Episodic Agency and the Epistemic Conditions of Responsibility

Abstract

This article argues that contemporary accounts of agency mislocate its normative significance by treating it as a standing capacity—typically reason-responsiveness or reflective control—available across normal conditions of action. While such accounts aim to preserve responsibility under determinism, they risk over-ascribing agency and thereby trivialising both freedom and responsibility. I propose an alternative conception of agency as episodic and epistemically conditioned. Most action proceeds under conditions of epistemic alignment, in which inherited norms, roles, and evaluative frameworks render conduct intelligible without requiring authorship in a strong sense. Agency becomes explanatorily salient only when this alignment fails—when epistemic rupture disrupts practical intelligibility and forces agents to take ownership of the normative terms under which action proceeds. By analysing epistemic dissonance as an agentially significant event, the paper shows how agency can ground responsibility without being a continuous feature of action or belief. It further explains how agency may be structurally foreclosed within institutional roles through constitutive failure, even where intention and competence remain intact. Re-locating agency in this way preserves the normative core of responsibility while avoiding both metaphysical inflation and sceptical denial.

Keywords

agency; responsibility; compatibilism; authorship; epistemic alignment; epistemic rupture

1. Introduction: The Mislocation of Agency

Contemporary debates about free will and responsibility are often framed as disputes about control under causal constraint. Compatibilist strategies, in particular, seek to reconcile responsibility with determinism by locating agency in the possession of certain capacities—reason-responsiveness, reflective endorsement, or rational self-governance—so that responsibility is secured whenever action issues from suitably reasons-connected internal states. While these approaches differ in detail, they share a common ambition: to show that agents are responsible so long as their behaviour can be explained by the exercise of capacities that remain appropriately responsive to reasons. This article argues that the shared strategy mislocates agency. Treating agency as a standing capacity available across normal conditions encourages an over-ascription of agency, and thereby trivialises both freedom and responsibility: if agency is presumed wherever behaviour is competent and intelligible, it loses its distinctive explanatory role—a conflation already diagnosed in early compatibilist work distinguishing intentional action from free agency (Watson 1975, 207–209; cf. 219).

This standing-capacity picture is not confined to marginal views. It structures influential accounts of moral responsibility grounded in hierarchical endorsement, reasons-responsiveness, and rational self-governance, where agency is secured by the continuing availability of capacities for reflective control or sensitivity to reasons under normal conditions (Frankfurt 1971, 7–10; Watson 2004, 73–80; Fischer and Ravizza 1998, chs. 2–3). Although these approaches differ in their metaphysical commitments, they converge on a shared explanatory strategy: responsibility is underwritten by the agent's possession of capacities that remain stably available across ordinary contexts of action. It is this structural commitment —rather than any particular doctrine—that systematically generates the inflationary tendency at issue.

This inflationary tendency is visible in adjacent debates about 'doxastic freedom' and epistemic responsibility. Wagner argues that compatibilist attempts to extend 'freedom' to mental attitudes by weakening its conditions end up emptying the concept of its point: once 'control' is relaxed to mere reason-responsiveness, the same template threatens to ascribe 'freedom' to fear, hope, and anger, eroding freedom's normative distinctiveness (Wagner 2017, 3028; 3044–3045). Rettler, by contrast, defends the legitimacy of doxastic blame by articulating an influence-based control condition: although we lack direct intention-based control over belief, we can execute intentions to engage in active reflection that causally improves our beliefs, and this, she argues, is sufficient for legitimate doxastic blame (Rettler 2018, 2213–2215; 2225). Taken together, these positions illustrate a broader pressure within contemporary theory: the need to identify some continuously available form of control capable of underwriting responsibility even in the absence of voluntary choice.

These positions are not endorsed here. They instead motivate a structural diagnosis. The pressure to locate agency in a continuously available 'control' capacity—whether reason-responsiveness or reflection—treats agency as a background property of competent agents rather than as something whose normative salience depends on the conditions under which ownership becomes unavoidable. The paper's central claim is that this assumption should be rejected. Agency is not best understood as a stable property or standing resource of action. It is an episodic and epistemically conditioned phenomenon, emerging most sharply when inherited frameworks of practical understanding cease to settle what is to be done.

Most action proceeds under conditions of epistemic alignment, where reasons appear salient, options are practically ranked, and courses of action are settled without requiring authorship in a strong sense. In such cases, intentional and even deliberative behaviour may be fully intelligible without invoking agency as a distinct explanatory factor. Agency becomes explanatorily salient only when this alignment fails—when epistemic rupture forces the agent to take ownership of the normative terms under which action can proceed. Re-locating agency in this way does not amount to scepticism about responsibility, nor does it rely on neuroscientific debunking of will or autonomy. The aim is not to deny responsibility, but to clarify when and why agency matters in explaining it.

2. The Standing-Capacity Assumption in Compatibilism

Despite their internal diversity, compatibilist accounts of responsibility share a common structural assumption: that agency consists in the possession of a standing capacity available to agents across normal conditions. Whether framed in terms of reason-responsiveness, reflective endorsement, or rational self-governance, agency is treated as a general resource possessed by competent agents, absent pathology. The result is a default picture on which ordinary action is presumptively free whenever it flows from internal states suitably connected to reasons. Freedom, on this view, is secured not by the conditions under which action must be owned, but by the continuing availability of capacities that underwrite control.

The claim here is not that compatibilist accounts ignore manipulation, coercion, or bypassing conditions. On the contrary, much of the literature is devoted precisely to identifying when such factors undermine control and thereby defeat responsibility (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, chs. 4–6; Hieronymi 2006, 51–60). The present objection is orthogonal. It concerns cases in which no such undermining is present—where intention, deliberation, and responsiveness are intact—yet agency fails because the normative framework itself absorbs authorship into background alignment. Even in the absence of bypassing or coercion, action may proceed in a way that leaves no intelligible space for ownership.

Wagner's critique of compatibilist 'control' strategies in the doxastic domain helps isolate the problem. Once freedom is defined by a weakened form of reason-responsiveness, it becomes unclear why the same form of 'freedom' should not attach to affective or dispositional states such as fear, hope, or anger, thereby dissolving freedom's normative distinctiveness into ordinary psychological transitions (Wagner 2017, 3044–3045). Rettler's account is more discriminating, but structurally similar. She distinguishes intention-based, reason-based, and influence-based control, and argues that influence-based reflective control—executing intentions to engage in active reflection that improves belief—is sufficient to satisfy the control condition for legitimate doxastic blame (Rettler 2018, 2213–2215; 2225). In both cases, the explanatory burden is borne by the continuing availability of a capacity that agents can, in principle, deploy whenever responsibility is at stake.

The objection here is not that such accounts misdescribe many ordinary cases, nor that they fail to secure important moral intuitions about accountability. It is that the standing-capacity picture obscures a distinct class of cases in which agents act intentionally, competently, and even reflectively, yet lack genuine authorship. In those cases, action proceeds smoothly under stable normative alignment—roles,

expectations, and institutional norms settle what counts as a reason and what counts as success—so the explanatory work is done by background alignment rather than by ownership.

By treating agency as continuously available, standing-capacity models tend to assimilate alignment-driven action and authorship-demanding action to a single phenomenon, differing only in degree of control or reflectiveness. What they miss is a structural difference in kind. The following sections propose a different explanatory architecture: agency becomes normatively salient not where action is merely intelligible or reasons-responsive, but where the agent cannot bypass ownership because inherited alignments no longer determine what is to be done.

3. Epistemic Dissonance as an Agential Event

Much intentional action unfolds against a background of epistemic stability. Reasons appear salient, norms intelligible, and options practically ranked without sustained scrutiny. Under such conditions of epistemic alignment, agents can act competently—and sometimes deliberatively—while remaining within inherited frameworks that settle the normative terms of action. Reflection, where it occurs, typically operates within these frameworks rather than upon them, reaffirming rather than renegotiating the standards that govern practical judgment.

This section proposes that agency becomes explanatorily salient at moments of epistemic dissonance, understood not as psychological discomfort but as an epistemic event: a disruption in the coherence of practical understanding. When reasons conflict, expectations diverge, or the situation becomes practically under-determined, inherited alignments no longer settle what is to be done. The background that previously rendered action intelligible ceases to function as a guide. At that point, reflection is not a standing capacity underwriting agency; it is an imposed demand created by the breakdown of alignment. The agent must now determine not merely which option to take, but how the normative terms of action themselves are to be understood. Agency becomes visible here not as responsiveness, but as authorship.

The relevant contrast is therefore not between easy and difficult deliberation, but between choice within a settled normative frame and authorship of that frame itself. In ordinary hard cases, agents must determine which permissible option best satisfies an established set of reasons. In epistemic rupture, by contrast, what is unsettled is not merely which option to take, but what counts as a reason, a requirement, or a success condition for the role or commitment in question. The agent is no longer selecting under a framework, but determining how the framework itself is to be understood (cf. Watson 2004, 88–90; Hieronymi 2006, 60–64). It is this shift from option-selection to frame-authorship that marks the emergence of agency in the strong sense proposed here.

This framing clarifies the limit of 'control' strategies. Wagner's objection is that weakening freedom to fit determinism risks making the notion indiscriminate, extending it to states where its normative role is lost (Wagner 2017, 3044–3045). Rettler's influence-based view shows how sophisticated such strategies can be—she makes active reflection central to satisfying the control condition, and ultimately characterises doxastic control as the capacity to execute intentions to reflect in epistemically improving ways (Rettler 2018, 2225). The episodic view inverts this explanatory order. Reflection does not ground agency: epistemic rupture triggers reflection, and thereby forces authorship where alignment would otherwise allow action to proceed 'on rails'. What matters is not the possession of a reflective capacity,

but the necessity of negotiating breakdown when inherited structures no longer determine what counts as a reason.

A caveat is required. Epistemic dissonance is not proposed as a necessary or sufficient condition for responsibility in general. Agents may be responsible without experiencing dissonance, and dissonance itself does not guarantee authorship. Its role is diagnostic rather than criterial. Dissonance marks the conditions under which agency becomes a distinct normative phenomenon—when ownership cannot be deferred because the framework that normally absorbs responsibility into background alignment has ceased to function.

4. Situation, Alignment, and the Limits of Situated Agency

Recent work in philosophy of action and cognitive science has rightly emphasised the extent to which agency is shaped by situations. Accounts of situated and embodied agency show that behaviour is often guided by environmental structures, social expectations, and practical affordances that pre-shape what appears possible or salient (Dewey 1938, ch. 6; Gallagher 2017, ch. 2). This section acknowledges the force of these insights while arguing that situational shaping, taken on its own, does not yet amount to agency in the strong sense. What such accounts typically lack is a criterion for when authorship becomes normatively salient rather than merely responsive.

Situation-based approaches characterise practical contexts as structured along dimensions that influence action. Heijmeskamp analyses situations along four axes—complexity, determinedness, the establishment of expectations, and restrictiveness—showing how these features shape what actions appear obvious, appropriate, or available to agents (Heijmeskamp 2024, 4–7). In highly determined and socially stabilised situations, agents commonly experience action as a straightforward response to what the situation 'calls for'. Much of the practical work appears to be done by the situation itself.

These analyses provide an important corrective to voluntarist pictures of agency. However, they also risk collapsing authorship into responsiveness. If agency is identified with the successful navigation of situational affordances, it becomes continuous with skilled coping or adaptive engagement. Agency is then attributed wherever action unfolds intelligibly, regardless of whether the agent must take ownership of the normative terms under which action proceeds.

This tendency is particularly evident in continuity-based accounts of situated agency. Weichold's sensorimotor account conceives action as ongoing dynamical coupling between organism and environment, emphasising smooth interaction and continuity rather than breakdown (Weichold 2018, 768–773; 774–780). Such accounts capture important aspects of embodied skill, but they leave little conceptual space for distinguishing between action that flows from stable alignment and action that demands authorship. This is not to deny that skilled coping can be agentive in a thin sense, but only to deny that such responsiveness exhausts the conditions of normative authorship.

The episodic conception proposed here draws that distinction explicitly. Situational dynamics undoubtedly shape behaviour powerfully, but most such shaping operates below the threshold of agency. Alignment with situational norms or expectations can guide action without requiring agents to renegotiate the normative framework itself. Agency becomes salient only when situational determination

breaks down—when complexity, conflict, or normative incoherence render inherited alignments insufficient to settle what is to be done.

From this perspective, indeterminate or problematic situations mark a qualitative shift rather than a more demanding instance of the same phenomenon. Where a situation no longer determines action, responsiveness gives way to authorship. The agent must assume responsibility for revising, reaffirming, or resisting the normative terms that previously governed action. Situation-based models describe how agents are guided by situations; the episodic model specifies when agents must take responsibility for them.

This does not reject situated cognition. It rejects only the inference from situated responsiveness to agency as such. By distinguishing alignment-driven action from moments of epistemic rupture, the episodic model preserves the insights of situation-based approaches while avoiding their tendency to treat agency as continuous and ubiquitous.

5. Episodic Agency: From Alignment to Authorship

The preceding analysis has shown that much contemporary theorising about agency presupposes a picture of agents as bearers of standing capacities—capacities for control, reflection, or reason-responsiveness—that remain available across normal circumstances. This section advances a different account. On the view proposed here, agency is not a continuously exercised capacity but an episodic achievement, arising at points of epistemic rupture where inherited alignments no longer settle what is to be done.

Most intentional action proceeds under conditions of epistemic alignment. Practical situations are typically experienced as determinate: reasons appear salient without contest, options present themselves as already ranked, and reflection operates within boundaries fixed in advance. In such cases, action may be intentional, reasons-responsive, and even deliberative, yet appeal to agency as a distinct explanatory factor adds little. What explains the action is the stability of the underlying epistemic framework rather than any active authorship over alternatives.

Consider a routine professional decision governed by established procedural norms. An administrator receives an instruction to apply a standard eligibility rule to a borderline case. Ordinarily, the rule determines the outcome: the relevant criteria are known, the justificatory structure is settled, and the action can be explained entirely by reference to institutional role and standing policy. The agent may reflect, but only within the space the framework already provides. Nothing in the situation yet requires her to assume authorship in a strong sense; she acts as a competent bearer of a role.

Suppose, however, that the instruction now conflicts with a newly issued internal directive, or with a professional code that articulates an incompatible obligation. The same case no longer admits of a straightforward application. The administrator is not confronted with a proliferation of options, but with the collapse of the background that previously rendered the option obvious. The rule no longer settles what counts as the appropriate action; the role no longer determines how its own standards are to be interpreted. At this point, the situation becomes practically indeterminate without becoming practically complex. What is required is no longer given by alignment, and the agent can no longer discharge

responsibility by appeal to routine competence. The question of what to do re-emerges as genuinely open because the normative terms under which action proceeds have themselves become unstable.

It is in this sense that agency becomes explanatorily indispensable only when alignment fails. At moments of epistemic rupture—when reasons no longer transparently apply, when normative expectations conflict, or when the situation becomes practically under-determined—agents can no longer rely on inherited structures of intelligibility. Agency, on this account, consists in the forced assumption of authorship under such conditions. As argued above, what is forced here is not merely deliberation but authorship of the normative frame itself, rather than the exercise of any standing capacity (Frankfurt 1971; Watson 2004). Unlike hierarchical or identification-based accounts, the episodic model does not locate authorship in reflective endorsement of motives, but in authorship of the normative framework within which endorsement itself becomes possible. The agent must now decide not merely between options, but between ways of understanding what the role, the rule, or the commitment itself requires.

This explains why reflection should not be understood here as a standing capacity. Reflection is not a background resource agents may exercise at will; it is a demand imposed by breakdown. Where epistemic alignment remains intact, reflective endorsement merely reiterates inherited commitments. Where alignment collapses, reflection becomes unavoidable because the agent must negotiate the rupture itself—by revising commitments, resisting pressures toward premature closure, or re-authoring the normative terms under which action can proceed. In this sense, agency is not exercised over a situation but in response to its breakdown.

This episodic conception helps clarify why responsibility can be preserved without positing free will as a metaphysical faculty. Wagner argues that compatibilist strategies that weaken freedom conditions risk trivialising the concept by extending it indiscriminately to mental states and dispositions, thereby undermining its normative force (Wagner 2017, 3044–3045). What matters for responsibility is not the possession of a special freedom-conferring capacity, but whether the agent is called upon to take ownership of a course of action when inherited frameworks no longer suffice. Agency, so understood, is neither ubiquitous nor illusory; it is condition-dependent and normatively thick.

Recent work on situated agency reinforces this diagnosis while leaving its core implication underdeveloped. Heijmeskamp notes that situations may become practically indeterminate—marked by complexity, restrictiveness, or conflicting expectations—such that action is no longer straightforwardly guided by available affordances (Heijmeskamp 2024, 7–9). What such accounts tend to miss is that indeterminacy is not merely a descriptive feature of situations but the site at which agency becomes visible as authorship rather than responsiveness. The episodic model makes this explicit: agency emerges precisely where situational determination breaks down.

Finally, episodicity should not be confused with rarity. Institutional environments can suppress epistemic rupture through routinisation and role-fixation, but they can also provoke it through conflicting demands, normative incoherence, or crises of legitimacy. The claim is therefore not that agency is exceptional in moral life, but that it is conditional rather than continuous. Recognising this allows us to explain both widespread conformity and moments of principled resistance without inflating agency into a permanent feature of action as such.

6. Constitutive Failure and Role-Bound Agency

The episodic conception of agency can be further clarified by examining how agency may fail from within institutional roles, without any corresponding failure of intention, deliberative competence, or practical rationality. This section develops the notion of constitutive failure as a distinct mode of agency failure compatible with episodicity and resistant to psychologistic or sociological reduction.

Constitutive failure arises where an agent's attempt to understand herself as a non-complicit author of her actions becomes normatively unintelligible given the role-embedded standards that structure the practices in which she participates. As Pauer-Studer argues, professional and institutional roles are constituted by normative principles that shape what forms of self-ascription are intelligible for role-bearers (Pauer-Studer 2018, 646–649; cf. Kutz 2000, ch. 3; List and Pettit 2011, ch. 1). An agent may therefore act intentionally, competently, and even reflectively, while nonetheless failing to secure a coherent self-understanding as a non-complicit agent.

Crucially, this form of failure is not psychological. It does not depend on ignorance, coercion, motivational deficit, or weakness of will. Nor does it rest on causal contribution to wrongdoing. Instead, the failure is normative and epistemic: the agent's role-based commitments undermine the possibility of intelligibly dissociating herself from the principles that structure the institutional practice itself. In such cases, attempts at self-exoneration fail not because they are insincere, but because they presuppose a form of authorship the role no longer permits (Pauer-Studer 2018, 651–654).

It is important to distinguish constitutive failure from more familiar modes of compromised agency. Unlike weakness of will, it does not involve conflict between judgment and motivation. Unlike ignorance, it does not turn on lack of awareness of relevant facts or norms. Unlike coercion or compulsion, it does not involve external pressure that overrides deliberation. In constitutive failure, the agent may deliberate competently, endorse her reasons sincerely, and experience herself as acting voluntarily. What fails is not control, but intelligibility: the role itself deprives the agent of a standpoint from which she can coherently understand her action as her own in the relevant normative sense (cf. Watson 2004, 84–90). Continued alignment with institutional norms can therefore block agency more effectively than overt constraint, precisely because it preserves the appearance of ordinary authorship while structurally absorbing responsibility into role-performance.

This analysis helps explain prolonged compliance without appeal to bad faith or moral blindness. Where role-embedded norms remain stable, agents may persist in patterns of action that are increasingly normatively compromised without experiencing rupture. Alignment continues to render action intelligible, and reflection, where it occurs, merely reaffirms the role's internal standards. Agency fails here not because the agent refuses to take responsibility, but because the institutional framework continues to make non-authorship appear coherent. This helps explain how institutional agency can be structurally displaced onto collective forms without invoking bad faith or weakness of will (List and Pettit 2011, 43–48).

Constitutive failure thus complements the episodic account of agency. It marks situations in which epistemic alignment persists despite mounting normative incoherence. The agent continues to act within a stable framework of role expectations, yet that very stability blocks the possibility of genuine

authorship. Agency does not disappear in the sense of intentional action or competence; it becomes structurally foreclosed.

Where epistemic rupture occurs—where role-embedded norms are called into question and alignment breaks down—agency may re-emerge as episodic authorship, forcing renegotiation of practical identity. Where rupture is suppressed, agency fails not through incapacity but through the continued intelligibility of a role that absorbs responsibility into institutional form.

This analysis abstracts from historical particulars. What matters is the structural insight: agency can fail even where intention, deliberation, and competence remain intact if the normative conditions for intelligible self-ascription are undermined by the roles an agent occupies. Constitutive failure is therefore a standing risk of role-bound agency in complex institutions.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 'This Eliminates Free Will'

A natural objection is that if agency is episodic rather than continuous, the account effectively eliminates free will and thereby undermines responsibility. This objection rests on the assumption that responsibility requires the existence of free will as a standing metaphysical capacity. The present view rejects that assumption. What it denies is not responsibility, but the need to ground it in a distinct freedom-conferring faculty continuously possessed by agents.

Nor does the view restrict responsibility to rare exceptional moments; it denies only that responsibility must always be grounded in freedom.

Wagner argues that compatibilist attempts to preserve freedom by progressively weakening its conditions risk draining the concept of any substantive content, extending it indiscriminately to states and dispositions that no longer mark a distinctive normative achievement (Wagner 2017, 3035–3040). The episodic account adopts a different strategy. Rather than weakening freedom to save it, it abandons free will as a general property while preserving responsibility by relocating agency to the moments at which authorship is demanded.

This is not a sceptical position about responsibility. The view does not deny that agents are frequently responsible, nor does it claim that responsibility is illusory or exceptional. What it denies is only that responsibility must be explained by appeal to a continuously available capacity for free choice. Responsibility attaches not because agents always possess freedom, but because they sometimes cannot avoid taking ownership when epistemic alignment collapses. In this respect, the account preserves the core normative function of responsibility while dispensing with an inflationary metaphysics of will.

7.2 'This Is Sociology, Not Philosophy'

A second objection is that the account merely redescribes sociological or institutional dynamics under the guise of agency. This objection misidentifies the explanatory level at which the argument operates. The claim is not that social structures causally determine action, nor that responsibility is explained by

empirical patterns of compliance or influence. The claim is that normative conditions of intelligibility—conditions governing when an agent can coherently understand herself as an author—can themselves undermine or demand agency.

Pauer-Studer's analysis of complicity is instructive here. She shows that agency may fail through constitutive dependence on role-embedded norms that render non-complicit self-ascription unintelligible, even where intention, deliberation, and causal contribution remain intact (Pauer-Studer 2018, 654–656). This is not a sociological explanation but a philosophical one: it concerns the normative architecture of self-understanding and the conditions under which authorship can be coherently claimed. The episodic model generalises this insight. Agency is compromised or demanded depending on whether epistemic conditions permit or block intelligible self-ascription. No appeal to empirical prevalence or causal determination is required.

7.3 'Reflection Is Still Doing the Work'

A final objection is that, despite appearances, the account still relies on reflection as a standing form of control. If responsibility depends on reflective engagement, then episodicity seems merely rhetorical. This objection again conflates two distinct roles reflection can play.

Influence-based accounts of doxastic control, such as Rettler's, explicitly treat reflection as a stable capacity agents can deploy to bring their attitudes under rational influence (Rettler 2018, 2225). On such views, reflection grounds control, and control grounds responsibility. The episodic model rejects this stabilisation. Reflection does not ground agency; it is triggered by epistemic rupture. Where alignment holds, reflection is optional and derivative, serving only to reiterate inherited commitments. Where alignment fails, reflection becomes unavoidable because inherited structures no longer settle what is to be done.

Agency therefore does not rest on the availability of reflection as a general capacity, but on the necessity of negotiating breakdown when reflection can no longer be bypassed. What grounds responsibility is not reflective control, but the inescapability of authorship when epistemic alignment collapses.

8. Conclusion: Agency Without Illusion

This article has argued for a re-location rather than an elimination of agency. Against accounts that treat agency or free will as a standing capacity exercised across ordinary action, it has proposed an episodic conception of agency according to which authorship emerges at moments of epistemic rupture. These are points at which inherited alignments—normative, practical, or institutional—no longer settle what is to be done, and responsibility can no longer be deferred to background structures of intelligibility.

On this view, agency is neither ubiquitous nor illusory. It is real but conditional, structurally limited, and normatively thick. Its reality is not secured by metaphysical freedom or by possession of a general capacity for control, but by the demand placed on agents to take ownership when epistemic alignment collapses. Responsibility attaches not because agents always possess free will, but because they sometimes cannot avoid authorship when the normative terms of action themselves become unstable. Ordinary attributions of responsibility need not therefore presuppose contemporaneous authorship: they

may inherit their normative force from earlier or background episodes of agency through which roles, commitments, and alignments were originally assumed.

Re-locating agency in this way dissolves a persistent tension in contemporary debates. It explains how agents can be accountable without inflating freedom into a permanent feature of action, and how much ordinary conduct can remain intentional and normatively assessable without being fully agential in the strong sense presupposed by free-will theories. It also explains why responsibility may be both widespread and unevenly distributed across practical life: pervasive where alignment endures, but concentrated where rupture forces ownership.

The institutional implications are immediate. Where epistemic alignment is stable and reinforced, action tends toward conformity without requiring authorship, and responsibility is readily absorbed into role and procedure. Where alignment breaks down—through conflict, incoherence, or crises of legitimacy— agency becomes unavoidable, and resistance can emerge not as deviance but as an expression of authorship. The same framework thus accounts for both prolonged compliance and sudden moral re-orientation without appeal to weakness, bad faith, or exceptional freedom.

Understanding agency without illusion, as episodic rather than continuous, shifts philosophical attention from the metaphysics of free will to the epistemic conditions under which authorship becomes inescapable. The central philosophical task, this suggests, is not to secure freedom as a background property of agents, but to understand when and why responsibility can no longer be deferred.

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Epistemic Agency, Doxastic Responsibility, and Control

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