

UNITED WISDOM

Freedom from and freedom for: two dimensions of autonomy

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *“For their real freedom.”*

Thomas Hill Green, *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, final paragraph of the abridged Hanover Historical Texts Project transcript. This short fragment concerns the conditions of health and education for young citizens. The text read.

What this article is about

Sometimes liberation has a clear form: we no longer need to ask permission, endure interference, or carry out someone else's plan. Yet once a prohibition is removed, another question may emerge: what is now actually possible? An open door does not tell us where we want to go, whether we have time for the journey, or whether we can return if the direction proves unsuitable. A discussion of freedom therefore needs to consider both the absence of coercion and the capacity to use the space that has become available.

These dimensions are connected, but neither replaces the other. Available resources do not justify an imposed goal; the right to refuse does not remove every shortage of resources. Through examples invented specifically for this article, we will distinguish a prohibition, an obstacle, one's own intention, and assistance. Our philosophical interlocutor is Green, who connected freedom with the conditions for developing human capacities. His social vision does not become a ready recipe for organizing society here. Our narrower task is to see more precisely what space for autonomy opens up in a particular undertaking.

I. Removing a prohibition changes the situation without completing the task

Consider a hypothetical case. A study group previously prohibited students from proposing their own research topics. The rule has now been removed, and everyone may choose a question. This is a significant change: a participant no longer has to investigate only what the supervisor assigns. It retains its value even if someone has no proposal yet. We cannot declare the removal useless simply because the new possibilities were not used immediately. A person has gained the right to consider a direction, try it, or decide not to continue this project at all.

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But suppose that information about the new procedure is available only during working hours, materials must be found in a locked room, and the deadline for choosing is a single evening. Topics are formally unrestricted, while the practical path to preparing one remains narrow for some participants. It helps to name two different changes: compulsory assignment has ended, but the conditions for an independent proposal have barely changed. If we conflate them, the organizer may treat every difficulty as personal passivity, while a participant may overlook even the space that has actually opened up. An accurate description preserves both facts without devaluing either.

Removing a prohibition need not come with a guarantee of success. An independent project may have difficulties that nobody can remove in advance. Nevertheless, we can assess a right to choose by asking whether there is at least one understandable path to exercising it. Not every difficulty is a concealed prohibition, but a possibility for which no accessible time, information, or resources exist deserves further consideration. The first dimension of freedom asks about interference: who closes off an action, and on what grounds? The second attends to execution: what will the person need to make use of what is permitted? The answers sometimes coincide and sometimes require different responses. Distinguishing them opens a next step instead of a general dispute about whether someone is sufficiently free.

II. The absence of interference preserves one's own decision

Freedom from interference is especially visible when someone claims the right to determine another person's life. Even generous support may come with a condition that the recipient choose the sole approved direction. In that case, the number of opportunities provided does not yet show who owns the decision. A person may receive a comfortable room, materials, and time while losing the right to change the topic. Assistance becomes control when its provider declares their goal obligatory for someone else. That transition needs to be considered separately from the usefulness of the resources themselves.

In a hypothetical example, an organizer offers to pay for a participant's short training course on condition that she subsequently take on a particular community role. Such an offer is not necessarily unacceptable: a joint project can have known purposes and reciprocal obligations. However, the honesty of the arrangement depends on how clearly the condition is stated, whether she can refuse, and what happens to support already accepted if she revises her decision. A transparent project with a limited commitment differs from a promise of general freedom concealing lifelong gratitude or a duty to remain convenient.

The absence of interference therefore does not mean living without any agreements or boundaries. It requires distinguishing an agreed rule for a particular undertaking from someone else's authority over every subsequent decision. Participants in joint work may voluntarily accept a deadline, a common format, or a distribution of duties. Their right to leave the project

and the consequences of leaving nevertheless deserve clear discussion. Freedom does not automatically increase with ambiguity: vague expectations sometimes provide a stronger basis for pressure than a commitment limited in advance. Precision allows people to understand the cost of participation and others to make plans without appropriating their future. Relations remain reciprocal when every obligation has a subject and a limit, and one person's disappointment does not become an unconditional right to direct another.

III. A possibility needs a path to execution

When there is no prohibition, it is useful to trace the path from intention to action. This path usually has several links: learn about the opportunity, understand the procedure, find time, gain access to the required place or tool, and take the first step. Someone may have sufficient desire and skill while lacking one intermediate condition. A general invitation to show initiative then conceals how the task is arranged. It is more useful to ask about the particular transition that cannot be made. This examines one undertaking in specific circumstances rather than the person's entire character.

Suppose a community venue invites residents to run open classes. There is no formal prohibition on new subjects, but applications must be submitted in person during a short morning interval. A resident working at that time sees free choice on paper and an inaccessible entry to the procedure. The reason may be a habitual schedule rather than hostility on the organizers' part. Considering the obstacle does not require proving malicious intent in advance. An alternative way of submitting an application could change access to the first step while retaining the general requirements for the programme itself.

Yet we cannot assume that every proposed change is feasible. Organizers also have limited time, responsibilities, and resources. Discussing only the participant's need gives an incomplete picture; discussing only the organizer's convenience leaves the announced possibility unexamined. The subject becomes a narrow condition: what method of application can actually be provided, and whose participation would it enable? Sometimes the answer will be a simple schedule change; sometimes it will be an explanation of a limitation that cannot currently be overcome. Even the latter is more useful than a moral appraisal of someone who did not accept the invitation. It distinguishes inconvenience requiring effort from the absence of an accessible path, after which the person can decide whether another project is worth seeking. Freedom for action acquires substance through such transitions rather than the number of attractive names on a list of alternatives.

IV. Resources do not determine a goal

Suppose access has become available: there is time, information, and an acceptable participation procedure. The question of why the person wants to act remains. A ready opportunity may attract us because others approve of it while failing to match our own intention. Here it matters to distinguish capacity from obligation. Being able to run classes does not in itself oblige someone to become a teacher. Resources for a large project do not prove that this particular project should occupy the coming year. Autonomy includes deciding where not to invest one's available energy.

One's own direction does not always emerge in complete isolation. We learn about new activities from others, try forms they suggest, and learn from people whose judgement we respect. Influence is not identical to coercion. The significant question is whether we retain the ability to discuss the goal, change it, and recognize that it does not fit. A desire can become clearer through joint work without thereby belonging to someone else. Conversely, demanding an entirely independent goal in advance creates an unattainable picture of freedom, as though any interest arising in conversation had already been spoiled by outside influence.

A practical distinction appears in the response to reconsideration. A helpful interlocutor asks what has changed and clarifies the boundaries of their continued involvement. A controlling one demands that the initial agreement count as final proof of what the person must want. Of course, reconsideration sometimes affects promises to others and creates real costs. Those need to be acknowledged and, where possible, discussed, but they do not make an earlier goal permanent. We can retain responsibility for a specific promise while declining a way of life to which it once belonged. Freedom for something means being able to relate action to a meaningful direction, rather than a duty to keep using every resource provided. Without this distinction, developing capacities easily becomes a demand for constant usefulness.

Uncertainty about direction is also permissible. To use a small opportunity, we need not first prove that we have found an authentic and unchanging desire. Sometimes we understand our interest only after a first experience. The question about one's own intention is therefore better posed as an invitation to clarify than an examination in independence. An outside interlocutor can help identify several options without having to pronounce which one expresses the person's true identity. A person may not know the answer, postpone the choice, or try a limited form. This pause does not destroy autonomy: it preserves space in which direction can still change without having to defend an earlier explanation.

V. Conditions for development and the limits of public assistance

Green discussed freedom in connection with the shared development of human capacities. In the abridged text read for this article, he considers labour, health, and education, attending to the conditions under which a person can participate in social life. This is a historical philosophical position, not a description of current legislation. For our question, the significant distinction is that one can support the conditions of action without directly producing another person's moral autonomy. This distinction does not settle every dispute about legitimate authority, but it indicates a limit to turning assistance into moral direction.

In a contemporary hypothetical example, that limit is straightforward. A library can make information more accessible, arrange an understandable registration process, and provide a workspace. These actions do not imply a right to assign a visitor an obligatory meaning in life. A teacher can explain difficult material and help someone try a method; the student's understanding is not guaranteed, and agreement with the teacher's worldview is not the measure of all successful learning. Support creates an opportunity that its recipient may use differently from what its provider expected. If that use is excluded in advance, the form offered should honestly be named a specific project with a set goal.

Creating conditions also involves choices. Time, rooms, and resources are usually insufficient for every desired direction. Calling something freedom cannot remove this difficulty or declare every allocation neutral. Decisions about which opportunities to support have consequences for different people. It therefore helps to discuss criteria, limits, and the possibility of revision rather than good intentions alone. Recipients' participation in that discussion does not in itself promise a fair outcome. It helps reveal where a useful resource has become tied to an unclear procedure or an inaccessible price. The limit of assistance concerns both the person's goal and the organizer's knowledge: nobody foresees every way others may use an opened space. Learning from that difference is part of responsibility for the conditions.

VI. One person's freedom exists among the freedoms of others

A person pursues their direction in a shared world. A music session occupies a room's time, public discussion requires participants' attention, and a project uses a shared tool. One's desire therefore creates no unconditional right to every resource. Two people may have an equal right to pursue a favourite activity and still be unable to occupy the same hall simultaneously. The problem need not be suppression of someone's individuality. Sometimes it calls for ordinary coordination that allows several directions to coexist without promising to eliminate inconvenience altogether.

In that case, it matters to identify what the restriction addresses. A prohibition on particular hours may protect neighbours' rest; a prohibition on the topic itself may express unwillingness

to admit another view. Rules with the same outward form do not necessarily have the same grounds. Assessment requires information about their purpose, application, and available alternatives. We cannot automatically call every boundary the freedom of others, just as we cannot call every boundary arbitrary violence. Clarifying the circumstances requires discussion of a specific action rather than a contest over whose freedom matters more in general.

Another aspect of shared life is assistance that we cannot demand as the natural extension of our own desire. Someone may invite a friend to join a project but needs to hear a refusal without treating it as evidence of moral inadequacy. Refusal does not mean the project is meaningless or that help will never be appropriate. It shows the limits of this person's participation at this time. Freedom for a common undertaking arises from agreed contributions rather than the belief that a worthy goal automatically cancels others' right to manage their energy. Reciprocity remains when the size of a contribution, its timing, and the end of participation can be discussed. Shared space then supports different plans, including those we do not consider most important. This is harder than simply clearing room for our own plan, but describes autonomy among people more accurately.

VII. An unused opportunity does not prove a lack of freedom

Opportunities have another limit: a person may choose not to use them. Suppose that, even after the application procedure changes, the resident still proposes no class. Perhaps she has chosen other work, decided to rest, or realized that she does not want a regular commitment. Refusal alone does not prove that the change was useless or that she still lacks autonomy. An open path matters even when nobody takes it. The right to choose includes leaving an alternative unrealized without having to explain one's whole life.

Nor should refusal become proof that the conditions are fully sufficient. If ten people do not use an opportunity, that observation alone does not reveal why. Their reasons may differ, including a difficulty unknown to the organizers. Assessing a procedure calls for caution: accessibility cannot be inferred solely from participant numbers, or voluntariness from the absence of complaints. Collecting explanations must itself remain limited. A person need not disclose private circumstances so that an organizer can obtain an attractive picture of effectiveness. Optional feedback about a particular stage can be offered while retaining the right not to reply.

This caution protects freedom from two opposing demands. The first insists that announcing an opportunity is enough, after which all responsibility belongs to the recipient. The second requires recipients to use support to confirm its value. In both cases, their decision becomes part of someone else's report. A more precise approach distinguishes the quality of the conditions from the actual choice. Conditions can be improved without compelling

participation; refusal can be respected without concluding that nothing needs improving. This distinction does not provide a universal way of evaluating a programme. It merely keeps several questions open and prevents us from replacing an unknown reason with a convenient moral story. Free space need not immediately fill with action in order to remain free.

VIII. Reconsideration supports a self-directed course

Some opportunities look attractive before a first experience and then need reconsidering. Someone may start open classes and discover that preparation takes far more time than expected. That experience need not indicate a weak will or a false interest. It provides new information about the cost of the chosen direction. Freedom for action includes not only starting but being able to consider such information. Without reconsideration, one's own plan can become a trap sustained by the demand to prove the initial decision correct at any cost.

Reconsideration has a relationship with commitments. If a class has already been announced and participants expect a meeting, a sudden cancellation may cause inconvenience. Recognizing this helps us seek a limited way of concluding: give notice, fulfil an available part of the promise, suggest a new date, or explain directly that continuation is impossible. None of these options guarantees that others will be satisfied. Autonomy does not promise choices without consequences. It allows us to consider consequences while retaining the right to decline a lengthy path that no longer matches our capacity or goal.

It therefore helps to distinguish a trial from a sustained commitment in advance. A single trial class should not quietly turn into a promise to run a year-long programme. If that promise is genuinely needed, it deserves discussion as a separate step. Beginning with a limited form sometimes makes action more accessible precisely because the person need not bind an indefinite future to it immediately. A trial nevertheless requires respect for other people's time. Calling something an experiment should not exempt us from all notice or responsibility. A well-limited trial joins personal freedom with an understandable scope of participation: what are we trying, how long does it last, and how will we recognize that it is time to stop? Reconsideration then forms part of meaningful action rather than an admission of personal defeat.

IX. Inner work and changing conditions answer different questions

The Stoic tradition attends to the distinction between one's own judgement and what depends on outside circumstances. In the first section of the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus proposes making this distinction rigorously. It may help us avoid treating every external outcome as a complete expression of our worth. But attending to judgement does not replace the question of access to action. If someone is not permitted to enter a room, reframing the refusal does not open the door. It may support their next response, but changing the procedure requires another action and sometimes another participant.

Conversely, correcting the procedure does not automatically determine a person's attitude towards it. Even an accessible programme may raise doubts: does the goal fit, is participation worth the effort, and do they want this particular opportunity? These questions cannot be finally settled on a recipient's behalf. Inner work and social change can accompany one another while retaining different objects. Respect for one's own judgement does not require denying material obstacles; attention to obstacles does not require portraying a person as wholly unable to respond. The concrete extent of each possibility needs examination without a general formula presumed to apply to every circumstance.

The boundary of comparison between traditions is especially important here. The historical ideal of invulnerable inner assent cannot be transferred to every threat or dependence as an obligation imposed on a harmed person. A social philosophy of conditions, in turn, provides no permission to control someone for their presumed good. Both approaches are useful when they clarify a question rather than close it. We can ask which judgement we want to examine and, separately, which obstacle requires a change in a shared procedure. If the latter change is currently unavailable, that does not make it unnecessary; if it is available, it does not remove all personal choice. The distinction allows a next step without turning one method into a universal measure of human freedom.

X. Autonomy has a concrete and changing scope

Freedom is thus easier to examine through several connected circumstances: the absence of unjustified interference, an accessible path to action, one's own direction, and the possibility of reconsideration. In a real undertaking, these may develop unevenly. Someone has the right to choose a topic but no time to prepare it; gains time but encounters an obligatory goal; chooses a goal independently but does not yet know how to conclude participation. Instead of a single mark for complete freedom, a more precise map emerges. It shows where a further conversation or change actually addresses the difficulty.

Such a map is not for competition between people. One person's ability to carry out a plan does not imply that another in outwardly similar circumstances should achieve the same result. Information, duties, available support, and the cost of failure may differ. Nor should every difference be declared insurmountable in advance. We examine conditions to understand a possible step, not to issue a final verdict on someone's character. Sometimes that step is a request to clarify a procedure, sometimes a limited trial, and sometimes a decision not to participate. Each option needs its own grounds rather than a general approval of activity.

Autonomy therefore does not equal endless independence from everyone. A person can freely accept help if they understand its conditions and retain their own decision within the stated boundaries. They can depend on a shared tool without giving others authority to determine all their goals. They can change their intention while acknowledging specific consequences of an earlier promise. None of this guarantees a comfortable life or the absence of conflict. But attending to both dimensions of freedom helps us avoid treating either as a sufficient answer to the other. When a prohibition is removed, examine the possibility; when conditions are provided, preserve direction; when direction is chosen, clarify its relations with others. Freedom then becomes a question about a real space for action in which someone can participate without having to prove their worth at every step.

What this means in practice

If you wish, take one small undertaking that is formally available now: joining a meeting, suggesting a topic, or learning a tool. Do not choose a situation involving threats, violence, or a need to disclose someone else's information for this exercise. You may limit it to a few minutes and write nothing down. First note whether there is a direct prohibition or an obligatory decision by someone else. Then identify one transition needed for a first action: learn the procedure, find time, gain access, or check the conditions of participation.

Separately, ask why you want to do this. You need not find an ultimate purpose in life; it is enough to understand whether you want this particular step now. If you do not, you may finish without trying to correct yourself. If you do but the path is blocked, select only a question or request that is safe and appropriate to make. Do not promise yourself that an answer will remove the obstacle or that someone else must provide what you want.

If a trial is possible, limit its time and scope beforehand. Consider whom your participation affects and who should be told that it is a trial. After the first step, you may revise your intention, clarify the conditions, or stop. This check does not measure your maturity or prove complete freedom. Its modest purpose is to distinguish a right, an opportunity, and your own direction in one undertaking, while preserving the right not to do the exercise at all.

Key quotation

> *“To maintain the conditions.”*

Thomas Hill Green, *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, paragraph on labour, education, and health in the abridged Hanover transcript. In the complete sentence in the excerpt read, the conditions concern the free exercise of human capacities, distinguished from the state's directly producing moral goodness. Text and context.

Connections between traditions

For Green, freedom concerns the social conditions for developing capacities; for Epictetus in the first section of the *Enchiridion*, it concerns distinguishing one's own judgement from external things. We can compare their questions about what a person can bring about and what should not be treated as wholly one's own. Their subjects and aims nevertheless differ: the social arrangement of opportunities does not reduce to Stoic discipline of judgement, and that discipline does not become a programme for allocating public resources.

The neighbouring UW:A02 article on Stoicism examines the inner response to circumstances in detail. This article adds another question: what accessible path exists after a prohibition is removed? This addition does not equate the traditions or promise that combining the two views will remove every dependence. It merely helps prevent an answer about judgement from replacing one about conditions, or vice versa.

Sources

1. Thomas Hill Green. *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*. Hanover Historical Texts Project, abridged primary transcript. The entire published excerpt was read, including omissions and its bibliographic heading. The discussions of shared development of capacities, contracts, labour, education, and the limits of state assistance inform this article. Hanover's heading gives 1861; the lecture's edition catalogue record gives Oxford, Slatter and Rose, 1881. The discrepancy is explicitly retained: the complete printed copy was not read, and only verified fragments of the available abridgement are quoted.

2. Epictetus. *Enchiridion*, §1, translated by Elizabeth Carter. Internet Classics Archive, MIT. The first section distinguishing one's own action from external things was read and used for a limited comparison without direct quotation. Historical promises of invulnerability are not presented as a contemporary guarantee of safety.

Tags

freedom, autonomy, freedom from, freedom for, choice, opportunity, conditions of action, personal goal, interference, coercion, access, education, assistance, Thomas Hill Green, Epictetus, Stoicism, social philosophy, personal direction, shared life, social conditions, development of capacities, right to refuse, reconsideration, trial action, responsibility, reciprocity, agreement, limits of assistance, resources, participation

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