

Claus Janew

Centre, Horizon, and “Taking a Stand”: A Phenomenological Map of Decision Episodes

Abstract

This paper offers a phenomenological description of how conscious decision episodes are structured when we experience ourselves as facing a live choice and “taking a stand.” Drawing on Husserl’s object–horizon structure, Gurwitsch’s theme/field/margin, and James’s focus/fringe, I argue that such episodes instantiate an **i-structure**: a centre–horizon pattern in which (i) a minimal focal node represents “this situation” as a unified whole, and (ii) a surrounding field or horizon encodes articulated considerations, constraints, and practical possibilities. Over this structure, two gradients of determinacy can be discerned: **identity-determinacy** (how settled “what this is” is), increasing toward the centre, and **affordance-determinacy** (how settled “what I can still do” is), increasing toward the horizon/periphery. In “live” decisions, there is a phase in which the situation is firmly experienced as “this decision now,” yet more than one option remains experientially live. The transition from such a phase to settled commitment is what I call an **authored resolution**: an instance of “taking a stand” that is not mandated by reasons alone, not felt as random or alien, and experienced as “my doing.”

I do not use this analysis to argue for or against determinism or libertarianism. Rather, I present it as a descriptive map that, I suggest, any adequate theory of agential sourcehood—compatibilist or libertarian—ought to be compatible with. I connect this map to phenomenology of agency and self-knowledge (Sartre, Moran, Pacherie), to Chang’s work on hard choices, and to multi-level compatibilism (List). The core claim is that making the experiential and structural shape of “up-to-me” decision episodes more explicit helps clarify what is at issue when we say that agents “author” their commitments.

Keywords: free will phenomenology; phenomenology of agency; i-structure (centre–horizon structure); identity-determinacy; affordance-determinacy; authored resolution; hard choices; self-constitution

1. Introduction: from metaphysics to lived structure

Debates about free will and moral responsibility are typically framed in metaphysical terms: are the laws deterministic? Does the agent have alternatives in some deep sense? Are there “self-forming actions?” These questions matter. But they presuppose that we have some grip on what it is, from the inside, to **decide**—to experience ourselves as the sources of our commitments.

My aim in this paper is to provide a **phenomenological map** of a certain class of conscious episodes: those in which we experience ourselves as facing a live choice, weighing reasons, and ultimately “taking a stand.” I suggest that such episodes have a characteristic internal structure which can be abstractly described and which ought to constrain metaphysical theorizing.

The basic pattern is familiar from phenomenology and the psychology of attention:

- a **focal centre**—the thematized “this” of experience;
- a **field or horizon**—co-present but unthematized aspects;
- a **margin or periphery**—the outer edges of awareness (Husserl 1913/1982; Gurwitsch 1964; James 1890).

I take this pattern and, for ease of reference, label it an **i-structure** (“individual-structure”). In this context, the term is not meant to introduce a new ontology; it is a neutral label for the centre–field pattern I want to analyse in connection with agency and free-will debates. I use “centre–horizon” and “centre–field,” as well as “structure” and “pattern,” interchangeably for this basic experiential configuration, and I will focus on two features of it that organise what follows.

First, I distinguish two different *questions* we can ask of the same field—“what is going on here?” and “what can I still do?”—and show how they give rise to two different **determinacy gradients** over the same i-structure. Standard object–horizon discussions do not typically contrast these two questions in this way, and I argue that doing so helps clarify how identity-questions and affordance-questions are often conflated in accounts of deliberation.

Second, I isolate a **phase** of certain decision episodes—a “crossing phase”—in which:

- identity-determinacy at the centre is high (the situation is firmly experienced as “this decision now”),
- while affordance-determinacy there is still low (multiple options remain experientially live).

I then describe the shift from that phase to commitment as an **authored resolution** and connect it explicitly to existing notions of **self-constitution** (Moran’s “avowal” and Chang’s “will-based reasons”) and to multi-level branching models (List).

I assume a standard supervenience picture: whatever happens experientially is realized by underlying processes. Nothing in what follows presupposes or denies micro-indeterminism. The question is purely structural and experiential: **how**, from the first-person standpoint, are “up-to-me” decisions organized?

2. I-structure and its phenomenological pedigree

2.1 From object–horizon to i-structure

Husserl’s analyses of object-experience emphasize that any perceived object is given in profiles against a horizon of co-givenness: background context, partially anticipated aspects, and practical possibilities (Husserl 1913/1982). Aron Gurwitsch (1964) refines this into a tripartite structure:

- a **theme**—the object of focal attention;
- a **thematic field**—correlated items surrounding the theme;
- a **margin**—more remote background.

William James (1890) similarly speaks of the “very focus of my mind” and the “fringe” of consciousness, the halo of relations and tendencies that accompany the focal content.

In an object- or task-directed episode E:

- there is a **centre C**: the lived point at which “this” (glass, patient, task, problem) is taken as a unitary theme;
- there is a **field or horizon P**: a structured surround of partial profiles, contextual elements, and potentialities that co-belong to “this.”

2.2 Extending to deliberation

Deliberative episodes—choosing between options, weighing reasons—also instantiate this pattern. For example:

- You are torn between accepting an academic job in city A or a policy position in city B (a variant of Chang’s kind of case).
- There is a **centre C**: “this decision about my future now.” It is not just “thinking about A” or “thinking about B” but the unified sense that *this is the choice I must/should make at this juncture*.
- There is a **field/horizon P**: articulated considerations (salary, meaning, family, location), constraints (visa, timing), and various imagined scenarios under each option.

Again, the deliberation is not a simple list of thoughts; it has a structured centre–field organization.

Existing phenomenological work on agency and decision—Sartre’s discussion of anguish and the gambler’s resolve (Sartre 1943), Moran’s account of deciding as a form of self-knowledge (Moran 2001), Pacherie’s multi-level analysis of intentions and sense of agency (Pacherie 2007)—all presuppose such a pattern. My contribution is to make its internal differentiation more explicit along two dimensions—identity and affordance—and to use that to locate the experiential kernel of “taking a stand.”

3. Two questions, two determinacy gradients

The same i-structure $\langle C, P \rangle$ can be assessed for “determinacy” in at least two distinct dimensions, corresponding to two questions we naturally and often implicitly ask.

3.1 Identity-determinacy: “what is happening here?”

One dimension concerns **what** the episode is about:

ID-question. What is going on here? What is *this*?

Call the degree to which this question is settled **identity-determinacy (ID)**. In many ordinary cases:

- At **C**, ID is highest: I take it that *this is my choosing between A and B about my career*, or *this is my confronting this patient's diagnosis*, etc.
- In the **field/horizon P**, there is more latitude: background conditions and some aspects of the horizon could vary without altering the identification of “this” as that choice/problem/encounter.

So, with respect to ID, determinacy tends to **increase toward the centre**: the “whatness” of the situation crystallizes at the theme.

3.2 Affordance-determinacy: “what can I still do?”

A different dimension concerns **what remains to be done**:

AD-question. Given how things stand, what can I still do? Which courses of action are open, which closed?

Call the degree to which this question is settled **affordance-determinacy (AD)**. Here, the distribution tends to be different:

- The **field/horizon P** carries many constraints and channels: practical impossibilities, structural facts, social roles, institutional rules. These determine that certain trajectories are closed or highly unlikely.
- At the **very centre C**, in a *live* decision episode, there is a felt openness: *I have not yet gone one way or the other*, even though I am aware of constraints.

So, with respect to AD, determinacy tends to **increase toward the horizon/periphery**: the surround is rich in determinate practical facts; the core question “what will I do?” is not yet resolved.

James’s “fringe” already points to the idea that a thought comes with “halos” of tendency, of “which way it may go” (James 1890, ch. 9). Here, I simply make that dimension more explicit and contrast it with identity.

3.3 Gradients as heuristics

We then have, schematically:

- **ID**: low at horizon → high at centre,
- **AD**: low at centre → high at horizon.

I do not claim exact metrics or sharp boundaries. In some episodes, ID may be fuzzy at C (for example, when “what is going on” is itself in question). In others, AD may feel central (e.g. in a sudden realization “I could just walk out of this life”).

The point is that, in **paradigmatic, relatively non-pathological decision episodes**, these are useful tendencies:

- “what this is” is most settled at the focal centre;
- “what I can (still) do” is primarily encoded in the organized horizon of constraints and possibilities.

Thinking in terms of these two questions and gradients helps avoid a common conflation: we sometimes slide from “the situation is now clearly this” to “what I can do is already settled,” as if identity-determinacy at C automatically entailed affordance-determinacy there. Distinguishing them lets us see more clearly the juncture at which the situation is fixed but the future course of action is not.

4. “Live” decisions and the crossing phase

4.1 Live versus non-live and pathological cases

Call a decision episode S **live** when:

- more than one option is experienced as a genuine possibility;
- the agent has not yet committed himself;
- the episode has an i-structure $\langle C, P \rangle$ where:
 - C is experienced as “this decision about X now” (reasonably high ID);
 - P articulates considerations and consequences;
 - AD, with respect to which option will become actual, is still low at C.

This contrasts with:

- **mere ruminations** or fantasies, where options are entertained without being experienced as live (low AD in another sense);
- **compulsive or severely constrained cases**, where one option is experienced as forced (effectively high AD at C), despite the presence of alternatives at P.

I focus on the first class. The fact that the i-structure's ID/AD schema does not fit every case is not a flaw; it is a reminder that we are mapping **paradigmatic episodes of intact agency**. Deviations—in compulsion, severe depression, or radical akrasia—may themselves be diagnosable as partial breakdowns of the pattern (for example: ID failing to stabilize; AD being experienced as already closed at C).

4.2 Crossing as temporal phase

Within a live decision, the two gradients are not static; they evolve over time.

In some cases, the crossing phase is extended and vacillating: we oscillate between options, new considerations arise, our sense of “what is really at stake” sharpens. ID at C may slowly increase as we come to see that this is, say, not just a job choice but a life-shaping one. In parallel, AD at C may remain low for a period: multiple futures continue to press on us.

In other cases, the crossing can be very brief—almost instantaneous—especially in relatively trivial decisions (“coffee or tea?”) where ID is high quickly and the field of reasons is sparse.

Heuristically, the **crossing phase** is that temporal stretch in which:

- ID at C has reached a plateau: the agent now experiences himself as *being* at a decision point of a certain kind;
- yet AD at C is still low: nothing, from the agent's point of view, has yet settled what he will do.

It is in this phase that the sense of “it is now up to me” is often strongest.

4.3 The crossing phase as juncture

It is important not to reify the crossing as a “place” in the mind. It is a **juncture in the unfolding of the episode**, picked out by:

- what question the agent is bringing to bear (still “what shall I do?” rather than already “what will I now do?”);
- and how ID and AD stand relative to each other.

This is, I think, the experiential counterpart of what analytic authors sometimes describe as the shift from **deliberative stance** to **executive or intending stance** (Bratman 1987). From Moran's point of view, it is the juncture at which one moves from reflecting on reasons to **speaking for oneself** in avowal (Moran 2001, ch. 4).

5. Authored resolution and self-constitution

5.1 Taking a stand: before, during, after

What is it like to pass from the crossing phase to a settled decision? Here, existing descriptions converge.

Sartre's image of the gambler who resolves never to gamble again dramatizes the sense of **anguished freedom** and of a decision that “institutes” a new attitude, not just discovers it (Sartre 1943). Moran emphasizes that, in deciding, we do not simply uncover a prior preference but **commit** ourselves, taking responsibility for that commitment (Moran 2001). Pacherie distinguishes between forming a long-term intention and its subsequent guidance of proximal action, which shifts the phenomenology from openness to execution (Pacherie 2007).

In the vocabulary developed here:

- **Before** authored resolution, during the crossing phase, the i-structure $\langle C, P \rangle$ is organized around a yet-unresolved question; ID at C is high, AD is low.
- **During** the resolution, there is a “tilt” in how C is filled (one option becomes the content of “this is what I will do”) and in how P is structured (reasons and imagined futures reorganize around that content).
- **After** resolution, ID remains high but AD at C has increased: the course is now, for the agent, settled. The episode shifts into an intending/executing mode.

I use the term **authored resolution** for those junctures where this transition is experienced as something the agent *does*—an act of taking a stand—rather than something that simply happens to him.

Authored resolution (phenomenological characterization). In a live decision episode S, an authored resolution is a transition out of the crossing phase in which:

- one option A_j is now taken as what *I will do*;
- the field/horizon P reorganizes around A_j : considerations favouring A_j recede into justifying background; considerations favouring other options are redescribed as “what I am giving up” rather than live pulls;
- and the subject experiences this reorganization as a self-constituting move—*his* taking a stand—rather than as the mere revelation of a hidden psychological fact.

This connects directly with Moran’s idea of **avowal** as a kind of self-constitution: when I say “this is what I shall do,” I am not reporting an antecedent state but **committing myself**, thereby partly making it the case that this is my settled intention (Moran 2001). On the present picture, such avowals typically coincide with or immediately follow authored resolutions at crossing phases.

5.2 Hard choices, will-based reasons, and reconfiguration

Ruth Chang’s discussion of **hard choices** and **will-based reasons** further clarifies what is distinctive about authored resolutions in some cases (Chang 2017). When options are on a par—neither better, worse, nor equally good—the balance of “given” reasons does not single out a unique rationally required choice. Chang argues that, in choosing one option over another in such cases, we can generate new, **will-based reasons**: reasons constituted by our commitment itself.

In our earlier example:

- During the crossing phase, Alice faces A (academic job) and B (policy position) as on a par. ID at C is “this is my hard choice about who to be,” AD at C is low.
- In an authored resolution, Alice may, for instance, commit to A and thereby “make it true” that *being an academic* is now among the reasons that count in her future deliberations.
- Structurally, this can be seen as enriching the field/horizon P: new will-based considerations enter and stabilize both ID and AD in a new configuration.

On this view, authored resolutions are not merely the moment we happen to pick an option. They are the junctures at which **self-constituting acts**—in Moran’s sense—and **the creation of will-based reasons**—in Chang’s sense—coincide with a reorganization of the i-structure.

6. How the map might serve different theories

6.1 For compatibilists

For compatibilists, especially those emphasising reasons-responsiveness and ownership (Fischer & Ravizza 1998), the i-structure map offers:

- a **more structured phenomenological target**: reasons-responsiveness can be seen in how P is organized and updated; ownership is felt most vividly at authored resolutions;
- a way to articulate what is meant by saying that, at the agential level, “more than one outcome is possible” even if, at some micro-level, the evolution is fixed: agential openness corresponds to crossing phases where AD at C is low while ID is high.

Christian List’s multi-level compatibilism, for instance, models agents as higher-level systems with branching agential trajectories (List 2014, 2019). The present analysis can be read as a **first-person correlate** of his formal branching structure: crossing phases are where, in experience, those branches are most salient, and authored resolutions are where, in Moran’s language, I *speak for myself* by choosing among them.

6.2 For libertarians

For libertarians (e.g. Kane 1996), especially those who privilege certain “self-forming actions,” the map can serve as a **phenomenological anchor** without pre-judging metaphysics:

- Self-forming actions are typically described as **decisions under significant conflict**, where the agent feels torn between competing reasons and must decide who he will be. Those are paradigmatic crossing-phase episodes.
- If indeterminism is to be located anywhere, libertarians often place it at those decisive junctures. The i-structure description helps say **where those junctures are** experientially and what features they have.

My point is not that compatibilists and libertarians must agree on ontology, but that both can agree that the experiences in which freedom and responsibility are most vividly at stake have the sort of centre–horizon shape and ID/AD dynamics I have described.

7. Conclusion: what the map claims, and does not claim

I have tried to articulate a structural description of a familiar but philosophically significant class of episodes:

- object- or task-directed;
- organized by a centre–horizon i-structure;
- involving a *live* choice and, in some cases, a self-constituting commitment.

The i-structure, the ID/AD gradients, the notion of a crossing phase, and the idea of authored resolution are meant as **organising tools**:

- they make explicit how the questions “what is going on here?” and “what can I still do?” are answered in different parts and phases of the same experiential field;
- they help pick out a juncture—the crossing phase—where our sense of “up-to-me-ness” is typically strongest;
- they locate authored resolutions—the experiential kernels of taking a stand—in the temporal transition out of that juncture.

I have not claimed that:

- this pattern holds for all forms of agency, let alone for all actions (pathological cases, compulsions, background habits will need separate treatment);
- this structure resolves the metaphysical free-will debate;
- existing phenomenology of agency is deficient.

Rather, I offer this as a **clarificatory map** that synthesises strands from Husserlian and post-Husserlian phenomenology with insights from analytic discussions of hard choices, self-constitution, and agential possibility. If successful, it should help both sides of the free-will debate say more clearly what kinds of experiences their theories must accommodate, and furnish phenomenologists with a slightly sharper vocabulary for describing the “shape” of deciding.

References

- Bratman, M. (1987). *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*. Harvard University Press.
- Chang, R. (2017). “Hard Choices.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 3(1), 1–21.
- Fischer, J. M., & Ravizza, M. (1998). *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gurwitsch, A. (1964). *The Field of Consciousness*. Duquesne University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1913/1982). *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book*. (Trans. F. Kersten). Nijhoff.
- James, W. (1890). *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1. Henry Holt.
- Janew, C. (2014). *Dialogue on Alternating Consciousness: From Perception to Infinities and Back to Free Will*. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*, 5(4), 351–391.
- Kane, R. (1996). *The Significance of Free Will*. Oxford University Press.
- List, C. (2014). “Free Will, Determinism, and the Possibility of Doing Otherwise.” *Noûs*, 48(1), 156–178.
- List, C. (2019). *Why Free Will Is Real*. Harvard University Press.
- Moran, R. (2001). *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton University Press.
- Pacherie, E. (2007). “The Sense of Control and the Sense of Agency.” *Psyche*, 13(1), 1–30.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943/1956). *Being and Nothingness*. (Trans. H. E. Barnes). Philosophical Library.

Author's note

This paper was drafted and iteratively revised with extensive assistance from large-language-model tools. The overall conception and final endorsement of the arguments are mine, and I take responsibility for the content.

I have used the term "infinitesimality structure" (i-structure) elsewhere (e.g., Janew 2014), but have scaled it down to "individual-structure" for this paper. However, within this limited scope, the two terms are essentially synonymous.

Personal website: <https://free-will.de>