

UNITED WISDOM

Freedom and action: where a person has room to choose

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Epigraph

> *“Some things are in our control and others not.”*

Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, §1, translated by Elizabeth Carter. The complete opening sentence contains nine words. This Stoic distinction needs its philosophical context; it promises no unconditional control over every inner state or external event.

What this article is about

Freedom can mean the absence of a prohibition, the practical availability of an action, the ability to make a decision, participation in setting a shared rule, or the capacity to sustain a chosen direction. These meanings are connected, yet distinct. Someone may have permission but lack a necessary resource, act under pressure, or choose a form of participation without deciding how others respond. This article offers an introductory map of freedom through desire, choice, circumstances, responsibility, and consequences. We examine selected chapters of Aristotle on voluntary action and deliberation, Epictetus’s Stoic instructions, and John Stuart Mill’s argument about social liberty. Their philosophical grounds remain different. An invented work decision traces the movement from a general wish to a particular action, without treating limited options as a judgment on the whole person. The practical section invites you to examine one decision and identify what room for choice is currently known, what requires clarification, and what depends on others.

I. Freedom involves several questions

Consider an invented example. Ilya is helping prepare a small joint project. He is offered a task to finish by Friday. He would like to accept, but another commitment already occupies part of the week, and the necessary information has yet to arrive. Saying that he is free to choose tells us little about which options are available or what they mean for the participants.

Several questions arise. Is Ilya allowed to decline? Can he do the work with the time and information available? Is he prepared to choose this particular form of participation? Who else needs to respond before the decision becomes workable? What changes for others if he accepts, declines, or proposes another deadline? Distinguishing these questions prevents one statement about a free or unfree person from standing in for the whole situation.

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Being able to name an option already matters in a conversation, but it does not establish feasibility. Someone can agree and subsequently discover that a resource is missing. They can have the resource yet lack authority to change a shared task. They can help formulate a rule but find themselves in the minority when a decision is made. Each situation leaves its own scope for action.

An introductory map can keep personal decisions, practical conditions, and relations with others in view together. The question becomes specific: which action am I considering, what obstacle is known, and whose participation is needed? This approach guarantees no favorable outcome. It helps us avoid extending the availability of one step to a person’s whole life, or taking one limitation as proof that no action is possible.

II. A wish still requires a decision

In *Nicomachean Ethics* III.2, Aristotle distinguishes voluntary action, choice, wish, and opinion. Voluntary action is broader than choice in his account: an action may originate in someone without prior deliberation. A wish can also concern something their own efforts cannot accomplish. These distinctions help us examine the expressions “I want” and “I choose” more carefully.

Ilya wants the project to succeed. He has yet to choose which task he will accept and under what conditions. The desired overall result includes several people’s actions. His own decision might concern preparing part of a text, requesting missing information, or proposing a later deadline. Each option has a content that the general wish for success does not yet specify.

There is no need to dismiss a wish because it lacks a settled method. It can express an important direction while the means of action remain undecided. We can ask which transition is being considered: from what is desired to what is possible, from what is possible to what is agreed, or from what is agreed to what is done. Uncertainty at one transition does not automatically settle the others.

An opinion about an option also differs from readiness to undertake it. Ilya might think the deadline reasonable for the project while being unable to accept it himself. Or he might perform a task without sharing every consideration of its organizer. Aristotle’s argument belongs to his ethics of character. Our invented story uses these distinctions to clarify a decision; it does not attribute a modern work management procedure to him.

III. One’s own part and the external result

In the opening section of *The Enchiridion*, Epictetus separates what he regards as a person’s own actions and judgments from externally dependent things, including property, position, and reputation. His instruction accompanies strong claims about freedom and tranquility. These remain part of the philosophical position; they cannot simply become a guaranteed contemporary result.

For Ilya’s decision, we can distinguish an action from the response it receives. He can write a request, put forward an option, and communicate his time constraint. The organizer’s response belongs to another participant. Having a step of his own does not mean that Ilya has chosen everyone else’s agreement or the project’s eventual success. This boundary makes what he undertakes easier to describe.

Practical circumstances also affect whether the step itself is available. Information, time, communication, and sometimes assistance are needed. The Stoic distinction therefore cannot replace examination of material and social conditions. An action may be difficult or unavailable to someone even when it is described as their own. This map draws no unconditional power over every inner state from the text.

We can place two questions alongside each other: what depends on my decision here, and what condition makes that decision workable? The first retains personal participation; the second keeps it connected to circumstances. Responsibility then has a specific object. Someone answers for a chosen action under known conditions, without being declared the sole creator of every event and response they encounter.

IV. Deliberation concerns what can be done

In III.3, Aristotle describes deliberation about actions that can depend on our efforts and whose outcome is not entirely certain. In his examples, a professional end is already accepted: a physician considers how to treat, rather than establishing anew the purpose of medicine. We can use this narrower framework while keeping the question of accepting the task itself distinct.

Once Ilya agrees to participate, the next question concerns means. Which information is missing? Can it arrive in time? Could the scope of the work change? Which first step is needed to make the next one possible? Deliberation connects the desired result to a sequence of available actions. Discovering that something cannot be done provides a reason to reconsider that sequence.

Aristotle’s text also makes room for seeking others’ help with an important decision. Asking for information or discussing an issue together does not exclude personal choice. Someone can

take another person’s competence into account while retaining the question of which action they themselves undertake. Assistance may broaden the options considered, but it does not prove that the outcome is secured.

Suppose Ilya learns that some information will arrive only on Thursday. He could propose preparing the available material first, postponing completion, or declining the task in its current form. Choosing requires examining each option’s conditions. Naming an end confidently supplies no missing means. A detailed list of means still calls for a decision about which course to take.

V. A decision depends on what is known

In III.1, Aristotle considers ignorance of particular circumstances: what someone acts with, what they are doing, toward which result, and in what manner. His account of voluntary and involuntary action belongs to an ancient evaluation of conduct. For our introductory map, the useful question concerns which facts a participant knows or merely assumes before deciding.

Ilya might accept a task while imagining it to be smaller than it turns out. That assumption needs to be distinguished from the description he received. Was the scope known? Who was meant to clarify it? What became apparent later? Answers help explain a changed decision without requiring an immediate judgment on the person’s entire good faith.

A missing fact differs from an uncertain future. The size of material already prepared can be checked. A future audience’s response may be unknowable in advance. In the first case, the next step could be obtaining information; in the second, considering several possible outcomes. Waiting for complete certainty can leave a decision open even after available information has been obtained.

Checking what is known should not become an endless prerequisite for every action. Its extent depends on consequences and reversibility. In our small invented project, a preliminary part could first be agreed, with its status made explicit. Another task would require other conditions. Precision matters: what is known, which assumption is being used, and which changed circumstance would justify discussing the decision again?

VI. Pressure changes the conditions of choice

Aristotle’s III.1 examines mixed actions: things someone would not choose in themselves but does under particular circumstances to avoid a greater evil or obtain a significant result. His examples show the complexity between external compulsion and voluntary action. This is a historical philosophical framework, not grounds for delivering a ready verdict on a person today.

If Ilya accepts an inconvenient deadline because he fears letting down participants already invited, his decision has a cost. Recognizing that he took a step does not establish that its conditions were welcome. We can ask what restricted his choice, which alternatives he saw, and what consequences he associated with each. Circumstances retain their place in the explanation.

Different pressures require their own examination. Conflicting preferences, a missing resource, dependence on a shared schedule, and a threat have different conditions. They cannot automatically be placed on one simple scale. In particular, the existence of some response by a person does not prove the absence of coercion, or make them responsible for someone else's violence or threat.

In this work example, accepting a task can be separated from evaluating how it was offered. We can discuss how Ilya acted while also questioning the distribution of work. A step preferred among restricted options does not make the whole arrangement fair. This distinction retains both the person's action and the practical price attached to their decision.

VII. Permission and capacity differ

At the beginning of *On Liberty*, Mill explicitly identifies his subject as civil or social liberty: the limits of society's legitimate power over an individual. He does not offer a proof of metaphysical free will here. His argument introduces a separate question about others' intervention, which cannot be replaced by asking how well someone governs themselves.

Suppose the organizer recognizes Ilya's right to propose another deadline. This clarifies the acceptability of a proposal but supplies no additional time. Conversely, being able to do the work does not settle whether demanding it was justified. The availability of an action and the legitimacy of intervention concern different aspects of the situation.

In the selected passages, Mill distinguishes an adult personal sphere from conduct affecting others; his ground concerns utility and human development. The text's historical colonial exceptions and restrictions were read and have not been adopted as the article's norms. The comparison remains philosophical. It determines no current legal rights in a particular jurisdiction.

For our example, the subject of the shared decision matters. A joint task's deadline may affect other participants. Ilya's personal activities beyond the accepted work raise a different question. When these areas merge unnoticed, a request for progress can become a demand to justify his whole personal schedule. Clarifying the sphere does not settle the dispute, but shows which intervention is being discussed and on what grounds.

We can extend the invented story: the participants jointly establish a process for their next project. Ilya proposes discussing deadlines before allocating tasks. He chooses his proposal and helps formulate a shared rule, yet cannot adopt it alone. Others have their own reasons and can respond. Even if the proposal is rejected, they can separately examine whether he had a chance to speak, whether the decision process was clear, and how the rule distributes work. This is our example of participation, rather than an account of Mill's political theory or current law. It adds a distinction: agreement with a particular outcome and participation in determining it differ. Someone may support a shared process while disputing one decision, or agree with the outcome while questioning how it was reached. Examining this requires knowing the rules and people's actual participation, rather than inferring them from the result.

VIII. A personal plan includes examining experience

In the third chapter, Mill discusses individuality and applying received experience through one's own judgment. A familiar pattern can be followed on different grounds: because it fits, because it has been considered, or simply because that is what people do. He values participation in choosing a plan of life, while retaining a limit connected with consequences for others.

Ilya might notice that he usually agreed to deadlines without discussion. This habit does not show that every earlier choice was wrong. Sometimes the arrangement suited the situation. New circumstances now call for a different question. He can examine his experience and retain what remains useful, without declaring his entire past an imposed script belonging to someone else.

A personal plan need not be wholly new. It can retain received knowledge, shared rules, and lasting commitments. What matters is whether someone understands how the chosen approach relates to their circumstances. After considering it, they may accept the familiar option, change it, or keep the decision open until a necessary response arrives.

In our story, proposing a smaller task can be an independent decision while the project remains collective. Individuality appears in how an end, capacities, and consequences are brought together. This is Mill's philosophical argument, not experimental proof that independent planning always improves well-being. Our map helps identify where someone participates through their own judgment.

Examining experience also includes the possibility of learning. If Ilya cannot yet perform the proposed work, this differs from a prohibition or an absence of desire. He can ask whether help is available, what preparation is needed, and whether the deadline allows it. Some opportunities emerge later through learning and shared organization; others remain unavailable now. Calling a future possibility a present capacity would be inaccurate. A

temporary limit also establishes no unchanging boundary for a whole life. In this invented story, two scales can be considered: what step is available this week, and what conditions could broaden participation in the next project? The answers may differ. This retains a present boundary and possible development, without promising that effort alone overcomes every obstacle. Resources, assistance, and the arrangement of the shared task remain conditions in their own right.

IX. Inaction also has consequences

In the first chapter, Mill separately considers harm arising from action and from inaction, calling for greater caution about compulsion in the latter case. This matters for our map because leaving something unchanged is also among the options. Its consequences require examination; they do not disappear simply because no new step is taken.

If Ilya has not answered, the organizer might still be counting on him. Silence does not disclose which account is correct: the task is accepted, the answer postponed, or the offer never received. Clarifying the status may therefore be an available action in itself. It does not constitute agreement to all the work, but changes the information supporting the shared plan.

The consequences of silence also depend on context. Was a deadline for answering set? Did Ilya know that a decision was expected? Could he communicate? Which obligations already existed? These questions distinguish an uncertain expectation from an accepted promise left unfulfilled. Examining consequences retains the facts, instead of automatically requiring constant availability.

A joint undertaking may need clarity, which can be obtained in different ways. Participants agree on how long an offer remains open and what happens without a response. Freedom of choice then connects with an intelligible arrangement for interaction. This is our application of a philosophical distinction; it establishes no particular legal obligation and does not make every possible act of assistance compulsory.

Sometimes the next step depends on a joint response. Ilya has proposed moving the deadline and awaits the group’s decision. This waiting cannot wholly be described as inaction: part of his participation is completed, while circumstances have yet to permit another part. He can clarify when an answer will arrive and what he can do meanwhile. Once a deadline passes, the earlier proposal may require fresh agreement. An absent response should not become concealed consent where no one established that arrangement. The other person’s freedom remains a real condition: they may support, amend, or decline the proposal. A plan can take these possibilities into account. This observation requires no prediction of their decision; it identifies a dependency and keeps a proposed approach distinct from an agreement already made.

X. Responsibility has a specific object

Ilya can accept responsibility for preparing an agreed portion of the material. This promise has a scope, deadline, and conditions. It differs from declaring that he will secure the project's entire success. When responsibility is specified, others can understand what result to expect and which part of the undertaking still needs their organization.

Responsibility does not remove uncertainty. Someone may complete the chosen step while the overall outcome differs from what was hoped. We can distinguish the quality of their action, fulfillment of an agreement, and the eventual result of joint work. These questions are related, but their answers may differ. Evaluation gains substance when how the result arose is known.

In Epictetus's §4, an action is considered together with how it is to be conducted amid foreseeable obstacles. Our invented example can place a second question alongside the goal: how does Ilya intend to handle changed conditions? He could name when he will report missing information, instead of silently promising that no obstacle will ever arise.

Responsibility thus includes being able to explain and correct a step. Explanation cannot substitute for necessary action, while correction need not involve assuming every result belonging to someone else. If the task becomes unavailable, a person can communicate that and discuss its consequences. Our map leaves room for limits of capacity, the fact of a promise, and a further concrete decision.

XI. Revising a decision can preserve its direction

During preparation, Ilya receives new information and realizes that he cannot finish the original scope in time. This change does not by itself establish that the whole project should be abandoned. He can examine which reason for the decision remains, which condition has changed, and which option is possible now.

Aristotelian deliberation considers means and feasibility; Mill's account of personal judgment considers applying experience to one's circumstances. Together, these supports let us distinguish commitment to a direction from keeping every method unchanged. Ilya might retain the wish to participate and propose another role. Alternatively, he could decide that the new conditions require ending his involvement.

Revision needs to be communicated if others rely on the earlier decision. A personal change enters a joint undertaking through its consequences. Someone can name the new circumstance, propose an option, and clarify which obligations have already arisen. This conversation guarantees no agreement, but makes the subject of disagreement specific.

The end itself also remains open to examination. In our contemporary map, we can ask whether to continue a task, whose rationale was accepted, and how it relates to other important undertakings. This question is not attributed to Aristotle's narrower account of deliberating about means. Distinguishing a source from our application lets the examination expand without presenting a later thought as something the philosopher already said.

XII. Room for choice can be named

Freedom in this map does not become one property that someone either possesses completely or lacks altogether. We have examined permission, capacity, wish, a deliberated step, external conditions, others' participation, and consequences. Their combination forms a particular situation in which the known room for action can be identified.

Ilya could accept part of the task, propose another deadline, request information, or decline participation. Some options need another person's agreement; others are immediately available; some remain assumptions. Listing them makes them neither equal nor easy to choose. Its purpose is specificity: what is being considered and on what grounds?

Aristotle helps distinguish wish, chosen action, and circumstances; Epictetus distinguishes personal participation and an externally dependent result within a Stoic framework; Mill examines the personal sphere and social intervention within his philosophy of liberty. Their grounds remain different. They offer no common proof of complete inner control, an absence of constraints, or a single correct theory of responsibility.

We can close the examination with one question: which decision is mine now, and what must be learned or agreed before it becomes an action? The answer may be small: a clarification, a specific step, or acknowledgment of a missing condition. At this scale, freedom becomes a matter of attentive participation in one's situation, retaining the reality of obstacles and other people's separate decisions.

What this means in practice

Choose one small decision that actually awaits you. State its object: which action is being considered, within what timeframe, and whom it affects. You need not begin with your largest life choice or use this observation to demonstrate how free you are overall.

Name the desired result and your own step separately. List the known conditions: time, information, resources, and others' participation. Mark which are present, which can be clarified, and which remain uncertain. Keep incomplete knowledge of the future distinct from an available fact that is missing.

Consider several options, including declining, changing the scope, or awaiting a response. For each, identify the costs and consequences currently known to you. Where an option needs someone else's agreement, retain it as a proposal rather than a possibility already secured.

Choose one question whose answer would change your next step. It might concern the task's scope, a response deadline, or an available resource. After clarifying it, examine the options again: has a condition changed, does the accepted reason remain, and what are you actually prepared to do?

If the decision concerns joint work, communicate it so that others can understand your part. Later, distinguish the action completed from the overall outcome, and consider whether an explanation, correction, or new agreement is needed.

This is our reflective sequence, informed by the philosophical distinctions examined. It has not been tested as a psychological intervention and promises no removal of external constraints. Its purpose is to clarify one real decision, retaining circumstances, personal responsibility, and another person's right to respond.

Key quotation

> *"We deliberate not about ends but about means."*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.3, translated by W. D. Ross. This complete sentence contains eight words. In this argument, the professional end is taken as a starting point. The article's separate question about accepting or revising an end is our extension, rather than a concealed part of the quotation.

Connections between traditions

No.	Two supports	What the comparison clarifies	Boundary
1	Epictetus, §1: one's own action and the external; Mill, I: limits of others' power	The availability of my step and the legitimacy of intervention are different questions	Stoic authority over judgment does not equal social liberty or material capacity
2	Aristotle, III.2: wish and choice; Epictetus, §§1–2: one's own action and a dependent outcome	A desired overall result can be distinguished from a particular action undertaken	No complete control or guaranteed success follows
3	Aristotle, III.1: mixed actions under pressure; Epictetus, §§4–5: response to an obstacle	Recognizing a personal step retains circumstances and the cost of alternatives	Coercion is not justified and no verdict is delivered on a person under threat
4	Aristotle, III.3: feasible means; Mill, III: applying experience through personal judgment	An accepted task can be related to an available approach and one's own judgment	Revising the end itself is a separate authorial extension
5	Aristotle, III.1–3: circumstances and chosen action; Mill, I: action and inaction	Known consequences and prior promises are considered for each option	No present legal duty or compulsory status for every possible assistance is established
6	Epictetus, §4: how to conduct an action; Mill, IV: shared obligation and the personal sphere	A form of participation can be clarified without surrendering every personal decision	Taking initiative does not establish the fairness of every shared rule

Primary sources

1. Epictetus. The Enchiridion. Translated by Elizabeth Carter. The complete selected §§1–2 and 4–5 were read with the translator attribution; adjacent sections were consulted within the scope recorded in the research notes. Stoic instruction, rather than a contemporary experimental method. The Greek was not collated.

2. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book III. Translated by W. D. Ross. The complete selected III.1–3 were read. III.4 and the opening of III.5 were consulted without claiming full reading of

those chapters. Ancient ethical argument; contemporary legal or clinical conclusions are not attributed to the source.

3. John Stuart Mill. On Liberty. English original. Selected passages were used from I on liberty's subject, intervention, action, and voluntary participation; III on individuality and applying experience; and IV on shared obligations, persuasion, and the personal sphere. The actual scope read is recorded in the research notes. No claim is made to have read the complete chapters or book.

The Russian quotations are our translations of the named English versions. The invented story, map, and practical observation are the authors' exposition. Brief attributed quotations and links establish no blanket rights for a future operation. Full import and vectorization of primary texts were not authorized.

Tags

freedom, action, choice, wish, decision, deliberation, circumstances, constraints, responsibility, consequences, personal sphere, social liberty, consent, coercion, uncertainty, means, ends, possibility, participation, promise, personal judgment, experience, Epictetus, Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Stoicism, ethics, philosophy, primary sources, United Wisdom

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