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People Don't Want Freedom

*An essay on the difference between freedom as fantasy
and freedom as responsibility*

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Give someone a completely free Saturday — no obligations, no plans, no one who needs anything from them — and watch what happens. Within an hour, most people have filled it. They have scheduled something, reached for the phone, invented a purpose for the day that was not there when they woke up. The blankness was not welcome. It was something to be resolved.

This is worth sitting with. The thing people say they want most — time, freedom, space — is often the thing they find hardest to inhabit when they actually have it.

The word freedom gets used constantly, aspirationally, as the organizing principle of modern individual ambition. People want to be free from demanding jobs, free from relationships that constrain them, free from obligations they did not choose, free from expectations assembled by other people about what their life should look like. The freedom they imagine is a specific kind: options without consequences, openness without anxiety, possibility without the weight of having to choose.

This version of freedom does not exist. And the gap between the fantasy and the real thing is where most of the interesting psychology lives.

Real freedom is not the removal of limits. It is the removal of excuses.

When there is nothing constraining you — no institution to obey, no authority to defer to, no expectations to meet or fail — the choices you make are unambiguously yours. There is no one else to blame for them. No structure to point to as the source of your unhappiness. No system to indict for the shape your life has taken. The freedom that people fantasize about is the freedom to do what they want. The freedom that actually arrives is the freedom to be responsible for everything.

This is not a comfortable thing. It is, for most people, quietly terrifying.

Sartre called it the burden of radical freedom: the recognition that you are not only free to choose but condemned to choose, and that your choices constitute you. There is no essential self underneath the decisions, waiting to be discovered. The self is the decisions. Which means the person who defers every choice, who follows every expectation, who lives entirely inside a structure they did not build and would never question — that person is also choosing. They are choosing not to choose. And they bear the same responsibility for that as anyone else.

Sartre called the refusal to acknowledge this bad faith. The lived experience of it is simpler.

It is relief.

The relief is real, and it is important to understand why.

Structure — routine, institution, obligation, expectation — does something psychologically valuable. It removes the need to decide. And deciding is expensive. Every decision requires you to know what you

want, weigh it against what you fear, tolerate the uncertainty of outcome, and hold yourself accountable for the result. A life with strong external structure offloads most of this. The job tells you where to be. The social role tells you what to want. The institution tells you what to value. The calendar tells you what to do with the time.

The person inside this structure is, in a narrow sense, less free. In another sense, they are relieved. They have someone to blame when things go wrong — the system, the boss, the family, the culture. They have a narrative they did not have to author. They have a self they did not have to choose.

This is why people often defend structures that limit them far more vigorously than they defend the structures that serve them. The limiting structure provides something the open field does not: accountability that lives somewhere else.

The modern economy understood this before its users did.

The great paradox of the freedom economy is that it sells liberation while engineering dependency. The rhetoric is independence, authenticity, being your own person. The mechanism is the feed, the algorithm, the recommendation system, the trend cycle — all designed to make choices for you while giving you the feeling of making them yourself. The platform does not constrain you. It curates you. And curation is a softer word for the same thing.

You chose that show. The algorithm offered it at the precise moment your resistance was lowest and your mood was most receptive. You chose that purchase. The interface placed it at the top, showed you

who else had bought it, and removed the friction between impulse and transaction. You chose that opinion. It arrived through a feed that had already filtered out the views you were unlikely to adopt.

The freedom is real, in the technical sense. No one forced you. The choice was yours. But the field in which the choice was made was designed, deliberately and at scale, by people whose interests were not identical to yours.

This is not a conspiracy. It is a business model. And it works because it offers something people genuinely want: the feeling of freedom without the burden of self-determination. The sensation of choosing without the weight of choosing.

More options do not make people more satisfied. Past a certain threshold, they make people less decisive, more anxious, and more prone to regret whatever they chose — because awareness of what was not chosen grows with the size of the option set. Every choice becomes a small loss. Every commitment forecloses something else.

But the deeper problem is not the size of the choice set. It is what genuine freedom demands of the person inside it. To navigate real openness — to live without an authority telling you what is worth wanting, without a community telling you what is respectable, without a tradition telling you where you fit — requires a very specific inner orientation. You have to know what you actually want, not just what you have been trained to want. You have to hold your own judgment in the absence of external validation. You have to be willing to be wrong in a way that implicates no one but you.

Most people have never been asked to develop this. The institutions of modern life — school, work, family, social media — are all, in their different ways, systems for telling people what to want. They provide the want so that the individual doesn't have to generate it themselves. And when people find gaps between those systems, they discover they don't know what they want — that they have an enormous capacity for preference but no clear sense of desire. The gap does not get filled with self-authorship. It gets filled with whatever the next structure provides.

Self-authorship is the actual content of freedom, and it is genuinely difficult.

To author your own life — to decide what you value, not because it was given to you but because you examined it; to pursue what you want, not because it is legible to others but because it is real to you; to hold yourself accountable for the shape your life takes without pointing at anyone else as the primary cause — this is not a skill that develops naturally. It requires sustained discomfort. It requires the capacity to sit with uncertainty, to tolerate the absence of external validation, to act without the cover of a system or a trend or a consensus.

Most people experience this capacity in small doses and find it exhausting. The person who leaves a relationship to be free discovers that freedom from the relationship does not produce the life they imagined — it produces the raw material of a life, which requires building, which is entirely their responsibility. The person who quits the conventional career to pursue something meaningful discovers that meaning does not arrive. It has to be made. Which is slow and uncertain

and cannot be delegated.

The entrepreneur who wanted to be their own boss discovers that being your own boss means being your own everything — your own structure, standard, source of confidence, and critic. The absence of the old constraint does not feel like liberation. It feels like exposure.

Freedom, in the actual form it takes, is less an opening than an assignment.

This is why discipline is not the opposite of freedom. It is one of its most reliable forms.

The person with strong commitments — who has chosen what they value and organized their behavior around it — is in a meaningful sense freer than the person with unlimited options and no commitments. Not because they have more possibilities. Because they have fewer decisions to make. The hard choices were made once, at the level of values, and the daily choices are downstream of that. The discipline is not a cage. It is the evidence of a prior freedom — the freedom to have decided.

This is what the romanticization of freedom consistently misses. The freedom that feels good — unscheduled time, no obligations, open possibility — is freedom that has not yet been tested. The freedom that actually produces a life is more demanding. It requires you to use the openness, to make something of the space, to hold yourself responsible when you don't.

Real freedom is not the end of constraint. It is the moment when all the constraints are yours.

I want to be careful not to turn this into an argument against freedom. It is not.

What I am arguing is that the freedom most people claim to want is not the freedom that will satisfy them. The fantasy — unlimited options, no obligations, someone else responsible for the difficult things — is not a destination. It is an escape from the destination, dressed up as arrival.

The freedom that matters is harder and quieter and less photogenic. It is the freedom of having examined your own values rather than inherited them. Of knowing what you actually want, not what you have been trained to want. Of making choices you would still own in ten years, in circumstances that have no good options. Of building a life that is yours not because no one constrained you but because you actually chose it.

Most people will not do this. Not because they are weak, but because the structures of modern life are specifically designed to make it unnecessary — to absorb the need for self-determination into consumption, preference, identity performance, and the comfortable labor of optimizing inside a system someone else built.

The question is not whether you want freedom. Almost everyone says they do.

The question is whether you want what freedom actually costs.