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# Horizon Theory

## A Constraint-Based Ethics of Conditions, Energy, Transitions, and Sustainable Generativity

Original dissertation - standardised Fieldnotes.scot publication version

### Publication note

This is the original systems-facing Horizon Theory document. It should not be treated as interchangeable with the Horizon Theory v2 working note. The original dissertation explains the conditions systems create - structural, perceived, and emotional horizons - and is most important for institutional and service design. The v2 working note is a developmental extension explaining how human energy, becoming, and stabilisation move inside those conditions.

In simple terms: the original dissertation explains the conditions systems create. The v2 note explains how human energy and development move inside those conditions.

### Canonical guardrail

Sustainable generativity is the longitudinal capacity of a horizon to produce value while ethically maintaining or improving the conditions upon which production depends.

Horizon Theory explains the structure. Fieldethics governs the conduct of use. The theory does not aim to make people cope better inside harmful systems. It asks whether the conditions themselves are ethically viable.

## Contents

# Introduction

This document presents the formal academic articulation of Horizon Theory. The theory emerges from a sequence of lived observation, reflective calibration, and systems reasoning concerning how human systems operate under constraint.

The work is not primarily a proposal for policy reform. Rather, it offers a structural framework for understanding how conditions, energy, regulation, and responsibility interact within bounded human environments. The aim is to make visible the dependency relationships that determine whether individuals, institutions, and services remain viable over time.

Many contemporary systems attempt to produce outcomes without maintaining the conditions required to sustain them. This creates predictable patterns of pressure, distortion, burnout, and preventable suffering. Horizon Theory approaches these failures not as cultural shortcomings or individual weaknesses, but as structural sequencing errors within constrained systems.

The theory therefore focuses on horizons: bounded fields of operation within which regulation, action, and responsibility must be sustained. By examining how conditions shape energy, how energy shapes regulation, and how regulation shapes honesty and responsibility, the framework provides a diagnostic structure for understanding both human suffering and sustainable generativity.

This document sets out the theoretical foundations of the framework. It is presented here in full academic form so that the ideas may be examined, tested, refined, and potentially developed through serious scholarly engagement without being detached from the ethical ground that governs its use.

# Abstract

Horizon Theory proposes a constraint-based ethical framework for understanding human viability within layered, real-world environments. It argues that sustainable generativity emerges from cared-for horizons, while preventable suffering emerges from neglected ones.

A horizon is defined as any bounded, lived field of operation—biological, emotional, relational, institutional, or ecological—within which regulation, action, and responsibility must be sustained over time.

The framework centres three core commitments.

- Energy and regulation are real constraints rather than motivational variables.
- Ethical functioning follows a structural dependency sequence:

*REGULATION → SAFETY → HONESTY → CAPACITY → RESPONSIBILITY → OUTCOMES*

- Responsibility is reciprocal but asymmetrical, scaling with power and proximity to conditions.

Horizon Theory is diagnostic rather than solutionist. It does not aim to “fix people.” Instead, it provides structural criteria for ethical horizon management: ethically maintaining viable conditions, restoring balance at transitions, preventing chronic energy deficit, and enabling responsibility to emerge sustainably within constraint.

# 1. Introduction

Many contemporary systems—services, workplaces, institutions, and families—operate around a repeated design error: they demand outcomes before maintaining the conditions required to sustain them.

The predictable result is pressure, distortion, burnout, brittle outcomes, and preventable suffering.

This is not primarily a culture problem. It is not primarily a people problem. It is a constraint and sequencing problem.

Horizon Theory begins from a simple premise: humans are finite systems operating under energy and regulatory constraints.

People do not become more honest, capable, or responsible by being demanded into it. These capacities become available when the conditions of their horizons make them affordable.

Where conditions are degraded, honesty becomes expensive, capacity narrows, and responsibility becomes performative rather than sustainable.

This work does not attempt to motivate people into better behaviour. Instead, it provides structural scaffolding for understanding how viable horizons are maintained, how energy deficits accumulate, and how sustainable responsibility becomes possible within constrained environments.

# 2. Core Thesis

Horizon Theory advances two core statements operating at distinct but interdependent layers.

## 2.1 Human Core Thesis (Ethical Layer)

Sustainable human capacity emerges from cared-for horizons; preventable suffering emerges from neglected ones.

Human cost and human potential are shaped by whether horizons are maintained or degraded.

Where conditions are sustained, regulation stabilises, honesty becomes affordable, and responsibility can emerge. Where horizons deteriorate, pressure, distortion, and avoidable suffering follow.

## 2.2 Structural Core Thesis (Constraint Layer)

Human systems operate under finite energy constraints. When energy debt becomes structural, degradation becomes predictable.

Chronic deficit produces downstream failures irrespective of intention.

Together, these two theses guard against two common distortions:

- ethics without mechanics (normative but structurally vague)
- mechanics without ethics (technically efficient but extractive)

Horizon Theory therefore treats ethical viability and structural constraint as inseparable components of sustainable systems.

# 3. Foundational Definitions

## 3.1 Horizon

A horizon is a bounded, lived field of operation—biological, emotional, relational, institutional, or ecological—within which a person or system must regulate, act, and sustain activity over time.

Horizons constrain what forms of regulation, honesty, capacity, and responsibility are possible.

Horizon dynamics apply wherever organised systems operate within bounded fields under constraint.

They are most visible where structure, boundary, and limitation interact to shape possibility.

## 3.2 Structural, Perceived, and Emotional Horizons

Horizon Theory distinguishes between structural, perceived, and emotional horizons.

Structural horizons (objective constraints) define the limits of possibility. These are shaped by boundary, organisation, energy availability, and material conditions.

Perceived horizons (cognitive constraints) define recognisable possibility—what an individual or system can identify as viable within structural limits.

Emotional horizons (affective modulation) define the limits of perceivability and navigability within those limits.

In human systems, horizons are structurally defined but affectively mediated.

## 3.3 Conditions

Conditions are the structural and environmental features of a horizon that determine regulatory cost and energy expenditure.

Conditions include (not exhaustive):

- material (space, tools, resources, staffing)
- temporal (time, pacing, recovery opportunity, deadlines)
- informational (clarity, continuity, handovers, signal versus noise)
- relational (trust, fear, respect, power dynamics)
- physiological (sleep, illness, arousal load)
- ecological (environmental stressors, infrastructure, climate stability)

## Core law

Outcomes do not create conditions. Conditions create outcomes.

When outcomes ethically strengthen the conditions that produced them, a horizon becomes sustainable.

When outcomes degrade those conditions, the system enters extraction and eventual collapse.

## 3.4 Energy

Energy refers to finite regulatory and physiological capacity available for cognition, emotion, action, and recovery.

Energy is not motivation. It is not mindset. It is not affect.

It is the currency of sustainable functioning.

Chronic deficit degrades:

- regulation stability
- cognitive flexibility
- honesty tolerance
- relational patience
- sustainable responsibility

# 4. The Ethical Sequence (Dependency Chain)

Horizon Theory treats ethical functioning as a structural dependency chain:

> *REGULATION → SAFETY → HONESTY → CAPACITY → RESPONSIBILITY → OUTCOMES*

This is not a ladder of virtue. It is a constraint order.

## 4.1 Why the Order Matters

Without regulation, safety becomes fragile.

Without safety, honesty becomes expensive.

Without honesty, capacity becomes distorted.

Without capacity, responsibility becomes performative.

Without responsibility, outcomes become brittle or false.

## 4.2 Mis-Sequencing as Harm

When systems demand responsibility or outcomes before building regulation, safety, and capacity, failure is structural, not personal.

Inverted sequencing produces:

- pressure, shame, fake compliance
- burnout, collapse, churn
- dishonest reporting and metric gaming

# 5. Layered Horizons (Constraint Stack)

Horizon Theory identifies a layered horizon stack. These layers function as constraint tiers.

## 5.1 Biological Horizon

Organism-level constraints:

- sleep, health, injury, illness
- nervous system state
- developmental stage and aging
- neurodivergence and medication realities

Biological horizons set baseline ceilings for regulation and energy availability across all other horizons.

### 5.2 Emotional Horizon (Expanded)

The emotional horizon refers to the affective field within which possibility is experienced.

Emotional states function as internal constraints that shape the operational range of the system. They influence risk tolerance, cognitive bandwidth, behavioural flexibility, and self-perceived competence.

Emotional systems possess horizon structure and exert horizon-modulating force within human systems.

Fear may narrow perceived possibility. Security may stabilise it. Shame may distort it. Hope may expand it.

Emotional contraction operates through shifts in attentional bandwidth, risk tolerance, and self-perceived competence.

Emotional state modulates the experienced and actionable horizon without altering structural limits.

Degradation at the emotional layer increases cost across biological, relational, and institutional horizons.

## 6. Transitions and Boundary Conditions

Transitions are boundary crossings between horizons: handovers, role shifts, service boundaries, relational changes, and institutional interfaces.

### 6.1 Core Claim

In many current institutional systems, transitions generate energy deficit at the point of crossing because they follow a pressure-first sequence.

This is accounting, not judgement. Context is reduced, uncertainty increases, and regulation demands rise while continuity is disrupted.

### 6.2 Transition Failure is Structural

At transitions, contextual continuity is reduced. Timelines outrun nuance. Risk frames outrun reality. Stress accumulates. Mis-sequencing compounds.

This is not merely communication failure. It is horizon failure.

### 6.3 Ethical Minimum at Transitions

Ethical transition design requires restoration to energy balance and, where possible, the generation of surplus.

If transitions systematically increase energy debt, the system is structurally harmful by design.

## 7. Energy Economics of Institutions

Institutions operate on human energy. When output expectations exceed sustainable recovery, they shift into extraction mode.

Extraction mode indicators include chronic urgency, rising reporting burden, suppressed bad news, wellbeing-as-compensation programmes, and crisis cycles, with churn normalised as “the sector.”

Support interventions are not inherently wrong. They become ethically compromised when they replace structural repair, mask chronic load, or extend extraction cycles.

Downstream relief cannot compensate for upstream extraction.

# 8. Responsibility and Reciprocity

Responsibility is the capacity to respond respectfully, honestly, and sustainably within a horizon, given the conditions and energy available.

Responsibility is emergent, condition-dependent, energy-dependent, and role-relative.

Structural and individual responsibility are reciprocal but asymmetrical.

Individuals are responsible for how they act within horizons.

Those who shape horizons are responsible for the conditions within their power.

Responsibility scales with power and proximity to conditions.

When people design conditions they do not or have not lived inside, systems drift toward extraction and distortion.

Neither level negates the other.

## 8.1 Responsibility Under Emotional Constraint

Responsibility is exercised within horizon conditions.

Emotional states influence how individuals perceive, act within, and assume responsibility for their horizons.

Temporary emotional contraction may reduce operational bandwidth without eliminating moral agency.

This means that individuals may remain ethically responsible for their actions even when their practical capacity to respond is narrowed by emotional constraint.

Chronic emotional compression, especially under structural deficit, reduces sustainable responsibility and increases reactive behaviour.

Responsibility therefore depends on two conditions: structurally viable horizons and sufficient emotional regulation to operate within them.

# 9. Failure Signatures

When horizons are mismanaged—conditions degraded, energy debt normalised, transitions unmanaged, or the ethical sequence inverted—systems produce a predictable signature.

## 9.1 Structural Symptoms

- regulation instability (reactivity, shutdown, errors)
- cognitive narrowing (reduced complexity tolerance)
- honesty distortion (silence, underreporting, metric gaming)
- fake capacity (heroic bursts, firefighting as normal)
- responsibility theatre (commitment language masking overload)
- brittle outcomes (short-term spikes, long-term collapse)

Communication style is itself a condition within a horizon.

In environments containing vulnerable or dysregulated individuals, tone becomes a regulatory signal.

Command-style communication, appropriate in hierarchical operational systems, can destabilise regulation when transferred unchanged into care or justice environments.

Communication that carries dismissal or implicit superiority can narrow the operational horizon of others. Attention shifts from the task to the perceived threat. Capacity drops. Honesty becomes expensive. Cooperation weakens.

### 9.2 Human Cost

- chronic stress
- burnout and health decline
- shame and internalised blame
- moral injury
- relational strain
- quiet despair and disengagement

Failure is structural before it is personal.

### 9.3 Horizon Contraction Mechanisms

Horizon contraction may occur through:

- threat response
- shame activation
- cognitive fatigue
- arousal overload
- role ambiguity
- chronic uncertainty

Contraction narrows operational range without altering structural limits.

Persistent contraction increases risk of misjudgement, withdrawal, dishonesty, and burnout.

Failure signatures must therefore be analysed across both structural and emotional layers.

## 10. Sustainable Generativity

Sustainable generativity is the longitudinal capacity of a horizon to produce value while ethically maintaining or improving the conditions upon which production depends.

It is cyclical: outputs either ethically replenish the conditions that sustain future capacity, or they extract from them and reduce future viability.

The operative question is not whether value is produced, but whether production ethically strengthens or weakens the system’s ability to continue producing without hidden depletion, coercion, humiliation, or dignity loss.

Sustainable generativity therefore replaces endurance signalling as a metric of competence.

Durability, not intensity, is the indicator; but durability only counts when the maintained conditions are ethically viable.

The word ethically is a necessary guardrail. Sustainable generativity does not mean keeping a system productive at any human cost. It means producing value while preserving dignity, honesty, capacity, future viability, and the conditions required for life and responsibility to remain possible.

## 11. Stress-Identity Distortion

A frequent cultural distortion occurs when stress becomes identity:

“I thrive under pressure.”

“I’m built for chaos.”

This framing obscures several structural realities:

- acute pressure competence being mistaken for sustainable capacity
- adrenaline-driven focus masking long-term energy cost
- calm being misread as laziness
- recovery being misread as weakness

When stress becomes identity, it functions as a selection filter within institutions:

- rest is penalised
- early exit is shamed
- honesty is suppressed
- extraction becomes normalised

## 12. Closure, Exit, and Reform

Where horizons are structurally energy-negative and repair is not viable without self-collapse, closure or exit may be ethically required.

Exit before collapse preserves:

- regulation
- honesty
- future capacity

Closure is preventive maintenance, not failure.

Sustainable reform must obey the ethical sequence. Reform attempted under dysregulation reproduces degradation.

Reform requires:

- energy viability
- truthful reporting
- load adjustment
- transition repair
- pacing

Where reform becomes structurally impossible, exit remains ethically valid.

## 13. Leadership and Institutional Selection Bias

Leadership pipelines often reward outcome delivery under pressure rather than energy-literate horizon management.

This creates selection bias toward deficit tolerance rather than sustainable stewardship, amplifying:

- dysregulation tolerance
- suppression capacity
- short-term optimisation

Rather than cultivating:

- regulatory literacy
- condition maintenance
- sustainable generativity

## 14. Diagnostic Framework

Core diagnostic triad:

Where is the load coming from?

What is it draining?

What upstream condition is broken that is causing the deficit?

This framework shifts attention away from assigning personal blame and toward examining the structural conditions producing the problem.

Individuals still act within systems, but sustainable correction requires repairing the conditions that generate the deficit.

## 15. Epistemic and Methodological Position

Horizon Theory is grounded in:

- lived experience
- practice observation
- systems reasoning
- constraint analysis
- reflective calibration
- iterative stress-testing

Reflection is not authority; it is calibration.

The body is not noise; it is regulatory evidence.

The theory does not claim universal prediction.

It claims reliable pattern recognition under constraint:

- mis-sequencing reliably produces distortion
- energy deficit reliably degrades honesty and capacity
- ethically maintained or improved conditions reliably increase sustainable generativity

### Practical falsifiability

If improving conditions, reducing structural energy deficit, and removing pressure as a primary driver of behaviour does not increase honesty affordability and sustainable capacity over time, the model is incomplete.

## 16. Critiques and Counterpositions

“This is common sense.”

Common sense collapses under pressure without structural reinforcement. Horizon Theory operationalises common sense under constraint.

“This reduces humans to machines.”

Humans are complex conscious biological systems. Acknowledging constraint protects dignity by preventing coercive demands and misattributed blame.

“This excuses individuals.”

Individual responsibility remains within constraint. Structural responsibility scales with power. The theory rejects both total blame and total absolution.

“Pressure builds excellence.”

Acute, time-bounded pressure can sharpen performance; chronic pressure degrades sustainability and truth.

## 17. Policy and Design Implications

Evaluation criteria shift:

- from “Did you hit outcomes?” to “What did it cost humans to hit outcomes?”
- from “Who failed?” to “Which conditions failed?”
- from “Improve accountability” to “Make honesty affordable”
- from “Increase resilience” to “Stop designing chronic deficit”

Design criteria:

- protect regulation
- maintain safety
- enable honest reporting
- reduce chronic load
- repair transitions
- measure ethically sustainable generativity

## 18. Limitations

The theory:

- does not eliminate suffering
- does not solve ecological constraint
- does not negate moral agency
- does not promise universal reform viability

It clarifies viability under constraint.

The framework identifies structural conditions that shape human capacity, but it does not remove responsibility from individuals acting within those conditions.

Likewise, it does not guarantee that institutions will choose to repair the horizons they influence.

Horizon Theory therefore describes ethical viability; it cannot compel ethical action.

## 19. Future Research

Empirical studies may examine:

- load-to-recovery ratios as leading indicators of structural deficit
- transition failure mapping and deficit accumulation across boundaries
- leadership regulation literacy and its relationship to institutional stability
- longitudinal sustainable generativity metrics
- comparative domain studies (e.g., healthcare, education, justice, corporate systems)

Further work may also explore the lived dimension of horizon management through practice-based inquiry.

Dyadic or small-group studies may be particularly useful for observing how regulation, honesty, responsibility, and sustainable generativity emerge within real relational horizons over time.

## 20. Conclusion

Humans live inside horizons.

Horizons have conditions.

Conditions shape energy and regulation.

Regulation enables honesty.

Honesty enables capacity.

Capacity enables responsibility.

Responsibility enables outcomes.

Recognition of non-zero viability permits action without illusion.

When horizons are cared for, sustainable generativity increases.

When horizons are neglected, preventable suffering increases.

Energy is finite.

Sequencing matters.

Responsibility scales with power.

Maintenance must be ethical.

Appendix A – Core Axioms (Full)

Dependency Order

Ethical functioning follows a structural dependency chain:

> *REGULATION → SAFETY → HONESTY → CAPACITY → RESPONSIBILITY → OUTCOMES.*

Mis-sequencing produces distortion and preventable harm.

Condition Primacy

Conditions generate outcomes. Outcomes do not generate conditions.

Energy Conservation

Energy is finite. Chronic deficit degrades regulation, honesty, capacity, and sustainability.

Transition Deficit

Transitions are entered under energy deficit. Ethical design requires restoration to baseline viability or surplus.

Emergent Responsibility

Responsibility emerges under viable constraint. It cannot be demanded sustainably under chronic deficit.

Harm Propagation

Structural deficit propagates downstream across relational, institutional, and ecological horizons.

Closure Rule

Where reform is non-viable without self-collapse, closure or exit preserves future capacity and is ethically valid.

Capacity Emergence

Capacity expands when regulation is stable, safety is credible, and honesty is affordable.

## Appendix B – Anti-Co-option Identity Statement

Horizon Theory is not a wellbeing programme, resilience training, or productivity framework.

It does not aim to make people cope better inside harmful systems.

It is a constraint-based ethics of horizon management: ethically maintaining conditions and transitions so honest, sustainable responsibility becomes possible and human capacity can grow. Horizon Theory should be read alongside Fieldethics, which provides the conduct ground for its serious use. A system cannot claim sustainable generativity if its continuity depends on hidden human depletion.