

UNITED WISDOM

A hierarchy of values: what I will give up, and for what

Meaning and Direction

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Epigraph

> *“Of things some are in our power, and others are not.”*

— Epictetus, Encheiridion, I, first sentence. English translation by George Long.

What this article is about

A list of important words rarely explains how someone lives when there is insufficient time, money and energy for everything. Honesty, relationships and professional success can all matter, while the permissible price of each remains disputed. This article considers a hierarchy of values as an accountable order of commitments: why I act, what takes priority under particular conditions, and which means I refuse to use. We distinguish a stated order from a lived one, ends from means, and temporary concessions from lasting boundaries. Aristotle, Kant and Epictetus offer different philosophical comparisons rather than a common recipe. Hypothetical workplace and family scenes show whose resources a choice affects, why regret need not cancel its grounds, and how priorities can be revised while retaining responsibility towards people who relied on earlier promises.

I. Value becomes visible where something has a cost

Imagine someone offered an interesting job. It promises a good income and professional freedom, but requires several months away just when they have agreed to support someone close through a difficult period. In this invented scene, both sides matter. Saying that the person values growth and relationships is insufficient: it does not explain what they will give up, for how long or on what conditions. A hierarchy of values begins with the permissible cost, rather than an attractive arrangement of words. An undecided person does not necessarily lack values. The grounds of the different commitments may simply remain insufficiently described.

“Hierarchy” can suggest a rigid ladder, with health always above work and relationships always above money. Such an order sometimes names a boundary, but can easily become too crude. Money may mean paying for necessary treatment rather than prestige. Work may involve helping others, while a relationship may demand constant availability that the person cannot sustain. The labels then conceal circumstances instead of explaining them. We should

discuss not only values in general but the particular expression of them before us. Different actions under one label may deserve different responses and involve different responsibilities.

It helps to distinguish three levels: what I consider significant, what I give priority here, and what I will not do even to secure that priority. This is an editorial distinction, not an established diagnostic scale. It lets us recognise the value of both the selected and rejected possibilities without pretending one has disappeared. Someone may temporarily prefer care to a professional opportunity and still regret losing it. They may choose work, but must precisely describe and discuss the limits of promised support with the person relying on it. The cost becomes clearer through action, duration and consequences for particular people than through a solemn declaration of priorities.

II. A stated order and a lived order

A person may put honesty first yet conceal an awkward mistake to protect their reputation. They may say family comes before everything while repeatedly giving it only leftover time. This discrepancy deserves attention, but does not warrant immediately calling someone a hypocrite. Fear, habits, income dependence, previous commitments and unclear alternatives can all matter in a particular situation. A hierarchy reconstructed from one action will be incomplete. Words alone nevertheless are insufficient: a repeated concession gradually becomes part of life's actual order. We need to notice repetition without replacing examination with a sweeping accusation or excusing every action by its attractive initial purpose.

Consider another editorial example: someone wants to preserve time for reading but keeps accepting optional meetings. They say knowledge matters more than approval. This may be a sincere conviction that has not acquired protected space in the diary. A meeting may also serve another important purpose: maintaining a relationship they do not wish to lose. To understand the discrepancy, describing the particular sequence of agreements is more useful than repeating “discipline.” Who proposed the meeting, what was promised, which refusal seemed permissible, and what would happen if it moved? These questions reveal conditions of choice. They do not establish a hidden motive or require treating every pleasure as an obstacle to growth.

A lived order can be discussed as evidence, not a final judgement on a person's identity. Notes on several actual decisions provide material: which resource was protected, what yielded, and who bore the cost. A value sometimes survived in a way an observer did not expect. Sometimes a persistent contradiction emerges that calls for honest changes to promises or habitual action. Either way, the possibility of correction matters. “I am always like this” turns a temporary description into destiny, while “it means nothing” erases consequences. A more accurate position lies between them: this action happened, its grounds can be clarified, its repetition can change, and commitments already accepted call for accountability.

III. An end and a means can exchange places

Distinguishing ends from means reveals an odd reversal: someone defends a method so firmly that they forget why they chose it. In a hypothetical story, a family wants more time together and starts planning weekends tightly. Gradually, completing the plan matters more than hearing one another's tiredness. A means of preserving closeness becomes a reason for further complaints. This is not an argument against planning. It remains useful while allowing scrutiny of its purpose. What is the arrangement meant to sustain, and how would we recognise that it was obstructing this? Without that scrutiny, a habitual action can become protected merely because it once served something important.

In Book III of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle distinguishes an assumed end from deliberation about achieving it. This provides an entry point: disagreement can concern a method while appearing to concern a value. The passage does not determine which ends a contemporary reader should accept or how to reconcile several ends. It should not become a claim that the foundations of a life are beyond discussion. Our narrower observation is that, once an end has been named, the suitability of a means can be considered separately. The source and our editorial application are related rather than identical; the distinction preserves accurate reading and room for further reasoning.

It is therefore useful to mark which priorities are ultimate orientations and which are possible means. Income can support security, recognition can provide access to an audience, and a timetable can make care possible. These connections are changeable. If a means no longer performs its function, or requires destroying what it was meant to sustain, its place needs reconsidering. We can retain care while changing participation, or preserve professional growth while declining a particular project. A different means does not guarantee freedom from loss. Actual options must be checked rather than declared available because they would be logically convenient. Clarifying a hierarchy begins with distinguishing tasks and continues by examining available action.

IV. Not every value has a substitute

Discussing costs tempts us to put everything on a common ledger: hours, money and opportunities. Such accounting does help show resource expenditure. It does not explain whether a particular way of obtaining a benefit is permissible. Additional income and breached trust do not become equivalent merely because both affect a life. In an invented scene, an employee is offered a bonus for concealing an error that affects colleagues. The size of the bonus can be assessed, but does not replace the question of permissible participation. If one side is a constraint on action and the other a desirable outcome, simple weighing already distorts the task. A hierarchy includes restrictions on some routes as well as preferences.

In the Groundwork, Kant distinguishes replaceable value from dignity. In his argument, dignity concerns the moral standing of a rational being, rather than someone's subjective feeling of importance. This is not a ready-made list of contemporary household priorities. The distinction is useful here as an objection to the idea that everything merely requires suitable compensation. Our editorial application is limited: before comparing benefits, ask whether the decision concerns a person, commitment or boundary that cannot simply be purchased through an advantage. We neither claim every hard situation has one obvious answer nor attribute contemporary negotiating rules to Kant.

“Inviolable” should not expand into protection for every wish. I can regard my comfort as important without a right to make someone else supply it constantly. I may cherish freedom while having accepted a specific commitment that limits available choice. A boundary therefore needs explanation: what is protected, why does this method breach it, and to whom does the rule apply? If the rule operates only when convenient for me, it needs further scrutiny. A hierarchy gains substance when someone distinguishes a strong personal preference from a principle they also propose respecting in another's life. This does not erase personal wishes; it reveals their limits in a shared space.

V. What depends on me and what needs agreement

A difficulty with priorities is that they can concern other people's behaviour. Someone places respect high but understands it as obligatory agreement with every decision. They want reliable relationships while demanding a guarantee that another person will never change. Such wishes are understandable as a desire for security, but fulfilling them is not entirely within one participant's power. If a hierarchy describes only a desirable state of the world, it can remain unavailable even under consistent action. We need to name both the value and our share of responsibility: what we can offer, check, perform, discuss or discontinue without appropriating another's decision or promising impossible certainty.

The first chapter of Epictetus's Encheiridion distinguishes what is in our power from what is not. The historical text makes stronger claims about external circumstances than this article does. We do not use it to prove that health, possessions or loved ones lack human significance. For our purpose, it helps ask where personal action is mistakenly replaced by a demand on the world. We can care for health without guaranteeing the outcome and build trust without controlling another's response completely. The distinction neither requires indifference nor removes the need to protect oneself from actual harm through available lawful means.

“Respect matters more than success” should therefore be expressed through actions that can be examined. I will not pursue success by publicly humiliating a colleague; I will disclose significant information; I will discuss disagreement without threats. These decisions describe

my side even though consequences depend on many participants. “Everyone must respect me” offers no such footing. Agreements remain possible between the two: rules for feedback and consequences for breaching them can be negotiated. Without agreement, changing participation may be necessary instead of proving one's value through greater concessions. A hierarchy becomes more realistic when it recognises limited power and preserves others' responsibility for their own decisions.

VI. A temporary priority and a lasting boundary

A hierarchy can change with a task without becoming arbitrary. During necessary care for a loved one, someone protects time differently than in a quiet month. Before a project's completion, work may temporarily receive more attention without relationships becoming insignificant. What matters is how the change occurs and where it ends. An exception announced beforehand, with an intelligible duration and attention to affected people, can be examined. If it reappears every week and never ends, “temporary” ceases to explain anything. The word can preserve earlier promises on paper while depriving them of content in actual schedules and actions.

Imagine a couple agreeing to two busy evenings for important work. One understands the arrangement as a limited concession; the other treats it as the beginning of a permanent new order. The conflict need not arise from different values. Duration, scope and conditions for returning may simply have remained unstated. Here a hierarchy needs conditional language: what takes priority now, why, who agreed, and what remains protected? An answer might include availability at a specified time or declining additional tasks once the work is completed. This invented example is not a compulsory model for every couple; it shows the difference between an agreed change and silently transferring its cost to someone else.

A lasting boundary can coexist with a temporary priority. Someone may accept a demanding schedule while refusing lies about deadlines or humiliation of employees. They can yield convenience while retaining a duty to communicate significant changes. It helps to describe separately what may change here and what constrains permissible action. This does not remove every dispute. It makes disputes more specific: people discuss duration, promises, actions or boundaries instead of trying to establish who loves family more or respects work more. The more precisely an exception is named, the harder it becomes to use it as indefinite permission for every subsequent demand.

VII. The cost someone else pays

It is easy to speak of sacrifice when the costs appear only on one's own account. Many concessions affect people who did not make the choice. If I give up rest for an important project, it remains solely my decision only insofar as its consequences do not turn loved ones into an obligatory support service. If I end a collaboration on principle, others may need time for a handover. A hierarchy of values is no permission to overlook these consequences. It explains a priority while leaving responsibility for its implementation intact. A strong reason for choosing can coexist with a poorly organised transition; recognising the latter need not cancel the former.

In a hypothetical scene, someone reduces their income to pursue meaningful creative work. Their partner supports the change, but not indefinitely or at the expense of shared financial security. Calling creativity a supreme value does not determine the partner's obligations. Shared burdens, resource limits and a point for reconsideration need discussion. Another's disagreement is not necessarily betrayal of the dream. It may reveal a cost the initial formulation omitted. Equally, the person need not abandon everything new to avoid every inconvenience. The task is honest agreement on participation, rather than obtaining universal approval.

The useful question is therefore both “What will I give up?” and “What am I currently disposing of without sufficient agreement?” An answer can change the method, duration or scale of action. Sometimes it shows that a desired priority cannot presently be implemented in that form. This unwelcome constraint cannot be removed by declaring pure intentions. Our dignity and freedom do not increase by turning others into resources for our own story. Two kinds of precision matter: naming the value we protect and the people whose boundaries need protection alongside it. Otherwise, a hierarchy becomes an excuse for conveniently distributing losses, where one person supplies the right words and others pay most of the price.

VIII. Regret need not disprove the order

After choosing, someone can continue valuing the lost possibility. That does not necessarily indicate a mistaken hierarchy. If both options mattered, losing one does not disappear because the other had a clear justification. Someone declining the trip in our work-and-care scene can regard the decision as justified and still regret the professional opportunity. Regret need not be suppressed as evidence of weakness, nor treated as an immediate instruction to reverse the choice. It shows the cost was real. The next question concerns what can be restored, what needs agreement, and what has already been promised—not a duty to feel complete relief.

A hierarchy demanding that we cease loving everything below the top becomes too harsh towards human complexity. We can prefer necessary treatment to a trip and still miss travelling. We can protect honesty and feel the loss of a profitable agreement. A lower position here does not mean no value anywhere. We can therefore describe a choice without destroying the rejected possibility: “This mattered, but I am not prepared to pay that price now.” That is more accurate than persuading ourselves the opportunity was always meaningless. It also leaves room for a future when changed conditions make part of what was lost available through another route.

Regret can also reveal something inadequately considered. Perhaps the cost exceeds expectations or circumstances have changed significantly. Reconsideration then need not be a whim if the new grounds and existing commitments are recognised. The distinction is between attending to new circumstances and endlessly reopening the same fork without new information. This article sets no timetable after which reflection must stop. It offers a narrower check: what new thing has become known, and what action is now possible? Sometimes the answer is to change the plan; sometimes to recognise the loss and continue. Neither answer requires calling the rejected value false or forbidding a complicated feeling.

IX. An order can be revised without self-deception

Values need not retain the form someone gave them years ago. A new commitment, different experience or discovered harm can change their expression. Reconsideration becomes more convincing when it remembers the earlier grounds. Instead of “I never cared,” someone can say, “I previously gave this priority for this reason; that reason has changed.” This avoids rewriting history to suit the present. A changed conviction must also be distinguished from refusing to acknowledge past consequences. People may have relied on a promise even if its maker no longer accepts the old order. A new view does not automatically remove the need to discuss a transition, repair possible harm and conclude commitments where feasible.

Imagine someone who once accepted every extra task to build financial reserves. Later they notice the reserve has been achieved while the routine continues through habit. Revision need not abandon security; it may clarify how much is actually needed for it. The end remains while the means no longer fit. In another case, the end itself changes: recognition no longer sufficiently explains professional success, and someone wants more meaningful participation. Both stories are invented. They show different changes that should not collapse into “changed their mind.” Precision helps establish what needs rearranging and which earlier grounds still operate.

An honest revision can name an event, new information or discovered contradiction, together with the limits of the new decision. A hierarchy that appears only after each inconvenient demand and disappears at the next advantage is difficult to trust as a stable orientation. An

observer, however, cannot always see the whole history. Discussing a particular promise and change is better than demanding lifelong proof of one formula. Someone can answer for the consistency of their explanation without promising unchanged future priorities. This preserves adult freedom to change without making it a right to leave others with every consequence unexamined. A new foundation requires a new description of participation, not merely a new name for one's identity.

X. A hierarchy as an accountable commitment

A substantive hierarchy of values need not resemble a final table. It can consist of clear relations: why I act, which means I regard as permissible, what takes priority under certain conditions, and which consequences I will accept. These relations need specificity, or “priority” protects whatever is wanted at the moment. Someone may place reliability above making a quick impression and express it through working practices: avoiding unverified deadlines, communicating changes and handing over necessary information. This order appears in commitments without requiring disclosure of every personal value or turning every conversation into a report on moral character.

Accountability is not an obligation to obtain everyone's approval. Another may understand the grounds and still disagree. Some differences are substantial enough to require changing shared participation. A hierarchy helps establish which agreement remains possible and which price someone will not accept. It guarantees neither preservation of every relationship nor victory in an argument. The manner of disagreement matters: describing one's decision accurately, recognising affected commitments and declining to treat every other boundary as a character defect. Where relationships involve violence or threats to safety, philosophical reflection does not replace necessary protection and professional assistance. An attractive ladder of values creates no obligation to remain in danger to prove consistency.

Return to the work-and-care scene. The person need not discover a rule that decides every similar case beforehand. They need to recognise actual commitments, available ways of supporting someone and the limit of a permissible cost. They may stay, postpone the trip, agree on another form of help, or acknowledge that promised participation is impossible. Each option requires scrutiny of circumstances. A hierarchy provides footing when it helps explain that scrutiny and accept responsibility for the chosen action. Its maturity is not measured by absence of regret, an unchanging list or severe-looking principles. It appears in preserving what matters, acknowledging the cost of what is relinquished, and not silently transferring that cost to people whose agreement was never sought.

What this means in practice

Begin, if you wish, with a recent situation in which something important had to yield. Do not select a dangerous or deeply painful conflict for the exercise. Briefly record what you protected, what you relinquished and who paid most of the cost. Then examine the wording: did “success” mean income, recognition or meaningful work? Did “relationships” mean closeness, keeping a promise or avoiding all disagreement? The aim is not to expose you, but to replace an overly broad word with a particular commitment.

Next, separate the end, the means and the boundary. Name why the action was taken, why the method appeared suitable, and what you would refuse to do even for the result. If another means appears, first examine its availability: time, participants' agreement, resources and the consequences of transition. An imagined possibility is not an actual route without that scrutiny. Mark separately which changes require discussion with people already relying on your participation.

Finally, you might formulate one limited future commitment, such as communicating a changed arrangement beforehand or checking existing promises before accepting another task. You may leave the exercise without a new decision if information is insufficient. This is a voluntary editorial reflection, not a maturity test, a proven life-management technique or a requirement to select the same value every time. Its purpose is to make your order more accountable while retaining room for circumstances and other people's boundaries.

Key quotation

> *“In the kingdom of ends everything has either value or dignity.”*

— Immanuel Kant, Groundwork, section II. English translation by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott.

Connections between traditions

Question	Philosophical connection	Limit of comparison
What is being compared?	Aristotle examines action in circumstances; Kant distinguishes replaceable value and dignity.	Practical costs and moral standing are not one scale.
How can an end be retained?	Aristotle's ends/means distinction helps scrutinise a method.	It does not determine every ultimate end for a modern reader.
What may we dispose of?	Epictetus distinguishes personal power from externals; Kant constrains treatment of rational beings.	Limited control and the grounds of dignity differ.
What does yielding mean?	Aristotle's situational analysis can be compared with our distinction between temporary priority and boundaries.	The modern example is not a paraphrase of an ancient rule.
How can action be consistent?	Stoic attention to personal action and Kantian attention to principle offer different checks.	Neither check is a diagnosis of personality.

Primary sources

1. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, III.1 and III.3. W. D. Ross translation: circumstances of action and ends/means.

2. Immanuel Kant. Groundwork, section II. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott translation: replaceable value and dignity.

3. Epictetus. Encheiridion, I. George Long translation: the limits of what is in our power.

Only the passages identified in the research notes were read. Russian quotations are United Wisdom translations from the named English translations, not direct translations from the ancient or German originals. All contemporary scenes are hypothetical editorial examples.

Tags

values, hierarchy of values, priorities, commitments, choice, permissible cost, boundaries, ends, means, dignity, honesty, responsibility, concession, regret, consistency, revision, promises, relationships, work, resources, freedom, agreement, Aristotle, Kant, Epictetus, virtue, Stoicism, morality, circumstances, philosophy of life

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