

## [Common Error No. 38](#) [1]

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### **38. "It's all very well to talk of freedom, but poor people are not free to buy Rolls Royces."**

Actually, the poor *are* free to buy Rolls-Royces. They are not rich enough to buy them, but they are not prevented from doing so by the whim or will of others. If they had or could get money they could buy luxury goods, but there are some things people are not free to do, be they rich or poor.

They cannot smoke with impunity in a public bar, or demonstrate within the vicinity of Parliament. Being banned from doing something is about curbs on freedom. Being able to afford something is about power over circumstance.

A person who lacks the resources to buy something might hope to raise the money by saving, working, borrowing, or winning it. Most of us buy things we couldn't at one time afford. It wasn't that we were thwarted by the will of those in a position to stop us, only that we lacked the necessary means.

There is a crucial difference between being held back by circumstance and being restrained by the superior power of others. In the first case you have aspirations beyond your present abilities, but in the second case you are subject to the arbitrary dictates of an authority which makes you live as it sees fit, rather than as you want to do.

A free society allows people to make their own decisions, rather than have them subject to the whims of those in power. There are things they cannot do, not because they are unfree, but because they are unable. People are free to jump unaided over the Eiffel Tower, but are not able to do so. The difference is that people can overcome a lack of means more readily than gravity. In a free society they can hope to prosper, and to do the things hitherto beyond them. In an unfree society they cannot.

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