

UNITED WISDOM

A boundary and an ultimatum: what depends on my action

Relationships and Intimacy

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

R-06-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

A boundary and an ultimatum: what depends on my action

Epigraph

“Your option is avoidable.”

William James, The Will to Believe, section I. A fragment of his discussion of alternatives that permit a third position, from the 1912 English edition.

What this article is about

In a fictional scene, Oleg and Dasha stand by the door before visiting friends. He is already forty minutes late; she has the keys in her hand. Dasha says she will leave on her own in ten minutes. Oleg hears a threat: if she sets a condition, she must be trying to control him. A week later, he makes a similar statement: if she sees her friend again, he will cancel their shared holiday. Both statements contain a condition and a consequence. Yet the decisions work differently.

Distinguishing a boundary from an ultimatum takes more than one magic word. It involves the situation: what participation someone ends, what they can actually do, whose resources they use, and whose choice they seek to influence. This article considers a condition together with its cost. Sometimes a clear boundary hurts and changes a relationship; sometimes a polite offer leaves only the appearance of choice. Neither a calm voice nor the phrase “I choose” settles the question by itself.

I. A consequence: an event or a means of pressure

Dasha really can leave separately. Her action responds to a particular difficulty: the wait has exceeded what she agrees to continue. If Oleg stays home or travels another way, their evening will change, but he retains the possibility of deciding for himself. She does not promise to make him hurry. She will also have to bear a less welcome outcome: perhaps he will never leave, and their friends will ask why she arrived alone.

Cancelling the shared holiday is more complicated. Oleg might genuinely not want to travel following a serious conflict. In the scene described, however, the trip becomes a means of stopping a meeting he does not attend himself. The connection between the events matters, along with what has already been paid for or agreed and whom the decision affects. Shared

tickets, savings, and arrangements with children cannot quietly become one person’s lever simply because that person began the sentence.

It helps to distinguish a consequence arising from ended participation from a punishment devised to obtain a particular answer. If I do not drive, a journey with me driving my car will not happen. If I take away access to someone else’s belongings to secure agreement to a journey, that is a different action. Both situations may involve irritation. Irritation itself establishes neither rightness nor wrongness; what happens between people remains the subject of examination.

Even a connection between action and consequence supplies no final justification. Someone may control a resource another needs, be the only available helper, or have accepted an obligation beforehand. Dependence, notice, and the possibility of revision then matter. A boundary does not make a difficult decision easy or remove the need to explain accepted responsibility. Its purpose is more modest: to identify the conditions of my participation without declaring control over another my natural entitlement.

II. Who will perform the action being described

A condition becomes more concrete when its actor is visible. “You will stop raising your voice” describes demanded behaviour from another. “I will end this call if the shouting continues” describes an action available to the speaker. The second wording allows examination of whether the call can really end and what follows. It promises no calm response. Even an intelligible warning may meet protest, and protest alone does not make the action unavailable.

The pronoun “I” offers no protection against pressure. Someone can say, “I decide that you will no longer speak to your sister,” while grammatically making themselves the principal actor. They can call withholding another’s money or circulating a private message a personal choice. Examination must therefore go beyond the sentence: what will happen, what access it affects, what agreement was given, and whether refusal is possible without an expressly imposed penalty.

In shared life, a boundary often concerns participation rather than exclusive possession. If two people work in the same room, one person’s decision to stop taking evening calls does not mean the other permanently loses the room. They will need to discuss time, noise, and available places. Both may have little space, and a fair agreement may take time. Recognising a shared problem is more precise than declaring every inconvenient request an invasion of one’s territory.

Dasha can state her departure time and offer Oleg a separate key. The offer is optional; she need not manage every aspect of an adult’s travel. But if they have one shared key and Oleg would be locked in without a way out, the description of her action changes. A detail absent

from a slogan becomes significant. A useful examination of a boundary asks about the actual world: who can open the door, get home, or complete an accepted part of a shared task.

III. Not every fork has only two roads

In section I of The Will to Believe, James distinguishes forced from avoidable options. His examples show that a verbal pair of alternatives need not exclude a third position. This is historical philosophical reasoning about belief, rather than research on family conflict. Its limited relevance here is a question: do the two stated outcomes genuinely exhaust what can be done?

“Either come with me or this relationship means nothing to you” joins a decision about one evening to a verdict on all closeness. Between those poles there may be separate travel, shorter participation, a conversation tomorrow, or different plans without separation. Neither person is obliged to like any of these possibilities. What matters is avoiding the concealment of options behind a loud declaration that no third path exists. Declining the offered pair creates no obligation to find a perfect compromise.

Some forks are real. If an order must be paid for today, postponement also has consequences. If someone no longer agrees to live together under existing conditions, indefinite preservation of shared life cannot be promised merely to prevent another feeling pressured. The deadline, its basis, and one’s choice need honest expression. A time limit is not automatically blackmail; manufactured urgency intended to secure a concession requires a different examination.

It can help to ask what would happen if the other person never heard the warning. Dasha still does not want to wait another hour and can leave. Oleg might happily take the holiday if he never learned about Dasha’s meeting with her friend. This is no infallible test of intention, but it helps reveal whether a consequence serves one’s own participation or chiefly another’s compliance. The answer is best checked against actions, rather than guessed from one unpleasant facial expression.

IV. Notice does not become a promise to cause harm

Someone can state beforehand that they will end a conversation, stop lending a possession, or decline the next task. Such notice gives another information for making plans. It matters especially when the previous arrangement has continued for a long time. Yesterday my car was available every Saturday; today I have decided differently. Even without a standing promise, an opportunity to learn the new arrangement calmly before the morning of a trip has practical value.

Notice becomes questionable when it adds harm unnecessary for ending participation. “I will not lend you my car” and “I will damage your car if you go” are not two styles of the same

boundary. A gentle tone cannot improve the second action. The same applies to public humiliation, use of confidential information, and threats involving necessary support. Calling a threat care or instruction does not change the action someone is being asked to accept.

Sometimes a speaker is unsure what they will do. They set a rigid deadline hoping their resolve will never be tested. It can help to stop before making the dramatic declaration. Uncertainty can be expressed more honestly: I am not ready to continue this conversation now; I will decide on further participation after a pause. The message need not look final and powerful. It offers less attractive certainty, but does not turn tomorrow's revision into a hidden failure to maintain today's role.

An excessive warning can be corrected. Dasha might have said she would never go anywhere with Oleg again, then realised the issue was today's wait. Clarification requires neither complete surrender nor defence of every previous sentence. She can acknowledge the exaggeration while retaining her decision to leave separately. The statement's scope is corrected; the particular limit remains an independent choice, rather than a reward for flawless speech.

V. Agreement secured at the price of fear

In Matthew 20:25–28, Jesus addresses his disciples, contrasting domination with service. A narrow ethical comparison with using one's position to control another is possible. The passage describes neither contemporary relationships nor unlimited fulfilment of every request. In an ordinary situation, a separate question remains: what price does someone impose for disagreement?

If agreement is secured by threatening another's ability to work, communicate, or use necessary belongings, outward silence says little about willingness. The person may have chosen the lesser available difficulty. No diagnosis of either speaker or conceding participant is needed to see the lever being used. It is enough to describe which access is used to obtain an answer and what happens after refusal. Such specificity makes the action discussable without constructing a portrait of an evil person from one scene.

Dependence may not have been chosen quickly or freely. A shared move, care of a child, or lack of separate accommodation can substantially restrict options. Advice to pronounce a resolute sentence and leave immediately may not fit available circumstances. When threats, violence, or dangerous dependence are present, a shared discussion exercise is unsuitable. Personal clarification and available safe support that considers actual circumstances may be a starting point, without testing another's response for an exercise.

Yet not every disappointment is fear, and not every consequence is punishment. If two people want different futures, learning that one no longer agrees to continue the relationship may be

deeply painful. The seriousness of that pain does not automatically make staying or leaving right or wrong. Obligations, the manner of communication, and separate choice all need consideration. A demand never to cause disappointment can also deprive someone of deciding for themselves.

VI. Another’s freedom does not require my endless availability

Quran 2:256 names the absence of compulsion in a religious context. It supplies no ready rule for all family conditions and establishes no unified teaching across traditions. The limited comparison concerns persuasion and imposition. The following reasoning about participation is editorial: another can retain choice while I decline to participate in every decision they make.

For example, I cannot declare that my adult brother must stop playing games at night. But I can stop being the person who wakes him five times each morning and explains his lateness to others. If I previously promised help with an important journey, that episode needs a separate decision; a change in future availability does not silently cancel it. My brother may keep his routine, seek another way to wake up, or abandon the trip. I need not make every option convenient.

There is a temptation to call a boundary successful only when the other chooses my preferred path. My brother goes to bed earlier, so I did everything right; he does not, so I must devise a more effective condition. My limit then becomes a programme of instruction again. It can be assessed differently: have I stopped doing work I no longer agree to do, addressed an accepted obligation, and left clear that his further decision belongs to him?

An unwelcome outcome may be hard for both of us. I will hear complaints; my brother will face the consequences of lateness; shared plans may need changing. This proves neither that the old arrangement should return nor that his failure deserves celebration as a lesson. Sympathy can coexist with ending the previous service. A new limited offer is possible if I truly want to make it. It need not appear automatically after every unhappy message.

Another difficulty is calling withdrawal of help an honest choice while continuing the service with reproaches. My brother still receives five morning calls, but each begins with a reminder that I am not obliged to call. No new arrangement exists; irritation has become an additional charge. It is better to acknowledge that I currently continue helping and decide separately whether I want to continue. I cannot demand that another guess a limit I do not enact or treat silent dissatisfaction as adequate notice of a change. If helping remains my choice, I can make it specific: one call at an agreed time. If that does not suit me, I need not offer it for the sake of an attractive compromise. An available alternative must be real for its proposer too.

VII. Shared obligations cannot be hidden behind personal choice

A boundary concerns my participation, but participation may already have been promised. We agreed to take a child to an activity; now one of us says personal freedom means they will not discuss the schedule at all. The other is left with a task both accepted. The word “boundary” does not settle this. We need to understand how the obligation was accepted, why it became unmanageable, who can fulfil it, and how revision can be communicated without presenting earlier agreement as someone else’s fantasy.

It is possible to stop accepting new duties while taking responsibility for a transition. If I no longer want to help an acquaintance with their business regularly, finishing the present task and setting an end date are possibilities. They are options, rather than a required template for every situation. Resources may run out sooner, or circumstances become unsafe. What matters is avoiding promises of a transition I cannot provide and avoiding an unsafe arrangement merely for the appearance of a graceful ending.

Dasha and Oleg can separately reconsider their arrangement for getting ready. If she always contacts the friends, gathers belongings, and checks transport, the wait begins long before the final forty minutes. One limit at the door will not resolve the whole distribution of work. They may need to clarify who sets the time, gathers what is needed, and reports a delay. That conversation concerns their shared task more closely than a trial over who may state conditions.

They may discover that their shared arrangement does not suit them at all. One likes arriving early; the other prefers an unstructured evening. They can travel separately, choose fewer shared events, or seek a different agreement. Not every difference must disappear to confirm closeness. But separate travel should not become concealed punishment through a week of silence, conspicuous exclusion from other plans, or demands for gratitude for freedom granted.

VIII. The condition is followed by examination of action

The sentence at the door takes seconds; the decision becomes visible later. Dasha leaves after ten minutes and discovers an urge to send five more messages explaining how wrong Oleg is. She can notice the urge without treating it as an instruction. Complete calm is unnecessary for retaining her decision. Yet a prolonged exchange demanding acknowledgement of her rightness can turn separate travel back into a struggle for a particular answer.

Oleg can also say that he disagrees with the deadline or finds travelling separately inconvenient. That information can be heard without immediately cancelling the action. If he identifies something significant and new—for example, that she took their only needed key—it

should be checked. Distinguishing new information from repeated dissatisfaction matters, but does not require calling every objection manipulation. The other remains a participant in the situation, rather than an obstacle in a test of my firmness.

My own cost also deserves consideration. Ending nighttime conversations means bearing unfinished matters. No longer lending the car means some shared trips will not happen. Limiting participation in an argument leaves the desired final sentence unsaid. If I am prepared only for a scenario where the other quickly yields, my own action may not yet be chosen. That is a reason to reconsider an available step, rather than accuse myself of insufficient maturity.

Examination need not continue indefinitely. After one episode, I may see that the promised action was impossible or too broad. My next message can be more precise, shorter, and more modest. This differs from changing conditions chaotically to obtain a convenient answer. Revision is grounded in the actual circumstances of my participation. I can explain what changed without demanding that another find every version perfect and forget the inconvenience caused by the previous one.

Delayed consequences omitted from the initial sentence also merit examination. I ended a call because of shouting, then failed to answer messages about an accepted shared task for a week. Perhaps I truly need a longer pause. If possible, I should then identify its scope and an available way to exchange necessary information. Otherwise, a brief limit on conversation quietly expands into ending all participation, leaving the other to interpret missing answers. This creates no obligation always to remain reachable or resume dangerous contact. It invites distinctions between ending the current call, postponing a personal dispute, and reconsidering a shared project. Each decision has its own scope. Seeing that scope honestly is more useful than defending every subsequent action with the original word “boundary.”

IX. A conversation in which nobody must win

A few days later, Dasha and Oleg return to their evening by the door. She says she does not want prolonged waiting without notice. He says her deadline sounded like a judgement of his whole personality. His account does not establish that she actually voiced that judgement, but it helps identify what was heard. They can clarify the particular words and travel arrangement without requiring either person to surrender their own memory.

One possible result is small: before a shared outing, both state a time and, if delayed, say whether they will travel together. This promises no permanent freedom from irritation. If Oleg disagrees, Dasha can retain separate travel as an option. If that arrangement also inconveniences her, she can choose fewer shared events. These decisions concern participation in a particular activity; they need not measure love, gratitude, or a proper attitude towards someone close.

Sometimes conversation fails, and even a small agreement remains unavailable. Correct wording cannot be promised to open another person. Someone may prefer a pause, a separate decision, or ending a particular shared task. In dangerous circumstances, assessment of available safety matters more than experimentation with a condition. Absence of reconciliation does not make understanding one's action pointless. Its result may be precise knowledge of what participation I accept and which limits are currently real.

A boundary becomes recognisable through treatment of oneself and another, rather than the solemnity of its name. It has a subject, an available action, and an acknowledged cost. It can accommodate a promise, correct rudeness, hear new information, and avoid making another's agreement the only acceptable outcome. Such choice guarantees no easy closeness. It may at least help avoid presenting a wish to control as care or treating every personal limit as hostility.

Clarification may also concern speaking in front of witnesses. Dasha can leave, but announcing to friends that she will finally teach Oleg punctuality turns a private decision into public instruction. Oleg can dislike separate travel, but recruiting allies to persuade Dasha to wait changes the conversation's participants. Both may need support, and seeking it is permitted. The distinction is between help with one's own choice and inviting third parties to pressure another. Someone can describe their difficulty while retaining another's private details and ask for help with transport or planning. Support then expands real options instead of becoming an additional penalty for disagreement. Neither participant must manage this perfectly on the first attempt.

What this means in practice

If you want to examine the idea, choose one small, safe episode in which your participation can still be discussed: a nonessential call's timing, waiting before a walk, or lending a personal possession. The practice is voluntary; you can skip it or stop. Avoid situations involving threats, violence, dangerous dependence, or necessary support that cannot simply end. This is an editorial clarification exercise, rather than validated therapy or a guaranteed way to change another person.

Spend five minutes noting what you currently decline, what action is actually available to you, and what was already promised. Beside it, identify consequences separately for each participant. Check whether you have included additional harm to secure a concession. If a shared obligation or resource emerges, note the need for separate discussion. If the action is unavailable, avoid turning it into a dramatic warning; choose a smaller step or leave the question open.

If you wish, communicate one particular limit without demanding agreement with your assessment of the relationship. In a safe situation, for example, you could say how long you

are willing to wait and what you will do afterwards. This is an editorial wording example, rather than a universal script. Allow room to hear significant new information and decide whether it changes your choice. Another may feel disappointed; you may decline to make immediate calm a condition of respectful conversation.

Afterwards, briefly examine three things: what you communicated, what you did, and what remains unresolved. Avoid judging success by the speed of another's concession. You may need to clarify a promise, narrow the action, or recognise that shared discussion is presently unavailable. One observable detail is sufficient; endless examination of your own purity is unnecessary. In the fictional scene, that detail might be a separate key, separate travel, or timely notice, rather than final victory at the door.

Key quotation

> *"They are measured by his willingness to act."*

William James, The Will to Believe, section I, discussing how alive a hypothesis is to a particular thinker. The pronoun refers to hypotheses' liveness and deadness. This measure is not a formula for assessing boundaries.

Connections between traditions

James distinguishes types of option within the philosophy of belief. Matthew 20:25–28 concerns service and domination among the disciples. Quran 2:256 names absence of compulsion in a religious context. The limited comparison raises questions about alternatives and the use of position; it establishes no shared doctrine, empirical effectiveness of the exercise, or universal family law.

Sources

William James. The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Longmans, Green and Co., New Impression, 1912; the collection's first edition appeared in 1897. The preface and section I of the title essay, pages 1–4, were read; the quotations come from section I, page 3. Other essays are not represented as independently read sources.

Matthew 20:25–28, King James Version, BibleGateway. The specified passage was read; theological commentaries were not separately studied.

Quran 2:256, Quran.com, English translation by Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran. The verse and displayed 2:257 context were read. Full tafsir and the precise printed translation edition were not established. Russian exposition is editorial paraphrase.

Tags

boundaries, ultimatum, refusal, choice, consent, responsibility, relationships, closeness, conditions, consequences, warning, pressure, promise, participation, agreement, time, shared resources, waiting, conversation, autonomy, respect, revision, differences, safety, James, philosophy, Christianity, Islam, practice, United Wisdom

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.