

UNITED WISDOM

Responsibility for life without complete control over it

Meaning and Direction

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Epigraph

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

— Epictetus, Enchiridion1, opening sentence. The displayed Internet Classics Archive translation is attributed to Elizabeth Carter; exact print-edition identity is not established.

What this article is about

We can answer for a promise without governing its outcome, or influence a situation without choosing its ending. These distinctions become difficult when an unsuccessful plan proves complete personal guilt or an external constraint excuses every omission. This article considers responsibility as particular participation that retains the limits of human power. Through an invented gathering, we distinguish events, available actions, agreements and costs to others. Epictetus, Aristotle and James provide different historical perspectives without becoming a single system. Planning, pressure, distributed work and available repair are examined without promises of command over either past or future. The material establishes no legal culpability, diagnoses no experience and guarantees no relief. Its purpose is more precise language for responsibility, retaining agency, actual commitments and information still missing from our account.

I. Responsibility begins with distinctions

Imagine a small group preparing a public gathering. One participant arranges the venue, another sends invitations, and a third prepares the programme. The building unexpectedly closes the day before, and the gathering must be postponed. An organiser thinks that accepting the task meant guaranteeing its outcome. Another participant replies that if circumstances overpower us, nobody is responsible for anything. Both responses close the inquiry too quickly. In this invented scene, we need to establish what was promised, which information was available, when communication became possible, and who now needs an update. Cancellation alone establishes neither complete guilt nor a complete absence of responsibility. It invites us to recover the history of decisions and distinguish the parts each person actually contributed.

The words “I am responsible for my life” can describe several relationships. I choose an available action, recognise a promise, consider consequences, participate in repair, or explain

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a decision. They can also quietly become a claim that my will produced everything that happens. Responsibility then resembles an extraordinary power: someone should have anticipated another's refusal, prevented changes around them, and guaranteed that effort would produce the desired result. This article considers a narrower understanding. Taking responsibility means participating where participation is genuinely available while retaining the significance of actions already taken. This is an editorial philosophical perspective rather than an established universal measure of personal responsibility. It allows careful examination of a particular situation without turning the whole course of a life into evidence of one person's intentions.

Distinguishing an event, an action, and grounds for judgement helps the conversation. The building's closure is an event. Communicating new information or remaining silent are possible actions after it becomes known. A promise of timely notification may provide grounds for responsibility. Merging everything makes someone either assume responsibility for the closure itself or excuse even a message they could have sent. The distinction supplies no answer for every case. It gives inquiry an order: establish what happened and who could know what, then examine available action and accepted commitments. We need not begin by calling ourselves all-powerful or powerless. Between these images lies a particular human situation that can still be described, with some questions answered and others honestly left open until the relevant information is available.

II. What a limit on our power means

Epictetus begins the Enchiridion by distinguishing our actions from what lies outside our power, including body and property. This demanding Stoic framework makes strong promises of freedom from obstruction, which we do not transfer to readers. Our bounded comparison concerns action and outcome, not insignificant losses or instantly selectable feelings.

In our invented scene, the organiser can check the venue, ask about an alternative, and honestly describe the plan's limitations. They acquire no authority over every decision made by the building's owner. If an advance notice later comes to light, the judgement changes: why was that information not checked? If no warning existed, hindsight cannot create one simply because the consequence is now known. Limits on power are established through circumstances rather than the unpleasantness of the result. Looking for a limit should not become a formal way to evade examination, however. “It did not depend on me” needs clarification: which part did not depend on me, and what action remained available? Naming both parts makes the explanation accountable instead of merely reassuring.

Power over an event also differs from an ability to influence it. We can improve conditions, propose changes, contact others and contribute to shared work. An absence of guarantees does not make these actions meaningless. Influence should not be presented as complete

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control: another person can refuse, a system can respond differently, or a necessary resource can remain unavailable. Responsible language can hold both statements together: “I will do this part” and “I cannot promise that result by myself.” The combination may sound less impressive than unconditional confidence. It gives others more accurate information for their own decisions, however. Bounding a promise can express respect for participants rather than indifference to the shared undertaking, because their planning should not rely on an assurance we have no basis to provide.

III. Choosing within circumstances we did not choose

In Nicomachean Ethics III, Aristotle examines compulsion and mixed action: cargo is thrown overboard in a storm without anyone wanting the loss itself. Circumstances alter what is chosen. This is historical moral reasoning, not contemporary law. Our scene retains available possibilities and costs rather than making “chosen” a universal verdict that erases pressure, dependence and missing information.

Consider another editorial scene: an employee temporarily accepts an additional task because otherwise the shared work would stop. They did not choose the shortage of people or welcome the larger workload. Within that constraint, however, they could agree on a deadline and explain that an earlier task would be delayed. A later assessment should retain the whole history. “You agreed yourself” does not explain the costs or conditions of agreement. “I chose nothing” may obscure the specific arrangement that was nevertheless possible. These statements are not necessarily false; they are insufficient without details. The distinction allows us to ask about available action without making circumstances invisible or depriving someone of every contribution to a decision. Understanding a constraint and recognising a contribution can belong to the same account.

This does not require always discovering one more possibility. Available action can be severely restricted, while someone else's advice assumes resources the person lacks. A long list of options proves little freedom if its paths are dangerous or practically inaccessible. Several such alternatives do not equal unconstrained choice without substantial cost. The article leaves these cases open to careful examination rather than accusations of insufficient effort. Respecting someone's participation also means refusing to invent power they did not possess. Responsibility becomes more precise when compulsion, dependence and missing resources are treated as part of the situation alongside actions and consequences, rather than obstacles to a preferred accusation. An account should describe what was available then, not demand that the past contain possibilities it never offered.

IV. A plan as participation, not a contract with the future

A plan connects intention with action by identifying a sequence, checking resources and agreeing on participation. It does not become a contract signed by the future. Between today's decision and its consequences lie other people, changing conditions and information not yet available. Forgetting this makes every deviation a personal failure. Emphasising uncertainty alone can make planning seem unnecessary. Both extremes miss a significant relationship in our editorial perspective: a plan matters precisely because a desired result does not automatically follow from desire. It prepares the available part and identifies conditions requiring revision. Respecting uncertainty can make planning more specific: not “everything will work,” but “we will check this condition and communicate if it changes.” The statement describes an undertaking others can understand without pretending that preparation abolishes contingency.

James4:13–17 questions command over tomorrow, placing an unknown future alongside the Lord’s will and doing the good one knows. This is Christian instruction, not time management or Stoicism. Our bounded comparison concerns finite knowledge alongside action. Readers need not accept its theology to examine promises of already-secured outcomes; the text’s religious meaning remains intact.

Return to the group preparing the gathering. The original plan could distinguish a confirmed venue from a preference and an agreed task from assumptions about others' availability. Closure requires another plan rather than a promise to recover the former course at any cost. An organiser can propose postponement, explain when information will become available, and ask participants to agree. They should not declare a new date convenient on everyone's behalf. Planning retains reciprocity by providing information needed for each person's participation. Failure of the first arrangement does not make subsequent action empty. It responds to changed circumstances without removing inconvenience or guaranteeing identical assessments of the work. Responsibility continues through clarification rather than an attempt to restore the image of an organiser who never makes mistakes.

V. Outcomes need an examination of causes

Success can look like proof that the entire preceding route was correct. Failure can equally become proof that a person was wrong. Yet the same action can meet different circumstances, and different actions can produce outwardly similar outcomes. In an invented scene, two organisers check conditions in time, but only one venue remains available. This is neither a study of chance nor a claim about how frequently such events occur. It reveals a logical problem in assessment: an outcome is not automatically a complete account of a decision's quality. We need to establish available action, attention to important information, and the connection between that action and the result. Good fortune replaces no explanation; an unpleasant consequence supplies no ready accusation without inquiry into how it came about.

The reverse distinction should not shield every intention from its consequences. “I meant well” states a presumed aim without explaining the method. Someone may have ignored an available warning, promised another person's participation, or concealed uncertainty important to others. External unpredictability does not remove scrutiny of those actions. Which risk was known, and on what grounds was it passed to participants? This essay calculates no permissible level of risk and replaces no professional procedure. It examines honesty in the relationship: was an unknown outcome acknowledged, did affected people receive necessary information, and what action became available when an error emerged? Intention belongs to the history but does not exhaust it. A caring aim and an inadequate method can coexist, requiring more than either praise for the aim or condemnation of the entire person.

A conversation about the outcome can therefore move in two directions. First recover the past without knowledge unavailable then; next use new knowledge for subsequent action. These tasks differ. A former decision cannot be called poor solely because a new fact is obvious now. Nor should an old method continue as though the discovered fact changed nothing. Responsible revision requires no pretence that someone should have known everything beforehand. It recognises that information is different now. For our group, this might mean another notice, checking a different venue, or withdrawing an undertaking that can no longer be fulfilled. Change responds to the present situation rather than proving everlasting correctness or total inadequacy. The account can retain a reasonable earlier decision and a necessary later revision without treating them as contradictory.

VI. Shared life has no single controller

Responsibility can be distributed when an undertaking depends on several participants. That does not mean it vanishes between them. Each may have a particular part: communicate information, fulfil an agreement, report a limit, or avoid promising for another. Nobody gains complete command over the combination of actions. In our group, the venue organiser is not automatically responsible for every invitation, while the programme's author cannot direct the building owner's decision. Without clear boundaries, a worried participant might attempt to assume everything while others treat every difficulty as somebody else's. These are possible editorial scenes, not diagnoses of personality types. Discussing roles prevents a shared result from becoming an unlimited demand on one individual and helps participants understand which commitments they can reasonably rely on in their own planning.

Distribution also requires attention to conditions. If a group lacks necessary access or time, the issue cannot be reduced to personal organisation. A participant holding decisive authority should not be treated as occupying the same position as people merely carrying out instructions. Unequal resources and authority alter possibilities. We investigate no particular organisation and establish no participant's culpability. The proposal is to keep the setting within an explanation rather than exclude it because questioning an individual is easier. Reference to a system should not erase a known personal action either. A more accurate description can retain a limited role, substantial environmental influence and a need to consult those who can change the conditions. It makes neither individual effort nor institutional arrangements disappear merely to obtain a simpler story.

Specific questions help: who could decide, who possessed the information, who agreed to the promise, and who can now make a change? They form no universal investigative method. They retain several relationships instead of “everyone is guilty” or “nobody is guilty.” An inquiry might reveal a gap in an agreement, a particular participant's action, or a condition the group could not alter. Different parts can be named without immediately compressing them into one conclusion. Responsibility in shared life also includes willingness to discuss how cooperation is arranged. Nobody must govern a system alone, but they can honestly identify where further decisions require others' participation and should not be promised on their behalf. The resulting explanation can guide another conversation even when it provides no complete resolution of the original difficulty.

VII. When acknowledging a limit becomes an excuse

Acknowledging a limit can be honest, but the formula itself proves no honesty. In an editorial scene, someone says they could not influence the venue's closure, accurately describing the circumstances. They have nevertheless known about cancellation for hours without notifying waiting participants. Reference to an ungovernable event conceals an available action. In another scene, the message was sent immediately, but the recipient's connection failed. Identical dissatisfaction then belongs to a different history. To avoid making limited power a universal excuse, specify the parts: the event was outside my decision, notification was available, and receipt also depended on another condition. None should automatically absorb the others. A precise explanation can admit both a genuine limit and a neglected obligation without inventing either total innocence or responsibility for everything.

Someone can also call a completed step sufficient without checking their undertaking. “I sent a message” means different things when the agreement concerned sending it or confirming that a participant knew of an important change. An unanswered message does not always require endless contact attempts; circumstances and the accepted obligation determine the boundary. Yet an undertaking should not be privately reduced after difficulty appears without acknowledging the change. A responsible conversation can say: one part was completed, another became unavailable, and the next method needs agreement. This is no universal communication rule or procedure for dangerous circumstances. It shows why a limit should be related to the actual arrangement rather than the smallest convenient action presented as complete fulfilment. Others may have reasonably planned around a different understanding of the promise.

Scrutiny in the other direction matters too: another's complaint needs an object. Demanding a guarantee against every possible change can exceed what was agreed and what was possible. Inconvenience deserves attention without establishing every obligation claimed. We can recognise the cost of postponement, offer an available change, and decline a promise nobody can ensure. Responsibility requires no agreement with every accusation, just as an absence of complete control requires no denial of every personal mistake. These relationships can coexist. For our group, a mature conversation clarifies facts, promises and available assistance; it need not end in mutual satisfaction or a final judgement about who is a good person in every area of life. The remaining disagreement can be named without making it proof that clarification itself failed.

VIII. Repair does not require undoing the event

Discovering an error can prompt an impossible demand: restore the former situation, ensure nobody experienced inconvenience, and recover an impeccable image. Available repair may be smaller—communicate omitted information, acknowledge a promise's limit, clarify consequences, or change the subsequent method. These actions neither erase the past nor ensure immediate acceptance of an explanation. Their value concerns a present relationship to consequences. In our scene, late notification cannot now become timely. We can nevertheless state the actual position, retain the delay in the account, and discover which inconvenience can still be reduced. Responsibility continues through available restoration rather than a demand to govern the past as though it remained open to choice. Recognising a mistake need not become a promise to achieve a result that has already become impossible.

Repair needs agreement where it affects others. An organiser can propose another date without promising that a participant will attend. They can accept an additional task without treating forgiveness as payment for effort. They can acknowledge an inaccurate message without determining how its recipient should now feel. These boundaries retain another person's participation and right to disagree. Repair is no transaction in which acknowledgement automatically purchases calm or restored trust. It addresses a particular part of the consequences. Where further decisions depend on several people, naming that dependence is more honest than declaring the matter finally closed because one participant completed an available step. The action can be meaningful while its relational result remains uncertain, and neither fact should be removed to produce a more satisfying ending.

Not every unpleasant outcome calls for personal repair as restitution for one's error. Someone may have breached no undertaking yet contribute to assistance after an event. That is another meaning of responsibility: voluntary participation in a shared situation rather than admission of having caused it. Everyone in our group can seek a new possibility even if closure had nothing to do with their actions. Distinguishing the grounds prevents assistance from becoming concealed proof of guilt. A person can say, “I did not produce this event, but I am willing to do this available part.” The statement retains facts and relationships together. It requires neither acceptance of every task nor a verdict of bad character when assistance is unavailable. A contribution can be offered with a boundary rather than an unlimited commitment to absorb the entire difficulty.

IX. Life as participation in an unfinished situation

Responsibility for life becomes harder to discuss when we expect one comprehensive answer: everything depends on me, or nothing does. Actual relationships need more detailed language. Some events were not chosen; some actions are available now; commitments were accepted; information remains missing; other participants retain their own agency. These parts need not form a final formula for every year of a life. The essay considers particular participation without presenting it as power over destiny. We can answer for an honest undertaking without promising success, decide and revise with new knowledge, or regret an outcome without deriving total personal guilt from regret. The account remains open to circumstances rather than requiring every situation to confirm one dramatic image of human freedom or helplessness that was selected in advance.

Historical texts illuminate different boundaries without forming a single system. Epictetus offers a Stoic distinction between one's own and the external; Aristotle considers action, circumstances and the choice of means; James relates an unknown future to the Lord's will and moral instruction. A limited resemblance concerns the boundaries of human power, while grounds and purposes differ. A contemporary editorial scene proves none of the three accounts true and makes them neither interchangeable nor compulsory. Readers can consider the question while retaining agreement, disagreement or uncertainty about each source. Historical support should clarify distinctions rather than become an authoritative demand to dismiss external events or describe every action as predetermined by another will.

Returning to the opening gathering, the organiser can state responsibility more precisely: I did not govern the closure; I answer for what I promised to check and communicate; I will establish what happened; I will propose an available change without promising others' participation. This is no final victory over uncertainty. Another gathering may fail, someone may remain dissatisfied, or a new fact may alter the plan. The person nevertheless acts within the actual situation rather than disputing an imaginary duty to control everything. Responsibility appears in their relation to an available action, grounds of a promise, and another's cost. Life remains unfinished without cancelling participation. A mature step can be a bounded, honest action requiring no advance proof of power over the entire subsequent course of events or agreement from everyone affected by it.

What this means in practice

If you wish to continue, choose a small situation in which the outcome differed from the plan. Do not begin with a severe loss or dangerous event. Briefly describe what happened without making your opening sentence a judgement on your whole identity. Then name your action and accepted commitments separately: the venue became unavailable; I learned this at a particular time; I promised to notify participants of changes. This account neither establishes guilt nor proves everything was done correctly. It identifies the subject of the conversation.

Now distinguish what you could do then, what you could merely influence, and what lay outside your power. Record the information genuinely available and new facts discovered later. Do not automatically carry later knowledge into the past. Where something remains unknown, write a question rather than invent an answer. Consider other participants: what was agreed with them, which decision cannot be taken on their behalf, and who can change a condition you cannot alter alone?

Finally, name one available step: establish a fact, communicate a change, discuss a promise’s boundary, or propose agreed repair. You can also recognise that another person’s participation is now required. This is voluntary editorial reflection rather than an established method for reducing anxiety or determining legal responsibility. It replaces no professional procedure and requires no solitary examination of dangerous circumstances. Its purpose is a particular possibility of participation without promising command over the entire result. If reflection becomes too difficult, it can be stopped; completing an exercise is no obligation to the article or proof of maturity.

Key quotation

> *“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.”*

— James4:14, first sentence, King James Version. The adjacent verses retain reference to the Lord’s will and moral exhortation.

Connections between traditions

1. **The field of action: Epictetus and Aristotle.** In Enchiridion §1, Epictetus separates one's actions from body, property and reputation; in Nicomachean Ethics III.3, Aristotle directs deliberation toward feasible means. Both distinctions help ask what action is available rather than treat a desired outcome as a possession. Epictetus, however, draws a strict Stoic boundary around what is one's own, while Aristotle examines means that can include friends' contributions. Our scene brings that question to a contemporary agreement without declaring every offer of help controllable or every outcome deserved.

2. **Choosing under pressure: Aristotle and Epictetus.** In III.1, Aristotle examines a mixed action through cargo thrown overboard in a storm: the particular threat and moment of choice matter. In §1, Epictetus connects mistakenly claiming external things with constraint and contrasts this with one's own action. Both distinguish an agent's action from surrounding conditions, but evaluate them differently: Aristotle discusses circumstances of praise and pardon, while Epictetus advances a demanding account of inward freedom. This comparison cannot make a victim responsible for coercion or derive contemporary legal liability from an ancient argument.

3. **Planning does not confer ownership of the future: James and Epictetus.** James4:13–16 challenges confidence in a trading plan in light of an unknown tomorrow; Enchiridion §1 warns against treating external things as one's own. Their limited resemblance concerns claimed certainty: an intention gives no possession of everything on which its outcome depends. Their grounds differ substantially: James places life and action under the Lord's will, while Epictetus uses a Stoic distinction between one's own and the external. A reservation in a contemporary plan therefore proves neither a shared theology nor a promise of emotional invulnerability.

4. **Uncertainty and responsible action: James and Aristotle.** After recalling an unknown tomorrow, James4:17 retains a requirement to do known good; Aristotle in III.3 examines means where action is possible and its outcome uncertain. The limited resemblance is that incomplete knowledge of the future leaves a question about present participation. Their grounds differ: James speaks of sin before God, Aristotle of deliberation and choice. Our proposal to clarify a task or agree on assistance attributes no single moral system to both texts and demands no promise of an unavailable outcome.

5. **The limits of a feasible step: Aristotle and James.** In III.3, Aristotle ends a search for means when impossibility is established while considering what can be done; James4:13–17 combines limited knowledge of the future with responsibility for known good. The comparison helps distinguish an unavailable result from a particular opportunity to participate. But abandoning an impossible means in Aristotle does not cancel every moral requirement, and James's verse proves no ability to meet every demand made by others. Available repair after a mistake remains a separate editorial application that checks resources, circumstances and another person's agreement.

Primary sources

1. Epictetus. Enchiridion1; displayed Elizabeth Carter translation: the boundary of one’s own power.

2. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics III1/III3, selected passages; W. D. Ross translation: action, circumstances and means.

3. James4:13–17, King James Version: an unknown future, the Lord’s will and moral action.

Actual reading scopes and limits are recorded in the notes. Russian quotations are United Wisdom translations from the identified English translations; Greek originals were not collated. Scenes and the exercise are editorial reasoning with no established efficacy.

Tags

responsibility, life, control, choice, action, circumstances, uncertainty, promise, plan, outcome, influence, power, obligation, participation, cooperation, resources, compulsion, error, repair, revision, information, future, consequences, agency, boundaries, Epictetus, Aristotle, James, Stoicism, philosophy of life

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