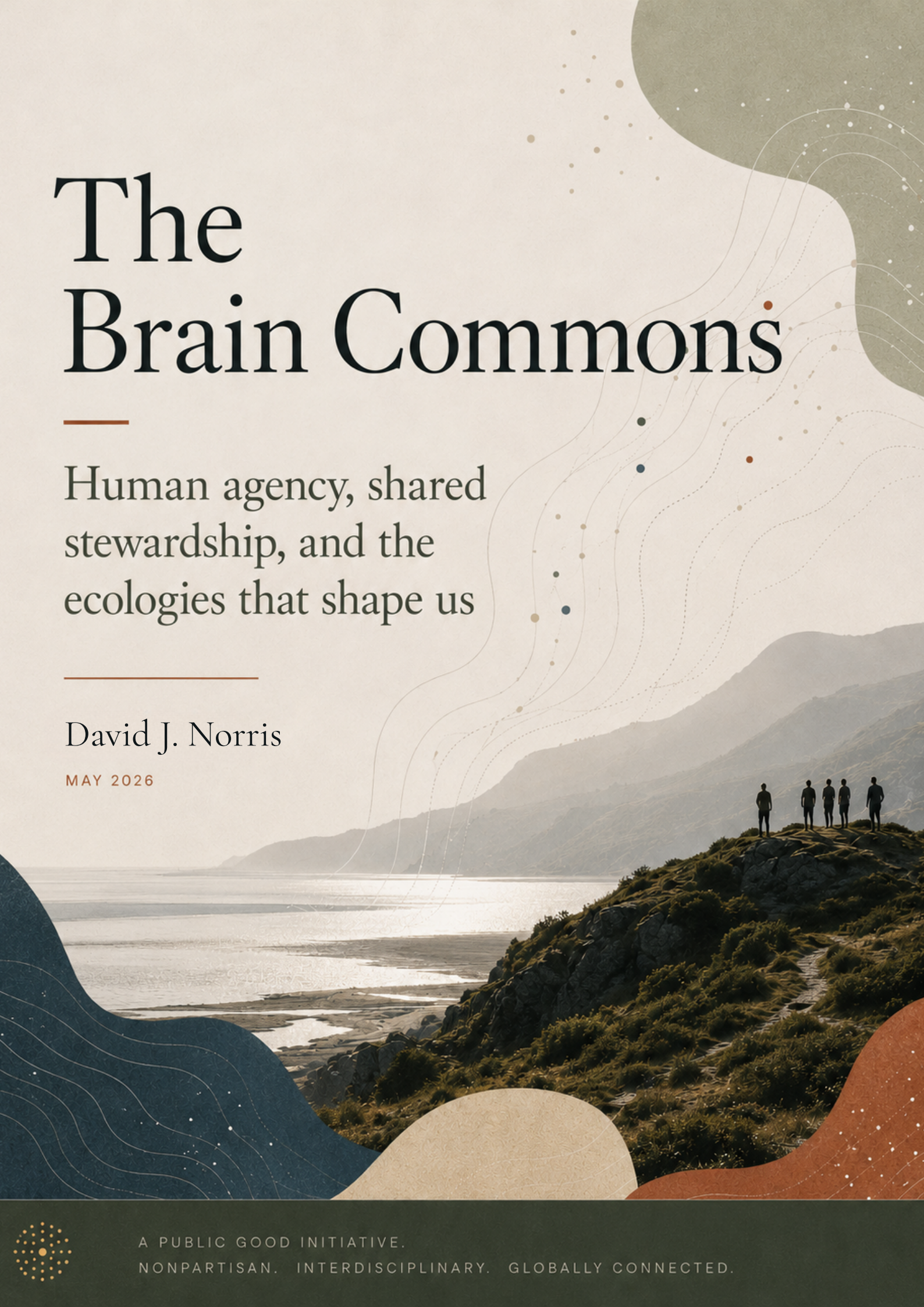


The Brain Commons

The background of the cover features a series of wavy, concentric lines in shades of green, blue, and orange, resembling topographical maps or neural pathways. These lines are interspersed with small dots of various colors. In the lower right, a landscape scene shows a rocky cliff with green vegetation, a path leading up to it, and five silhouetted figures standing on the peak, looking out over a body of water and distant mountains under a hazy sky.

Human agency, shared
stewardship, and the
ecologies that shape us

David J. Norris

MAY 2026

A circular logo composed of many small dots arranged in a grid-like pattern, with a larger dot in the center.

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The Brain Commons

Human agency, shared stewardship, and the ecologies that shape us

Central Proposition

Human agency does not arise in isolation. It is the lived, relationally arising capacity to judge, respond, refrain, and participate meaningfully in the world. It is real in the person, but never privately produced.

Agency is formed within ecologies: the relationships, places, technologies, institutions, histories, rhythms, and obligations through which people come to notice, make sense, care, refuse, act, and participate.

These ecologies are not neutral. Some create room for attention, trust, judgement, recovery, restraint, and meaningful participation. Others make agency harder to sustain. They fragment attention. They compress judgement. They burden care. They thin trust. They make pause, refusal, and sustained thought harder to hold. They leave people trying to remain clear, steady, and responsible within conditions that work against them.

This is the contradiction now pressing across care, work, education, family life, technology, and civic participation. Contemporary life depends on people being able to think clearly, regulate themselves, care for others, judge wisely, refrain when needed, and participate meaningfully, while many of the conditions around them make those capacities harder to hold.

In the age of generative AI, this concern can no longer remain at the margins. The conditions shaping attention, judgement, trust, imagination, authorship, work,

learning, care, refusal, and participation are being redesigned in real time, at scale, often before we have developed the language, institutions, or shared practices to understand what is being altered.

The failure is not that we care for individuals. The failure is that we often care for individuals while leaving untouched the ecologies that keep producing the need for care.

This paper introduces the Brain Commons as a way of seeing and stewarding that shared terrain: the field through which human agency is shaped, strained, captured, protected, or restored.

Executive Summary

Human agency is increasingly being treated as an individual responsibility while the conditions shaping it remain under-examined.

Across care, work, education, family life, technology, and civic participation, we are often quicker to name what is happening in the individual than to trace the wider field in which that difficulty has taken form. We can describe the symptoms, the behaviour, the burnout, the dysregulation, the disengagement. We are less practised at asking about the field around that strain: the environments people inhabit, the rhythms and expectations they are living within, and the relations that either support or erode their capacity to respond.

This is not simply a gap in compassion. It is a gap in perception. The visible burden is often individuated before the field is understood.

When a child struggles, the focus may land on the child before it reaches the classroom rhythm, sensory environment, learning design, family pressure, or wider systems moving through that child's day. When a worker is exhausted, the focus may land on resilience or mental health before it reaches workload, interruption, managerial design, time poverty, relational strain, or the design of work itself. When a family is overwhelmed, the focus may land on family functioning before it reaches housing pressure, administrative complexity, care burden, institutional

fragmentation, or the cumulative abrasion of trying to live within systems that do not join up.

These individual responses are not always wrong. Often they are humane, necessary, and urgent. The person must be seen. But when the field remains under-seen, the burden keeps being reproduced. The person returns to the same conditions, and the intervention is asked to do more than it can hold.

This paper begins with a more disciplined doubleness of vision: to see the person clearly, and to see the field more truthfully. That doubleness is only the entry point. Once the person and field are held together, a more complex ecology comes into view: relations, histories, technologies, institutions, rhythms, incentives, and places all moving at once. What is needed is not a fixed map, but an observational lens and a navigating compass for a dynamic terrain.

The aim is not to look past the individual, nor to dissolve responsibility into abstract systems. It is to recognise that human agency is not held by the individual alone.

Human agency is not isolated independence. It is the lived capacity to judge, respond, refrain, and participate meaningfully in the world, formed through relation and shaped by conditions no person creates alone. It is lived in persons, but never privately produced. Agency includes action, but it is not reducible to visible movement. It also lives in pause, restraint, refusal, care, and the capacity to remain meaningfully present to what is being asked.

Because agency is formed through relation and conditions, it is also vulnerable to them. It can be supported, strengthened, and drawn forth. It can also be driven, captured, manipulated, exhausted, or redirected.

The Brain Commons gives language to this shared field. It is not a metaphor for the brain alone, nor a list of individual capacities. It points to the relations and conditions through which agency finds room to take form — or is narrowed, burdened, redirected, and diminished.

To speak of a commons is to recognise that these conditions are shared, vulnerable, consequential, and not infinitely self-renewing. They can be depleted. They can be enclosed. They can be extracted from. They can also be stewarded.

The commons introduces obligation without collapsing into moralism. Where agency depends on shared conditions, care cannot stop at the individual carrying the visible burden.

The person must remain visible. The field must become answerable. The relations between them are the work of stewardship.

I. The Problem We Keep Misreading

A great deal of modern care, management, education, and governance begins where strain becomes visible.

The pattern appears wherever human capacity is under pressure. A child cannot settle. A worker cannot keep up. A family cannot cope. A clinician cannot sustain the load. Each visible difficulty calls for response. The child may need support. The worker may need relief. The family may need practical help. The clinician may need protection. The difficulty is real. Care must never become so abstract that it forgets the life immediately before it.

But visible difficulty also narrows attention. Once strain appears in the person, the response gathers around the person: a plan is written, a referral is made, a risk is assessed, a technology is introduced, a person is coached, treated, accommodated, monitored, encouraged, or corrected. These responses can reduce suffering. They can restore function. They may be exactly what the moment requires. The danger is not that we respond. The danger is that we mistake the site where strain appears for the whole place from which it comes.

How we see the problem determines where we place the remedy. If we locate the problem primarily in the individual, our interventions gather primarily around the individual. We treat, coach, train, regulate, encourage, monitor, medicate, accommodate, or advise. Yet if the wider field remains untouched, the person is asked to return to the same conditions that helped produce the difficulty.

The same misreading appears in care, work, and digital life.

In care systems, agency is often discussed as patient choice, family responsibility, or individual capacity. But choice becomes thin when people are navigating fragmented services, unclear eligibility, repeated forms, delayed responses, and unsupported coordination. A person may formally have options while lacking the cognitive, relational, and practical conditions needed to act on them. A family may be described as disengaged or overwhelmed when they are absorbing the burden of systems that do not join around them.

In workplaces, exhaustion is often named after it becomes personal. The worker is offered support, leave, coaching, or resilience tools. Yet the design of work may remain unchanged: constant interruption, unclear priorities, compressed timelines, performative responsiveness, and too little protected time for judgement. The person receives care, but the field remains intact.

In digital life, the language of individual self-control is increasingly inadequate. People are told to manage distraction inside environments designed to study, predict, and direct attention. The deeper issue is the asymmetry between human attentional limits and systems optimised to capture behavioural response.

The claim is not that every burden begins in the field. The claim is more precise: strain often appears in the person while being produced, amplified, or sustained in the relation between person and field.

A child may receive behavioural support but return to a classroom rhythm that overwhelms their capacity to settle. A worker may receive wellbeing resources but return to a role organised around interruption and invisible urgency. A family may receive advice but return to fragmented services, unclear responsibilities, and administrative demands that consume the very capacity they are expected to use. A clinician may be encouraged to practise self-care while returning to a workload shaped by moral complexity, documentation burden, risk management, and insufficient relational time.

This is why many interventions do not hold. Not because people do not try. Not because support is useless. Not because individual responsibility is meaningless. But because the room to which people return has not changed.

That habit is no longer sufficient for the conditions we are living inside.

2. The Person Must Remain Visible

There's a danger in correcting individualism too quickly. In trying to recover the field, we can lose the person.

This paper isn't arguing behaviour, symptoms, choices, responsibility, discipline, treatment, or personal agency do not matter. They do. The person is not an illusion. The actor is real. People make decisions. People hurt and are hurt. People carry obligations. People require care. People can act with courage, avoidance, generosity, resistance, confusion, wisdom, or harm.

That's why the field must be brought into view carefully. If we lose the person while trying to see the wider conditions, we've only replaced one blindness with another. So, the point isn't to look past the person towards the terrain. It's to better see the person in dynamic relation.

A person is always more than the site where difficulty becomes visible. They're also living within a pattern of relationships, environments, demands, histories, tools, institutions, expectations, and absences. Some of these conditions steady the person, offering deep identity. Some fracture them. Some invite participation. Some quietly consume the capacity participation requires.

This relational framing avoids two errors.

The first error is individualism: treating agency as private will, motivation, resilience, self-management, or choice. The person is made to carry too much of the explanation. Exhaustion becomes poor boundaries. Distraction becomes weak discipline. Disengagement becomes low motivation. Overwhelm becomes inadequate coping.

The second error is system abstraction: treating the person as if they disappear into structures, policies, platforms, environments, or social forces. The person is made to carry too little of the explanation. Judgement, dignity, responsibility, suffering, and possibility are flattened into systems language.

The Brain Commons must hold a third position. The person remains visible, but never isolated. The field becomes visible, but never abstracted away from human life.

The work is relational. It's concerned with the conditions through which people can perceive, make sense, judge, relate, care, refuse, commit, and participate meaningfully.

This is where agency becomes the central doorway into the paper.

3. Agency, Personhood, and Expression

Human agency is often spoken of as if it belongs wholly to the individual: a matter of choice, autonomy, resilience, self-direction, or will.

There is another way to enter this. Not one that erases the individual, but one that understands the self as formed in and with the world. Human beings don't act from outside their conditions. They move through them, are shaped by them, and help reshape them in return. Agency therefore cannot be reduced to isolated choice. It must be understood as a living relation between person and world.

But this requires a careful distinction.

Agency is not personhood itself. Personhood remains prior to, and deeper than, any visible expression of agency. It is not earned through movement, productivity, coherence, participation, or self-direction. A person who is still, dependent, exhausted, volatile, withdrawn, or unable to act coherently does not become less of a person.

Agency is better understood as the capacity for personhood to find form in the world: through perception, judgement, relation, refusal, action, care, and meaningful participation.

This distinction protects the dignity of the person while allowing us to examine the conditions of agency. When agency is weakened, personhood is not lost. What may be lost, constrained, or distorted is the room through which personhood can find coherent expression.

Agency deserves our most serious attention. Not because it makes a person worthy, but because it's one of the ways personhood becomes able to answer the world: to notice, judge, refuse, care, create, repair, belong, and participate. To protect agency is to protect the room through which human possibility can take form without being coerced, flattened, or captured.

A person may be acting constantly and still have weakened agency. They may be busy, responsive, productive, compliant, expressive, or activated without being meaningfully self-directed. Agency is not merely movement. It is the possibility of meaningful expression under conditions.

This is why agency is never solitary. A child's agency is shaped by whether they are seen as a problem to manage or a person to understand. A worker's agency is shaped by whether their environment allows judgement or only rewards speed. A family's agency is shaped by whether systems join around them or distribute burden back onto them. A clinician's agency is shaped by whether their professional judgement is supported or continually compressed by administrative and institutional demands. A citizen's agency is shaped by whether public life invites deliberation or trains reaction.

In each case, the question isn't merely whether the person has capacity. It's whether the world around them is organised to call capacity forth or to close it down.

Agency arises between person and world.

It's shaped by people, places, tools, institutions, histories, technologies, obligations, and possibilities. These are not background details. They are part of the field through which personhood may find form.

The issue isn't whether conditions shape us. They always do. The question is whether those conditions call agency forth or drive it elsewhere; whether they enlarge perception, judgement, relation, and responsibility, or narrow them in service of compliance, extraction, reaction, or control.

Because agency is formed through conditions, it is also vulnerable to conditions. It can be strengthened by trust, coherence, rhythm, relational support, meaningful responsibility, and room to think. It can also be weakened by overload, fragmentation, surveillance, manipulation, isolation, coercion, instability, and capture.

The crisis of agency is therefore not simply that people are prevented from acting. In many settings, people are acting all the time. They are responding, clicking, complying, producing, adapting, deciding, performing, navigating, explaining, proving, managing, and reacting.

The deeper problem isn't movement itself, but direction.

Agency is weakened when attention, desire, judgement, and participation are redirected towards ends people have not named, questioned, or chosen together. It's weakened when a person's movement through the world is increasingly shaped by conditions designed elsewhere, optimised for other purposes, and removed from shared stewardship.

The question, then, is not only whether people can act.

It's what is shaping the action, and whether there remains room for personhood to find form in ways that are coherent, relational, accountable, and meaningfully self-directed.

4. The Conditions of Agency Are Being Reshaped

The conditions shaping agency are not neutral.

They are increasingly designed and measured, automated and optimised, monetised and scaled — often without shared invitation, visibility, or stewardship. Human beings have always lived within shaped conditions: homes, tools, rituals, institutions, roads, markets, schools, clinics, laws, technologies, and stories. The fact that conditions shape us is not new.

What is changing is the scale, speed, intimacy, opacity, and intensity with which those conditions can now reach into perception, judgement, emotion, relation, restraint, response, and participation.

Generative AI intensifies this question. It does not simply add another tool to the environment. It enters the conditions through which people search, write, decide,

imagine, learn, relate, organise work, interpret information, and trust what they encounter. Its significance is not only that it automates tasks. It increasingly mediates sense-making itself.

Used well, it may extend human capacity. It may help people think, organise, express, translate, remember, and create. But used carelessly, or governed only by speed and market incentive, it may thin authorship, blur provenance, accelerate dependency, reshape labour, and make it harder to know whether judgement is being supported or quietly displaced.

The danger is not adoption itself. The danger is unexamined encroachment: powerful tools entering the conditions of attention, judgement, authorship, trust, restraint, and participation before their effects on agency have been named or stewarded. The terrain can shift before we have found the language to ask what has changed.

In digital environments, attention is not merely invited. It is tracked, modelled, predicted, and converted into value. A person may experience choice at the surface while the platform learns patterns of behaviour underneath. The question is not only whether a user clicked freely. The deeper question is what field of prompts, rewards, frictions, and predictions helped organise that action – and what capacity for pause, refusal, or independent judgement was weakened along the way.

In workplaces, productivity is increasingly mediated through dashboards, notifications, metrics, targets, and systems of availability. Responsiveness becomes a virtue. Recovery becomes private. The worker remains responsible for their output, but the design of work shapes how much room remains for judgement, attention, restraint, and sustained thought.

In care systems, families and clinicians do not simply make decisions. They navigate forms, thresholds, funding categories, eligibility rules, service gaps, compliance demands, and administrative labour. Much of this work is invisible until someone fails to keep up. Then the failure appears personal.

In public life, participation no longer occurs in a simple civic square. It occurs through media and platform architectures that can intensify outrage, reward speed, thin attention, and erode trust. People are asked to participate wisely inside environments that often profit from reactivity.

These are not separate problems. They are signals from the same terrain.

Agency is being shaped by environments often more sophisticated in capturing human response than in protecting human capacity.

The problem is not design itself. Human life has always depended on shaped conditions: tools, rituals, buildings, laws, care systems, schools, and public spaces. The problem is design that draws on human attention, judgement, trust, emotional labour, relational capacity, or cognitive effort without becoming answerable for what it makes easier, harder, more likely, or less possible.

Individual responsibility, wellbeing, and resilience all retain a place. Each names something real. But none can fully describe a world in which the conditions shaping action are increasingly organised at scale. The question is not only whether people choose well, feel well, or persist under strain. It is whether they retain the conditions needed to make sense, judge, care, refuse, refrain, commit, and participate.

We need a language that can hold the person and the field together.

This is what the Brain Commons is intended to name.

5. What the Brain Commons Names

communis: shared, common, held with others. From *com-* — together — and *munus* — duty, service, gift.

The Brain Commons gives language to the field in which agency either finds room to take form, or is narrowed, burdened, redirected, and diminished.

This definition must be handled carefully. The Brain Commons is not a metaphor for the brain alone. It does not reduce social life to neuroscience. Nor is it a list of individual capacities such as attention, regulation, trust, or cognitive function. Those capacities are valuable, but they are not the whole field.

If agency is lived personally but arises through relation, then the Brain Commons names the conditions through which that agency becomes possible: the relations between people and environments, people and technologies, people and institutions, people and cultures, people and one another.

The word “brain” is intentional. The pressures described here touch the living conditions of cognition, emotion, perception, judgement, regulation, relation, restraint, and participation. They affect how people attend, decide, recover, trust, imagine, learn, remember, care, refrain, respond, and act.

The word “commons” carries the moral weight of what is shared. It refers to conditions not held privately by the individual alone, and not renewed by the individual alone. There is an older intuition here: what is shared is not merely an asset or resource, but something received, depended upon, and entrusted to our care because others also depend upon it. The language of commons carries traces of gift, duty, and stewardship before it becomes a language of economics or governance.

Modern commons scholarship sharpens this intuition. What is shared does not preserve itself simply because it is valued. Shared conditions require practices of stewardship: ways of noticing use and depletion, forms of participation, responsibilities, boundaries, repair, and accountability. Without such practices, what is shared may be neglected, enclosed, extracted from, polluted, or exhausted.

To speak of the Brain Commons is to say that the conditions shaping agency are not merely private affairs. They are part of our shared human infrastructure. They are inherited, shaped, used, depleted, renewed, and passed on through the relations and systems in which human life takes form.

The Brain Commons asks us to notice where capacity is being drawn down without replenishment. It asks where judgement is being rushed, where trust is being thinned, where restraint is being made harder, where relational life is being burdened by systems that do not join up. It asks where people are being asked to carry privately what is being produced collectively.

Most of all, the Brain Commons asks a practical question:

What conditions are shaping agency here?

That question can be asked in a clinic, a school, a family, a workplace, a design process, a public institution, a platform, a care system, or a community. It does not answer everything. But it changes what becomes visible.

6. Obligation Without Moralism

Once agency is understood as formed through relation and conditions, responsibility must be located differently. It does not disappear into “the system”, nor does it remain sealed inside the individual.

As the conditions shaping agency become visible, they also become answerable. This is where the commons introduces obligation without collapsing into moralism. Obligation here does not mean guilt. It means answerability: the duty that arises when our designs, decisions, institutions, technologies, or habits shape the conditions through which others must act.

If agency were only a private possession, its care could remain largely private. Individuals could be told to build resilience, manage attention, regulate better, choose wisely, seek support, and take responsibility. These practices still have a place, but they cannot carry the whole ethical burden when the conditions of action are themselves being shaped elsewhere. A system cannot draw down human capacity, leave the surrounding conditions unchanged, and then call the individual’s struggle a failure of responsibility.

Moralism misreads weakened agency as personal failure. It blames individuals for faltering under conditions they did not create, cannot see, or do not have the power to change. It turns agency into a test of virtue: endure more, optimise better, regulate harder, be more resilient, and call the result responsibility.

A commons frame asks something more exacting. It asks us to become answerable to the conditions we share. This is not sentimentality. It is an ethic of proportion. Responsibility should sit where influence, benefit, and power also sit. A workplace that fragments attention cannot answer the problem only by offering mindfulness. A care system which overwhelms families with navigation burden cannot answer the problem only by teaching coping strategies. A school that intensifies demand cannot

answer the problem only by locating dysregulation in the child. A technology designed around attention capture cannot place the whole burden of self-control on the user. A public culture organised around reaction, distrust, and speed cannot be surprised when thoughtful participation becomes harder to sustain.

The commons does not remove responsibility from people. It refuses to let responsibility be misallocated.

Without this distinction, the argument can sound like blame directed at systems, institutions, technologies, or leaders. But blame is not the point. Blame asks who is at fault. Stewardship asks what must now be cared for, redesigned, protected, limited, or restored.

Moralism arrives after agency has faltered and asks the individual to try harder. Stewardship arrives earlier and asks what kind of field is making agency harder to sustain.

The commons changes the location of responsibility. It does not remove responsibility from the person; it refuses to leave the surrounding conditions morally unnamed. What is being cared for is not only behaviour, symptoms, performance, or choice. It is the room through which personhood can find coherent expression.

That room is relational, material, institutional, technological, cultural, and civic. Because it is shared, it requires stewardship.

7. The Work of Stewardship

Stewardship begins with perception.

Before the conditions of agency can be protected, they have to be seen. Before the field can be repaired, its signals must stop being misread as merely individual weakness, disorder, resistance, disengagement, or failure.

This does not require a new bureaucracy of care. Nor does it require every human difficulty to be explained by systems. It requires a more disciplined kind of attention:

to see the person clearly, to see the field more truthfully, and to trace the relation between them.

In practice, stewardship begins with better questions.

Where is visible strain being located in the individual before the field is understood? What conditions are shaping agency here? What is being extracted, and from whom? Where is attention being fragmented? Where is judgement being rushed? Where is restraint being made harder? Where is relational life being asked to absorb institutional failure? Where are people being asked to adapt to conditions that should themselves be redesigned? Where does support strengthen agency, and where does it simply help people endure the same field for longer?

These questions are not abstract. They change the design of care, work, technology, education, and civic life.

In care, stewardship means designing services that do more than treat the person at the point of visible distress. It means reducing the surrounding burden that keeps reproducing distress: navigation load, fragmented responsibility, unsupported carers, time pressure, poor relational continuity, and administrative labour that consumes the very capacity people are expected to use. These are not administrative details. They shape agency.

In workplaces, depletion should be read as a design signal, not only a personal wellbeing concern. Stewardship asks whether the rhythm of work protects judgement or continually interrupts it; whether the organisation depends on invisible coordination, unpaid recovery, emotional masking, or the quiet heroics of people who keep systems functioning despite their design.

In education, behaviour must be seen in relation to rhythm, environment, expectation, belonging, and support. The question is not only what is happening inside the child, but what is happening around the child, between the child and others, and through the systems that organise the child's day.

In technology, stewardship asks whether systems extend human capacity or quietly consume it. A technology may be efficient while still extractive. It may be useful while shaping attention, judgement, restraint, and relation in ways that require scrutiny.

In civic life, stewardship protects the conditions for attention, trust, deliberation, and participation against environments that profit from their erosion. Democracy depends not only on formal rights, but on the human capacity to perceive, deliberate, trust, refrain, and act with some meaningful relation to the common good.

Stewardship is not control. It is not paternalism. It is not the fantasy that all conditions can be perfected or all strain removed.

It is the disciplined care of what makes agency possible.

At its centre is a simple shift. We stop asking only: what is wrong with this person? We also ask: what is happening in the field through which this person is trying to live, work, care, think, decide, refrain, and participate?

That shift does not weaken care. It strengthens it.

Care that cannot perceive the field remains trapped at the point where strain becomes visible. It may be compassionate, but not yet sufficiently ecological. It may support the person while leaving too many of the surrounding conditions untouched.

Stewardship does not look past the person. It looks more carefully at the world the person is being asked to inhabit.

8. Intellectual Lineage Without Reduction

The Brain Commons does not emerge from nowhere. It arises from a convergence of traditions that have each, in different ways, refused the idea that human agency can be understood by looking at the individual alone.

This lineage is mixed because the problem is mixed. The conditions shaping agency are cognitive, relational, occupational, biological, technological, institutional, cultural, civic, and moral. No single discipline can hold that whole field without flattening it.

Commons theory gives the work its language of shared conditions. It asks how what is held in common is governed, protected, depleted, enclosed, or restored. What is shared does not preserve itself simply because it is valuable. Shared conditions require stewardship: accountability, boundary-setting, participation, repair, renewal, and attention to what is being used faster than it is being replenished.

Occupational therapy and occupational science bring the argument back to lived function. They ground agency in the ordinary and profound textures of daily life: doing, caring, making, resting, adapting, belonging, and participating. Human beings are not only thinkers or choosers. We become ourselves through the occupations, roles, environments, relationships, and meanings that give personhood form in the world. Agency is not only declared in principle. It is lived, enabled, constrained, and expressed through what people are actually able to do.

Cognitive ecology and embodied accounts of cognition break open the false boundary between mind and world. Human beings make sense through bodies, tools, environments, movement, perception, feedback, and participation. Judgement does not arise in a vacuum and then act upon an external world. It takes shape through encounter. The field around a person can support thought, burden it, extend it, fragment it, or quietly redirect it.

Allostatic load and exposome biology give the argument biological gravity. Environments do not merely surround human life; they enter the body over time. Repeated adaptation has costs. The body carries the burden of conditions that are unstable, excessive, threatening, polluted, fragmented, or chronically demanding. The conditions of agency are therefore not only social, cultural, or symbolic. They are also physiological.

Attention ethics brings the struggle for agency to the level of perception itself. Attention is not only a private discipline. Environments can support it, fracture it, invite it, monetise it, or exploit it. Attention is one of the gates through which the world becomes available to judgement. When attention is captured at scale, agency is not simply distracted. It is redirected.

Relational knowledge traditions widen the account of knowing. They refuse the idea that knowledge can be separated from place, story, obligation, memory, and pattern. Knowledge is carried, tested, authorised, and lived through relation. The world is not

inert background for individual action, and agency is not separable from continuity, responsibility, and place.

Poetic traditions of attention protect the work from becoming merely instrumental. They return perception to beauty, grief, place, relation, mystery, and responsibility. The world is not only a problem to solve or a mechanism to optimise. Human beings are summoned as much as they are tasked. Without this, an account of agency may become technically useful but morally thin.

These traditions are scaffolding, not display. They discipline the work without owning it. They prevent the Brain Commons from becoming a slogan, a wellbeing model, a technology critique, a loose systems metaphor, or a decorative language for complexity.

Together, these traditions keep the aperture open. They resist the temptation to place agency in one location — the mind, the body, the individual, the system, the institution, or the culture — and instead return us to the wider ecology in which judgement, care, refusal, and participation take form.

9. A Beginning

The Brain Commons isn't offered here as a finished doctrine.

It is offered as a lens, a language, and an invitation. Naming too early carries a risk: it can narrow attention before the field has been fully seen. This paper uses the name Brain Commons not to close the work, but to keep the field visible.

It gives name to something many people already sense: that human capacity is being strained in ways our existing categories do not fully explain. Burnout, disengagement, loneliness, cognitive overload, behavioural complexity, mistrust, distraction, and emotional exhaustion may appear as separate problems. Often they're treated that way.

But beneath them is a shared question.

What is happening to the conditions through which human beings can perceive, judge, relate, act, and participate meaningfully?

This is the question of agency. And once agency is seen as something formed between person and world, the question can no longer remain private. It becomes a question of the commons.

The work ahead is to make this field more visible, more measurable, more accessible to explore, and more answerable. It's to develop better language, better heuristics, better practices, and better forms of shared stewardship. It's to help leaders, clinicians, designers, institutions, communities, and citizens recognise where agency is being supported, where it's being captured, and where the conditions for its return need to be restored.

This work will require more than a paper. It will require examples, measures, case studies, public language, institutional practice, technology critique, and new forms of coalition. It will require intellectual rigour, but also moral restraint. The aim isn't to declare that every burden belongs to the field. The aim is to stop pretending the field is neutral.

The person must remain visible.

The field must become answerable.

The relations between them are where the work begins.

Closing Statement

Human agency is not the private possession of an isolated self. It is the lived capacity to judge, respond, refrain, care, and participate meaningfully in the world — arising through relation, held in the person, and shaped by conditions no person creates alone.

When the conditions around people are humane, coherent, trustworthy, and life-giving, agency can strengthen. People can perceive more clearly, judge more wisely, care more deeply, refuse what diminishes them, and participate more meaningfully.

When those conditions are overloaded, fragmented, extractive, or distorted, agency weakens. Not always dramatically. Often silently. A little less attention. A little less trust. A little less room to think. A little less capacity to care. A little less confidence to pause, judge, refuse, or act from within a meaningful relation to the world.

This is the silent erosion.

The Brain Commons names the shared terrain in which this erosion occurs, and in which repair might begin.

It asks us to recognise that the conditions of agency are not held by individuals alone. They are shaped by relationships, institutions, technologies, environments, histories, and cultures. They are shaped by what we build, what we tolerate, what we measure, what we reward, what we neglect, and what we ask people to carry alone.

If we are serious about protecting human agency, we must become serious about the conditions through which agency is formed.

That is the work of the Brain Commons.

Not to replace the person with the field.

To see the person more truthfully within it.

Selected Sources and Intellectual Lineage

The Brain Commons draws from several traditions rather than one fixed school of thought. These sources are offered as conceptual lineage rather than exhaustive evidence. They name the traditions informing the paper, not every authority relevant to the field.

Commons, stewardship and shared conditions

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*

A foundational account of how shared resources can be governed through collective practices, institutional design, boundaries, accountability and local stewardship.

David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*

A contemporary account of commons as living social practice rather than simply resource management.

Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”

Useful as a contrast point, particularly because later commons scholarship complicates and challenges the assumption that shared resources inevitably collapse without centralised control or privatisation.

Ecology of mind, systems and relational pattern

Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*

A foundational influence for thinking about mind, relation, feedback, pattern, context and the limits of locating cognition solely inside the individual.

Nora Bateson, *Small Arcs of Larger Circles* / Warm Data work

Relevant to relational systems, contextual intelligence, living pattern and the difficulty of understanding human life through single-variable explanations.

Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*

A practical and ethical account of systems, feedback loops, leverage points and the consequences of intervening without understanding the wider field.

Occupational therapy, occupation and lived participation

Ann Wilcock, work on doing, being, becoming and health

A central occupational science influence for understanding human beings through occupation, participation, meaning, becoming and the conditions that support or constrain daily life.

Elizabeth Townsend and Helene Polatajko, *Enabling Occupation II*

Important for occupational enablement, participation, justice, environment and the social conditions that shape what people are able to do.

Mary Law and colleagues, Person–Environment–Occupation model

Useful for grounding agency in the dynamic relation between person, environment and occupation.

Gary Kielhofner, *A Model of Human Occupation*

Relevant to volition, habituation, performance capacity, environment and the way human action takes form through lived systems of participation.

Embodied, enactive and extended cognition

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*

A key source for embodied and enactive accounts of cognition: mind as enacted through body, world and lived experience.

Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind”

Important for the claim that cognition can be extended through tools, artefacts and environmental supports.

Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*

A foundational text in distributed cognition, showing how cognitive work is spread across people, tools, practices and environments.

Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*

Relevant to embodied agency, perception, action and the lived body as central to cognition.

Attention, agency and the attention economy

Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*

Important for attention as a shared cultural and environmental concern, not merely a private discipline.

James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*

A significant contribution to the ethics of attention, persuasion, digital environments and human freedom in the attention economy.

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*

Relevant to the capture, prediction and monetisation of behavioural data, and to the asymmetries between individuals and large-scale digital systems.

Stress biology, allostatic load and exposome thinking

Bruce McEwen, “Stress, Adaptation, and Disease: Allostasis and Allostatic Load”

A foundational account of allostasis and the cumulative physiological burden of repeated or chronic adaptation.

Christopher Wild and contemporaries work on the exposome

Important for the idea that environmental exposures across the life course shape health and disease risk beyond genetics alone.

Nancy Krieger, ecosocial theory and embodiment

Relevant to how social conditions, inequality, exposure and lived environments become embodied over time.

Relational knowledge, place and obligation

Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk*

Relevant to relational pattern, knowledge systems, complexity, story, place and non-linear forms of sense-making.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

A vital source for thinking about gift, reciprocity, obligation, ecology, gratitude and the moral life of relation.

Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* / work on ecological humanities

Relevant to relational ethics, country, ecological grief and responsibility beyond the individual human subject.

Poetic and moral traditions of attention

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*

Important for attention, unselfing, moral perception and the discipline of seeing reality more truthfully.

Simone Weil, writings on attention “*the rarest and purest form of generosity*,”

A profound source for attention as moral, spiritual and relational practice.

Mary Oliver, writings on nature

Relevant as a poetic source for attention to the natural world, receptivity, wonder, and the moral significance of careful perception.

David Whyte, *Constellations*, writings on work, belonging and conversational life

Relevant to poetic attention, vocation, threshold, work and the human capacity to be addressed by the world.

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* and writings on beauty

Relevant to beauty, belonging, threshold, interior life and the moral significance of perception.

These sources are not presented as a complete bibliography. They name the main traditions beneath the paper: commons stewardship, relational cognition, occupational life, biological embodiment, attention ethics, place-based knowledge, and poetic moral attention. Together, they help hold the central claim: human agency cannot be understood by looking at

the individual alone, and it cannot be protected by asking the individual alone to adapt.

Contact

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