

UNITED WISDOM

Envy of Other People's Freedom

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“...not wish to be a general or senator ... or consul, but a free man”.*

Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, XIX; George Long's translation, *A Selection from the Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion*, Project Gutenberg no. 10661. An excerpt, with an omission marked. This is the Stoic understanding of freedom, not a claim that external restrictions do not matter.

What this article is about

Imagine an ordinary conversation: an acquaintance explains that she turned down a promotion, kept Fridays free, and is planning to go away for a month. You respond kindly, but a prickly thought appears: “It's easy for her. She can afford it.” Sometimes money, family support, a passport, health, or the absence of obligations really does lie behind that thought. Sometimes there is a more uncomfortable discovery: you have a similar opportunity but cannot bring yourself to use it without permission from people who never promised to give their permission.

Envy of freedom differs from wanting someone else's possession. What becomes attractive is a way of directing one's own life: choosing, declining, changing one's mind, leaving time unfilled. This article explores what we see in another person's freedom, where comparison conceals real inequality, where it points to a restriction we impose on ourselves, and why acknowledging a wish does not mean immediately copying the other person's action. The feeling receives no moral exemption, but it does not become a verdict on the person either. It may supply material for a question: what possibility do I want to recover, and who will pay for making it real?

I. We envy the verb, not the outcome

Another person's freedom often attracts us before we know whether we like its actual content. Someone envies a trip despite disliking flying; someone else envies a divorce despite not wanting to separate; another envies leaving a prestigious job despite valuing their profession. Remove the appealing picture, and an action remains: leave, finish, refuse. It is the possibility of saying this verb on one's own behalf that seems inaccessible.

In a hypothetical example, a colleague says, “I no longer take weekend projects.” It is not their rest itself that irritates you. You could also rest next Wednesday, but Wednesday would be a gift from circumstances, while their weekend looks like a decision they made. The difference

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between receiving an interval and establishing a boundary explains why the same number of free hours can feel different. This is an editorial distinction between life situations, not a measured law about how all envy works.

The first useful question is therefore very concrete: what exactly do I envy? Money, protection from consequences, the possibility of not explaining oneself, the courage to withstand disapproval, or the absence of people whose needs must be considered? These answers lead in different directions. Extra income will not replace the right to decline, and a conversation about boundaries will not produce rent money. Calling all these things “freedom” makes it easy to choose an action that does not address the original problem.

In chapter XIX of the *Encheiridion*, the Stoic Epictetus advises against taking high status as evidence of a happy life. His argument is more radical than our everyday question: he connects true good to what is within the person's power. We need not accept the entire Stoic system to retain the precision of the observation. A visible sign of freedom does not tell us how someone feels inside their decision. Envy reveals an image's attraction; it does not provide access to another person's life.

II. Unseen support may lie behind apparent ease

Outward ease does not imply identical starting conditions. Someone who resigns calmly may have savings, a home without a mortgage, and a partner with a stable income. Someone else may have a rare, sought-after skill. Another may be able to return to their parents' home. None of this devalues the decision, but it changes its cost. The same gesture can be an experiment for one person and a threat to basic stability for another.

Comparison becomes unfair when support is removed from it in advance. Imagine two people wanting a shorter working week. One loses some income but keeps a reserve; the other already pays for a relative's medication and has no cushion. “Just choose yourself” erases a difference that character alone cannot overcome. The opposite extreme is also inaccurate: having support does not prove that the freer person made no decision and took no risk. They can benefit from an advantage and still make a difficult choice.

Two objections need separating here. First: I lack a resource that is distributed unequally. Second: the other person should not use their resource until I have it too. The first may support negotiation, cooperation, or public criticism. The second shifts attention from access to an opportunity toward shrinking someone else's life. It does not bring you closer to what you want, even if it briefly makes the comparison less painful.

You can ask about support without interrogating or exposing someone. “How did you prepare for that transition?” asks how the decision actually worked. “Everything is paid for you anyway, isn't it?” attempts to cancel its significance. Interest produces information: how long

preparation took, what had to be postponed, what alternatives were available. That information can replace someone else's attractive “I can” with your own more modest “What condition would I need?” This change guarantees no outcome; it simply makes the wish concrete.

There is another important difference between an opportunity and access to it at the right time. For example, a contract provides paid leave, but the workplace is arranged so that choosing dates brings hostile pressure. The formal right has not disappeared, yet exercising it takes effort. Envy of a colleague who takes leave calmly may point precisely to the conditions for exercising a right. That is more accurate than arguing about which employee is more grateful to the employer.

III. An internal prohibition can be real without being all-powerful

Sometimes the external resource exists, while permission is still awaited. A person can afford an evening without work but feels they must first prove sufficient exhaustion. They can choose different clothes but mentally prepare an explanation. They can skip a gathering but search for a respectable reason an imagined court will accept. In these cases, envy is directed toward someone who manages without that court, or at least does not give it the final word.

One episode cannot establish where the prohibition came from. It may involve a familiar family role, an agreement, professional responsibility, one's own values, or an earlier situation in which refusing really was unsafe. Not every “I can't” is a thinking error. Clarification must leave room for facts: what will happen after refusal, who has actual authority, which consequences have occurred, and which are only anticipated?

It helps to distinguish an obligation from a demand to keep justifying one's existence. If you promised to collect a child, changing the plan affects someone else. If you want half an hour to read and no one depends on those thirty minutes, having to present proof of conscientiousness may be a separate habit. A slogan about freedom will not remove it, but you can notice it as an action: I am explaining myself before anyone has asked.

In chapter III of *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill defends space for individual choice and diverse ways of living. This is a nineteenth-century political and philosophical argument, not a contemporary therapeutic instruction. The text includes historical restrictions and exceptions that we do not adopt as standards of human dignity. A narrower line matters for our question: another person's custom does not itself make a decision better for a particular adult. A courteous explanation is possible; endless proof of the right to have a preference does not necessarily become a duty.

IV. A free person also has ties

Freedom does not mean the absence of relationships, care, or consequences. An adult can accept an obligation voluntarily and remain the author of that decision. A friend chooses to help you move, a partner to remain beside you during a difficult period, a parent to give time to a child. Their Saturday is occupied, but being busy does not itself prove a lack of freedom. What matters is how the obligation was accepted, whether its terms can be discussed, and the limits of another person's power.

In a hypothetical scene, you envy an acquaintance who cancels every plan without explanation. Before calling this freedom, consider where the cost of cancellation went. Who expected their help? Who paid for a non-refundable ticket? Who must now finish shared work? If someone gains ease at the expense of people left without a choice, the appealing gesture contains a responsibility problem. This is no reason to suspect every refusal; it is a reason not to confuse consequences disappearing from view with their absence.

In the first chapter of *On Liberty*, Mill places a limit where action affects others and also discusses responsibility for certain omissions. His harm criterion does not automatically settle every contemporary dispute about boundaries. It offers a direction for thought: disapproval differs from injury. A relative's disappointment in your profession and breaking a specific promise provide different grounds for conversation, even when both provoke strong feelings.

In Galatians 5:13–15, freedom stands alongside serving one another through love. This is Paul's address to a Christian community, not a secular theory of independence. There is a limited intersection with Mill: freedom does not justify treating people arbitrarily. The grounds differ—Christian love and a philosophical defence of individuality. The comparison helps pose our question without making the texts one doctrine.

Promises also have different degrees of specificity. “We're counting on you” may mean agreed, important help or unlimited availability that nobody directly discussed. Before declining, it may therefore be necessary to establish the agreement's actual subject. You need not guess every expectation, but you can clarify what you really agreed to. Discussing timing, scope, and a replacement turns a vague moral duty into a relationship in which both people have an opportunity to respond.

V. A wish for freedom may conceal a wish for a break

Not everyone who envies another person's move wants a new country. They may want a week without instructions. Not everyone who envies a person without a family wants solitude. They may need an evening without keeping ten other people's tasks in mind at once. Taking the image as an accurate description of the need can lead us to damage valuable ties for relief that depended on an entirely different change.

Imagine someone looking at an acquaintance's mountain photographs after a hard month. They decide, “I need that life.” But in the imagined mountain life, someone has already cooked, arranged accommodation, and removed the need to answer messages. The mountains become a place to which constant availability has been mentally displaced. Understanding this does not mean abandoning the trip. It means seeing two tasks: a possible journey and the everyday conditions that turn any journey into a promise of rescue.

You can test the distinction gently: if my home and job stayed the same but I had two protected evenings, how much would the wish to abandon everything change? The answer need not be convenient. Sometimes it would barely change: the person really feels constrained by their chosen arrangement. Sometimes the image loses half its power. Either way, information appears that was missing from the original comparison.

A break need not be justified by a major crisis. Nor can we promise that a small pause will remove a lasting restriction or a severe condition. We are discussing voluntary clarification of a wish, not treatment. If workload makes a pause impossible, consider the distribution of work, available support, and working conditions. Demanding that someone become calmer while carrying the same load may only add another task by which they judge themselves.

VI. The cost we are willing to recognise only in ourselves

Envy sometimes makes someone else's cost invisible and our own the only real one. You see a person choosing less profitable work but not their worry about the future. You see refusal of a family expectation but not the long conversations followed by coldness they had to withstand. The unknown easily becomes a convenient account: the other person received everything without effort. That account explains the pain of comparison, but not necessarily the other person's life.

Acknowledging the unknown does not mean inventing comforting suffering behind every beautiful photograph. Someone may really have an easier life. They need not suffer secretly for your situation to deserve sympathy. More modest honesty is required: I know the action and some conditions; I do not know its full cost. This formulation leaves room for real

advantage, effort, and fortunate circumstances. It does not force us to choose one cause in advance.

You can then bring cost back to your own decision. Reducing workload may require lower income, negotiations with a team, or giving up a former view of yourself. The cost is not always financial. A person may fear losing the role of reliable, indispensable, always available. Sometimes this role provided important closeness or a feeling of being needed. Envy of independence then coexists with a wish to preserve relationships built around dependence. The two wishes do not cancel each other.

Should you pay that cost? The article cannot decide for you. Clarification replaces another person's display with your own possible exchange: what will I gain, what will I lose, which losses are reversible, who is affected, and what support is available? Sometimes a mature answer is preparation for change. Sometimes it is declining change at this stage. A consciously deferred decision differs from believing there was never a right to make it, although outwardly the situations may look the same.

An unknown future is part of the cost too. Neither a bold person nor a cautious one has a complete guarantee. The difference may lie in how much uncertainty each is willing to accept now. You have a right to a more cautious transition if it fits your conditions. Just avoid treating caution as proof of moral superiority or risk as proof of maturity. These judgments often obscure the practical task: prepare support and choose an acceptable scale.

VII. Envy and a justified objection are different

A feeling can accompany a well-founded grievance without proving it. Imagine a colleague is allowed to work remotely while you are refused without explanation despite having the same duties. Fairness has a concrete subject here: criteria, procedure, comparable conditions. If all attention goes toward stopping envy of the colleague, the chance to investigate management's arbitrary decision may be lost. The other person is not necessarily the source of the restriction.

It helps to separate the desired outcome from the object of irritation. Do you want their permission withdrawn or clear common rules established? Do you want them to suffer alongside you again or your request to be considered? This is an uncomfortable distinction because the first impulse may be to diminish someone else's life. You can notice it without turning it into action. A feeling and a chosen action differ; room for responsibility remains between them.

The opposite case also occurs: “fairness” conceals a wish for sameness despite different circumstances. The colleague may have a separate agreement, a different task, or a limitation they need not disclose publicly. Painful comparison gives us no right to another person's

private information. A request for a transparent process should not become a demand to disclose a diagnosis, family situation, or every contractual detail to the whole workplace.

Stoic attention to one's judgment and liberal protection of space for choice offer different tools. The first helps us avoid treating the initial picture as final; the second lets us examine rules and power. With only the first, every injustice risks becoming a failure of inner work. With only the second, we may miss a prohibition that survives even after the rules change. Our subject needs both questions, without making their philosophical foundations identical.

VIII. Stop requiring someone else's unhappiness

Envy becomes especially confining when relief is possible only after another person's failure. Our own freedom temporarily ceases to be the goal. The main event must be someone else's return to a familiar cage: let them reconsider, become frightened, lose money, face condemnation. This story can appear as a passing thought. Responsibility begins where we decide to support it through conversation, gossip, or action.

Declining to support that story does not require immediate happiness for the other person. You can tell yourself honestly: this hurts, I am comparing, I do not want to discuss the details now. Polite distance is sometimes more accurate than conspicuous enthusiasm followed by cutting comments. The right not to join someone else's celebration does not include the right to turn it into punishment. Plenty of calm responses exist between coldness and sincere admiration.

Consider a hypothetical example: an acquaintance leaves her child with another adult for the first time and takes a short break. You have wanted a pause for a long time too but lack support. Saying “A real mother wouldn't do that” converts your missing opportunity into an accusation against her character. It creates no help for you and teaches both women to regard rest as a moral offence. A more accurate inner sentence is: it hurts to see support available to her that I do not currently have.

No practical solution follows automatically from this accuracy. Help, changed conditions, a discussion about sharing care, or acknowledgement of a real shortage may be needed. But an important direction appears: seek to expand your own space rather than reduce someone else's. The Christian warning against mutual “devouring” in Galatians 5:15 serves here as a meaningful parallel, not psychological evidence. Paul addresses his community about life in love; applying it to envy remains our editorial comparison.

A separate trap appears when other people's independence receives public approval. Everyone admires the person who left, and you feel defeated twice: you did not do what you wanted and did not receive recognition. The wish to appear free before an audience becomes mixed with freedom itself. You can ask whether the action would remain attractive if nobody

knew about it. This question does not expose the wish as false; it distinguishes the content of life from its display.

IX. A small freedom need not resemble someone else's

Wanting to follow another person's example is understandable, but copying can again deprive us of authorship. If their free life becomes a new compulsory standard, you enter another version of the old submission. Earlier you had to meet family expectations; now you must match an image of independence. Leaving, stopping explanations, changing profession: the same verbs become an examination you must pass to count as an adult.

You can choose a different scale. In one hypothetical case, a person does not resign but stops promising a response within five minutes. Another keeps the family celebration but no longer takes on all the preparation. A third stays in the familiar city but, for the first time, chooses their own way of spending Sunday. These changes are not a universal recipe. Their meaning depends on the particular restriction they address and whether they shift work onto someone else without consent.

A small action is especially useful as a way of obtaining information. If you declined an optional gathering, did more breathing room appear? Did the anticipated conflict happen? Was there disappointment that proved bearable? Or did a real problem arise that needs considering? Observation matters more than a success story written in advance. An agreed pause, no change, and a decision to return to the former arrangement can also provide honest information.

Mill defends diverse life experiences without making diversity an obligation for everyone to experiment immediately. For us this supports leaving our own path open. Freedom can appear through change or through confirming a chosen relationship or activity after reconsideration. If you like your familiar profession, someone else's courage does not oblige you to leave it. It may help you see that staying is allowed as your own decision, not merely because departure is forbidden.

X. Return to the conversation without a trial

At the article's beginning, an acquaintance described her free Fridays. After these distinctions, you can hear the conversation differently. It no longer has to prove her privilege or your inadequacy. Perhaps you are interested in how she negotiated workload. Perhaps the details hurt too much today and you prefer another topic. Perhaps you have discovered a wish you previously left unnamed. None of these options requires the feeling to become beautiful immediately.

Envy of freedom can be a signpost but an unreliable navigator. It highlights the attractive, compresses the unknown, and makes another person's choice spectacular. Sometimes it reveals a missing resource. Sometimes a right you do not exercise. Sometimes exhaustion attached to a distant image. Only further clarification shows which task belongs to this particular episode. The same word does not promise the same content.

Freedom cannot be defined solely by the strength of a pleasant feeling after refusal. An action may bring relief while breaking a promise; it may cause fear yet still be a responsible choice. Assessment requires conditions, consequences, and the consent of affected people. Feeling therefore does not become the highest judge, but neither is it removed from consideration. It reports your relationship to a possible life rather than delivering a ready verdict on that life's arrangement.

The most meaningful change here is modest: someone else's “I can” stops sounding like proof of your “I never will.” Resources, history, preparation, obligations, and your own decision appear between them. Some opportunities remain inaccessible. Some can be discussed. Some probably are not needed by you. Seeing this variety is harder than condemning a free person or ordering yourself to become the same. Yet it opens space for a life you need not borrow in its entirety.

What this means in practice

If the subject feels familiar, choose one safe episode of comparison and describe it without generalising about your entire life. For example: “When an acquaintance declined weekend work, I felt irritated and thought I couldn't do that.” Then separate what you observed from what you assumed. You heard the refusal; their savings, relationship with management, and feelings afterwards may remain unknown. You need not obtain someone else's secrets to acknowledge your own wish.

Try completing: “In their action, I would like the possibility of...” An action makes the answer clearer: decline an additional task, stop justifying rest, choose time, negotiate the distribution of care. Then ask what prevents it: a missing resource, real danger, a specific obligation, uncertain consequences, or expected disapproval. Several obstacles can remain at once. When information is scarce, obtaining it is more useful than calling yourself cowardly.

Next consider the cost of one small change. Who is affected? Is warning, consent, or a replacement needed? What remains reversible? What outcome can you observe without requiring yourself to feel free immediately? For example, agree on one evening without new work messages and observe what happens to workload and relationships. This is a voluntary way of clarifying, not a compulsory exercise or a promise of emotional improvement.

If refusal could lead to violence, loss of essential care, housing, or another serious danger, this article does not propose testing courage through confrontation. Safety and suitable outside support matter more than an impressive gesture. If a desired change cannot be made now, you may record conditions for returning to it. Keeping the wish, postponing action, and not devaluing another person's opportunity are three separate decisions too. None needs to be made merely to comply with this article.

Key quotation

> *"...different experiments of living..."*

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chapter III, paragraph beginning *As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect...*. Project Gutenberg no. 34901, Walter Scott Publishing Co. text with W. L. Courtney's introduction; a short excerpt. The context concerns diverse ways of living subject to limits on harm to others, not a right to transfer one's cost to other people.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Intersection and boundary
Epictetus XIX ↔ Mill III	Visible success does not determine one's life's value; Stoic independence of judgment differs from political protection of diversity.
Mill I ↔ Galatians 5:13	Freedom involves relationships with others; the harm criterion and Christian service through love have different foundations.
Epictetus XIX ↔ the question of unseen support	Happiness cannot be inferred from status; examining resources editorially supplements but is not Epictetus's teaching.
Mill III ↔ choosing one's scale of change	Diversity allows a different way to live; our voluntary practice does not follow from the treatise as a proven psychological method.
Galatians 5:15 ↔ declining to wish for another's failure	The image of mutual destruction helps comparison; Paul addresses a community rather than proposing a theory of contemporary envy.

Sources

• Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, XIX–XXIII, George Long's translation, Gutenberg no. 10661. These chapters and the edition's biographical note were read; support for distinguishing status from Stoic freedom. Reading the complete work is not claimed.

• John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chapters I and III, Gutenberg no. 34901. Passages on harm, limits to freedom, individuality, and choosing a life plan were read; historical exceptions are acknowledged rather than adopted as a norm.

• Galatians 5:13–15, King James Version, 1611. The specified passage was read; Christian freedom and love, without claiming to represent all Christian interpretations.

Tags

envy, freedom, autonomy, individuality, comparison, choice, right to decline, obligations, responsibility, unseen support, resources, privilege, respite, rest, disapproval, internal prohibition, consequences, fairness, criteria, consent, personal boundaries, Epictetus, Stoicism, Mill, liberal philosophy, Paul, Galatians, love, diversity of life, voluntary participation

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