

The Self-Made Person: Myth, Reality, and Promise

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Abstract

Many of us think we are self-made. Some of us may be, but only qualifiedly. We do not make ourselves directly or from whole cloth. Each of us is shaped by myriad genetic, familial, cultural, and governmental forces. These forces do not eliminate self-control. They do, though, limit some options, expand others, and make achieving still others more or less difficult. Understanding these forces' scope identifies constraints on our self-making, shows why we are indebted to people who enrich(ed) our lives, and informs and elevates control we do have. This knowledge empowers us to be morally more responsible agents—ones who improve others' lives, frequently by employing, supporting, and enhancing vital governmental institutions.

1. Introduction

Many of us think we are self-made. We think our achievements sprung (almost) entirely from our intelligence, ingenuity, and diligence. That may be qualifiedly true of some who make it from deprived backgrounds. But only qualifiedly.

Many of us who are not victims sometimes think we are while failing to acknowledge those who *are* victims, including those we victimized and those whose victimization benefitted us. For instance, many of us fail to grasp how race, gender, and social class frame people's options for good or ill.

Relatedly, most of us are prone to judge our actions (and those of people we like) favorably. We blame our failures on something other than ill-advised choices, limited abilities, or laziness. Thus, if I receive a poor grade, do not land a coveted promotion, or am spurned by a potential lover, I may blame others' biases or ignorance, or my unfortunate circumstances. I scrounge for ways to excuse or mitigate responsibility when things turn out badly while taking credit when they turn out well. I am unlikely to do same for behaviors or traits of those I dislike. I am not alone.

These tendencies expose faulty views of personal control and moral responsibility. We assert control and accept responsibility when it suits us; we spurn them when it doesn't. We ignore plain facts about each. Although we are not leaves tossed by winds of circumstance, we are all fashioned by complex causal chains largely beyond our control, and often beyond our ken. Understanding this reveals limits on our control and shows why the control we have is indirect. Once we identify those forces shaping us, we can work with and within them to enhance control and act morally responsible.

2. Dewey and Grace

John Dewey identified the nature, scope, and power of these forces a century ago. He noted that the ways our lives unfold are matters of luck—although by “luck” he did not mean some magical power. Rather, he averred that the contours and trajectories of our lives are framed by forces we do not directly control, in worlds given us by earlier generations, just as their worlds were given to them. Or as he puts it: “It is of grace, not of ourselves that we lead civilized lives” (1922: 21).

We live in a world of art and music, bridges and roads, trains and airplanes, computers and cell phones, democracy and a vigorous press, public education and health care, because of the work of previous generations. We are better off than folks during the Great Plague, not because we are more worthy, but because we had more than three centuries of innovation between them and us, innovation making our world more inviting to us, more receptive to our choices and actions. No one born yesteryear could own a computer factory. Neither would (most of) these people today:

1. A New Guinea villager.
2. A poor, uneducated Syrian immigrant in Madrid.
3. Harlem vagrant with a crackhead mother and an unidentified father.

Of course, some of these might start a factory, but only after serendipitous intervention of others.

The point is commonplace. Who is more likely to become a partner in an esteemed law firm: a child of a bright lawyer or physician, or the child of a preschool teacher or sanitation worker? That is not to say the former will and the latter cannot. Only that the former's doing so is unsurprising; the latter's, rare.

Although obvious when stated, this truth is masked in public imagination. If you google “the best predictors of success,” you find studies isolating characteristics of successful people: intelligence, hard work, emotional

stability, critical thinking, etc. Of course, not everyone possessing these traits succeeds, and some lacking them do succeed. Even when people with said traits succeed, we do not know *how* these traits matter, nor how *these* people acquired, developed, and deployed them. To understand why some people “succeed,” while others do not, we must dig deeper.

3. Setting the Stage

No one’s traits arise in a vacuum. We are shaped by genes, families, and friends, as well as the culture, political, and business environments in which we live. Dewey explores these themes in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). He offers accounts of human nature, moral deliberation, moral responsibility, and personal power, each informed by a social-psychological understanding of habit. Most people think habits are reflexive, and therefore, outside our control. Some are. But since they are shaped by circumstances, including people’s past and current choices, they are partly controlled by humans, albeit indirectly. None of us makes the world anew. Each generation transmits what it receives—always altered and ideally improved. A Deweyian account of habit explains *that*, *how*, and *why* choice and action matter, and, therefore, how we can shape our lives—individually and collectively (1922: Part 1).

I trace ways we develop genetically, psychologically, and socially, before explaining how knowledge of these forces heightens our control.

4. What Shapes People

4.1. Significance of Genes

Many physical features—including eye color, general height, early-onset myopia, and facial structures—are writ in our genes. Some are wholly trivial: whether one can roll her tongue. Others, e.g., some genetically-based diseases (or the predilection to developing them) are life-shattering. Many of these diseases cannot be eliminated, although the contours of some can be influenced by acute attention to lifestyle or diet.

Genes also influence intelligence. “Geneticists have isolated genes responsible for half of someone’s intelligence” (Plomin, R. and von Stumm, S. 2018). No single gene, though, does the trick: Intelligence is shaped by the expression and interactions of several. Likewise for personality traits, such as depression or outgoingness.

Given the scope of genetic inheritance, we expect many parental traits to be replicated in their biological progeny. If parents are moody, we are not surprised if their children are too. However, the full explanation for these traits requires identifying relevant environmental forces. If a child’s parents

are depressed or quick to anger, their children will likely be stressed or withdrawn. The family environment buttresses genes' effects.

Were children not shaped by upbringing, we would not be concerned about the nature and stability of the family. Nor would parents seek locales with fine public—or affordable private—education. If these did not matter, parents seeking them would be wasting time and money.

Other parental traits alter what children can do easily, or only with effort. We expect children of musical prodigies can carry a tune, while ones with short, stubby fingers will not be concert pianists. Someone born with essential tremors should not pursue neurosurgery or defuse explosives. Put generally, size, dexterity, personality, intelligence, and eyesight open some options, foreclose others, and make achieving still others easier or more difficult.

These factors, however, do not fix their children's lives. There are legions of lives they might live, paths they could follow.

4.2. Time and Circumstances of Our Births

Although genes frame the people we can be, the time, location, and circumstances of our births are often more profound. Someone born in 500 CE anywhere in the world could not have driven a car, used a computer, attended a state-sponsored university, had open-heart surgery, been vaccinated against polio, or read a paperback. Not only were these not options for them, but few could also fathom the possibilities. Yet by “grace,” we have these options because our predecessors made them imaginable and possible. People then lacked options because they were born at the “wrong” time. Many lack them today because they live in the “wrong” part of the world. Someone in the slums of Mumbai or on the Mongolian Steppes lacks options afforded to most in industrialized societies. That is not to say everyone in a Western country has the same options. Each person's chances vary further according to her particular circumstances, including her family, friends, social and business structures, and government. I say a bit about each, although I will focus on the crucial role of government, including ways it can enhance and funnel moral responsibility.

4.3. Business and Social Structures

Businesses and social structures influence us in ways we often do not notice. I realized how pervasively during the family's first year in Scotland. Our flat had a small (dorm-sized) refrigerator. Why? We did not need a large one. We had three bakers, a fishmonger, two butchers, multiple vegetable/fruit stands, and an all-purpose grocer within 300 yards of our flat. Each day one

of us would make the rounds to purchase food for the day. We used the refrigerator for staples (margarine) and some leftovers. Once every few weeks, we would drive two miles to Tesco to purchase canned goods.

Some would not like this way of living; we adored it. However, the option of eating food purchased (and often made or picked) within a day or two is viable for a few Americans. The design of towns requires virtually all of us to drive to purchase food; therefore, virtually everyone needs a large refrigerator. What eludes us is that relying on large grocers to feed ourselves is not a choice we made. This option was dictated by economic arrangements and business practices.

These practices, when amplified by effective advertising, shape what we perceive to be our needs and interests and available means for achieving them. In so doing, they structure how we live. They often promote objects and services we would have never dreamed of wanting sans advertising. Then, once we are accustomed to them, we cannot envision life without them.

4.4. Community Influences

Wider social influences—including families, friends, and schools—also create and then shape or reshape our options. Affluent parents usually live in communities with good public schools or affordable private ones. Their children rarely *have* to work and can devote more time to studies. Moreover, the parents—and fellow students—are literate and model academic excellence. Thus, their children are *likely* more curious, better educated, and more effective writers and speakers than children from poorer families who often must work while attending middling schools (Strenze, T. 2007: 411–414). Of course, some who start poor succeed, but when they do, we can usually point to genetic or environmental factors enabling success. Unfortunately, common views of choice ignore incontrovertible facts about ways time and place expand or limit options.

4.5. Religious and Cultural Influences

We are often further blind to the power of cultural and religious environments shaping us, including any “decision” we make to affiliate with some religious community. Mill notes that he did not originally grasp that factors making him a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: 20). He—like most of us—assumed we rationally adopted our beliefs. Although that may be partly true for some, it is not entirely true for any, and largely false for most of us. Why, Mill asks, are most East Indians Hindu rather than Christians? Did they examine competing for holy books and adopt Hinduism? No. Yet, if this is

true of most reared as Hindus or Muslims or Confucians, why should we think that it is any less true of our family members, our friends, or ourselves?

Likewise for cultural norms. Why do the Japanese have tight bonds of extended family, bonds many westerners lack? Is it that they considered various social arrangements and settled on the one in which they were reared? Of course not (Diamond, J. 2019: Chapter 3). Or why for a century did most white Southerners support slavery? Did we think African Americans were equals of Caucasians, and decided, on available evidence, that they were naturally slaves? No. We were reared in environments where these views were norms, and we lacked the impetus or opportunity or ability to seriously examine them. Some of us went through the motions of questioning our views: we asked simple-minded questions to which we thought we already “knew” the answers (LaFollette, H. 2017: 13–15). Unfortunately, although we acknowledge human fallibility abstractly, many of us think we are spared flaws inflicting others. As J.S. Mill elegantly explains:

Unfortunately for the good sense of mankind, the fact of their fallibility is far from carrying the weight in their practical judgment which is always allowed to it in theory; for while everyone well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion of which they feel very certain may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves . . . liable. (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: 19)

We are equally fallible in assessing the way our lives unfold. If we are rich and successful, we often believe wealth, status, and success are mostly of our making—even if these are better explained as products of genes, environment, and circumstances (Frank, R. 2016).

Suppose, for instance, that we could magically transport a wealthy person to a 1600s peasant’s household. Would he have the life or riches he has? No. Each person builds her life on foundations erected by those before. If a person’s parents were educated, smart, wealthy, or hard-working, her opportunities will be greater than those born to poor, uneducated, unstable, mentally challenged, and slothful parents.

This defies question. My parents were working class, not because they were lazy or dullards, but because their options were limited by genes, parents, and world. They—like many born during the Great Depression—had no realistic opportunity for higher education or inherited more than a

pittance. What is amazing is not that they were not wealthy, but that they did so well. Brights and hard work mattered, but only so much.

What about education? Why does it matter? As did most of my family and friends, I initially thought of education as a ticket to a better economic life. This shaped initial plans to pursue engineering, the ministry, and later psychology. However, I had a cadre of teachers who challenged me to think for myself. In so doing, they enabled me to see options once invisible to me.

5. Serendipity and Choice

Despite initial plans, I ended up a professor after a three-year stint as a journalist. Why did I stop pursuing previously chosen careers and enter the two I did? Did I survey options and evaluate them? No. I could not have planned on being a journalist or a professor since I never considered either until happenstance injected each into imagination. As I approached graduating college, a faculty friend introduced me to a renowned journalist and editor; a new option was born. Several years later, while working in a political campaign, I met a philosopher who convinced me to take a few grad courses. I loved it and decided to pursue a graduate degree. Both seeming diversions turned out well, although I did not create either option. Nonetheless, I was not impotent. Once options were present, I saw and could exploit them.

Put differently, although I had to be able to pursue visible and viable options, I did not create them from whole cloth. My culture and family are key elements of the causal story. So, too, the government. Yet many commentators contend the government is a threat we just conquer if we wish to make ourselves. As I explain shortly, this is malarky. But first, I talk more broadly about the character of control we do have.

6. The Control We Can and Do Have

The aforementioned causal forces shape, but do not eliminate, our control. Being aware of them, though, does alter how to understand, exercise, and expand control. They thereby inform moral deliberation and action.

6.1. Giving to Posterity

Recognizing our indebtedness to predecessors and others grounds Dewey's avowal that gratitude is the root of all virtue. We can make the world better or worse than the one we inherited, but not by ourselves and not directly. Thinking we can is hubris. Still, we can influence ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren in ways that predecessors and contemporaries influenced us. We can make them worse, by damaging the environment or

vital institutions. Or better by protecting and enhancing both in ways essential for democracy and realistic self-control.

6.2. Control of Our Lives

Our control is limited since a) circumstances limit our options, b) we assume we have options we lack, c) we fail to see those we have, or d) we lack the ability to realize them. Each of these is common. Consider option c). When completing high school, I never considered attending an Ivy League college. I did not appreciate what one was or how it might benefit me. Ignorance kept me from pursuing some options. Arguably I benefitted from traveling the paths I did, although I would have had more options had I considered other paths. However, the ability to see, have, and pursue options is not a singular ability. It is a constellation of them: to understand the world as it is, to envision a different world, to see ways to move from one to the other, and to discern how actions might hinder or facilitate movement. Living in an environment with vibrant general education and decent medical care, basic amenities, and food expands options for many. It increases people's ability to attain their goals. Whether we live in such an environment depends on our choices and others' actions. Knowing this helps us discern options and responsibilities. We can help others do same. That, too, is one of our responsibilities.

6.3. Responsibilities to Others

As Dewey noted, understanding our indebtedness to others grounds moral responsibilities. We show our gratitude to predecessors by ensuring they have adequate finances and medical care in retirement. Mostly though, we "pay it forward" by supporting environments benefitting future generations. This requires a sound democratic government.

7. The Nature and Role of Government

Some people eschew all but some minimalist role for government, and then, only reluctantly. For them government embodies the "deep state" that acts insidiously against our interests. Sometimes, it does—which is why genuine democracy is so important. The government's role is crucial, both for what it does directly and for what it enables others to do. The role of government is chronicled in Gallagher's magisterial: *How the Post Office Created America* (2017). He explains that the development and expansion of the post office had noteworthy ripple effects: it encouraged significant infrastructure (roads and trains), promoted a means of education (ready distribution of magazines

and newspapers), and encouraged internal migration (by enabling families to stay in touch over long distances).

7.1. Appropriate Limits on, and Essential Roles of, Government

Current discourse suggests government is either invariably evil or invariably good. It is neither. The difficulty comes in specifying appropriate limits on—and crucial roles of—government. The notions of ‘grace,’ ‘gratitude,’ and ‘serendipity’ offer direction. They reveal that good government is essential for flourishing.

First, let’s explore the notion of serendipity. I saw its centrality when reflecting on how I became a reporter for *The Tennessean*, then a professor, and later traveled extensively outside the United States. My autobiographical realities were not possibilities I entertained as a teen. All resulted from options others created or helped me envision. Of course, the options would not have been genuine had I lacked ability to pursue them. But both the options and the abilities emerged from my background; I did not create them from whole cloth. As I explained earlier, a chance meeting led to my being a reporter; another chance meeting 3 years later was a professional pivot that led to graduate studies; finally, years later, a seemingly insignificant decision to make a telephone call led to a string of visits and lectures I gave throughout Europe. Each visit had knock-on effects. For instance, the locale of our second year in Scotland (near the town of [Dunblane](#)) led to my abiding interest in the issue of gun control.

Each autobiographical detail reveals the importance of having and seeing options; and having the abilities to exploit them, each introduced or amplified by serendipity. Each exemplifies control most of us have, forms empowered by government.

7.2. Limits on Government

Before explaining why government is essential, we must acknowledge limits on it and its agents. It/they should not rifle through a person’s home, papers, finances, phone calls, or emails without compelling and transparent reasons. Nor should it imprison citizens for criticizing it. These claims are uncontroversial. We need more.

In thinking about what it should and should not do, we must ask: relative to what? A totalitarian regime? Or a minimalist government (Nozick, R. 2013 / 1974)? Neither extreme is an appropriate benchmark. Rather, we should compare it with functioning democratic regimes, and explore how we might improve them. Like Dewey, I contend government should be at least

—and arguably more—robust than in the United States. It should provide significant options for all citizens, by:

1. Protecting, providing, and expanding public health, and robust safety nets;
2. Making us more mobile, with accessible, safe roads, bridges, trains, etc.
3. Supporting liberal education for all; it exposes us to the arts and empowers us.
4. Promoting expression of ideas via a free press and assembly, and public media.
5. Doing each in ways encouraging civic friendship.

If the government does these, we will all see options we did not see—or have; it will provide knowledge and skills to pursue them. This is serendipity at work.

Even the best governments are imperfect. They are sometimes ineffectual, run by incompetent or selfish representatives or administrators. Such a government harms citizens overtly, and by its failures, covertly. I hope to enumerate a number of these points in future work. All draw on previous reading, and my experiences in city government and politics. Here I sketch the outline of an ideal government.

7.3. A Broadly Ideal Government

The core aim of good government is to empower all (most) citizens to flourish, by a) not harming them, b) protecting them from harm, and c) enabling them to have skills and knowledge to achieve their goals, d) including accessible health care, and an environment supporting children with--and from--parents.

We can debate the best system for achieving these aims; however, we must recognize that there is no unique solution. The precise ends and means change as circumstances change. We learn more and external environments change. For instance, the best way to battle climate change and environmental degradation depends, in large measure on when we begin to make said efforts . . . and how much degradation has already occurred. Or maintaining a good personal relationship depends not just on an amorphous ideal, but on the particular character of each person to said relationship, including each one's previous strong or detrimental relationships. Acting reasonably and responsibly are not fixed. They are amorphous, ever-changing. We can think

about these abilities broadly described, understanding the way we came to have the traits we have, how we embody them, and how they might change.

As I argued in earlier work, we see this when determining how demanding morality can be. “Morality is more demanding than many people suppose. More demanding, but still not terribly demanding. We cannot properly require people to do more than we can reasonably think they are capable of doing, and we cannot reasonably expect most people to be moral saints” (LaFollette 2007: 287).

Given the different nature of our abilities and circumstances, “what we can reasonably expect of ourselves and others is not fixed” (Ibid). We can expect more of the talented or rich than the poor or challenged. The responsibilities of each further vary depending on the social systems in which we live. If we make a just and fair society, the amount each of us must morally do decreases since others are carrying their portion of the moral load.

Finally, we should not forget that moral saints (Gandhi) would usually not experience helping others as onerous, while others might. Each of us has some ability to alter our attitudes (individually and collaboratively) so that we do not experience morality’s requirements as especially confining or costly. Put differently, we can make ourselves people who want to be morally excellent. Although not put in quite this way, I think that was Dewey’s aim. If we can succeed, then we others will benefit. Given our psychological propensities to be satisfied by doing actions we want to do, then most of us, in most circumstances, can be satisfied living a reasonably demanding moral life.

8. Getting from Here to There

Saying we should do this does not explain how to do it. There is no simple roadmap, in part because times and contours are always changing. Each change and movement remakes the landscape, and so shifts routes for moving toward the desired end. That said, there are common points we must consider: It is not just individual actions that enable us, but the actions of groups, as well as democratic processes and elections, including, open legislative meetings, a vigorous press, and a fair criminal justice system. Each can protect and empower us. Doing each for all helps us navigate treacherous individual and collective terrain. It is a sense of self-control with promise.

9. Conclusion

We thereby glimpse how Deweyan ideas explain indebtedness to predecessors and contemporaries, identify levers of power, and inform moral deliberation.

An earlier, shorter op-ed discussing these ideas appeared last year in [The Tennessean](#).

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