

UNITED WISDOM

Personal boundaries: where my choice ends and another person's begins

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *“Persecution cannot persuade the understanding”*

William Godwin, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, volume I, book II, chapter V, PDF page69, also numbered69 in the PLL pagination; an excerpt from his argument on coercion. The Russian translation is editorial. This is historical political philosophy, not an established law of family psychology. Primary text.

What this article is about

In a fictional scene, Irina tells her brother she cannot attend the family's Sunday dinner. He replies that she is setting boundaries and asks why the family must now accommodate her wishes. Irina hears an accusation of selfishness; he hears a rejection of closeness. Yet only one fact is established: she will not attend on a particular day. We do not know whether she promised to cook, whether other responsibilities were agreed, or whether another meeting is possible. Boundaries have already been named before the disagreement's subject has appeared.

A personal boundary becomes clearer when it concerns an actual action: what someone controls, what they accepted, what affects another person, and what involvement they are willing to accept. This article examines boundaries as a distinction between choice and responsibility, rather than a formula making every wish inviolable. The right to decline remains, alongside accepted obligations and real limits on freedom. The aim is not to prove one's rightness forever but to discuss shared life without appropriating another person's decision.

I. Identify the subject before naming it

A violated boundary can describe dozens of events: entering without permission, changing a shared plan, forwarding a private message, asking for money, raising one's voice, or merely suggesting an unwanted option. These actions have different consequences and need different responses. One label can turn discussion into a contest over whose account of the other's personality is correct. Starting with an action preserves the chance to understand what happened before choosing its name.

In Irina's story, the subject might be attendance, failure to perform an accepted task, or the family's decision to gather without her. If she promised nothing, her absence alone does not establish a broken agreement. If she promised a dish, timely notice and an available replacement become relevant. If her brother wants to cancel the evening, that is a separate decision for its organizers. Irina need not welcome every consequence, but her refusal does not control every guest either.

This examination differs from demanding justification. A subject can be named without a detailed account of private reasons: this concerns attendance on one day, not someone's entire relationship with the family. Explanation may help, particularly when a shared plan changes, but its length should not become the price of choosing. Private reasons also do not eliminate the need to communicate information essential to a shared task. Not telling everything and notifying others of changed participation are compatible actions.

Naming the subject also reveals that a suggestion is not necessarily an intrusion. A brother can invite his sister and feel disappointed if she declines. Asking alone does not establish appropriation of her time. The distinction concerns what follows the answer: is it accepted as information, can an arrangement still be discussed, or is withholding agreement declared unacceptable? This article does not identify the brother's motive. It identifies actions that can be examined so Irina need not answer a general accusation instead of a particular invitation.

II. Choice and consequences involve different participants

For clarity, distinguish what happened from what is anticipated. Irina heard a question; she may expect condemnation from the whole family, but does not yet know that it will happen. Her brother received a refusal; he may fear she no longer wants contact, but that is unconfirmed too. Answering an imagined future tribunal is harder than answering today's invitation. Establishing facts does not require dismissing anxiety: it can remain while the subject is clarified. It simply prevents anxiety from adding absent participants and obligations to the actual conversation.

A person can choose their involvement without choosing all its consequences. They can decline an invitation but cannot require everyone to feel no disappointment. They can ask for quiet but cannot determine a shared home's whole routine. They can stop describing their day but cannot guarantee that a partner will retain the same view of the relationship. This does not disprove boundaries. It recognizes several centers of choice in one situation, where each participant also has decisions of their own.

A boundary sometimes becomes an attempt to close down another's reaction: I declined, so you must immediately understand and calm down. The desire may be understandable, but it concerns someone else's inner state. A more precise position allows disagreement with your

assessment without granting a right to coerce you. An unpleasant feeling and a prohibition on your action are different events. Confusing them makes any disappointment look violent and lets any demand justify itself through the strength of disappointment.

In William Godwin's An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, 1793, book II, chapters V–VI, private judgment is considered alongside moral responsibility. Protection from coercion does not make every chosen action just. This is a philosophical argument about political organization, not current legal advice or a family experiment. The comparison is limited to independent consideration as distinct from yielding to external pressure.

Our practical inference is editorial: my choice does not make someone else responsible for performing a convenient reaction. Irina may stay away, and her brother may hold dinner, suggest another date, or rely on her less in future plans. These choices also have limits, especially when they become humiliation or threats. Ordinary disagreement, however, does not erase another's agency. A boundary becomes more accurate when it acknowledges both one's own refusal and another's ability to decide what cooperation now suits them.

III. A promise changes the question without making someone property

An accepted obligation differs from a familiar expectation. If you agreed to meet someone, protect information, or do part of a shared task, withdrawing affects something another person could rely on. Saying personal boundaries does not remove that basis. Yet a promise does not transfer complete control of your life either. The question becomes more specific: what was accepted, which circumstances changed, and how inability or revision can be communicated.

Suppose Irina did promise to bring dinner. An honest answer then includes that circumstance. She can notify them she will not attend, discuss the food separately, or acknowledge that she cannot fulfill the promise now. She need not compensate with any new offer whatsoever. What matters is not pretending that dependency on her decision never existed. Another's inconvenience may result from a genuine agreement rather than a failure to respect independence.

Matthew 5:33–37 addresses reliable speech without reinforcement through oaths. This is a particular Christian teaching, not an instruction for every contract. Its limited comparison concerns precision: agreement and refusal deserve intelligible meanings. The passage does not divide household work or justify compelling someone to fulfill a dangerous promise. Moral clarity is not an exhaustive legal rule.

In ordinary discussion, ask whether both understood a statement as a promise. One may have said they would try while the other heard confirmation. A request may have included several

tasks, with acceptance covering only one. Leaving an uncertainty open is better than declaring someone a violator from the remembered presence of one word. When an agreement did exist, it can be acknowledged without self-condemnation and the current limit described. Responsibility concerns real consequences rather than compulsory surrender of the right to stop.

IV. Shared things need agreements about their use

Some decisions cannot be divided neatly into only mine and only yours. A shared car, kitchen, budget, evening noise, or care for someone involves several participants. Personal choice remains, but the shared arrangement matters too. If one calls every object their private space, the common sphere vanishes; if another treats sharing as permission for any action, separateness vanishes. The boundary's work here is a clear agreement about use.

Consider another fictional scene: two people use one car. One wants to visit a friend on Saturday, while the other has arranged to drive a relative. Both can want their trip, but there is only one car. Existing arrangements, alternative transport, and present needs must be established. The word boundary cannot create another vehicle. It can help prevent appropriation of a decision without removing the material limit or consequences for the person promised transport.

An agreement might describe hours, notice, and decisions requiring both people's consent. Its value is not the number of rules. An elaborate contract can become another task and falsely imply that all of life has been accounted for. Often one disputed point suffices: how the car is booked on weekends. Changed circumstances invite review. One participant's old habit matters as history but does not prove permanent priority, especially when shared conditions change.

An agreement is not necessarily fair merely because someone said yes. They may have had no realistic way to decline without losing essentials; the conditions may have remained unclear. A single sentence cannot settle that assessment, but the question should stay open: which alternatives actually existed? Ordinary cooperation benefits from checking understanding and the possibility of revision. When threats or coercion appear, safety takes precedence over polite coordination; another household experiment need not test a dangerous arrangement.

V. Habit does not establish permission

Many expectations emerge without explicit discussion. Someone always replied immediately, arranged celebrations, lent money, or described their travels. In time this may have become an important routine for others. Repetition does not necessarily mean agreement to perform it forever. Habit tells us what happened before. What is accepted now requires the person's current answer and attention to genuine dependencies the old arrangement created.

In the Islamic text of Quran 24:28, the desire to enter does not overcome the absence of permission; a request to leave retains its significance. This is a particular religious rule about visiting homes. We do not turn it into ready-made policy for phones, family roles, or every boundary. Its narrow example is that persistence does not establish access. Comparison is possible without claiming that Islamic teaching and contemporary individual autonomy share identical foundations.

Irina may have attended for many years. A new refusal alters her brother's expectation but does not establish deception in her past consent. Circumstances and wishes can change. She can clarify whether this concerns one evening or a new ongoing arrangement. He can avoid expanding it into a verdict on the family. If essential help depended on her previous involvement, that deserves separate discussion. A history of voluntary dinners and a history of accepted care differ in consequences.

Changing a habit may take time, but time should not become an indefinite postponement of every refusal. Someone can announce that organizing gatherings will change next month, or alter involvement immediately if continuing is impossible. There is no single correct pace. What matters is communicating a significant transition without demanding that the other person find it pleasant. A new arrangement becomes clear through actions and answers, not through promising that enough explanation will ensure nobody is ever surprised again.

VI. Explanation can be a gift rather than payment for permission

People often explain a refusal because the relationship matters. They describe tiredness, another plan, a financial limit, or a wish to spend the day alone. Explanation can support understanding. Sometimes, however, discussion takes on the structure of an interrogation: each reason is judged insufficient and another required. The subject then changes. Instead of information about a decision, the conversation concerns another's authority to permit that decision after inspecting every justification.

Not every clarifying question is an interrogation. When a shared plan depends on your answer, another may reasonably want timing, the extent of involvement, and consequences. The question's purpose matters. Asking whether an agreed task can be done tomorrow helps

organize action. Requiring a report of an entire private day to prove a refusal's worthiness may exceed the subject. The questioner's motive remains unknown unless expressed; we are examining the conversation's structure rather than a hidden intention.

Irina can say Sunday is occupied and she does not want to discuss details. If food was promised, this does not resolve the whole situation: the food still needs an answer. If only attendance is involved, a detailed report may be unnecessary. She can choose a smaller explanation without accusing her brother or promising that he will understand everything. Declining to give a reason does not turn an agreed common matter into a private one; a common matter does not open access to all her information either.

An informational boundary becomes useful through precision: what is needed for a decision, what someone voluntarily shares, and what stays private. A return time may suffice without listing meetings; a sum may matter without the entire income history. Sometimes greater openness suits both people when freely chosen. We prescribe no compulsory degree of secrecy. Adult participation also includes choosing to share more. Greater openness must remain a real choice, while sharing less should not itself establish guilt.

VII. A formulation does not replace an available action

A boundary becomes more intelligible when it describes what someone will do: not answer overnight, end a conversation if insulted, or decline to forward a private letter. Requiring another never to be upset or always to accept one's assessment lies beyond that control. Correct grammar does not make every action fair. Someone can speak about themselves while promising punishment, denial of essentials, or deliberate humiliation. Meaning needs checking alongside form.

For the Sunday dinner, Irina can stay away and communicate that in time. She needs no special psychological formula. If her brother starts judging her character, she can suggest returning to the evening plan or stop the conversation. She need not demonstrate firmness at any cost. When conversation is safe, explanation, silence, and postponement are options. Material consequences deserve notice however calmly the words are spoken.

Some boundaries are difficult to act on now. Someone lives in another's home, depends on income, has work duties, or lacks transport. Offering a simple solution misses the conditions. Desired limits can be separated from available actions: what they want changed, what is possible today, and which resources a next step requires. Inability to refuse immediately does not make the wish illegitimate in meaning or establish a weakness of character.

This precision reduces promises to oneself that later become accusations. If only a warning about response time is possible, that is the available step. If refusal cannot be expressed safely, an exercise in firm speech is unnecessary. Not every boundary must be announced,

particularly when announcement increases danger. A general article does not know your circumstances. It offers a distinction to relate to them, rather than demanding immediate action to enact an attractive idea of independence.

VIII. Another's boundary tests our own measure of freedom

Independence is easy to support while it suits us. Hearing a refusal where consent was expected is harder. If boundaries become one participant's right, they become a privilege. Agreed shared life asks something else: do I allow the other person the same separateness, and can consequences be discussed without turning their decision into a personal defect? That does not mean finding every refusal reasonable or fair.

Irina's brother also chooses what he is willing to do. He may decline to organize a separate dinner solely for her convenience. She may be disappointed, but her refusal of Sunday does not allow her to appoint his next evening. If she wants to meet, that is a proposal he can decline. Boundaries therefore do not remove negotiation. They identify cooperation as an intersection of several real agreements rather than the victory of the best-defended desire.

Avoiding double standards matters especially with information. Not wanting to disclose your day creates no automatic right to inspect another's. If you need a pause, another's pause also deserves consideration rather than suspicion merely because it is inconvenient. Symmetry does not mean identical duties in unequal circumstances, however. One may care for a child or provide necessary assistance while the other has no such obligation. Actual roles, rather than superficially identical sentences, must be compared.

Recognizing another's choice does not mean silently accepting any arrangement. You can acknowledge their ability to decline and decide whether that cooperation suits you. A shared task may need redistribution or may fail to come together. This can hurt, but it is more accurate than forced agreement. Adult separateness promises no infinite compatibility. It makes visible where people can continue together and where a common agreement is still absent.

IX. A boundary can change and remain real

A limit once established need not be permanent. Today someone does not want guests; next week they invite people themselves. That is not automatically contradictory. Context, strength, trust, and desire can alter available involvement. If others depend on a decision, they need clear information about the change. Flexibility differs from unpredictability in how real agreements are treated and whether others can update their plans too.

Irina can say she will miss only this dinner. She may discover that weekly meetings no longer suit her. She can attend next Sunday without giving up the right to decline another time. She need not preserve refusal as proof of firmness. Her brother should not interpret one

attendance as abolishing every future boundary. Clarifying its meaning is better than deducing it from a gesture that may mean only wanting to meet today.

Revision should not arise only after pressure. If a decision changes each time because otherwise someone is humiliated, the formal presence of yes does not settle voluntariness. We make no relationship diagnosis from this alone, but retain the question of refusal's price. The option to change a position belongs to that person. They can also keep their answer after understanding another's reasons and acknowledging inconvenience.

Returning to the opening scene, Irina and her brother might establish that no food was promised and only an invitation was involved. Dinner will proceed without her. Another meeting is not yet arranged. This small result removes several false obligations: defending an entire life, making another happy, or deciding the family's fate in one evening. A boundary becomes a point of clarity between two participants. Each retains a decision, responsibility for their actions, and the possibility of proposing contact later.

What this means in practice

Acknowledging one's own mistake also has a place. If Irina initially spoke harshly, she can clarify and apologize for that particular treatment while still declining attendance. Her brother can acknowledge expanding an answer into a judgment of her family feelings without promising never to be disappointed. Repairing a way of speaking need not change the choice itself. This distinction allows respect to return without making an apology conditional on consent. The dinner still needs clarity: even after a warm conversation, people need to know who does what and which question stays open.

For voluntary reflection, choose one small, safe episode in which you wanted to accept or decline. Identify the actual action separately from the relationship's general name. Then examine three questions: what you really control, what obligation you accepted, and what depends on another person's decision. You need not prove who is good or bad. An unknown circumstance should remain a question rather than be reconstructed as a convenient story.

Formulate an available answer in ordinary language. You might decline that day while addressing an agreed task separately, discuss use of a shared thing without giving one person its whole schedule, or protect details while providing information needed for a plan. These are not compulsory phrases. Another answer or no discussion now are options. Precision does not require coldness or prohibit a warm explanation.

If testing a small change, name an observable action beforehand: sending a timely answer, clarifying one agreement, or declining an additional task. Then examine what happened and what information appeared. The exercise does not succeed simply because the other person did not object. Silence may indicate lack of understanding; a clear refusal can bring an

unpleasant feeling while preserving respectful cooperation. This is an editorial practice with no promise to remove anxiety or guarantee acceptance of a boundary.

With threats, coercion, or danger, safe support and real available options take priority over demonstrating independence to someone. A boundary need not be communicated in a way that increases risk. Even ordinarily, stopping is an option. The useful result may be modest: clearer knowledge of which choice is yours, which obligation exists, and where agreement remains absent. That precision may help a future conversation if you want to begin one at all.

Key quotation

> *“It may make us hypocrites”*

Godwin, same work, book II, chapter V, PDF/PLL page69; a separate excerpt continuing the same argument on coercion. The Russian translation is editorial; comparing it with household agreement establishes no inevitable result of every pressure. Primary text.

Connections between traditions

Godwin ↔ editorial distinction between choice and justice: independent judgment does not make every action right; a political argument establishes no current family law.

Matthew ↔ clarity of consent: reliable speech matters more than theatrical reinforcement of promises; religious teaching is not a complete contract protocol.

Quran ↔ limits on access: lack of permission and a request to leave matter; rules for visiting homes do not automatically govern all private life.

Godwin ↔ Matthew: conduct requires moral consideration and words need intelligibility; grounds of obligation and approaches to religious truth differ.

Three sources ↔ reflecting on one episode: comparison clarifies action and consent without proving universal traditional agreement or the exercise's effectiveness.

Sources

• William Godwin, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, vol. I. London, G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793; OLL PLL v6.0 electronic edition, 2011; selected passages of book II, chapters V–VI were read, including PDF/PLL page69 with the quoted paragraph, rather than the whole volume.

• Matthew 5:33–37, King James Version. Specified passage read; speech and oaths in a Christian context.

• Quran 24:28, The Clear Quran. Dr. Mustafa Khattab's English translation; verse and displayed 27–29 context read, not the whole commentary; access to a home.

Tags

personal boundaries, choice, consent, refusal, independence, responsibility, obligation, promise, agreement, family dinner, invitation, consequences, access, private judgment, Godwin, Matthew, Quran, clear speech, shared resource, schedule, information, privacy, habit, revision, voluntary participation, relationships, reciprocity, explanation, safety, respect

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