

UNITED WISDOM

The Scales of Life and the Weight of Possessions

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Why possession inevitably turns into service

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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> ***Archival editor's note.*** *This is a full translation of the supplied Russian archival edition. Its categorical relationships between wealth, power, moral injury, and freedom, its historical causal explanations, and its comparisons between traditions are the authors' interpretations, not newly verified scientific, clinical, historical, or financial conclusions. The epigraph and closing quotation are presented in the source as paraphrases, not authenticated verbatim quotations. Bibliographic attributions and locators are retained without claiming that they have been independently checked.*

Epigraph

“Whoever possesses much also serves much” — a thought in the spirit of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, developed in his *Letters to Lucilius* (compare Letters 28 and 5): the wise person treats wealth as a servant; the fool treats it as a master.

What this article is about

There is a direct proportionality between the scope of a decision-maker's authority and the level of abstraction at which human life is assessed. The greater the number of beings subordinate to an authority, the less concrete, more functional, and therefore more expendable each unit becomes. This mechanism is structural rather than psychological: it operates in military administration, economics, politics, and medicine. The article goes further, however, showing how any possession — power, capital, or status — creates a paradoxical dependence: the subject becomes the servant of its object. It is precisely the fear of losing this accumulated mass, the fear of returning to emptiness, that produces a willingness to embrace radical amorality. Through historical examples and philosophical traditions, from Stoicism to the Buddhist middle way, the article argues for an existential balance: freedom becomes possible only when accumulation has an established limit and things remain tools rather than masters.

I. The arithmetic of scale: how distance produces expendability

Within institutional reality, the value of human life is determined not by individual uniqueness but by its place in a matrix of priorities. This is not cynicism but bureaucratic rationality — Weber's *Zweckrationalität*: the higher the level of aggregation, the more life becomes a statistical unit. In medical triage during mass disasters, a doctor works with categories such as “expected duration” and “probability of survival,” rather than the person; in military logistics, a soldier is a unit of personnel, part of the headcount; in economic policy, unemployment is measured in percentages rather than biographies. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt showed that evil here is banal rather than demonic: it emerges from the administrator's ability to abstract away from the victim's particular existence. The proportionality is direct: the scale of the decision renders a person interchangeable, *fungibel*.

This creates a particular kind of moral vacuum in which deciding to “sacrifice five to save ten” requires no heroism, but does require the ability to think in terms of a matrix rather than flesh.

II. The burden of selection: the moral injury of choosing

Those who decide whom to sacrifice, from military tribunals to hospital directors, encounter what psychiatry calls “moral injury” and existential philosophy calls the “burden of freedom” (Sartre). The burden is not metaphorical: the impossibility of meeting an absolute duty with limited resources produces a paralysis of responsibility. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes prisoner administrators who had to decide who would go to work and who would go to their death; their psychological disintegration was no less terrible than the physical destruction of those they “selected.” Making decisions on a scale at which every choice means the death of others destroys subjecthood: a person becomes “part of the mechanism,” as Eichmann argued in his defense at trial. This is an ontological challenge — *ontologische Herausforderung*: how can you remain a subject while acting within a system that requires you to be an object?

III. Ontological inversion: possession as being possessed

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx described the “mysterious” character of the commodity: the thing that should have been a means becomes an end in itself, and the person becomes its appendage. This is not only economic fetishism but an existential inversion. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger analyzes “the they,” *das Man*, in which people are defined not by what is their own, *eigen*, but by possession: “having” determines “being.” In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre adds that ownership is a magical way of existing in the world, *magische Existenzweise*, through which a subject tries to appropriate being by means of a thing, only for the thing to appropriate the subject instead. The result is servitude to things, *Sklavendienst der Dinge*: the owner of a palace becomes its butler; the wealthy person becomes the bookkeeper of their capital. There is no moral condemnation here, but a structural description: possession generates care, *Sorge*, which fills all one's time and takes away the possibility of detachment, *Gelassenheit*, necessary for freedom.

IV. The abyss of loss: when fear becomes total

In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes held that the fear of violent death underlies the social contract. Yet more radical still is the fear of returning to nothing: losing the accumulated mass, *massa*. This fear is existential rather than rational; it concerns the threatened dissolution of the artificial “I” constituted through property. When people identify themselves with their assets, losing those assets is experienced as death. Their willingness to do “anything” — deceive, use violence, betray — therefore increases in proportion to the extent of ownership. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli observed that a prince who has lost power cannot be anything; a modern oligarch who loses capital becomes “nothing” in social space. This produces a paradox: the more you have, the less free you are, because every action becomes a function of preserving the mass.

V. Midas and Crassus: a historical anatomy of golden servitude

History offers many examples of the scale of possession turning people into prisoners of their own wealth. Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BCE), the richest Roman, died at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE while pursuing not strategic victory but Parthian gold. In *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch notes that Crassus could not stop because his *esse*, existence, was identical to his *habere*, having. Louis XVI (1754–1793), unable to relinquish privilege to preserve his life and crown, illustrates the same structure: fear of losing the status quo made him incapable of compromise and led him to the guillotine. The reverse example is Diogenes of Sinope (412–323 BCE), who discarded his cup when he saw that he could drink from his hand: he freed himself from the object as from a master. Historical experience shows that gold does not so much corrupt the subject as replace it.

VI. Exceptions: Cincinnatus and Marcus Aurelius as a technique of balance

Some historical figures maintained a balance between power or wealth and freedom by setting a limit, *limitatio*, rather than through outright renunciation. Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, traditionally appointed dictator of Rome in 458 BCE to save the republic from the Aequi, returned to his plow after sixteen days, relinquishing absolute power. His freedom lay in being able to let power go without losing himself. Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), Roman emperor and Stoic, practiced “inner poverty,” *paupertas interior*, in his *Meditations* (*Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν*). This was incompatible with the vanity of power: he looked soberly at imperial regalia as externals behind which the same mortality remained. These examples show that balance can be achieved not through minimalism but by making power instrumental — using it as a tool rather than an identity.

VII. The point of absolute possession: why maximum wealth means maximum unfreedom

There is an asymptotic curve beyond which an increase in capital ceases to increase freedom and begins to reduce it exponentially. This is the point at which servicing assets requires one hundred percent of a person's time and cognitive resources. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault analyzes precisely this moment: the population as a mass becomes an object of government, *biopolitique*, while its administrator becomes its hostage. The owner of a megacorporation, private island, or political party lives in a state of total defensiveness: any change is experienced as a threat. The Buddhist concept of *tanha* (*tṛṣṇā*, craving) describes this very mechanism: the more that is acquired, the stronger the thirst to acquire and preserve, creating an endless loop, *saṃsāra*. Absolute wealth amounts to an absolute prison in which the prisoner is their own guard.

VIII. The necessary equilibrium: Aristotle, madhyama, and zuhd

Philosophical traditions propose not the rejection of property but its limitation as a condition of freedom. In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces *mesotes* (*μεσότης*), the mean between stinginess and extravagance on which generosity, *liberalitas*, rests. Wealth here is an instrument, *organon*, for good deeds rather than a goal. In Buddhism, *madhyamā-pratipad*, the middle way, teaches avoidance of the extremes of asceticism and sensual indulgence. In Islam, *zuhd*, pious abstinence, means holding possessions "in the hand, not in the heart," paralleling the Stoic attitude toward *adiaphora*, things indifferent with respect to the good. These traditions converge on one point: freedom requires thinning out the mass of possessions, creating "gaps" through which independence can pass. Balance is not a compromise but a strategic necessity.

IX. A strategy of renunciation: Diogenes' practice as freedom

Renunciation, *renuntiatio*, is not a denial of life but its concentration. Diogenes, who lived in a large clay vessel, a *pithos* (*πίθος*), demonstrated that a minimum of possessions creates a maximum of autonomy, *autarkeia*. This is not asceticism for the sake of suffering, but training, *askēsis*, in being unaffected by loss. The Stoics practiced *praemeditatio malorum*, anticipating misfortunes so that loss would cease to be a threat. In a contemporary setting, this means diversifying not only assets but identity: being not "an owner" but "a person who temporarily manages." Fear of loss diminishes not through increasing security but through reducing the "I" that has something to lose.

X. What this means in practice

In practice, this means establishing a "threshold of sufficiency": a particular amount or status beyond which each additional unit brings servitude rather than freedom. The practice of "voluntary simplicity" does not require giving up comfort, but does require distinguishing a "tool" from a "master." It also means declining positions in which the scale of decisions requires sacrificing people as statistical units. If occupying such a position is unavoidable, a "practice of presence" is necessary: regularly restoring the particular reality of victims, for example by reading names rather than numbers. Finally, it means an economic "diversification of freedom": holding some assets in a form easily convertible into autonomy — liquid assets — rather than only in forms requiring constant protection, such as real estate and status. Freedom lies not in the absence of things but in the ability to sacrifice them without being destroyed.

Key quotation

“Wealth consists not in possessing many things but in having few needs. The person who wants little is rich; the one who wants much is poor, even if they own the whole world. For they serve their desires, and their desires are their jailers. Whoever cannot give away what they have does not possess it but is possessed; and the more they have, the heavier the chains.” — a thought attributed to Epictetus (c. 50–135 CE), a free paraphrase in the spirit of his *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*.

Connections between traditions

• *Mesotes* (Aristotle) ↔ *madhyamā-pratipad* (the Buddha) ↔ *zuhd* (Islam): three concepts of a middle way between accumulation and renunciation, in which wealth is acceptable as a tool but destructive as an end.

• *Zweckrationalität* (Weber) ↔ bureaucratic abstraction (Arendt) ↔ *maya* (Advaita): mechanisms through which a particular existence becomes a functional unit available for “expenditure.”

• *Praemeditatio malorum* (Stoics) ↔ *maranasati* (Buddhist meditation on death) ↔ *memento mori* (Christian practice): techniques for reducing fear of loss by anticipating dissolution.

• *Das Man* (Heidegger) ↔ the “outer person” (Russian spiritual tradition) ↔ *nafs* (Sufism): concepts of a false “I” constituted through possession and social approval.

• Cincinnatus (Rome) ↔ George Washington (United States) ↔ Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (the Caliphate): historical examples of voluntarily limiting power as evidence of spiritual autonomy.

Primary sources

1. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II. The theory of *mesotes* and the relationship to wealth.

2. Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*, II.2, IV.3. Practicing inner poverty while holding external power.

3. Epictetus. *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*. Freedom as independence from externals.

4. Plutarch. *Parallel Lives*, “Crassus.” The mechanism of golden servitude.

5. Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, Chapters 13–14. Fear as a foundation of society and power.

6. Karl Marx. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Commodity fetishism and inversion of the subject.

7. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, §§25–27. Analysis of *das Man* and care, *Sorge*.

8. Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*, Part II. The magic of owning and being possessed.

9. Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The banality of evil and the scale of administration.

10. Max Weber. *Science as a Vocation*. Rationalization and the "disenchantment" of the world.

11. Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. Biopolitics and the scale of government.

12. Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*, Chapter 17. Fear of losing power.

13. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago*. The psychology of administrators and the broken subject.

14. Lucius Annaeus Seneca. *Letters to Lucilius*, 5, 28, 90. Servitude to things and freedom from needs.

15. Diogenes Laërtius. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book VI. Anecdotes about Diogenes and renunciation.

16. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Stoicism".

17. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moral Injury".

18. *Dhammapada*, 186–187. Impermanence and freedom from craving.

Tags

scale, triage, moral injury, commodity fetishism, zuhd, mesotes, madhyama, Cincinnatus, Crassus, Marcus Aurelius, Diogenes, Stoicism, Aristotle, Heidegger, Sartre, Marx, Hobbes, Solzhenitsyn, Hannah Arendt, biopolitics, fear of loss, servitude to things, autonomy, renunciation, sufficiency practice, freedom through limitation, bureaucratic rationality, Zweckrationalität, das Man, adiaphora, limit, balance of power

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He is responsible for strategy, topic selection, editorial tone, and final editing. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. She is responsible for testing ideas in practice and keeping the texts connected to real life. She seeks to test what we write about in practice and observe how the principles of unity and mutual understanding work in actual relationships between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.