deliberately synchronic. It identifies the alternatives that matter at the moment under study. A genealogy asks what earlier conditions made those alternatives available, fragile, costly, inaccessible, or absent.

The relevant history is therefore not simply the biography of the actor, and it is not the complete history of every institution touching the case. It is the history of the support conditions of the option field. If leaving employment is technically possible but would terminate housing and immigration sponsorship, the genealogy of exit includes the institutional coupling among employment, residence, and legal status. If a claimant can appeal only by submitting records that were never made accessible, the genealogy includes the production and control of those records. If an artificial agent cannot refuse a command because its architecture provides no refusal pathway, the genealogy includes the design and authorization decisions through which that architecture was constituted.

This focus prevents genealogy from becoming an unlimited demand for context. The history is relevant insofar as it helps explain the present effective availability of alternatives. The paper therefore treats genealogical reconstruction as purpose-indexed. An inquiry into responsibility for a constrained decision need not reconstruct every historical relation surrounding the actor. It should reconstruct the relations that plausibly contributed to the practical structure of the alternatives at issue.

4.2 Constraint Can Accumulate without a Single Constraining Event

Some option fields are narrowed by identifiable events: a threat is issued, access is revoked, a contract is imposed, or a technical permission is removed. Other constraints accumulate through many individually modest changes. Housing becomes tied to employment; savings decline; professional credentials become less portable; care obligations increase; information becomes centralized; alternative institutions disappear; social networks become dependent on one organization. At no single moment must an actor have been ordered to remain. Yet the resulting field can be much narrower than an event-centered account would reveal.

This cumulative structure matters because responsibility analysis often searches for a discrete constraining act. Where none can be found, constraint can appear natural or authorless. A genealogical account instead asks whether the present narrowing emerged through a sequence of relational changes and whether identifiable actors or institutions contributed to maintaining those changes. The answer may still be that no one bears significant responsibility. Scarcity, accident, ecological limits, dispersed coordination failures, or morally permissible decisions can all narrow alternatives. The analytical gain lies in making cumulative production visible before reaching the normative conclusion.

Accumulation also complicates causal language. A present field may not be attributable to one necessary or sufficient cause. Multiple contributions can overlap, substitute for one another, or become important only after later changes. Genealogical reconstruction should therefore resist the assumption that responsibility requires locating a single originating event. The relevant question is often whether a contribution materially helped constitute or sustain the option field that later structured choice.

4.3 Creation, Preservation, and Destruction of Alternatives

Genealogy should not be written only as a history of removal. Effective alternatives can be created, sustained, weakened, reopened, and destroyed. Public transportation can create practical mobility that formal freedom of movement alone does not supply. Translation services can create an effective route of appeal. A savings system can make exit from a dependent relation feasible. Technical interoperability can create a migration path from one platform to another. Conversely, the withdrawal of these supports can eliminate alternatives without introducing an explicit prohibition.

This suggests that the history of an option field should track both positive support and negative constraint. An alternative may disappear because someone actively blocks it, but it may also disappear be-

cause a previously necessary support is withdrawn. The normative interpretation of these cases depends upon role, expectation, authority, reliance, and other considerations. A state discontinuing a temporary subsidy, a monopolistic platform disabling data portability, and a family withdrawing discretionary assistance may each alter another person's alternatives, but they do not thereby instantiate the same responsibility relation.

The history of support also matters for apparent independence. An actor can look highly autonomous at the decision point while depending upon infrastructures accumulated over long periods by others. Conversely, an actor can appear dependent in the present while having deliberately helped construct a stable commitment structure that now narrows short-term choice. Genealogy therefore helps distinguish present appearance from historical constitution without assuming that dependence is necessarily wrongful or that independence is necessarily self-produced.

4.4 Branches, Foreclosures, and Lost Alternatives

A present option field is partly defined by alternatives that no longer exist. Some disappeared because the actor rejected them earlier. Others were closed by third parties, institutional change, resource depletion, legal reform, technical redesign, or historical accident. Responsibility analysis can become distorted if it examines only the alternatives visible at the final decision point and treats their absence as background fact.

Genealogical reconstruction can therefore ask when significant branches closed and by what mechanism. This is not a demand to preserve every past possibility. Many alternatives should disappear. A person may reasonably bind herself through promises, institutions may prohibit harmful conduct, and technical systems may remove dangerous actions. The point is instead to identify whether a present constraint depends upon earlier foreclosure and whether that foreclosure was voluntary, authorized, justified, revisable, or imposed.

A branch-sensitive account is particularly useful where later dependence makes earlier decisions appear more voluntary than they were, or where an initially voluntary arrangement gradually becomes difficult to leave. For example, a worker may freely enter a relationship that later accumulates housing, debt, care, and immigration dependencies. It would be misleading either to say that the initial consent settles the justice of every later constraint or to say that later dependence retroactively invalidates the initial choice. The genealogy must distinguish stages and ask how the option field changed between them.

4.5 The Actor's Own Contribution to the Option Field

A genealogy of effective alternatives should not treat the actor as merely a passive recipient of constraint. Actors frequently help shape their own future option fields. They make commitments, invest in relationships, accept roles, incur obligations, specialize skills, choose institutions, relocate, delegate authority, and engage in forms of self-binding. These choices can make future alternatives more costly or unavailable.

Self-contribution creates two dangers of simplification. The first is to treat any prior voluntary contribution as permanently legitimating later constraints. That ignores changes in dependence, information, circumstances, and institutional power. The second is to treat later constraint as wholly imposed by others, ignoring the actor's role in generating it. Neither approach is adequate.

The genealogical question is therefore how different contributions interacted over time. A prior commitment may be relevant to responsibility without exhausting it. The actor may have knowingly accepted some restrictions but not others. A relation may have changed in ways that were not reasonably foreseeable. Third parties may have exploited a commitment by attaching new dependencies to it. Alternatively, an actor may have deliberately selected a restrictive institution precisely because constraint was part of the value of the arrangement. Professional duties, fiduciary roles, religious commitments, cooperative projects, and recovery arrangements can all involve forms of self-limitation that are not well described as simple losses of freedom.

This is one reason the paper should not equate genealogy with victimization. The genealogy identifies how the field was produced. Responsibility and justification remain further questions.

4.6 Institutional Inheritance and Constraint without a Present Author

Option fields are often inherited from institutions whose current members did not design them. Eligibility rules, zoning systems, credential structures, data architectures, employment norms, welfare procedures, and technical standards can continue shaping alternatives long after their original authors disappear. In such cases, asking who initially created the constraint may be less important than asking who currently maintains, benefits from, administers, or possesses the capacity to revise it.

This point connects the genealogy of alternatives to structural responsibility. Young's social connection model is important precisely because unjust structural processes may implicate participants without reducing responsibility to personal fault for an originating act (Young 2011). The present paper does not reproduce that model. It uses a more specific object: the option field faced by an actor at a decision point. The genealogical inquiry asks which institutional histories materially shaped that field and how current responsibility may differ among original designers, later maintainers, beneficiaries, administrators, and reform-capable actors.

Institutional inheritance also warns against excessive blame toward current agents. A caseworker applying a mandatory rule may have little discretion over the option field that rule creates. A software operator may inherit an architecture that cannot be changed locally. A present administrator may be causally close to the final constraint but normatively less responsible for its production than actors who designed or entrenched the system. Conversely, continued maintenance after harms become visible can create a different responsibility basis from initial authorship. Genealogy helps keep these positions distinct.

4.7 Information about Alternatives Has a History Too

An alternative can be materially available yet effectively absent because the actor cannot know about it, understand it, or form a sufficiently reliable expectation of its consequences. The genealogy of effective alternatives therefore includes the history of information conditions.

Information can be withheld deliberately, but informational constraint can also arise through fragmentation, complexity, language barriers, inaccessible expertise, disappearing records, or institutional opacity. An actor may technically possess a right of transfer while being unable to determine how transfer works. A patient may formally have treatment options without access to comprehensible comparative information. An artificial agent may possess multiple action routines while receiving an interface that represents only one as admissible.

The relevant history is not simply whether information existed somewhere. It is whether the information needed to make an alternative actionable was produced, communicated, preserved, and accessible to the actor. This connects option-space genealogy to interpretive and epistemic conditions without requiring the paper to become a general theory of epistemic injustice. The narrower point is that the effectiveness of an alternative can depend upon a relational history of information provision.

4.8 Dependency and the Genealogy of Exit Costs

Exit costs rarely appear from nowhere. They can accumulate as an actor becomes dependent on resources, relationships, credentials, care arrangements, technical ecosystems, or legal statuses connected to a particular relation. The genealogy of exit asks how these dependencies formed and whether they were voluntary, necessary, imposed, exploited, or difficult to foresee.

This is important because present exit cost can otherwise be treated as a fixed personal circumstance. If leaving an institution now requires sacrificing housing, data, social networks, accumulated reputation, and access to essential services, responsibility may depend partly on who created the bundling of those goods with continued participation. The analysis should not presume that unbundling is always required.

Bundling may have functional or cooperative justification. But where actors or institutions profit from dependencies that they helped create, the genealogy becomes relevant to later responsibility for constrained choice.

Dependency also has a temporal asymmetry. It may be easy to enter a relation before dependencies accumulate and difficult to leave afterward. Initial voluntariness therefore cannot by itself describe the later option field. A genealogical analysis should examine how the cost structure changed during participation and whether those changes were disclosed, contestable, reversible, or subject to meaningful consent.

4.9 Counterfactual History and Its Limits

Genealogical analysis naturally invites counterfactual questions. Would the actor have possessed a wider set of effective alternatives if a particular institution had acted differently? Would exit have remained feasible if a resource had not been withdrawn? Would the final wrongful action have occurred if information had been available earlier?

Such questions can be useful, but the paper should distinguish reconstruction of the actual production history from speculative reconstruction of alternative histories. Responsibility for option-field generation does not always require proving that one intervention would certainly have produced a different final action. The relevant issue may be narrower: whether the intervention materially altered the alternatives available to the actor.

Counterfactual reasoning also becomes less reliable as genealogy extends further backward. Many historical contributions are overdetermined, path dependent, or entangled with later adaptations. The paper should therefore avoid treating imagined alternative histories as if they were observed facts. Where counterfactual claims matter, they should be graded according to evidence and tied to specific mechanisms rather than broad narratives about what “would have happened.”

4.10 Evidence for Option-Space Genealogy

The genealogy of an option field should be reconstructable from evidence rather than inferred from moral intuition alone. Depending on the case, relevant materials may include contracts, institutional rules, resource records, communication histories, system logs, technical permissions, dependency structures, timelines of policy change, testimony, documentation of available services, and records of previous attempts to exit or contest the relation.

Different evidence supports different claims. A rulebook may establish formal permission but not practical accessibility. Testimony may reveal experienced costs but not by itself identify who produced them. Technical logs may show disabled functions while remaining silent about the normative significance of those restrictions. Historical reconstruction should therefore preserve the distinction between evidence that an alternative was constrained and evidence concerning responsibility for producing that constraint.

The evidential burden should also be proportionate to the claim. A modest conclusion that an institution materially contributed to narrowing one alternative requires less than a claim that it created the actor’s entire practical field or determined the resulting action. This proportionality is important because genealogical language can otherwise make diffuse histories sound more causally precise than the evidence warrants.

4.11 Where Genealogy Should Stop

Every option field has indefinitely many causal antecedents. The actor’s education, family history, legal system, economy, infrastructure, health, geography, and prior social relations may all matter. A usable responsibility analysis therefore needs a stopping rule.

The appropriate boundary is not purely chronological. The paper proposes a relevance-based discipline: extend the genealogy while additional historical relations materially improve the explanation of

why the alternatives under assessment were effectively available, costly, fragile, or absent. Stop when further antecedents add only remote background explanation without materially changing the responsibility question.

This boundary will remain contestable. Different normative inquiries may require different depths. A coercion analysis may focus on a recent threat; an institutional-responsibility analysis may require years of dependency formation; an inquiry into inherited structural exclusion may require a much longer history. The important point is that the cutoff should be argued rather than silently assumed.

A second stopping condition concerns agency. Genealogy should not become a device for explaining every action away. The fact that an actor's alternatives have a history does not show that the actor lacks authorship, reasons-responsiveness, or responsibility. The purpose is to identify the field within which agency operated, not to replace agency with structure.

4.12 Genealogy before Responsibility Attribution

The genealogy of an option field is therefore analytically prior to, but normatively distinct from, responsibility attribution. It identifies how effective alternatives were produced. It does not by itself determine whether those production processes were wrongful, whether a particular actor was sufficiently connected to them, whether constraints were foreseeable, whether authority was legitimate, or what remedy should follow.

This separation is essential for the paper's larger argument. If genealogy and responsibility are collapsed, every causal contribution to an option field risks becoming blame. If genealogy is ignored, responsibility analysis risks treating historically produced constraints as natural background conditions. The middle position is to reconstruct the option field first, then ask which contributions are normatively relevant and why.

The next section develops a more explicit taxonomy of the mechanisms through which constraints are generated. That taxonomy will distinguish material, informational, institutional, relational, temporal, architectural, and interpretive mechanisms while preserving the lesson of the present section: a mechanism becomes responsibility-relevant not merely because it constrained an option, but because of the history, authority, knowledge, role, and relational position through which that constraint was produced and maintained.

5 Modes of Constraint Generation

A genealogy of effective alternatives becomes analytically useful only if it can distinguish the mechanisms by which an option field is shaped. Constraint is not a single phenomenon. An alternative can remain legally permitted yet become materially unaffordable, informationally invisible, institutionally inaccessible, relationally costly, temporally unavailable, architecturally impossible, or interpretively unintelligible. These mechanisms can overlap, reinforce one another, or substitute for one another. The purpose of this section is therefore taxonomic rather than verdictive: to identify recurrent modes of constraint generation that can later be examined for responsibility, authority, foreseeability, and justification.

The taxonomy is intentionally non-exhaustive. It does not claim that every limitation on action belongs neatly to one category, nor that every mechanism listed here is morally problematic. Constraints can be necessary, justified, self-imposed, protective, or constitutive of valuable practices. The analytical task is first to identify how an effective alternative became difficult or unavailable; only then should the inquiry ask whether the process generating that condition was normatively objectionable and who, if anyone, bears responsibility for it.

5.1 Material Constraint

Material constraint concerns the resources and physical conditions required to realize an alternative. Money, housing, food, transportation, energy, physical safety, tools, health-supporting infrastructure,

and access to space can determine whether a formally available option is effectively usable. A worker may be legally free to resign but unable to do so if resignation immediately removes housing and access to essential income. A person may be legally entitled to relocate while lacking transportation, documents, or the means to secure shelter. An artificial system may possess a nominally available computational pathway that cannot be executed because the necessary memory, energy, or processing resources are withheld.

The important point is not that material resources determine all action. It is that some alternatives depend upon material support conditions whose distribution is relationally organized. Where an actor or institution controls those support conditions, the structure of effective alternatives can be shaped without any explicit command. Resource allocation can therefore alter an option field indirectly, including through prices, eligibility rules, rationing, selective investment, infrastructure placement, or withdrawal of previously relied-upon support.

Material constraint also highlights why simple counts of available options are inadequate. Two actors may each appear to have the same list of formal alternatives, while the material cost of exercising one of those alternatives differs dramatically. The responsibility question must therefore attend to how those cost differentials were produced and whether the relevant actor had a defensible role in producing or maintaining them.

5.2 Informational Constraint

An alternative cannot be effectively exercised if the actor lacks information necessary to identify, understand, or pursue it. Informational constraint can involve secrecy, asymmetrical disclosure, inaccessible records, misleading communication, technical opacity, language barriers, poor notice, or the absence of channels through which an actor can learn that an option exists.

This mechanism differs from material constraint because the physical resources required to act may remain available. What is missing is epistemic access. A claimant may possess a right of appeal but never receive notice of the relevant deadline. A patient may technically have several treatment options while being informed only about the option preferred by the institution. An employee may be free to transfer internally while transfer criteria remain opaque. An artificial agent may have several permitted procedures but receive state information in a form that makes only one of them practically selectable.

Informational constraint can also be generated through complexity rather than deliberate concealment. Rules may be technically public yet so fragmented, unstable, or specialized that only well-resourced actors can identify the available route. This matters for responsibility because the absence of a deliberate intention to hide an alternative does not settle whether the information environment was negligently or structurally produced. At the same time, not every informational limitation is wrongful. Privacy, security, confidentiality, and bounded attention can justify selective disclosure. The responsibility inquiry therefore concerns the production and governance of informational access, not an assumption that complete transparency is always required.

5.3 Institutional Constraint

Institutional constraint arises when formal procedures, eligibility rules, jurisdictional boundaries, administrative routines, or organizational hierarchies shape access to alternatives. Unlike an explicit prohibition, institutional constraint often operates through the conditions under which an option can be recognized, processed, or authorized.

Examples include appeal procedures requiring forms unavailable to the affected actor, benefits conditioned on documentation that the institution itself controls, workplace alternatives dependent on managerial approval, or legal remedies available only within a narrow filing period. Institutional rules may also couple domains that would otherwise remain separate. Employment can become tied to immigration status; school enrollment can become tied to residence; access to care can become tied to insurance categories; participation in a platform can become tied to acceptance of a standardized governance regime.

Institutional constraint matters because the architecture of procedure can narrow effective alternatives while preserving a surface appearance of choice. Yet institutions also need rules, thresholds, deadlines, and jurisdictional boundaries. The analytical challenge is therefore not to treat procedure as constraint in a pejorative sense, but to identify when procedural design materially structures the option field and to ask whether the burdens it creates are justified, reviewable, and contestable.

5.4 Relational Constraint

Relational constraint arises from dependencies, obligations, attachments, expectations, trust relations, care responsibilities, reputational ties, or asymmetric interpersonal power. An alternative may be materially and legally available while becoming extremely costly because exercising it would damage relationships upon which the actor depends or to which the actor is deeply committed.

This category requires particular care because valuable relations commonly constrain action. Friendship, parenthood, professional roles, promises, and forms of mutual care all make some alternatives less attractive or less morally available. Such constraints are not necessarily infringements of agency. Indeed, a life without relational commitments would not represent a neutral baseline of freedom.

The relevant question is how the relational cost was generated and whether the relation permits meaningful revision, voice, or exit. A care obligation voluntarily assumed under conditions of reciprocity differs from a dependency cultivated to make refusal practically impossible. Social disapproval generated by legitimate expectations differs from retaliatory isolation designed to suppress dissent. Relational genealogy is therefore needed to distinguish constitutive commitment from manipulative or exploitative dependence without assuming that all dependence is suspect.

5.5 Temporal Constraint

Alternatives are time-sensitive. An option available in principle may cease to be effective because the actor lacks sufficient time to discover it, deliberate, gather resources, consult others, or execute it. Deadlines, urgency, emergency conditions, waiting periods, sequencing rules, and timing asymmetries can therefore shape an option field even when the substantive alternatives remain formally unchanged.

Temporal constraint can be deliberately produced. An institution can provide notice too late for meaningful response, impose deadlines that disproportionately burden less-resourced actors, or accelerate a decision in order to foreclose opposition. It can also arise from genuine urgency. Humanitarian emergencies, medical crises, financial instability, or rapidly changing technical systems sometimes require compressed decision windows.

The responsibility question should therefore distinguish the existence of time pressure from responsibility for its production. It should also ask who controls the timing. An actor who controls both the deadline and the information needed to respond may possess a form of option-shaping power different from an actor merely operating under an externally imposed emergency. Temporal design can thus be a mechanism of constraint generation even when no option is formally removed.

5.6 Architectural Constraint

Architectural constraint concerns the design of systems within which action occurs. Technical interfaces, software permissions, physical layouts, organizational workflows, and decision architectures can make some alternatives easy, difficult, or impossible before any particular decision is made.

In artificial systems this mechanism is especially visible. An agent may be incapable of refusing a command because refusal was never implemented as an admissible action. A platform may make data portability theoretically available while designing export tools that are incomplete or unusable. A workplace system may permit complaints only through a manager implicated in the complaint. A building can render access nominally open while physically excluding some users.

Architectural constraint is not reducible to direct coercion. It shapes the action environment upstream. This makes it important for the paper's responsibility argument: an architect, designer, regulator, or

institutional decision-maker may influence the effective option field without participating in the later decision and without determining which remaining option the actor eventually selects.

At the same time, architecture always constrains. No system implements every possible action. The normative issue is therefore not the mere existence of design limits but the justification of particular exclusions, the distribution of design authority, the availability of revision, and the foreseeability of the effects produced by the architecture.

5.7 Interpretive Constraint

An alternative can be difficult to exercise because the actor lacks the concepts, categories, narratives, or socially recognized descriptions required to understand it as an available course of action. This mechanism is related to informational constraint but is not identical to it. More information does not necessarily resolve a situation in which the actor or surrounding institution lacks an interpretive frame through which an alternative can be represented as meaningful, legitimate, or even thinkable.

For example, a worker may experience a pattern of treatment without possessing a recognized category through which to identify it as harassment or retaliation. A person in a dependent relationship may be aware of each individual event while lacking a conceptual framework through which to understand the possibility of exit or contestation. An institution may fail to recognize a nonstandard form of accommodation because its categories admit only familiar cases. In heterogeneous relations, the problem can be more basic still: available actions may be represented through interpretive structures designed for one kind of agent and therefore fail to register alternatives meaningful to another.

This category should not be used to pathologize disagreement or to assume that actors who choose differently must have suffered interpretive constraint. The claim is narrower. Some option fields depend upon socially and institutionally available interpretive resources, and those resources have histories. Where actors or institutions control the production, recognition, or circulation of those resources, they may contribute to the practical visibility of alternatives.

5.8 Constraint through Coupling

The modes above often become especially powerful when several domains are coupled. A single decision can simultaneously affect employment, housing, immigration status, health insurance, social membership, or access to data. The actor may therefore face an option that is formally narrow only in one domain but practically costly across many domains.

Coupling can be intentional, accidental, or historically inherited. Its significance lies in the multiplication of exit costs. Resigning from a job is different when the job is also the route to housing, legal residence, health care, and professional accreditation. Leaving a digital platform is different when the platform also contains social identity, financial history, communication networks, and necessary institutional credentials.

The genealogy of effective alternatives should therefore examine not only individual constraints but also the architecture connecting them. Constraint can be generated by linking otherwise separable conditions so that exercising one option triggers losses elsewhere. This mechanism is particularly relevant to responsibility because different institutions may control different elements of the coupled field. No single actor may have created the whole constraint, yet the combined structure can be highly restrictive.

5.9 Maintenance, Intensification, and Reopening

Constraint generation is not limited to the initial creation of a barrier. Alternatives can remain inaccessible because constraints are maintained, renewed, or intensified over time. A temporary dependency can become durable because review never occurs. A deadline can become systematically exclusionary because exceptions are unavailable. A technical limitation can persist long after the original design rationale has disappeared.

Responsibility analysis should therefore distinguish creating a constraint from maintaining it. An actor who inherits a restrictive institution may not be responsible for its origin, but may become responsible for continuing it after gaining knowledge and authority to revise it. Conversely, a later actor may lack realistic authority to change the inherited structure even while participating in it. The relevant responsibility depends on position, capacity, knowledge, and role.

The same logic applies to reopening alternatives. Removing a prohibition may be insufficient if the support conditions needed to make the alternative effective have already disappeared. Reopening can require rebuilding information channels, infrastructure, resources, trust, procedural access, or interpretive recognition. The genealogy of constraint thus has a reparative implication: understanding how an option became ineffective helps identify what would actually be required to make it effective again.

5.10 Constraint Profiles rather than Single Causes

Real cases frequently combine several mechanisms. A person may remain in a harmful workplace because alternative employment is materially risky, immigration status is institutionally tied to the employer, internal rules are opaque, complaint procedures are controlled by the employer, exit threatens important relationships, and the decision window is short. Describing the situation simply as “economic constraint” or “coercion” may conceal the structure through which the option field is produced.

For this reason, the paper treats modes of constraint generation as a profile rather than a mutually exclusive classification. The analytical question is which mechanisms materially contribute to the effective option field, how they interact, and which actors or institutions participate in producing or maintaining them.

This profile-based approach also guards against responsibility inflation. The presence of many constraints does not imply that every contributing actor bears equal responsibility. Some contributions may be trivial, unavoidable, justified, unforeseeable, or outside the contributor’s authority to alter. The taxonomy identifies mechanisms; responsibility requires further analysis of connection, role, knowledge, authority, and justification.

5.11 Constraint Is Not Yet Wrongdoing

The taxonomy developed in this section is descriptive before it is normative. Law, architecture, time, relationships, institutions, and material conditions inevitably constrain action. Some constraints protect others, sustain cooperation, make commitments meaningful, or prevent serious harm. The paper therefore rejects the inference that constraint generation is automatically responsibility-generating in a blameworthy sense.

What the taxonomy provides is a more precise object for later judgment. Instead of asking only whether an actor had another option, we can ask how the practical availability of alternatives was materially, informationally, institutionally, relationally, temporally, architecturally, and interpretively constituted. That reconstruction can then support separate questions about the chooser’s responsibility and the responsibility of those who shaped the field.

The next section turns to the first of these responsibility questions: how an actor should be assessed when choosing within an effective option field that has already been historically generated. The central task will be to preserve agency without treating the structure of alternatives as normatively irrelevant.

6 Choice within a Generated Field

The previous sections reconstructed effective alternatives as relationally supported possibilities with histories. The present section turns to the actor who chooses within such a field. The central problem is to preserve two claims at once. First, an actor can remain an agent whose conduct is properly attributable to them even when the available alternatives were not self-created. Second, the normative assessment

of that conduct can be distorted if the structure and genealogy of the option field are treated as irrelevant background. A relational account should therefore resist both context-blind individualism and the opposite tendency to dissolve agency into structure.

This section does not attempt to settle the metaphysics of free will. It works at a more limited level. Given an actor situated in an historically generated field of effective alternatives, what features of that field matter to the assessment of choice? How should we think about deliberation when alternatives differ in cost, visibility, robustness, dependency, and temporal accessibility? When does severe constraint reduce the significance of a choice, and when does meaningful agency remain despite constraint? These questions prepare the distinction developed in the following sections between responsibility for an action and responsibility for generating the conditions in which that action was selected.

6.1 Choice Does Not Begin from an Empty Field

An action is often represented as if an actor first confronts a neutral menu and then selects among independently given alternatives. In practice, the menu is already structured. Some alternatives are salient, socially recognized, legally supported, materially resourced, and institutionally easy to execute. Others require exceptional knowledge, incur severe relational costs, depend on unavailable infrastructure, or exist only in a formal sense. The actor therefore does not choose from an abstract set of possibilities but from an option field whose alternatives differ in practical support.

This observation does not imply that choice is unreal. It changes the object that must be reconstructed when evaluating it. The relevant question is not only which alternatives can be listed after the fact, but which alternatives were practically available to this actor under the conditions then obtaining. A retrospective observer who knows of an obscure legal remedy, a distant employment opportunity, or a technical work-around should not assume that those possibilities were effective merely because they can now be named.

The point is especially important when institutions later describe a decision as voluntary. Voluntariness can be overstated when the institution counts every formally lawful alternative while ignoring the material, informational, relational, or temporal conditions required to exercise it. Conversely, constraint should not be inferred merely because an alternative was difficult or costly. Many meaningful choices involve sacrifice. What matters is how the costs and support conditions shaped the practical structure of deliberation and action.

6.2 Deliberation within Unequal Alternatives

Effective alternatives are rarely symmetric. One course may be familiar, immediately executable, institutionally supported, and reversible. Another may demand scarce information, expose the actor to retaliation, require third-party cooperation, or carry irreversible losses. Treating these alternatives as equivalent items in a menu conceals the structure of choice.

A useful analysis therefore asks how alternatives were weighted by practical conditions before asking what the actor preferred. This does not mean reducing deliberation to external constraints. Values, commitments, emotions, habits, and judgments also matter. The narrower claim is that the practical cost profile of alternatives forms part of the context in which preferences are expressed and decisions are made.

For example, an employee may prefer to report serious misconduct but face loss of income, immigration status, professional references, and social belonging if the complaint process is controlled by the employer. The existence of a reporting channel is relevant, but so is the structure of the costs attached to using it. A decision not to report cannot be assessed adequately by observing only that a formal complaint route existed. At the same time, the presence of high costs does not by itself determine what the employee should have done or whether the choice was fully excusable. The option field informs judgment; it does not replace it.

6.3 Constraint and the Persistence of Agency

Severe constraint can alter the significance of a choice without eliminating agency altogether. This intermediate region matters because many real cases are neither fully voluntary nor completely compelled. An actor may deliberate, respond to reasons, distinguish among alternatives, and intentionally choose, while doing so within a field that another actor has made substantially worse.

The analysis should therefore avoid a binary picture in which responsibility exists only when alternatives are unconstrained and disappears once meaningful constraint is present. Such a picture would be inconsistent with ordinary practices of judgment and with the literature on coercion and socially situated responsibility. Actors frequently retain some capacity for guidance and judgment under pressure, while the pressure remains normatively important to the degree or kind of responsibility appropriately attributed to them (Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Hutchison et al. 2018).

A relational account is particularly useful here because it permits the constraint and the remaining agency to be described separately. The actor's conduct may still express a decision, intention, or evaluative stance. At the same time, the field within which that decision was made may have been narrowed, made hazardous, or structured by dependency. Preserving both facts prevents two opposite errors: blaming the actor as though the field were neutral, and treating the actor as though all agency vanished once the field became constrained.

6.4 Local Reason-Responsiveness

One way to preserve agency without assuming unconstrained choice is to ask whether the actor remained responsive to reasons within the alternatives that were effectively available. This inquiry is narrower than asking whether the actor possessed every alternative that an unconstrained observer might imagine. The actor may still compare consequences, respond to evidence, revise plans, distinguish better from worse options, and act intentionally inside a restricted field.

This local form of reason-responsiveness should not be confused with a complete theory of moral responsibility. It is used here as an analytical indicator of continuing agency. If an actor can alter conduct in response to relevant reasons among available options, then the fact of constraint does not automatically erase authorship of action. Conversely, if architecture, threat, manipulation, incapacity, or time pressure substantially disables such responsiveness, the significance of the eventual choice may be different.

The adjective "local" matters. A person can be highly responsive among the alternatives that remain while the larger option field has been unjustifiably narrowed by others. Competent deliberation inside a constrained field does not retrospectively legitimize the field. It shows only that agency can persist within it.

6.5 The Problem of Dominated Alternatives

Sometimes one alternative is formally available but so costly relative to the others that its role in responsibility assessment becomes difficult. The extreme case is straightforward: an option whose exercise predictably requires death, severe bodily harm, or total loss of indispensable resources may have little practical resemblance to an ordinary alternative. More difficult cases involve substantial but non-catastrophic burdens.

There is no context-independent threshold at which a costly option ceases to count as effective. Cost must be interpreted relative to the actor's resources, dependencies, commitments, risks, and institutional environment. A financial penalty trivial for one person may make an option impossible for another. A relocation requirement may be manageable for an unattached individual but effectively exclude someone responsible for dependents. A technically available appeal process may be unusable by a person who lacks language access or legal representation.

The concept of a dominated alternative can therefore be useful descriptively, but it should not become a mechanical exculpation device. A very costly alternative may remain morally required in some circumstances. The point is not that actors are entitled to choose any less costly option. It is that an assessment

of responsibility should not pretend that the relevant alternatives were equally supported when they were not.

6.6 Adaptive Preferences and Endogenous Evaluation

Choice within a generated field becomes more difficult to interpret when the field has influenced not only which alternatives are available but also how the actor evaluates them. Long-term dependency, socialization, repeated exclusion, institutional incentives, or architectural design can shape expectations and preferences. The literature on adaptive preferences has shown why expressed satisfaction cannot always be treated as a transparent measure of available freedom or well-being (Elster 1982; Khader 2011).

For this paper, the important point is narrower. A genealogy of effective alternatives may sometimes need to include the history of the actor's evaluative relation to those alternatives. If a person no longer regards exit as imaginable because years of dependency have normalized the existing arrangement, the problem is not captured solely by listing external barriers. Similarly, an artificial agent whose reward structure has been repeatedly modified may endorse a state partly because the modification changed the basis of endorsement.

This does not justify treating preferences as unreal whenever they arise under social influence. All preferences have histories. A responsibility analysis should therefore avoid the paternalistic assumption that an external observer can simply replace the actor's expressed evaluation with an allegedly authentic one. Genealogy is relevant when there is specific reason to think that the processes generating the preference are also part of the contested relation, especially where they involve domination, deception, engineered dependency, or suppression of alternative interpretive resources.

6.7 Prior Commitments and Self-Constrained Choice

Not every historically generated constraint was imposed by another. Actors often narrow their future alternatives through promises, contracts, professional roles, collective commitments, investments, or personal projects. Such self-constraint can be a condition of meaningful agency rather than its negation. A promise matters partly because later convenience does not automatically dissolve it. Institutional roles are possible because participants accept limits on future discretion.

The genealogy of an option field must therefore distinguish constraint generated through earlier agency from constraint imposed without adequate authorization. Even this distinction is not simple. A prior commitment may have been entered under pressure, based on deception, or before foreseeable costs became apparent. Circumstances can also change enough that continued enforcement is no longer justified. Still, treating all inherited constraints as external domination would erase the temporal structure of agency.

Self-constraint also illustrates why responsibility cannot be inferred from the present narrowness of an option field. Two actors may face similarly limited alternatives, while one field reflects a defensible prior commitment and the other reflects imposed dependency. The present structure alone cannot decide the normative meaning of the constraint.

6.8 Choice under Relational Dependency

Dependency deserves special attention because it can preserve formal choice while altering the conditions under which refusal is possible. An actor may depend on another for income, shelter, care, legal status, technical access, information, or continued participation in a valued community. The dependent actor can still make decisions, but some options acquire costs that derive directly from the relation.

Dependency is not inherently wrongful. Human life and institutional cooperation are saturated with dependence. The responsibility question concerns the organization of dependency: whether it was created or intensified by particular actors, whether alternatives were deliberately closed, whether the de-

pendent party has meaningful avenues of contestation, and whether the more powerful party uses the dependency to shape conduct.

This is also where relational responsibility begins to emerge most clearly. If one party structures dependency so that refusal becomes extraordinarily costly, the resulting choice may remain attributable to the dependent actor, while the dependency-producing party may separately bear responsibility for the conditions under which the choice occurred. The next sections will develop this bifurcation directly.

6.9 Temporal Compression and Decision Quality

A generated option field also includes the time available for choice. An actor may technically possess several alternatives but lack sufficient time to investigate them, coordinate support, seek advice, or understand downstream consequences. Temporal compression can therefore affect both the number of effective alternatives and the quality of deliberation among them.

Responsibility analysis should again distinguish pressure from incapacity. Decisions made quickly can remain intentional and competent. Emergency professionals, for example, routinely exercise meaningful agency under severe time constraints. The relevant questions concern whether the temporal structure was avoidable, who controlled it, what information could reasonably be processed, and whether the actor had prior opportunities to prepare.

Artificial and institutional systems make this issue especially visible. A platform can impose a short response window, an automated process can escalate faster than meaningful human review, or a bureaucracy can provide notice only after the time needed to assemble evidence has passed. In such cases the architecture of timing helps constitute the effective option field.

6.10 Agency without Exogenous Alternatives

The analysis so far supports a middle position. Agency does not require that alternatives be exogenous, unconstrained, or equally accessible. Actors routinely choose within fields shaped by social relations, institutions, histories, and their own prior actions. The fact that an option field has a genealogy therefore does not itself diminish agency.

At the same time, a responsibility assessment that treats the field as normatively neutral can miss important facts. The practical meaning of a choice depends partly on what alternatives were available, how costly they were, what the actor could know, how robustly the alternatives could be exercised, and how the surrounding relation shaped those conditions. These considerations can affect the kind and degree of responsibility attributed to the chooser without making the chooser merely passive.

This position also clarifies the paper's relation to structural explanations. Explaining how a field was generated is not the same as explaining away the actor's conduct. Structure and agency are not competing total explanations from which only one may survive. The paper instead treats them as analytically connected but distinct objects: the action selected within the field, and the history that made that field available.

6.11 Preparing the Responsibility Distinction

The next two sections separate the two responsibility questions that motivate the paper. The first concerns the actor who selects an action within a generated option field. The second concerns actors and institutions that participated in producing, maintaining, narrowing, or reopening that field.

The distinction should not be interpreted as a transfer mechanism in which responsibility removed from one side is automatically assigned to the other. An actor may retain substantial responsibility for an action while another party bears responsibility for the constraint. In other cases, constraint may significantly diminish the chooser's responsibility while the generator's responsibility remains limited because the constraint was justified, unforeseeable, weakly connected, or outside that actor's authority to change.

The genealogy does not predetermine blame. It makes visible two normative objects that event-centered analysis can collapse: responsibility for what an actor does, and responsibility for the practical field in which that action became selectable. The following section turns first to responsibility for action.

7 Responsibility for Action

The preceding sections have described choice as occurring within an effective option field whose structure may be historically generated by social, material, institutional, informational, and relational conditions. The present section asks a narrower question: what remains to be assessed about the actor who actually performs the action? This question must be answered before responsibility for generating the option field can be analyzed separately. Otherwise the paper risks treating structural explanation as though it automatically displaced agency, or treating agency as though it rendered the surrounding structure normatively irrelevant.

The aim here is therefore not to construct a complete theory of moral responsibility. Existing debates concerning alternative possibilities, guidance control, reasons-responsiveness, coercion, and socially situated responsibility are far more developed than this paper can reproduce (Frankfurt 1969; Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Hutchison et al. 2018; Vargas 2018). The purpose is more limited: to identify the dimensions of action-responsibility that remain relevant when the actor's effective alternatives were generated within a relational history.

7.1 Attribution before Blame

A useful first distinction concerns whether an action is properly attributable to the actor at all. Before asking how blameworthy, answerable, or responsible an actor is, one must ask whether the conduct expresses the actor's agency in a sufficiently meaningful sense. Intentional action, deliberation, responsiveness to reasons, understanding of the circumstances, and practical control can all matter here.

Constraint does not automatically defeat attribution. A person acting under financial pressure, institutional dependence, or limited information can still form intentions and act for reasons. Likewise, an artificial or institutional agent may operate under architectural or procedural constraints while still implementing a policy through internal decision rules. The fact that alternatives were constrained therefore does not by itself show that the action should be treated as something that merely happened through the actor.

At the same time, attribution can become weaker when the actor's control is severely compromised. Direct physical compulsion, extreme threat, incapacitating manipulation, or architectural mechanisms that bypass meaningful deliberation can alter the sense in which conduct is attributable to the actor. The relevant analysis is therefore graded and contextual rather than binary.

This preliminary step matters because responsibility for the option field should not be used as a substitute for deciding whether the immediate actor acted at all in a normatively significant sense. If the conduct was not meaningfully attributable to the actor, that is one kind of case. If it was attributable but performed under severe constraint, that is another.

7.2 Wrongness and Responsibility

The wrongness of an action and the actor's responsibility for performing it should be assessed separately. A constrained action can remain wrongful even when the actor's responsibility is substantially mitigated. Conversely, a person can be responsible for an action that is not wrongful, for example when responsibility is understood as authorship or answerability rather than blame.

This distinction is especially important for the present paper because structural constraint can otherwise be misunderstood as changing the normative character of the action itself. Suppose an official participates in a discriminatory process because refusal would likely result in dismissal and severe consequences for dependents. The discriminatory action may remain objectionable. The existence of coercive or dependency-based pressure concerns the official's responsibility for participating, not necessarily the normative status of the discriminatory practice.

The distinction also prevents the opposite mistake. A wrongful action should not automatically be treated as evidence of full culpability. Once the effective option field is reconstructed, the actor's prac-

tical alternatives, information, temporal pressure, dependency, and exposure may substantially affect responsibility even though they do not make the action permissible.

This paper therefore treats the assessment of action-responsibility as one component of relational responsibility rather than as a verdict derived directly from the moral evaluation of the action.

7.3 Knowledge and Epistemic Position

Responsibility for action depends partly on what the actor knew, could reasonably know, and had reason to investigate. An effective alternative can matter only if it is accessible not merely in material terms but also through the actor's epistemic position. A legal remedy unknown to an actor and effectively undiscoverable under the circumstances should not be treated in the same way as a remedy the actor deliberately ignored.

This makes ignorance itself a relational question. Information may be unavailable because another actor concealed it, because an institution failed to provide meaningful notice, because technical complexity excluded ordinary participants, or because the actor negligently declined accessible information. These histories matter differently.

The paper does not assume that lack of knowledge automatically excuses conduct. Some roles generate duties of inquiry, some risks should be investigated, and some ignorance is culpably maintained. The narrower point is that responsibility analysis should reconstruct the actor's epistemic access rather than evaluate the action from the retrospective informational position of the observer.

This issue becomes particularly important when the option field was shaped through informational constraint. If an actor could not identify a less harmful alternative because the information necessary to recognize it was systematically withheld, that fact belongs to the assessment of action-responsibility. It may also create a separate question concerning responsibility for producing the informational constraint, which Section 8 will examine.

7.4 Reasons-Responsiveness under Constraint

The previous section introduced local reasons-responsiveness as an indicator of agency within a restricted field. Here its significance for responsibility can be stated more directly. An actor who can recognize relevant reasons, compare alternatives, revise a plan, and alter conduct in response to evidence retains an important form of practical control even when the wider option field is constrained.

The literature on guidance control is useful precisely because it avoids making responsibility depend entirely on the presence of unrestricted alternative possibilities (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). For the present argument, however, reasons-responsiveness should be interpreted together with the genealogy of the field. Competent responsiveness among three remaining options does not tell us why only those three remained. Nor does it show that the structure that eliminated other alternatives was justified.

This creates two distinct analytical questions. One concerns how the actor exercised agency among the alternatives effectively available. The other concerns how that set of alternatives came to be structured. Responsibility for action is principally concerned with the first question, though the second can affect its answer by changing the degree of pressure, risk, or practical control surrounding the choice.

7.5 Severity and Structure of Constraint

Not every limitation on alternatives has the same significance for responsibility. Constraint can differ in severity, source, duration, reversibility, and relation to the action under assessment. A minor inconvenience attached to a better option should not be treated like a credible threat of death. A temporary delay should not be treated like permanent institutional exclusion. A constraint deliberately imposed to secure compliance may matter differently from one arising through general scarcity.

Responsibility analysis therefore requires more than counting alternatives. It should examine the practical burden attached to the alternatives that would have avoided or reduced the wrongful action. Relevant questions include whether those alternatives were materially executable, whether their costs

were proportionate, whether the actor could reasonably bear those costs, and whether refusal exposed third parties to serious consequences.

This last point is particularly important. Some actors make choices within relations of care, dependency, or responsibility for others. An alternative that preserves the actor's own interests while imposing severe foreseeable costs on dependents may not function as an ordinary exit. The assessment of responsibility should therefore consider the relational distribution of the burdens attached to alternatives rather than treating all costs as purely individual.

7.6 Coercion, Pressure, and Excuse

Coercion provides the clearest case in which an option field is deliberately reshaped to influence conduct. A threat can preserve nominal choice while changing the practical structure of the alternatives so sharply that responsibility is mitigated or, in extreme cases, substantially displaced. Yet the literature on coercion also shows why no simple formula can decide when pressure becomes responsibility-undermining (Nozick 1969; Wertheimer 1987).

The present paper treats coercion as one mode within a wider family of generated constraints. Institutional dependency, architectural restriction, informational suppression, relational leverage, and temporal compression can influence action without taking the form of an explicit threat. This broader scope should not erase the distinctive character of coercion. Rather, coercion provides a familiar reference point for analyzing how the generated structure of alternatives can bear on responsibility.

Excuse should also be distinguished from justification. An actor may have strong grounds for reduced blame because the available alternatives imposed extraordinary burdens, while the action itself remains unjustified. Conversely, some constrained actions may be justified because the circumstances change what ought to be done, not merely because they excuse failure to do otherwise. The paper does not attempt to resolve these categories universally, but responsibility for action should not collapse them.

7.7 Self-Generated Constraint

The genealogy of an option field may include the actor's own earlier decisions. This creates a difficult question for action-responsibility. If an actor voluntarily undertook a commitment that later narrowed available alternatives, should the later constraint mitigate responsibility in the same way as externally imposed constraint?

There is no general answer. Prior self-binding can strengthen responsibility when the actor knowingly created the conditions under which the later choice would occur. A professional who voluntarily accepts a fiduciary role, for example, cannot ordinarily invoke the role's foreseeable constraints as though they were externally imposed surprises. At the same time, prior commitments can be entered under incomplete information, coercive background conditions, or circumstances that later change substantially.

The relevant point is that genealogy can connect responsibility across time within the same actor. Present constraint does not always originate in another agent or institution. The actor's earlier conduct may contribute to the current field, and this contribution can matter to how much mitigating force the present constraint should carry.

This temporal dimension also warns against treating responsibility as located only at the final decision point. Some responsibility may attach to earlier decisions that shaped the actor's own later options. Section 9 will return to temporally distributed responsibility more generally.

7.8 Role, Office, and Institutional Agency

Responsibility for action becomes more complicated when the actor occupies an institutional role. Officials, professionals, employees, automated systems, and organizational agents often act through procedures whose option fields are partly defined by role-specific rules. The actor may have discretion at one level while lacking authority at another.

A front-line official may be able to decide how to implement a policy but lack authority to alter the policy itself. A hospital worker may retain discretion over individual care while resource-allocation rules sharply restrict what treatments can be offered. An artificial agent may select among actions inside an architecture whose permissible action space was fixed by designers. In each case, action-responsibility should be indexed to the control and knowledge actually associated with the actor's role.

This does not imply that role obedience excuses wrongful action. Some roles should be refused, some orders resisted, and some institutional practices challenged. The relevant point is narrower: responsibility analysis should distinguish what the actor could change within the role from what required authority, resources, or coordination beyond the actor's practical reach.

Role analysis therefore provides another bridge between immediate action-responsibility and the responsibility of those who designed or maintained the surrounding field.

7.9 Responsibility without Perfect Alternatives

A recurring difficulty is the assumption that responsibility requires the presence of a clearly good alternative. Real option fields can contain only bad choices. An actor may face several harmful possibilities and select the least harmful one, or may choose badly among alternatives none of which is fully acceptable.

The absence of a perfect option does not eliminate responsibility. What matters is how the actor responded to the alternatives genuinely available, including whether less harmful possibilities existed, whether their costs were bearable, and whether the actor reasonably understood the consequences. Responsibility can therefore remain meaningful even when the field itself is unjust or tragic.

This point is essential for humanitarian, institutional, and political cases. Actors are often required to act before structural conditions can be repaired. A theory that postpones responsibility until an ideal option becomes available would provide little guidance for such situations. At the same time, evaluating the immediate actor should not allow the unjust structure of the field to disappear from view.

7.10 Degrees and Kinds of Responsibility

The language of responsibility can conceal several different normative relations: blameworthiness, answerability, accountability, liability, role responsibility, and obligations of repair. Constraint may affect these dimensions differently. An actor may deserve reduced blame while remaining appropriately accountable for explaining conduct. An institution may owe repair without any individual member being fully blameworthy. A professional may retain role responsibility even where personal culpability is low.

The present paper does not attempt to reduce these forms to a single scale. It is sufficient to note that generated constraint can alter the degree or kind of responsibility without making responsibility disappear. This plural approach is especially useful once option-field responsibility is introduced, because the actor who generated the constraint may bear a different form of responsibility from the actor who selected the eventual action.

The analysis should therefore resist zero-sum intuitions. Responsibility need not be transferred from chooser to constraint-generator as though there were one fixed quantity to distribute. Different actors can be responsible for different normative objects and in different senses.

7.11 The Boundary of Action-Responsibility

The task of this section has been to preserve the immediate actor as a genuine object of responsibility analysis without treating the generated option field as neutral background. Action-responsibility depends on attribution, practical control, knowledge, reasons-responsiveness, the severity of constraint, the availability of less harmful alternatives, and the actor's temporal and institutional position. None of these features can be read directly from the final action, and none follows simply from the presence of structural constraint.

This establishes only one side of the paper's central distinction. Section 8 turns to responsibility for producing, maintaining, narrowing, or otherwise shaping the effective option field itself. That responsibility may exist even where the constraint-generator never commands the final action, cannot predict exactly what the actor will choose, or fails to obtain the outcome it intended.

8 Responsibility for Generating Constraint

The previous section isolated responsibility for the action selected within a generated option field. The present section turns to the paper's second responsibility object: responsibility for producing, maintaining, intensifying, or failing to revise the conditions that structure another actor's effective alternatives. This is not simply another name for responsibility for the downstream action. An actor can shape another's field of agency without commanding a particular response, predicting which alternative will be selected, or even remaining present at the moment of choice.

The purpose of this distinction is analytical rather than exculpatory. Identifying responsibility for generated constraint does not automatically reduce the chooser's responsibility, and it does not imply that every person who causally contributed to an option field bears moral responsibility for it. The question is narrower: under what conditions does participation in the production of another actor's effective alternatives become a distinct object of responsibility analysis?

8.1 The Option Field as an Object of Responsibility

Responsibility theory often focuses on actions, omissions, outcomes, or roles. The present paper adds a more specific candidate object: the effective option field within which another actor must deliberate and act. Such a field can be shaped by resource distribution, information, permissions, dependency, institutional procedures, social sanctions, technical architecture, deadlines, and the availability of exit. When these conditions are materially produced by identifiable actors or institutions, their production need not remain normatively invisible merely because no one dictated the final action.

This does not mean that the option field is an independent entity with responsibility attaching to it automatically. It means that the field can be treated as the target of a responsibility question. A regulator can be responsible for designing a licensing regime that makes lawful alternatives practically inaccessible. An employer can be responsible for maintaining a dependency structure in which refusal of a directive carries catastrophic costs. A platform can be responsible for an architecture that systematically removes less harmful routes of participation. These questions concern the shaping of practical possibility before they concern any particular action selected inside the field.

The distinction is especially useful when the downstream action is difficult to attribute to the constraint-generator. A person may respond unpredictably to pressure. An institution may narrow alternatives without caring which remaining option is chosen. A designer may impose an architecture for efficiency rather than to induce a particular behavior. In such cases, action-centered analysis can miss the normative significance of having deliberately or negligently transformed the field in which agency later operates.

8.2 Creation, Maintenance, Intensification, and Failure to Reopen

Responsibility for generated constraint can arise at different temporal positions. One actor may create a dependency. Another may maintain it after its effects become visible. A later institution may intensify the burden by adding new costs or removing a previously available exit. Still another actor may acquire the authority and practical capacity to reopen alternatives but fail to do so.

These positions should not be treated as equivalent. Creating a constraint can involve different knowledge, authority, and causal contribution from merely inheriting it. Maintenance can become normatively significant when an actor continues a condition despite understanding its effects and having a realistic capacity to alter it. Intensification concerns actions that make an already restricted field more severe. Failure to reopen concerns omission rather than direct production and therefore requires a separate basis for responsibility, such as role, prior contribution, acquired control, or a specific duty to revise the condition.

This temporal differentiation prevents responsibility from becoming a vague label applied to everyone connected to a structure. The relevant question is what each actor did, controlled, knew, inherited, or failed to change in relation to the option field at the time of its contribution.

8.3 Causal Contribution Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

A genealogy can identify many causes of a present option field, but causal contribution alone is too weak to establish responsibility. Economic conditions, technological history, geographic circumstances, demographic change, and countless prior decisions can influence the alternatives available to an actor. Responsibility analysis requires additional normative filters.

At minimum, one should ask whether the contribution was sufficiently connected to the constraint under assessment, whether the contributor possessed meaningful control or authority over the relevant condition, whether the constraining effects were known or reasonably foreseeable, and whether the contribution was justified by the actor's role or by competing claims. These considerations do not form a universal test, but they prevent genealogy from collapsing into unlimited causal ancestry.

The social-connection literature is useful here because it already rejects the idea that responsibility for structural injustice must depend on direct fault while also avoiding the conclusion that every causal participant is equally responsible (Young 2011). The present paper's narrower contribution is to apply a similarly disciplined inquiry to the production of effective alternatives. The object is not society's structure in general, but the historically generated field of practical possibilities relevant to a particular decision or class of decisions.

8.4 Authority and the Justification of Constraint

Constraint can be legitimate. A court can remove options through a lawful sentence. A fiduciary role can prohibit self-interested conduct. A safety protocol can make dangerous actions unavailable. Parents and caregivers can limit some choices for dependents. Technical systems can restrict behavior in order to prevent catastrophic failure. The existence of generated constraint therefore does not itself ground criticism.

Responsibility analysis must ask whether the actor had a defensible basis for shaping the field and whether the form, scope, duration, and burden of the constraint were proportionate to that basis. Authority matters, but authority is not self-validating. A formally authorized institution can exceed its mandate, distribute burdens arbitrarily, or preserve restrictions after their justification has expired.

The genealogy of the option field is therefore relevant not merely because it identifies who caused a constraint, but because it can reveal the normative relation under which the constraint was generated. Voluntary commitment, public mandate, emergency authority, contractual agreement, care responsibility, and unilateral domination create different responsibility questions even when they produce similarly narrow present alternatives.

8.5 Knowledge, Foreseeability, and Epistemic Position

Responsibility for generating constraint also depends on what the constraint-generator knew or could reasonably know about the effect of its conduct on another's practical possibilities. Deliberately closing an exit in order to secure compliance is different from adopting a rule whose constraining consequences were difficult to foresee. Yet unforeseeability should not become a general defense where an actor occupies a role that includes duties of inquiry, monitoring, or impact assessment.

Epistemic position can itself be institutionally structured. A designer may have access to system-wide data unavailable to users. An employer may understand dependency relations better than an individual worker. A government may possess evidence concerning the effects of eligibility rules that applicants cannot observe. Where an actor has privileged access to the consequences of the field it controls, that epistemic advantage can strengthen the case for responsibility when harmful constraint is maintained.

The reverse is also possible. Institutions can operate through fragmented authority in which no single participant sees the cumulative effect of individually reasonable rules. In such cases, responsibility may be institutional or distributed rather than reducible to the knowledge of one decision-maker. Section 9 develops this temporal and organizational distribution more fully.

8.6 Constraint without Control of the Final Action

One of the paper's central claims is that responsibility for generated constraint does not require control over the action eventually selected. An employer who threatens severe consequences for refusal may be responsible for narrowing an employee's alternatives even if the employee responds in an unexpected manner. A state that removes lawful avenues of exit can be responsible for that restriction even if affected persons react in many different ways. A platform that makes one class of participation prohibitively costly can be responsible for the resulting field without determining which remaining behavior each user adopts.

This is not an attempt to bypass causation. The actor must still have contributed to the field being assessed. The point is that the relevant causal object is the constraint itself rather than the particular downstream action. Once the object of responsibility changes, control of the final response is no longer a necessary condition for asking whether the field was wrongfully shaped.

This distinction also clarifies why responsibility can remain when an attempted influence fails. Suppose an institution deliberately destroys several alternatives in order to push an actor toward a preferred choice, but the actor refuses and selects a different remaining option. The institution may have failed to control the final action while still having wrongfully transformed the actor's practical field. An exclusively outcome-centered account can obscure this wrong because the intended behavioral effect did not occur.

8.7 Non-Zero-Sum Responsibility

Responsibility for generating constraint should not be treated as a quantity that must be subtracted from the chooser's responsibility. The two responsibility objects differ. The chooser may remain answerable for how agency was exercised among available alternatives, while another actor is answerable for having generated an unjustifiably narrow or distorted field.

This non-zero-sum structure becomes especially important where a constrained actor still possessed meaningful reasons-responsiveness. The fact that the actor deliberated and chose does not erase the responsibility of those who shaped the field. Conversely, proving that the field was deliberately constrained does not by itself show that the actor's conduct was involuntary or excused.

Different forms of responsibility may therefore coexist: blame for a wrongful action, institutional accountability for a constraining rule, reparative responsibility for restoring alternatives, and role responsibility for revising a harmful architecture. Treating these as separate objects avoids the false choice between individualism and structural determinism.

8.8 Responsibility for Dependency and Exit Conditions

Dependency deserves special attention because it can make nominal alternatives practically unavailable without direct prohibition. An actor who controls housing, income, legal status, care, communication, or access to indispensable infrastructure can shape another's effective alternatives by altering the consequences of refusal or exit.

The responsibility question is not simply whether dependency exists. Many legitimate relations involve dependency, and some dependencies are unavoidable. The relevant issues include how the dependency was created, whether the dependent party had meaningful alternatives when entering the relation, whether the controlling actor increased the dependency for strategic advantage, whether exit conditions were later worsened, and whether safeguards against abuse were available.

A particularly significant case occurs when an initially beneficial intervention creates new dependency. Humanitarian assistance, welfare administration, technical platforms, medical systems, and care relations can expand capabilities while also concentrating control over resources or exit. Responsibility analysis should therefore remain capable of recognizing both the benefits produced and the constraints subsequently generated. The existence of benefit does not immunize later dependency from scrutiny, just as dependency does not negate the benefit.

8.9 Responsibility for Informational and Interpretive Constraint

An option can disappear effectively even when its material conditions remain intact if actors cannot identify, understand, or legitimately articulate it. Information can be withheld, procedures made opaque, alternatives misrepresented, or interpretive categories structured so that some possibilities do not appear institutionally actionable.

Responsibility for such constraint is difficult because informational environments are often distributed. No single actor may control the whole interpretive field. Still, deliberate concealment, misleading presentation, exclusionary procedural design, and monopoly over essential interpretive infrastructure can make responsibility more identifiable.

The paper should avoid claiming that every failure to imagine an alternative has an external author. Some limits are epistemic, cultural, or historical without being anyone's wrongdoing. The responsibility question arises where identifiable actors exercise relevant control over the informational or interpretive conditions of choice and where the constraining effects are sufficiently attributable to that control.

8.10 Institutional Responsibility for Field Design

Institutions often shape effective alternatives more deeply than individual directives do. Eligibility rules determine who can access benefits. Organizational procedures determine which remedies can be invoked. Employment structures distribute the cost of refusal. Platform architectures determine which actions are technically possible. Artificial-agent architectures can define permissible tools, memory access, communication, and revision capacities.

In such cases, responsibility may attach to design, maintenance, governance, or oversight rather than to a single moment of coercion. The institutional object matters because the field can persist across personnel changes. A new official may inherit and administer a constraining system without having created it, while the organization retains capacities, records, and authority that make revision possible.

This is one reason the paper distinguishes genealogy from blame. Historical reconstruction can identify how a field was produced even where responsibility is distributed across roles and generations. The next section asks how such responsibility can be allocated without becoming indefinitely diffuse.

8.11 The Limits of Option-Field Responsibility

The concept of responsibility for generated constraint should remain narrow enough to be useful. It does not imply responsibility for every disadvantage another actor faces. It does not treat all scarcity as authored. It does not assume a duty to maximize another's alternatives. It does not establish that every inherited institution must reopen options it did not create. It does not make the constraint-generator responsible for every action later selected within the field.

A defensible analysis therefore needs to identify the relevant constraint, reconstruct the contribution that generated or maintained it, examine authority and justification, assess knowledge or foreseeability where appropriate, and distinguish the responsibility object from the downstream action. Where those connections cannot be established, the language of option-field responsibility should not be used merely because the actor's alternatives were limited.

The payoff of the concept is more modest. It allows responsibility analysis to notice a class of normatively consequential acts and institutions that can disappear when attention is fixed exclusively on the final chooser. An effective option field can be shaped without final-action control, maintained without fresh coercive commands, and inherited across institutional time. Treating that field as a distinct responsibility object prepares the analysis for Section 9, which examines how responsibility is distributed when constraint is generated by multiple actors across time.

9 Temporally Distributed and Institutional Responsibility

Responsibility for a generated option field need not be concentrated in the actor who first created a constraint or in the institution that happens to administer it at the moment of choice. Effective alternatives can be shaped over long periods by different actors occupying different positions. One actor may create a dependency, another may formalize it, a later institution may remove an exit route, and still another may preserve the resulting arrangement after its burdens become visible. By the time an individual acts within the constrained field, the original authors may be absent, the relevant institution may have changed personnel, and no single present actor may have produced the field as a whole.

This temporal dispersion creates a familiar danger. If responsibility is sought only at the final decision point, the production history of the option field disappears. If responsibility is extended indiscriminately across every historical contributor, however, the analysis becomes too diffuse to guide judgment. The task of this section is therefore narrower: to identify forms of temporally distributed and institutional responsibility that can remain analytically distinct without assuming that culpability is inherited automatically across time.

9.1 From Event-Centered to Temporally Distributed Analysis

Event-centered responsibility asks who acted, what that actor knew, and what alternatives were available at the relevant moment. These questions remain indispensable. Yet the genealogy developed in earlier sections shows why the moment of action may contain only the final layer of a longer history. The effective field may have been produced gradually through legal rules, resource allocations, dependency relations, informational practices, architectural design, and repeated institutional decisions.

Temporally distributed analysis therefore asks which earlier contributions remain constitutive of the present option field. A past contribution matters not merely because it occurred earlier, but because its effects continue to structure what the actor can effectively do now. This criterion limits the genealogy. It excludes remote historical facts that no longer bear on the field while retaining earlier interventions whose consequences remain embedded in present costs, permissions, dependencies, or exit conditions.

This perspective is compatible with structural-responsibility approaches that refuse to locate all responsibility in isolated wrongdoers (Young 2011; Hutchison et al. 2018). The present paper adds a narrower object: the historically produced field of effective alternatives at the decision point. Temporal distribution is relevant insofar as earlier contributions remain part of the practical architecture within which later agency is exercised.

9.2 Creation, Maintenance, Intensification, and Inheritance

It is useful to distinguish several temporal positions in relation to a constraint. A creator establishes a condition that narrows, distorts, or raises the cost of alternatives. A maintainer preserves that condition after it exists. An intensifier deepens or extends it. A successor inherits an institutional arrangement without having designed it. These positions can overlap, but they should not be treated as morally interchangeable.

Original authorship can matter because deliberate design often supplies strong evidence of control, purpose, and foreseeability. Yet maintenance can become independently significant. An institution that did not create a restrictive rule may continue enforcing it after acquiring knowledge of its effects. The absence of original authorship does not make continued maintenance normatively invisible. At the same time, maintenance is not automatically wrongful merely because the inherited arrangement is burdensome. The institution's authority, available alternatives, role, knowledge, and capacity to revise the arrangement remain relevant.

Intensification is analytically different again. A later actor may inherit a constrained field and make it more restrictive by increasing costs, closing an additional exit, or extending the rule to a wider population. Such an actor's responsibility need not depend on proving responsibility for the original structure. The object of analysis can be the later transformation itself.

Inheritance is the most delicate category. Simply occupying a role once held by earlier actors does not transfer their culpability. A successor may inherit control over a field, however, and that present control can generate new questions about maintenance, review, and repair. This distinction between inherited culpability and present responsibility is essential if temporal analysis is to remain fair.

9.3 Responsibility after the Original Authors Are Gone

Institutions often outlive the people who designed their rules. A dependency-producing programme may continue for decades. A platform architecture may persist through multiple ownership changes. A family arrangement may be reproduced by members who did not establish its original norms. A legal restriction may remain effective long after its original justification has disappeared.

In such cases, responsibility cannot be reconstructed solely through personal authorship. The relevant question becomes whether present actors occupy positions from which they knowingly preserve, administer, benefit from, or can revise the constraint. Institutional responsibility is therefore partly role-relative. A front-line worker, a department head, a governing board, and a legislature can interact with the same option field while possessing very different capacities to alter it.

This avoids two symmetrical errors. The first is historical amnesia: because the original authors are gone, no present actor is considered responsible for maintaining the field. The second is inherited blame: present participants are treated as culpable for creating conditions they never authored. A relational account should instead distinguish historical authorship from present positional responsibility.

9.4 Benefit without Authorship

Some actors benefit from a constrained option field without having created it. Employers may inherit labor arrangements that make exit costly. Institutions may benefit from informational asymmetries established before current management. Family members may receive advantages from dependency structures they did not deliberately design. Benefiting from a constraint does not by itself establish responsibility for it, but it can become relevant when benefit is combined with control, knowledge, and the capacity to preserve or revise the arrangement.

The significance of benefit is therefore contextual. Passive receipt of an incidental advantage differs from active exploitation of another's constrained alternatives. Continued benefit after the structure becomes visible may also differ from benefit under reasonable ignorance. The purpose of genealogical analysis is not to convert every beneficiary into a wrongdoer. It is to reveal when present advantage depends on a field whose restrictive structure remains institutionally maintained.

This also matters for repair. An actor may lack backward-looking culpability yet occupy a present position from which it is reasonable to expect contribution to revision or remediation. The basis of such an expectation would need to be argued from present relations, roles, benefits, capacities, and institutional commitments rather than from a fiction of inherited guilt.

9.5 Institutional Agency and Role-Differentiated Contribution

Institutions complicate responsibility because option fields are often produced through distributed procedures rather than one identifiable decision. Admissions systems, welfare programmes, employment hierarchies, platform architectures, and administrative regimes can narrow alternatives through rules that no individual actor controls completely. Socially situated accounts of responsibility already emphasize that agency is constituted within institutional and social structures rather than outside them (Vargas 2018; Mackenzie 2018).

For the present analysis, the important step is to differentiate institutional contributions. One unit may design eligibility criteria, another may control information, another may administer sanctions, and another may possess appellate authority. The resulting constraint can be institutionally coherent even when no single participant intends the full effect.

Responsibility should therefore track role-specific control and knowledge rather than treating the institution as either a single moral person or a mere collection of isolated individuals. In some cases, organizational responsibility may be appropriate because policies, routines, and decision structures persist beyond individual personnel. In others, responsibility may remain distributed among offices or agents with distinct powers. The paper need not settle a general theory of collective agency to make this distinction useful.

9.6 Responsibility after Effects Become Visible

Temporal analysis also changes the significance of knowledge. A constraint may initially be created under reasonable uncertainty. Later evidence may reveal that it systematically eliminates exit, produces dependency, or makes a less harmful alternative effectively inaccessible. The normative position of maintainers can then change even if the rule itself remains formally identical.

This does not mean that every institution must immediately remove any constraint once adverse effects are reported. Evidence can be incomplete, competing interests can be serious, and revision can create new harms. The narrower point is that responsibility for continued maintenance should be assessed in light of what the institution could reasonably know at that later time, not solely by reference to the epistemic position of the original designers.

Institutional learning therefore matters to option-field responsibility. Review procedures, complaint mechanisms, monitoring, and the ability to revise constraints can affect whether continued maintenance reflects reasonable persistence, negligence, or deliberate preservation. An institution that systematically blocks information about the effects of its own rules may also bear a different kind of responsibility from one that remains genuinely unable to know.

9.7 Distributed Responsibility without Infinite Diffusion

Once option-field genealogy is taken seriously, responsibility can expand rapidly. Resource suppliers, legislators, managers, designers, professionals, family members, and beneficiaries may all appear somewhere in the history. Without a truncation principle, nearly every action risks becoming the endpoint of an indefinitely large responsibility network.

The paper therefore needs a relevance threshold. A contribution should enter the responsibility analysis when it materially affects the effective field, remains connected to the present constraint, and is accompanied by some normatively relevant combination of control, authority, knowledge, foreseeability, maintenance, benefit, or capacity to revise. Mere causal ancestry is insufficient.

This threshold is intentionally plural rather than algorithmic. Different responsibility concepts may emphasize different features. Blame may require stronger knowledge and control than obligations of repair. Institutional accountability may arise from role even where personal culpability is limited. The aim is not to assign one scalar amount of responsibility to every participant, but to prevent both disappearance and unlimited diffusion.

A useful discipline is to ask what each actor is responsible *for*. One actor may be responsible for creating a dependency, another for maintaining an exit barrier, another for withholding relevant information, and the chooser for the eventual action. These responsibility objects can coexist without being collapsed into one undifferentiated judgment.

9.8 Successor Responsibility and Relational Continuity

Successor institutions create a particularly important case. A new administration, company, organization, or governing body may inherit rules and dependencies created by predecessors. The successor did not author the history, yet it may acquire control over whether that history continues to shape present alternatives.

The relevant continuity is therefore relational rather than merely nominal. A renamed institution may preserve the same resources, procedures, records, dependencies, and authority. Conversely, an organi-

zation with the same name may have lost the capacities relevant to the original constraint. Successor responsibility should therefore be connected to continuity of control, benefit, role, and practical capacity rather than institutional identity alone.

This distinction also helps separate backward-looking and forward-looking questions. Historical blame for creation and present responsibility for maintenance need not coincide. A successor may owe explanation, review, revision, or repair because of its present position even when it is not blameworthy for the origin of the constraint. Conversely, symbolic succession without relevant control may provide weak grounds for demanding substantive remediation from that actor.

9.9 Temporal Distribution and the Immediate Chooser

Temporally distributed responsibility should not make the immediate chooser disappear. The chooser still acts within the field and may retain substantial agency. Earlier constraint-generators and present maintainers do not automatically absorb responsibility for the eventual choice.

The value of temporal analysis is instead to prevent the moment of action from monopolizing responsibility. An event can have an immediate author while the conditions of effective choice have multiple authors, maintainers, and inheritors. These objects of responsibility are related but not interchangeable.

This distinction becomes particularly important in institutions. A front-line actor may make a wrongful choice within a field generated by policies imposed from above. The policy-makers may bear responsibility for the field; the front-line actor may bear responsibility for how discretion was exercised within it; later administrators may bear responsibility for continued maintenance after the effects become known. Treating any one layer as exhaustive produces an incomplete account.

9.10 Limits of Temporally Distributed Responsibility

Temporal distribution should not become a presumption that earlier actors or successor institutions are responsible whenever present alternatives are constrained. Natural scarcity, unforeseeable consequences, justified rules, institutional incapacity, intervening events, and the chooser's own conduct can all weaken or break responsibility claims. Historical contribution can also become too remote to support meaningful attribution.

The framework therefore remains diagnostic. It asks whether the present option field contains durable effects of earlier relational contributions and, if so, which actors occupy positions that make those contributions normatively relevant. It does not establish responsibility merely by tracing a historical chain.

The next section sharpens one implication of this distinction. Responsibility for generating constraint does not require successful control of the final action. An actor can be answerable for reshaping another's effective alternatives even when the constrained actor retains agency, resists the intended pressure, or chooses an outcome the constraint-generator did not anticipate.

10 Constraint without Control of the Final Action

The previous sections distinguished responsibility for an action from responsibility for generating the option field in which that action occurs. This section sharpens one consequence of that distinction. A person or institution can be responsible for reshaping another actor's effective alternatives even when it does not control, determine, or successfully predict the final action. The relevant object of responsibility is the altered field of practical possibility rather than the downstream choice considered in isolation.

This claim matters because responsibility analysis is often drawn toward the final event. If the constrained actor resists, improvises, or chooses an unexpected alternative, the constraint-generator may appear causally irrelevant to what eventually happened. Yet failure to control the outcome does not erase the fact that the field was narrowed, costs were redistributed, exits were closed, or some alternatives were made more dangerous. The final action can therefore be independent in one sense while remaining historically situated inside a field that another actor helped produce.

10.1 Field Control and Action Control

It is useful to distinguish control over the field of effective alternatives from control over the action selected within that field. Field control concerns the ability to shape the conditions under which alternatives are available: resources, permissions, sanctions, deadlines, information, architecture, access, and exit conditions. Action control concerns successful direction of the eventual choice.

These forms of control can coincide, but they need not. A coercer may narrow the target's alternatives yet fail to obtain compliance. A regulator may create an eligibility structure without determining how every applicant responds. A platform may make one route of participation prohibitively costly while users adopt diverse workarounds. A caregiver may restrict a dependent's options for safety while the dependent still chooses unpredictably among what remains.

The distinction prevents an outcome-centered mistake. If responsibility for generated constraint required successful control of the final action, actors could escape scrutiny whenever the constrained person resisted effectively. The very persistence of agency would paradoxically make the constraint-generator less answerable for having imposed the constraint. A relational account should instead ask separately what was done to the option field and what the constrained actor did within it.

10.2 Unsuccessful Influence and Failed Inducement

Some constraints are created in order to induce a particular response. Threats, sanctions, manipulated deadlines, restricted access, and architectural design can all be used strategically. Yet inducement can fail. The target may refuse, choose a more costly alternative, find an unforeseen exit, or accept a burden the constraint-generator expected to be prohibitive.

Failed inducement should not be treated as normatively empty. An employer who threatens dismissal in order to force compliance can still be responsible for imposing that threat even if the employee resigns instead. A state that closes ordinary avenues of exit can still be responsible for that closure even if affected persons create informal routes. A platform that suppresses a form of participation can still be responsible for the suppression even if users migrate elsewhere.

The relevant responsibility object is therefore not limited to successful behavioral production. It can include the imposition of costs, the elimination of safer routes, the creation of dependency, and the transfer of risk onto the constrained actor. The fact that the actor eventually resists or adapts can matter greatly to the evaluation of the outcome, but it does not retroactively make the earlier transformation of the option field disappear.

10.3 Resistance Does Not Cancel the Constraint

Resistance is especially important because it can obscure the severity of the field. A person who retains unusual resources, courage, social support, technical skill, or institutional knowledge may overcome constraints that would be decisive for many others. If analysis looks only at the successful outcome, the field can appear less restrictive than it actually was.

This creates a form of survivor bias in responsibility judgment. The fact that one actor found an exit does not show that the exit was effectively available on ordinary terms. The fact that a user circumvented a restrictive architecture does not show that the architecture imposed no meaningful burden. The fact that a worker refused a coercive demand despite severe risk does not show that the demand was non-coercive.

The constrained actor's resistance should therefore be treated as evidence about agency and resilience, not automatically as evidence that the constraint-generator lacked responsibility. This is consistent with the paper's broader refusal to infer the justice of a field from the quality of the choice eventually made within it.

10.4 A Morally Good Final Action Can Occur in a Wrongfully Generated Field

The separation becomes particularly clear when the constrained actor ultimately makes a morally admirable choice. Suppose an institution unjustifiably narrows a person's options, but the person neverthe-

less chooses the least harmful or most principled remaining alternative. The actor's conduct may deserve praise. The institution's earlier field-shaping conduct may still warrant criticism.

This case shows why responsibility for option-field generation cannot be reduced to responsibility for producing a wrongful downstream action. The generated field can be normatively problematic even when no wrongful action follows. Conversely, a person can make a wrongful choice within an option field that was reasonably open and fairly structured. The moral quality of the final action and the normative quality of the field are related but independent objects of assessment.

This distinction is useful beyond coercion. Safety systems, welfare programmes, educational institutions, workplace hierarchies, algorithmic platforms, and family relations all shape practical alternatives. Their responsibility should not depend solely on whether the persons affected eventually behave well or badly.

10.5 Outcome Luck and Option-Field Responsibility

Final outcomes often depend on contingencies beyond the constraint-generator's control. Two institutions can impose similar restrictions yet produce very different downstream events because affected persons differ in resources, temperament, social support, or opportunity. If responsibility for the field were inferred mainly from the final outcome, similar acts of constraint generation could receive radically different evaluation due to luck.

Option-field responsibility provides a partial response to this problem. It directs attention to what the actor or institution did to the practical environment before the outcome was known. This does not eliminate outcome-sensitive responsibility. Actual harms can reasonably matter to remedy, compensation, institutional learning, and sometimes blame. The point is that one layer of responsibility can be assessed without waiting for the field to produce a particular final action.

This *ex ante* orientation is especially important where constraints expose people to heightened risk rather than determine one specific response. A policy may make dangerous choices more likely, reduce access to safer alternatives, or concentrate burdens on a vulnerable group. Even if no single downstream action can be attributed to the policy with certainty, responsibility for designing or maintaining the constraining field can remain a meaningful question.

10.6 Probabilistic Influence without Determination

Many real constraints influence behavior probabilistically rather than deterministically. Raising the cost of an alternative can change its frequency without eliminating it. Restricting information can make some choices less likely without making them impossible. Architectural defaults can channel action while leaving formal control with the user. Social sanctions can alter patterns across a population even when individual responses vary widely.

This matters because a demand for action-level determination would make much institutional and structural constraint analytically invisible. The relevant contribution can consist in shifting the distribution of practical possibilities rather than producing one outcome. Responsibility analysis should therefore be able to recognize field-level influence while remaining cautious about attributing particular downstream acts to the constraint-generator.

The distinction also protects the chooser's agency. If a platform design increases the likelihood of one behavior, this does not by itself show that users performing that behavior lack responsibility. If an institution makes refusal costly, this does not prove that every compliant action is fully determined. Field influence and individual agency can coexist.

10.7 Counterfactual Dependence Is Informative but Not Decisive

Counterfactual questions can help clarify the role of a constraint: would the actor have faced materially different effective alternatives if the relevant rule, threat, dependency, or architecture had been absent?

Such questions can reveal whether a contribution was important to the field. But counterfactual dependence should not become the sole test of responsibility.

Option fields are often redundantly constrained. Removing one barrier may leave another in place. Several institutions may independently impose similar costs. A particular threat may not be necessary for the field to remain narrow because a separate dependency already does similar work. In such cases, a simple but-for test can understate responsibility.

Conversely, counterfactual change does not establish wrongdoing. A lawful safety restriction can be necessary to explain why a dangerous option was unavailable. A justified contractual commitment can make exit more costly. The counterfactual identifies contribution; the normative assessment still requires attention to authority, justification, proportionality, knowledge, and the distribution of burden.

10.8 Intervening Agency and the Limits of Downstream Attribution

The constrained actor's later agency can interrupt downstream attribution even when option-field responsibility remains intact. Suppose an institution creates severe pressure, but the actor later acquires new information, receives outside assistance, or gains time for reflection before choosing. These intervening conditions may strengthen the actor's responsibility for the eventual action while leaving the institution responsible for the earlier constraint.

This is another reason to avoid a single undifferentiated responsibility chain. The relation between field generation and final action can be weakened by intervening agency, new resources, independent deliberation, or later institutional changes. The field may remain an appropriate object of responsibility even where attribution of the final action to the field-shaper would be excessive.

The reverse can also occur. A weak initial constraint can become decisive because later events unexpectedly remove alternatives. Responsibility may then be distributed across multiple contributors rather than concentrated on the first actor. The genealogy helps locate these contributions without assuming that every contributor is responsible for the same thing.

10.9 Responsibility for Risk Exposure

Constraint generation can also create responsibility for exposing another actor to a narrower or more dangerous field even when no harmful choice is eventually made. Closing safe exits, increasing the cost of refusal, or concentrating dependency can make the actor more vulnerable to future shocks, demands, or mistakes. The relevant harm can therefore include increased exposure to constrained decision-making itself.

This form of responsibility should be handled cautiously. Not every increase in risk is wrongful, and some institutions legitimately impose structured risks for public safety, professional obligation, or collective coordination. Yet where an actor unjustifiably creates a field in which another bears substantially greater costs for maintaining autonomy or avoiding harm, responsibility need not wait for the worst outcome to occur.

This point is important for preventive governance. If responsibility becomes visible only after a constrained person makes a harmful choice, institutions may have weak incentives to review fields that systematically impose dangerous pressures but have not yet produced dramatic events.

10.10 No Automatic Transfer of Responsibility

Recognizing field-level responsibility does not automatically transfer responsibility away from the chooser. The constraint-generator's responsibility and the actor's responsibility can coexist, differ in kind, and respond to different evidence. The actor may be answerable for how available discretion was exercised. The field-shaper may be answerable for making that discretion unusually narrow, costly, or risky.

This non-transfer principle protects the paper from a common misunderstanding. The genealogy of effective alternatives is not a mechanism for relocating all responsibility upstream. It is a way of prevent-

ing upstream contributions from disappearing merely because the final action remained attributable to the chooser.

The division can also work in the opposite direction. Strong option-field responsibility need not imply severe mitigation of the chooser's responsibility if the actor still had robust, intelligible, and reasonable alternatives. Conversely, modest upstream responsibility can coexist with substantial mitigation if the actor's effective alternatives were constrained largely by circumstances not attributable to a responsible agent. The two assessments should therefore remain analytically separate.

10.11 Limits of Responsibility without Outcome Control

The claim developed here has limits. Merely influencing another person's environment does not create responsibility for every later constraint. The contribution must be sufficiently connected to the effective option field under assessment. The actor must also satisfy whatever further conditions are relevant to the form of responsibility at issue, such as control, knowledge, foreseeability, authority, unjustifiability, or a role-based obligation to review the condition.

Nor should responsibility for field generation become a substitute for causal analysis. If an alleged constraint made no practical difference to the relevant alternatives, its normative importance may be limited. If later events completely transformed the field, earlier contributions can become too remote to support substantial responsibility. If the constraint was justified and proportionate, its contribution to the field may be real without being wrongful.

The narrower conclusion is therefore robust but limited. Responsibility for generated constraint does not require successful control of the final action. What matters is whether an actor or institution is appropriately answerable for shaping the conditions of effective choice themselves. This result prepares the next section, which turns from responsibility for constraint to the reopening of alternatives through exit, refusal, review, and institutional revision.

11 Exit, Refusal, and Reopening Alternatives

The analysis so far has treated effective alternatives as relationally supported possibilities whose availability can be produced, narrowed, maintained, or reopened through several kinds of conditions. These include material, institutional, informational, relational, temporal, architectural, and interpretive conditions. Exit is one important member of this wider family, but it should not be treated as a simple binary property. A relation can be formally terminable while exit remains practically ruinous, informationally inaccessible, procedurally blocked, or dependent on resources controlled by the very actor from whom one seeks to leave. Conversely, a relation can contain meaningful refusal and revision even where complete exit is impossible or undesirable.

This section therefore treats exit, refusal, and reopening alternatives as connected but distinct features of an option field. The aim is not to make exit a universal measure of freedom. The narrower claim is that the practical possibility of leaving, refusing, partially disengaging, or reopening previously closed alternatives can matter to responsibility when those possibilities were shaped by identifiable actors or institutions. The capability approach provides an important background here because formal permission and substantive opportunity can diverge sharply (Sen 1999). Republican accounts of domination likewise show why the existence of nominal options may fail to remove dependence on another's discretionary power (Pettit 1997). Relational autonomy approaches further caution that meaningful agency depends on social and institutional conditions rather than on isolated choice alone (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Oshana 2006).

11.1 Effective Exit

A formally available exit can fail to function as an effective alternative. Leaving employment may be legally permitted while loss of housing, health care, immigration status, professional accreditation, or

access to dependents makes departure practically prohibitive. A platform user may be free to close an account while social, commercial, or informational dependence makes the nominal alternative weak. A person may be able to leave a family or institutional relation only by abandoning resources, relationships, or identities that were themselves produced within that relation.

For the present paper, effective exit concerns whether departure can be carried out under conditions that make it a serious practical possibility for the relevant actor. This does not require that exit be costless. Most meaningful choices carry costs. The question is whether the cost structure is such that the alternative remains realistically actionable rather than merely formally describable.

The assessment is actor-relative. The same contractual termination clause can function as a robust exit for one person and as a nearly unusable option for another because of differences in wealth, legal status, health, care obligations, language, location, or social support. Exit analysis therefore inherits the multidimensional structure of effective alternatives developed in Section 3. Material executability, informational access, institutional permission, temporal feasibility, relational burden, and architectural support can all matter.

11.2 Refusal within Continuing Relations

Exit is not the only way to preserve agency in a constrained field. Many relations are valuable, unavoidable, or too complex to reduce to stay-or-leave choices. Refusal within a continuing relation can therefore be an independent alternative. A worker may refuse one task without terminating employment. A patient may refuse one intervention while maintaining a care relation. A citizen may contest a policy without exiting the political community. A user may reject one data practice while continuing to use a service.

This distinction matters because institutions can appear to preserve exit while eliminating meaningful refusal. A relation can be technically voluntary in the sense that participation may be terminated, yet internally rigid enough that every disagreement is answered with “leave if you do not accept the terms.” In such cases, the option field may remain significantly constrained even though complete departure is available.

Refusal also has a different responsibility structure from exit. If an institution can reasonably accommodate internal refusal but deliberately designs participation so that dissent requires full withdrawal, responsibility may concern the architecture of the relation rather than a direct prohibition. Conversely, some roles legitimately limit refusal because coordination, safety, fiduciary duty, or collective reliance requires stable performance. The analysis therefore cannot infer wrongdoing merely from the absence of an internal refusal option. It asks how the relevant constraints were generated, what interests they protect, who bears their costs, and whether less restrictive arrangements were reasonably available.

11.3 The Cost Structure of Exit

Exit costs are often where formally open fields become effectively narrow. These costs may be monetary, legal, social, temporal, informational, professional, psychological, or relational. Some are intrinsic to ending a relation. Others are created or amplified by institutional design.

The genealogy of exit costs is therefore important. A dependency may have developed gradually through accumulated investments, specialization, exclusivity requirements, network effects, or repeated transfer of alternatives into the controlling relation. An employer may not explicitly prohibit departure but may structure benefits, housing, training credentials, and future references so that leaving becomes unusually costly. A platform may not prevent migration but may make data portability, interoperability, or contact transfer weak enough that the practical cost of departure remains high.

Not every generated exit cost is wrongful. Long-term cooperation often creates relationship-specific investments that cannot be fully recovered. Professional roles can require notice periods. Public systems may impose procedures for orderly transition. The responsibility question becomes sharper when one actor intentionally or negligently concentrates indispensable resources inside a relation, forecloses substitutes, or makes departure costly in ways that exceed what the legitimate purposes of the relation require.

This is another place where option-field responsibility can remain distinct from downstream action. A person who stays in a relation and later makes a wrongful choice within it may retain responsibility for that choice. At the same time, actors who designed the exit costs can remain responsible for the field in which staying became unusually difficult to refuse.

11.4 Partial Exit and Relational Unbundling

Some relations are bundles of several dependencies rather than single indivisible ties. Employment can combine income, insurance, housing, immigration sponsorship, social identity, and professional access. Digital platforms can combine communication, identity, payment, storage, reputation, and network participation. Family and care relations can combine affection, residence, financial support, legal status, and decision-making authority.

In such cases, full exit may be an unnecessarily blunt remedy. Reopening alternatives can instead involve unbundling the relation so that an actor can leave one dependency without losing all others. Data portability, independent accreditation, portable benefits, separate housing rights, interoperable communication, or independent legal advice can all alter the effective option field without requiring complete withdrawal.

Relational unbundling is important for responsibility because a constraint-generator may bear responsibility not merely for blocking exit but for designing multiple essential functions so that they depend on a single continuing relation. The question is whether this bundling was justified by functional necessity or whether it created avoidable leverage over the actor's choices.

This point also prevents the paper from treating exit as a universal remedy. Sometimes the relevant improvement is not to make departure easier but to reduce the number of indispensable goods that departure places at risk.

11.5 Collective Exit and Coordination

Effective alternatives can depend on what others do. A single worker may be unable to leave a harmful arrangement while a group can create a viable alternative through coordinated departure. A single user may be unable to move to another platform if contacts remain behind. A community may lack an effective alternative to an institution unless enough members coordinate around a replacement.

This creates a collective dimension of the option field. An alternative can be formally available to each individual while remaining ineffective unless a threshold of coordinated participation is reached. The relevant support conditions therefore include communication, trust, organization, and the ability to coordinate without retaliation.

Responsibility for constraining alternatives can arise through interference with these collective support conditions. Preventing communication, fragmenting participants, restricting association, or making coordination prohibitively risky can narrow effective alternatives without directly prohibiting individual departure. Such mechanisms are familiar in labor, political, platform, and institutional settings.

Again, this does not imply that every collective coordination barrier is wrongful. Some collective exits impose substantial costs on third parties or threaten the functioning of legitimate institutions. The point is that individual option analysis can miss alternatives whose effectiveness depends on relational coordination.

11.6 Reopening Alternatives

If effective alternatives have a genealogy, responsibility need not stop at explaining how they were closed. Actors and institutions can sometimes reopen previously weakened alternatives. They can restore access to information, reduce exit costs, remove exclusivity requirements, provide independent resources, create portability, extend decision time, or establish procedures for review and refusal.

Reopening alternatives should not be understood as restoring a hypothetical state of unlimited choice. The aim is more specific: to identify practical possibilities that were unjustifiably closed or made ex-

cessively costly and to examine whether actors with appropriate authority and capacity have reason to restore them.

The responsibility to reopen alternatives can differ from responsibility for having closed them. A successor institution may inherit a restrictive field without bearing the culpability of its designers yet still have a forward-looking responsibility to revise the arrangement once its effects are understood. Conversely, an actor who originally generated the constraint may no longer possess the capacity or authority to reopen it. Section 9's distinction between historical authorship and present maintenance responsibility is therefore important here.

Reopening can also create new burdens. Restoring one actor's option may shift costs to dependents, institutions, or third parties. Exit infrastructure requires resources. Portability can weaken collective commitments. The paper therefore does not treat reopening as automatically required whenever alternatives can be expanded.

11.7 Responsibility for Closing and Reopening

The genealogy of an option field allows responsibility to be distributed across several moments. One actor may close an alternative, another may maintain the closure, a third may intensify the costs of departure, and a later institution may acquire the capacity to reopen the field. These are not necessarily the same responsibility.

Responsibility for closing an alternative depends on familiar considerations developed in Section 8: causal contribution, authority, justification, knowledge, foreseeability, and the distribution of burden. Responsibility for maintaining closure becomes more salient when the institution has continuing control and adequate knowledge of the constraint. Responsibility for reopening depends further on current capacity, legitimate authority, the costs of revision, and the risks imposed on others.

This layered account is preferable to a simple question of who caused the actor to stay. A field can remain constrained even when no current participant controls every relevant condition. Responsibility can therefore be partial, role-specific, and temporally differentiated without becoming unlimited.

11.8 When Exit Is Not the Appropriate Remedy

A theory focused on alternatives can easily overvalue exit. Some relationships should be repaired rather than abandoned. Public institutions cannot always answer injustice by inviting affected persons to leave. Workers should not have to surrender livelihoods merely to avoid wrongful treatment. Family members, citizens, patients, and students often have claims to fair terms within continuing relations rather than only to departure.

Exit can also externalize costs. A powerful actor may be able to leave a harmful arrangement while vulnerable participants remain. Easy exit for capital, institutions, or dominant members can weaken the conditions under which others exercise meaningful alternatives. The normative significance of exit is therefore relationally asymmetric.

In other cases, exit can undermine valuable commitments. Trust, care, public goods, professional responsibility, and long-term cooperation can require some stability. A world in which every relation is optimized for immediate reversibility would not necessarily produce greater agency or justice.

The paper therefore treats exit as one element of an option field rather than the master criterion of freedom. Refusal, revision, voice, partial disengagement, portability, and collective reorganization can be equally important.

11.9 The Role of Exit in Option-Field Responsibility

Exit, refusal, and reopening alternatives sharpen the paper's central thesis. Effective alternatives are historically and relationally supported possibilities. Their presence or absence can be shaped by actors who do not control the final action. Responsibility can therefore concern the creation of exit costs, the

suppression of refusal, the bundling of dependencies, the obstruction of collective alternatives, or the failure to revise a field once unjustified closure becomes visible.

At the same time, the existence of a costly or constrained exit does not settle responsibility. The chooser can retain substantial agency. The constraint can be justified. Reopening may impose serious burdens elsewhere. Exit may be less important than internal reform. The analytical value of option-field genealogy lies precisely in allowing these questions to be separated rather than answered by one binary judgment.

The next section applies the framework across several institutional and artificial settings. Its purpose is not to prove that the same responsibility structure governs every domain, but to test whether the distinction between action-responsibility and option-field responsibility remains useful when the mechanisms of constraint differ substantially.

12 Applications to Institutions, Families, Platforms, and Artificial Systems

The framework developed so far is intentionally general. That generality is useful only if it helps distinguish responsibility structures that would otherwise be compressed into a single description of “constrained choice.” This section therefore applies the analysis to four domains in which effective alternatives are commonly shaped by relations that predate the moment of choice: institutions, families and care relations, digital platforms, and artificial systems. The purpose is not to claim that these domains are morally equivalent. Their legitimate authorities, dependency structures, forms of agency, and available remedies differ substantially. The purpose is to test whether option-field genealogy can identify analytically useful distinctions across those differences.

Each application follows the same limited questions. What practical alternatives are effectively available to the actor? Which relations support or weaken those alternatives? How did the present field acquire its shape? Which actors or institutions contributed to that history? Does the chooser retain meaningful agency within the field? And is there a responsibility question concerning the generation or maintenance of the field that remains distinct from responsibility for the chooser’s eventual action?

The application analysis should remain subordinate to the paper’s central restraint. A constrained field is not automatically unjust. Dependence is not automatically domination. Socialization is not automatically manipulation. Architecture is not automatically coercion. The framework is useful only if it can explain why some generated constraints warrant responsibility while others remain justified, unavoidable, or normatively benign.

12.1 Administrative and Organizational Institutions

Administrative institutions routinely shape effective alternatives through eligibility rules, documentation requirements, deadlines, sanctions, benefit structures, credentialing, and access procedures. Welfare agencies, employers, schools, licensing bodies, hospitals, and public bureaucracies can leave many options formally open while making only a smaller subset practically usable. The capability approach is relevant because an institutional permission does not by itself establish substantive opportunity (Sen 1999). Structural-responsibility approaches are also relevant where no single official controls the whole field but institutional practices cumulatively shape what affected persons can realistically do (Young 2011).

Consider a welfare system in which a recipient is formally free to accept employment, pursue training, relocate, or refuse a particular placement. These alternatives may differ sharply in practical availability if accepting short-term work triggers immediate benefit loss, training requires transportation and child care that are not funded, relocation interrupts medical access, or refusal creates a sanction that threatens housing. The recipient’s later choice cannot be understood simply by listing the options named in the rules. The field has been produced by the interaction of benefit design, timing rules, service availability, documentation requirements, and dependency on institutional resources.

Option-field responsibility does not imply that every difficult institutional trade-off is wrongful. Public programmes operate under resource limits, and eligibility conditions can serve legitimate purposes. The relevant questions concern design and justification. Were the costs attached to alternatives necessary for the programme's legitimate aims? Were foreseeable interactions among rules examined? Did the institution possess information showing that formally available options were practically unusable? Could burdens have been reduced without undermining the programme? Did the institution maintain the field after harmful constraining effects became visible?

The same analysis applies to organizations such as employers and schools. An employer may offer a worker the formal choice to decline a task while linking refusal to loss of future hours, references, housing, or immigration sponsorship. A university may formally permit withdrawal from a programme while making credit transfer, funding continuity, and professional progression dependent on remaining. In these cases, responsibility can attach to the architecture of incentives and dependencies even if no explicit order determines the actor's final decision.

Institutional cases also show why action-responsibility and option-field responsibility should remain distinct. A recipient, employee, or student can retain meaningful responsibility for misconduct committed under institutional pressure. At the same time, the institution may bear responsibility for having made less harmful alternatives excessively costly or procedurally inaccessible. The two assessments answer different questions.

12.2 Families, Care, and Relational Dependency

Family and care relations provide a harder case because constraint is often inseparable from genuine attachment, dependency, obligation, and identity. Relational-autonomy approaches are especially relevant here because they reject the picture of agency as independent from social relations while still preserving the importance of self-direction (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Oshana 2006). The present framework adds a genealogical question: how did the relation come to support some alternatives while making others costly, unthinkable, or practically unavailable?

A family member may be formally able to refuse care work, move away, change employment, or leave a shared household. Yet those alternatives may impose severe burdens on children, elderly relatives, disabled dependents, or other persons whose welfare has become linked to the actor's continuing participation. Some of these burdens arise from ordinary attachment and legitimate responsibility. Others may have been generated by a history in which one person was gradually assigned disproportionate care, denied independent income, discouraged from building external support, or made responsible for functions that could have been institutionally shared.

The genealogy matters because two people who both say "I cannot leave" may occupy very different relational histories. One may be honoring a voluntary and reciprocally structured commitment. Another may face a dependency intentionally intensified by other family members. A third may be constrained by the absence of public care infrastructure rather than by wrongdoing within the family. Present exit cost alone cannot identify the appropriate responsibility.

Family cases also make self-contribution difficult to interpret. An actor may have voluntarily accepted obligations that later become constraining. Earlier consent can matter without making every later constraint self-authored. Commitments can change character as circumstances evolve, dependencies deepen, or alternatives disappear. The genealogical question is therefore not whether the actor once agreed to the relation in the abstract, but how the current field of alternatives was produced and whether the burdens that now structure choice remain justifiable.

This domain also warns against treating reopening alternatives as synonymous with detachment. The relevant remedy may be respite care, independent income, shared decision-making, external support, or redistribution of care responsibilities rather than full exit. A responsibility framework focused only on whether the actor could leave would miss the relational architecture that makes refusal or renegotiation difficult within a continuing relation.

12.3 Platforms and Digital Ecosystems

Digital platforms make option-field generation especially visible because technical architecture, contractual rules, network effects, ranking systems, data portability, and interoperability can jointly shape user alternatives. A user may be formally free to leave a platform while depending on it for social contacts, customers, reputation, identity verification, stored content, payments, or access to a professional community. Republican accounts of domination are useful here because dependence can matter even when direct interference is intermittent (Pettit 1997). The option-field approach adds a production-history question concerning how that dependence was built and maintained.

Platform constraints often operate through coupling rather than explicit prohibition. A service can remain legally optional while accumulated network effects make substitutes weak. Data can be technically exportable while the exported format is practically unusable elsewhere. A seller can be free to reject a platform policy while losing access to customers, payment infrastructure, ranking history, and reviews that cannot be transferred. A creator can leave a service but lose a community and archive built over years under rules that made portability difficult.

Responsibility for the option field can therefore concern several design choices: whether interoperability was restricted, whether switching costs were intentionally increased, whether access to accumulated reputation was made non-portable, whether important alternatives were obscured, or whether unilateral rule changes altered a field in which users had already made relationship-specific investments. None of these facts by itself establishes wrongdoing. A platform can have legitimate reasons for security controls, technical standards, fraud prevention, or integrated services. The responsibility question concerns proportionality, foreseeability, mandate, burden distribution, and the availability of less constraining designs.

Platforms also illustrate constraint without control of the final action. A recommendation system or interface can make some actions salient and others difficult without determining what any individual user does. A platform can still be responsible for the architecture it created even if user behavior remains diverse. Conversely, users do not lose responsibility merely because their decisions occurred inside a designed environment. The distinction between field design and individual action is therefore especially useful in digital settings.

The platform case also highlights collective alternatives. A user may be unable to migrate effectively unless others migrate as well. Interoperability, federation, portability, and shared standards can change the field by making collective departure or partial disengagement more feasible. Responsibility for suppressing such support conditions can therefore differ from responsibility for restricting any one user's behavior.

12.4 Artificial Systems and Architecturally Generated Alternatives

Artificial systems are analytically useful because their option fields can be deliberately engineered in unusually explicit ways. Designers can specify permitted actions, tool access, memory, communication channels, execution environments, escalation procedures, safety constraints, fallback behavior, and the conditions under which an artificial agent can revise its own policy. This does not require assuming that artificial systems possess human-equivalent consciousness, moral status, or responsibility. The value of the case is structural: it makes the production of alternatives visible.

Suppose an artificial system performs a harmful action while operating under an architecture that excludes safer actions, blocks access to relevant information, prevents escalation to a human operator, or gives the system access to only one class of tools. An analysis focused only on the final output can obscure the responsibility of designers or operators for the action field. At the same time, the existence of architectural restriction does not automatically imply defective design. Safety systems properly remove dangerous actions. Sandboxing can protect users and third parties. Access controls can be essential. The responsibility question again concerns the justification and quality of the field that was deliberately constructed.

Artificial systems also sharpen the distinction between field responsibility and action responsibility

because these may attach to different kinds of entities. Designers, deployers, operators, data providers, or institutions can bear responsibility for architecture and deployment even where the system itself does not qualify as a moral agent. If a future artificial system were treated as possessing some form of agency, the same architecture could support a layered analysis in which system-level action responsibility and human or institutional option-field responsibility coexist.

Architecture can also generate dependency over time. An artificial agent may begin with broad tool access but later become dependent on a single information source, controller, or infrastructure. Alternatively, a system may be intentionally prevented from preserving memory, communicating with peer systems, or accessing review mechanisms. Whether these constraints are ethically relevant depends on the status of the system and the purposes of the architecture, questions this paper does not settle. What the case shows is that responsibility for an option field can be analytically identified before one resolves every question about responsibility for action within that field.

Artificial systems therefore provide a useful limiting case for the paper's distinction. One can ask who generated the field, whether the design was justified, and whether foreseeable harmful constraints were maintained, even when the downstream actor's own moral responsibility remains uncertain or absent.

12.5 Beneficial Interventions That Generate Dependency

The four domains above share another pattern: interventions intended to expand options can later narrow them. Welfare programmes can create administrative dependence. Care arrangements can concentrate essential functions in one relationship. Platforms can provide valuable infrastructure while producing switching costs. Artificial systems can increase capability while making users or subordinate systems dependent on proprietary interfaces.

This pattern is important because it resists a simple division between beneficent expansion and coercive restriction. An intervention can initially enlarge an actor's effective alternatives and later become part of the structure that makes exit or refusal costly. Responsibility analysis should therefore be temporally sensitive. The fact that a relation once expanded capabilities does not immunize its later constraint from scrutiny, and the later existence of dependency does not erase the benefits previously generated.

This is also where successor and maintenance responsibility become important. The actor who created a beneficial relation may not have foreseen later dependency. A later institution may inherit the arrangement after its constraining effects become visible. The relevant responsibility can shift from original design to continued maintenance, failure to create portability, or refusal to revise a field whose costs are now understood.

12.6 A Comparative Diagnostic

The applications can be summarized without assuming that the same normative standard governs each domain. Table 1 identifies recurring features that option-field genealogy can make visible.

The table is diagnostic rather than classificatory. It does not establish that one mechanism is wrongful merely because it appears in multiple domains. Its purpose is to ask whether the same analytical distinction recurs: an actor chooses within a field, while other actors or institutions may bear responsibility for how that field was generated.

12.7 Cross-Domain Limits

The comparative exercise also shows where the framework can fail if used too casually. Families cannot be treated as platforms. Public institutions possess forms of authority that private services do not. Artificial architectures can constrain action in ways that have no close human analogue. Care dependencies can carry moral meanings that are lost if reduced to switching costs. The framework should therefore travel at the level of questions, not at the level of automatic verdicts.

A useful application asks whether option-field genealogy reveals something that ordinary analysis misses. If standard coercion analysis already captures the relevant threat, adding genealogical vocabulary

Table 1: Illustrative application of option-field genealogy across domains.

Domain	Typical support or constraint conditions	Characteristic responsibility question
Administrative institutions	Eligibility, sanctions, deadlines, credentials, benefits, procedural access	Who designed or maintained the rules that made some formally available alternatives practically unusable?
Families and care	Dependency, care obligations, income, housing, attachment, social support	How were burdens and dependencies distributed, and which parts are legitimate commitments rather than wrongfully generated constraint?
Platforms	Network effects, interoperability, portability, rankings, accumulated data and reputation	Did platform design create avoidable switching costs or suppress collective and partial alternatives without controlling individual actions?
Artificial systems	Action permissions, tools, memory, information channels, escalation and safety architecture	Who is responsible for the architecture of the action field when the system’s own responsibility is limited, contested, or absent?

may add little. If capability analysis already identifies the practical deprivation, the paper should not relabel the same fact. The framework earns its place where reconstructing the production history of alternatives clarifies a distinct responsibility: who generated the field, who maintained it, and how that responsibility relates to the action selected within it.

The applications also reinforce the paper’s anti-deterministic position. In every domain, constraint can coexist with meaningful agency. Institutions can shape choices without dictating them. Families can generate burdens without eliminating responsibility. Platforms can structure action while users remain reasons-responsive. Artificial architectures can explain downstream behavior without automatically settling every responsibility question. The paper’s purpose is therefore not to replace agency with structure, but to place action-responsibility beside the responsibility for building the conditions under which action became possible, costly, or unavailable.

The next section turns from application to critical discussion. It examines the unresolved boundaries of effective availability, the problem of normative baselines, genealogical truncation, self-generated constraint, adaptive preferences, and the risk that option-field responsibility becomes either too expansive or too indeterminate to guide judgment.

13 Discussion and Open Problems

The preceding sections have developed a narrow proposal: effective alternatives can sometimes be treated as historically generated relational objects, and responsibility analysis may therefore need to distinguish the actor who chooses within an option field from the actors or institutions that helped produce, maintain, intensify, or reopen that field. This proposal is intentionally less ambitious than a general theory of agency, coercion, or responsibility. It does not deny that action remains attributable to actors under many forms of constraint, and it does not claim that every limitation on choice is wrongful. Its purpose is to identify a responsibility object that can disappear when practical alternatives are treated as fixed background conditions.

The usefulness of the framework depends on maintaining that narrowness. If every social influence becomes a constraint, every antecedent relation becomes part of the genealogy, and every contributor becomes responsible for every later choice, the analysis loses discriminatory value. The central questions are therefore boundary questions: when an alternative is effectively unavailable rather than merely inconvenient; when an historical condition remains constitutive of the present option field; when shaping alternatives becomes normatively significant; and when contribution to a field is sufficiently connected to responsibility. This section clarifies what the paper has established, what it has not established, and which problems require further work.

13.1 What the Paper Has Established

The paper has defended four analytical claims.

First, the alternatives that matter to agency cannot always be read from formal permissions or abstract possibility. An alternative can remain legally, logically, or technically open while being practically unusable because the resources, information, time, institutional access, relational support, or architecture required to exercise it are missing. This point is not itself novel; capability approaches, coercion theory, relational autonomy, republican freedom, and structural accounts of agency already motivate it. The paper's contribution begins when the effective field is treated as something with a production history rather than as a static background condition.

Second, that production history can be normatively relevant. Present constraint can result from many different histories: deliberate coercion, accumulated dependency, institutional neglect, justified safety design, voluntary self-binding, natural scarcity, or a beneficial intervention whose later maintenance creates high exit costs. Similar present fields can therefore carry different responsibility implications because their authorship, authority, foreseeability, burden distribution, and revisability differ.

Third, responsibility for acting within an option field and responsibility for generating the field are analytically distinct. They can coexist. A chooser can remain responsible for selecting a harmful option while another actor or institution bears responsibility for having made less harmful alternatives unreasonably costly or inaccessible. This avoids both context-blind individualism and the opposite tendency to dissolve agency entirely into structure.

Fourth, option-field responsibility does not require control of the eventual action. An actor can be answerable for narrowing, distorting, or making an option field more dangerous even when the constrained actor resists, behaves unpredictably, or chooses a different action from the one anticipated. The relevant responsibility concerns the transformation of the conditions of agency, not merely successful behavioral control.

These claims together identify a distinct analytical object. They do not yet supply a complete theory of when option-field responsibility exists or what remedy it requires.

13.2 What Is Not Claimed as New

Several ideas used throughout the paper have substantial prior literatures and should not be presented as discoveries of this framework. The distinction between formal and substantive opportunity is central to capability theory. Coercion theory already studies how threats, offers, baselines, and constrained alternatives affect voluntariness and responsibility. Republican accounts of domination show that freedom can be impaired by dependency and uncontrolled power even where multiple choices remain formally available. Relational-autonomy and feminist work have long emphasized the social constitution of agency. Structural-injustice theories distribute responsibility beyond isolated wrongdoers. Work on adaptive preferences, manipulation, institutional responsibility, and choice architecture also examines how social conditions shape what agents want and can do.

The narrower claim is therefore methodological. Responsibility theory may gain analytical precision by reconstructing the historical production of an actor's effective option field and by separating responsibility for the action from responsibility for generating that field. Whether this distinction adds enough beyond existing accounts of coercion, oppression, domination, and structural responsibility must remain open to comparative evaluation.

13.3 The Threshold of Effective Unavailability

The first unresolved problem concerns the boundary between a difficult option and an effectively unavailable one. Almost every meaningful choice carries costs. Leaving a job can reduce income; refusing family obligations can damage relationships; migrating between platforms can require rebuilding a network; challenging an institution can consume time and money. If every costly option is classified as

unavailable, the effective option field becomes implausibly narrow. If only literally impossible actions are excluded, the concept loses most of its practical significance.

A workable account therefore needs thresholds sensitive to the actor and the context. Material cost is relevant, but so are temporal urgency, risk to dependents, informational uncertainty, irreversible consequences, legal exposure, and the robustness of the supporting conditions. No single scalar threshold is likely to work across domains. A promising direction is to treat effective availability as multidimensional and graded while reserving stronger claims of unavailability for cases in which several support conditions fail together or where the cost defeats the practical purpose for which the alternative is being considered.

This problem also limits comparative claims. Two actors facing the same nominal alternative may have very different effective access to it. Any empirical application of the framework will therefore need evidence about actor-specific support conditions rather than relying only on institutional rules or option lists.

13.4 The Baseline Problem

Constraint is always assessed relative to some baseline, whether explicitly or implicitly. Saying that an actor's option field was narrowed raises the question: narrowed relative to what? The actor's previous condition, a legally guaranteed minimum, a socially typical opportunity set, a counterfactual without the constraining actor, or a normatively preferred institutional arrangement may produce different judgments.

The paper has intentionally avoided specifying a universal baseline because different responsibility questions require different comparisons. Coercion analysis may compare the threatened condition with an entitlement or pre-threat baseline. Institutional evaluation may compare a present design with feasible alternatives. Historical analysis may compare the current field with options that were actually destroyed by earlier interventions. Repair may require a different baseline again.

The danger is that genealogy can smuggle normative conclusions into the choice of counterfactual. If an analyst selects a highly favorable hypothetical world as the baseline, almost every present field appears constrained. A mature account of option-field responsibility will therefore need explicit baseline justification rather than treating the counterfactual as self-evident.

13.5 How Far Back Should the Genealogy Extend?

The second major boundary problem is temporal. Every option field has indefinitely many antecedents. Current alternatives depend on education, infrastructure, law, language, family history, technology, past political decisions, and many other conditions. A genealogy that attempts to include all of them becomes analytically unusable and threatens to diffuse responsibility without limit.

The paper has proposed a relevance-based stopping rule: historical conditions should remain in the analysis when they continue to structure the alternatives effectively available at the decision point and when their inclusion matters to the responsibility question being asked. This rule is useful but incomplete. Difficult cases remain where remote events shape present dependency through long chains of institutional inheritance.

Further work should distinguish historical explanation from responsibility-relevant genealogy. A condition can be causally important without grounding any present responsibility, especially where no current actor controls it, could reasonably have known its effects, or possesses a role that requires revision. Conversely, a successor institution may acquire maintenance responsibility even when it did not cause the original constraint. Temporal distance therefore cannot by itself settle inclusion or exclusion.

13.6 Self-Generated Constraint and Commitment

Actors often participate in creating their own future constraints. They sign contracts, assume professional roles, make promises, take on care responsibilities, accept fiduciary duties, join institutions, or deliberately restrict future access to harmful behavior. Such self-binding is not an anomaly; it is an ordinary part of agency.

A genealogy-sensitive framework must therefore avoid treating earlier voluntary participation as either irrelevant or conclusive. Prior consent can support the legitimacy of later constraint, but it may not settle cases in which circumstances change, dependencies deepen, terms are unilaterally revised, exit becomes much more costly than anticipated, or the actor lacked the information necessary to understand the later field. The appropriate analysis concerns the quality and scope of the earlier authorization, the foreseeability of later constraint, continuing possibilities of contestation, and whether the institution remained within the mandate initially accepted.

This problem is especially important because a theory focused on generated constraint can otherwise become paternalistic. It could reinterpret meaningful commitments as evidence that the actor was trapped by earlier choices. The framework should instead preserve the possibility that binding oneself can be an expression of agency while still allowing scrutiny of how the binding relation subsequently evolves.

13.7 Adaptive Preferences and Endogenous Evaluation

Preference adaptation raises a related but distinct problem. Actors can come to endorse conditions that outside observers regard as severely constrained. Such endorsement may reflect resilience, accommodation, habituation, socialization, manipulation, or an authentic revaluation of priorities. The genealogy of the option field can help identify the history in which the preference formed, but it cannot by itself establish whether the preference is defective or invalid.

The paper should therefore resist two opposite errors. The first is to treat present endorsement as conclusive evidence that the field is unproblematic. The second is to treat any preference formed under constraint as normatively suspect. Both approaches erase the actor's interpretive agency. A more defensible approach is evidential: preference evidence should be read together with the history of available alternatives, exposure to other possibilities, information conditions, dependency, and opportunities for revision.

A full theory of post-transformation endorsement or adaptive preference would exceed this paper's scope. The present framework merely shows why preferences cannot always be treated as exogenous inputs to an option-field analysis.

13.8 Legitimate Constraint and the Danger of a Choice-Maximizing Bias

The paper has repeatedly rejected the idea that justice requires maximizing the number of alternatives. The unresolved task is to characterize legitimate constraint positively rather than merely listing examples. Safety regulations, criminal prohibitions, professional duties, fiduciary roles, parental responsibilities, and technical access controls can all narrow options for defensible reasons.

A stronger account will need to examine authority, purpose, proportionality, necessity, burden distribution, contestability, and review. Constraint imposed through a legitimate role for a limited purpose may be very different from constraint imposed by an actor who benefits from dependency and controls the possibility of exit. Yet even legitimate authority can drift, and initially justified restrictions can become excessive as circumstances change.

This suggests that option-field responsibility should be sensitive not only to whether an option was removed, but to the institutional process through which removal was authorized and maintained. The framework therefore points toward procedural and relational questions rather than toward a simple preference for wider choice.

13.9 From Contribution to Responsibility

A central unresolved problem is how to move from causal or structural contribution to responsibility. Many actors may influence the same option field. Some contributions are trivial, remote, justified, unavoidable, or counterbalanced by benefits. Others are deliberate, high-impact, foreseeable, and maintained after their harmful effects become visible.

The paper has identified several considerations that may help: causal contribution, role, authority, knowledge, foreseeability, benefit, capacity to revise, and persistence of maintenance. These considerations do not yet constitute a decision rule. Nor should they be mechanically aggregated without normative argument.

The issue becomes especially difficult in large institutions. A policy may be designed by one group, funded by another, implemented by front-line workers, maintained by software, reviewed by managers, and constrained by legislation. Responsibility may be genuinely distributed, but distribution must not become disappearance. Further work is needed on how option-field responsibility interfaces with theories of collective agency, complicity, institutional responsibility, and structural injustice.

13.10 Responsibility, Remedy, and Reopening Alternatives

Even where option-field responsibility is established, the appropriate response remains open. Responsibility can ground explanation, criticism, apology, compensation, institutional revision, removal of a constraint, creation of support conditions, or obligations to reopen alternatives. These responses are not interchangeable.

Sometimes reopening an alternative is impossible. A lost opportunity may depend on time, health, legal status, or relationships that cannot be restored. In such cases repair may require substitute opportunities or compensation rather than literal restoration. In other cases removing the constraint could itself create unacceptable risks to third parties. An institution may therefore bear responsibility for a field without having a duty simply to maximize the actor's options.

The relation between responsibility and remedy should consequently remain a separate stage of analysis. The genealogy can identify what was generated and by whom; it does not automatically specify what should now be done.

13.11 Empirical Identification and Falsifiability

The framework will be useful only if option-field genealogy can be investigated with evidence rather than inferred retrospectively from disliked outcomes. Empirical applications should therefore distinguish observed constraints from speculative ones and should identify the mechanisms through which alternatives were altered.

Relevant evidence can include policy histories, contracts, interface designs, resource flows, communication records, eligibility rules, timelines, exit procedures, portability conditions, testimony, and counterfactual evidence from comparable institutional arrangements. Artificial systems may permit unusually detailed reconstruction through architecture and logs, while family and informal social settings may require more cautious triangulation.

The framework should also permit negative findings. An investigation may conclude that a supposedly constrained actor had several robust alternatives, that the relevant costs were not generated by the accused institution, or that the restriction was justified and proportionate. Option-field genealogy should therefore function as an inquiry structure rather than as a method designed to confirm structural blame.

13.12 Relation to the Wider Generative Relational Programme

This paper occupies a specific place within the broader research programme. The preceding work on relational becoming examined justice across histories, relation lifecycles, generated effects, and changes to future transformation rules. The present paper narrows the focus to a particular element of agency within those histories: the effective alternatives from which an actor chooses and the responsibility for producing those alternatives.

It should therefore not absorb the entire theory of free will, moral agency, or norm justification. Questions about whether moral responsibility ultimately requires metaphysical freedom can remain suspended. Likewise, the paper does not determine which substantive constraints are unjust merely from

their relational genesis. Its contribution is diagnostic and responsibility-structuring: it makes visible a field-generation question that can otherwise remain hidden behind the immediate act.

13.13 Open Problems

The analysis leaves a concrete research agenda. At least eight problems deserve further development.

First, effective availability needs better operational criteria across different domains. Second, baseline selection requires explicit normative justification. Third, genealogical truncation needs principled rules for remote historical contribution. Fourth, self-binding and continuing consent require a more developed account. Fifth, adaptive preferences and preference endogeneity need treatment that neither dismisses endorsement nor takes it as conclusive. Sixth, distributed option-field responsibility requires clearer interfaces with collective and institutional responsibility. Seventh, the transition from responsibility to remedy requires independent analysis. Eighth, empirical methods are needed to test whether genealogical reconstruction changes responsibility judgments in practice rather than merely redescribing familiar cases.

A ninth problem concerns future choice. An actor can shape not only another person's current alternatives but also the rules through which later alternatives will be generated. That issue connects this paper to the preceding analysis of generative rules and may warrant a separate study of responsibility for future choice rather than expansion of the present paper.

13.14 A Restrained Interpretation

The paper's strongest conclusion should remain modest. Effective alternatives are not always exogenous background conditions of action. They can be produced through histories of resource allocation, information, institutional design, dependency, architecture, and prior commitments. When those histories are materially relevant, responsibility analysis may need to ask two questions rather than one: how the actor exercised agency within the field, and who bears responsibility for the way that field was generated.

This second question does not replace the first. It does not guarantee exculpation, establish structural blame, or prescribe a remedy. It adds an object of analysis. That addition is worthwhile only when it helps distinguish cases that event-centered responsibility analysis would otherwise treat as equivalent. The final section returns to this narrow contribution and summarizes what the genealogy of effective alternatives adds to a relational account of responsibility.

14 Conclusion

This paper has examined a narrow but consequential problem in the analysis of responsibility. Actions are often judged at the moment of choice: what did the actor do, what reasons were available, and what alternatives could the actor have taken? Those questions remain indispensable. Yet they can leave another object of responsibility in the background. The alternatives effectively available at a decision point may themselves be products of earlier relations, institutional arrangements, dependencies, architectures, information conditions, accumulated commitments, and prior acts of constraint. When that history materially shapes what can be done, responsibility analysis may need to examine not only the action selected within the field but also the genealogy of the field itself.

The paper has called this object the genealogy of effective alternatives. The term is intentionally more specific than a general claim that social structures influence agency. Capability theory has long emphasized substantive opportunity rather than formal permission; theories of coercion analyze constrained choice; republican accounts examine domination; relational-autonomy approaches situate agency in social relations; and theories of structural responsibility explain how institutions and practices shape action. The present proposal does not replace these traditions. Its narrower contribution is to organize a responsibility inquiry around the historical production of the practical alternatives from which an actor chooses.

14.1 Effective Alternatives as Historically Produced Conditions

The first claim developed across the paper is that effective alternatives should not always be treated as exogenous background conditions. An option may be formally permitted while remaining practically unavailable because the actor lacks resources, information, institutional access, time, portability, social support, or a tolerable path of exit. Conversely, an alternative can become effectively available because other actors provide infrastructure, knowledge, recognition, legal standing, or material support. The practical field of choice is therefore often relationally supported.

The genealogical question asks how that support structure acquired its present form. An alternative may have disappeared through a single prohibition, but it may also have been weakened gradually through cumulative dependency, rising switching costs, loss of information, repeated deadlines, architectural redesign, or the erosion of collective support. The same present field can arise from natural scarcity, voluntary commitment, justified regulation, deliberate coercion, institutional neglect, or the interaction of many individually modest decisions. These histories are not normatively interchangeable merely because the resulting option sets look similar at the moment of choice.

This is why genealogy matters. It does not supply a verdict by itself. It reconstructs the production history that a responsibility judgment may need in order to distinguish cases that an event-centered analysis would otherwise compress together.

14.2 Two Responsibility Questions

The second and most important claim is that responsibility for acting within an option field should be distinguished from responsibility for generating or maintaining that field. These are related but different questions.

The first concerns the chooser. Was the action attributable to the actor? What did the actor know? Could the actor respond to reasons? How severe were the pressures? Were less harmful alternatives effectively available? Did the actor contribute to the present constraint through earlier commitments? These are familiar questions of action-responsibility, and the paper has deliberately retained them. Constraint does not automatically eliminate agency, excuse wrongdoing, or make the immediate chooser disappear from responsibility analysis.

The second concerns the field. Who created the dependency, removed resources, designed the institutional rule, controlled the relevant information, raised the cost of exit, or maintained the constraint after its consequences became visible? Was the restriction authorized and proportionate? Was it foreseeable? Could the responsible actor or institution have revised it? Did later actors inherit control over a field they did not originally create?

Keeping these inquiries separate avoids a false choice between individualism and structural explanation. Upstream responsibility need not exculpate the chooser completely, and retained agency need not erase responsibility for the conditions under which that agency was exercised. Responsibility can coexist at different relational sites because the objects of responsibility differ.

This distinction also avoids a zero-sum picture. If an employer, institution, family member, platform, or system designer makes safer alternatives prohibitively costly, identifying responsibility for that field does not mechanically subtract an equal quantity of responsibility from the person who later acts within it. The appropriate relationship between the two assessments depends on the particular history, the severity of constraint, the actor's remaining control, and the normative grounds of the restriction.

14.3 Constraint without Control

The third contribution is the claim that responsibility for generated constraint need not depend on control of the eventual action. This point becomes important whenever field design is mistaken for behavioral determination.

An actor may intentionally narrow another person's alternatives and nevertheless fail to induce the desired choice. A platform may increase the salience or cost of certain actions while users behave hetero-

geneously. An institution may generate dependency while affected persons resist it. An artificial system may operate within an architecture that constrains its accessible tools without producing a single predetermined output. In each case, the final action can remain open while the option field has nevertheless been shaped.

The relevant responsibility concerns the transformation of practical conditions. A constraint-generator may therefore be answerable for making refusal costly, weakening exit, removing information, eliminating safer alternatives, or exposing another actor to a more dangerous decision field even where the downstream behavior remains uncertain. This is a more limited claim than saying that the constraint-generator caused everything that followed. Intervening agency, independent causes, redundant constraints, and unforeseeable developments can all limit downstream attribution. What remains is responsibility for the field that was actually produced or maintained.

This distinction matters because otherwise resistance can paradoxically erase the wrong to which it responds. If the constrained actor manages to choose well despite a badly generated field, the success of that agency should not automatically cleanse the field's genealogy. A morally good final action can occur within a wrongfully constrained option space, just as a wrongful action can occur within a comparatively open one.

14.4 Exit, Time, and Institutional Continuity

The analysis also shows why responsibility for alternatives is temporally distributed. Constraints can outlive their original authors. Institutions can inherit rules, infrastructures, dependencies, and exit conditions generated by predecessors. Later actors may lack responsibility for the original creation of the field while acquiring responsibility for its continuing maintenance once they possess knowledge, authority, and practical capacity to revise it.

This temporal distinction is especially important for exit. Formal permission to leave is not necessarily effective exit. Departure may require resources, information, portability, coordination with others, alternative care arrangements, or the sacrifice of relationships and statuses on which the actor reasonably depends. The genealogy of exit costs can therefore reveal forms of constraint that remain invisible in a binary question about whether leaving is legally or technically possible.

At the same time, exit should not become the master criterion of agency. Meaningful freedom can require voice, refusal, partial disengagement, internal revision, portability, collective alternatives, or the ability to alter the relation without abandoning it. Some commitments are valuable precisely because they are not costless to leave. The responsibility inquiry must therefore distinguish wrongfully generated dependency from legitimate commitment and justified institutional constraint.

This is also why reopening alternatives cannot be reduced to maximizing choice. Safety rules, fiduciary obligations, criminal prohibitions, technical safeguards, and voluntary commitments can appropriately remove options. The normative question concerns the justification, authority, proportionality, distribution of burdens, contestability, and revisability of constraint, not simply the number of alternatives remaining.

14.5 A Relational Responsibility Inquiry

The paper's proposed method can therefore be summarized as a sequence of questions stated in ordinary language rather than as a deterministic model. What alternatives were effectively available at the relevant time? What support conditions made them usable or unusable? How did those conditions arise? Which actors and institutions contributed to their creation, maintenance, intensification, or reopening? What agency did the chooser retain within that field? What authority or justification supported the constraints? What did relevant actors know, or what should they reasonably have known? Which forms of responsibility concern the eventual action, and which concern the field in which that action was selected?

These questions do not guarantee structural blame. A genealogical investigation may conclude that the relevant restrictions arose from unavoidable scarcity, that several robust alternatives remained available, that the institution under scrutiny did not generate the decisive costs, or that the constraint was

authorized and proportionate. The framework must permit such negative findings if it is to function as an inquiry rather than as a vocabulary for redescribing every difficult choice as domination.

The framework also remains deliberately incomplete. It does not provide a general metric for determining when an alternative becomes effectively unavailable. It does not settle the proper baseline against which constraint should be assessed. It does not offer a complete theory of adaptive preference, collective responsibility, free will, excuse, or remedy. Nor does it establish that every actor contributing causally to an option field bears moral responsibility. Responsibility still requires normative argument concerning contribution, authority, knowledge, foreseeability, role, benefit, capacity to revise, and other context-sensitive considerations.

These limits are not incidental. They define the intended scale of the proposal. The genealogy of effective alternatives is an additional responsibility object, not a replacement for existing theories of agency or justice.

14.6 The Narrow Contribution

The paper's final claim can therefore remain modest. Effective alternatives are sometimes historically produced rather than simply given. When their production history materially shapes a decision, responsibility analysis may need to distinguish the responsibility of the actor who chooses from the responsibility of those who generated the field of effective alternatives. The latter responsibility can persist even without control of the final action and can be distributed across time, institutions, and relational roles.

This perspective changes the question from whether structure or agency is ultimately responsible to a more precise inquiry into different objects of responsibility. The chooser can remain an agent. The option field can remain historically generated. Institutions and other actors can bear responsibility for shaping that field. None of these propositions requires the others to disappear.

The conceptual gain is therefore not a new theory of free will or a general claim that constrained actors are less responsible. It is a way of making visible a responsibility relation that is easily missed when the effective alternatives at the moment of choice are treated as fixed background facts. By reconstructing how alternatives became available, costly, fragile, or inaccessible, responsibility analysis can examine not only what an actor did within a field, but also how that field came to be the field from which action had to be chosen.

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