# Self-Made Person:

The Reality and the Myth

To varying degrees, many of us think we are “self-made.” Some explicitly state—while others imply—that our accomplishments resulted (almost) entirely from our intelligence, ingenuity, and hard work [Covey]. There is qualified truth in this supposition—especially for those who “made it” from deprived or working-class backgrounds. Yet we do—or should—recognize the claim is overstated.

Conversely, some think they are pawns in the chess game of life: that our fate is (largely) beyond our control: race, gender, social class, or political stance our options. Although some have less control than those more privileged, few are devoid of control.

This tandem of judgments is akin to our propensity to make asymmetrical judgments about our actions (and those we like) relative to judgments of those we dislike. We often blame our failures on something other than our ill-advised choices, limited abilities, or lack of persistence. If we receive a poor grade, do not land a desired job or coveted promotion, or are spurned by a potential lover, we often blame another, bad luck, or unfortunate circumstances. We scrounge for ways to excuse or mitigate our responsibility when things turn out badly, while taking credit when actions turn out well. We do not do same for negative traits or actions of those we dislike.

The core phenomenon I discuss here, however, is more pervasive than blame-deflection or inappropriate pride. Even some who think the notion of the “self-made person” borders on a straw person, also think that we have considerable *direct control* of our lives. Not so. Although we are not leaves tossed by winds of circumstance, we are *shaped* by complex causal chains largely beyond our control. After seeing this broadly and in detail, we understand the limits on our control and why it is not direct By understanding that and how we are shaped by cultures, governments, businesses, and others, we can isolate levers that help us maximize control we do have.

Dewey and “Grace”

If honest, we see that many ways our lives unfold are matters of luck—although by “luck” I do not mean some mysterious power. Rather, it is that the shape, trajectory, and contours or our lives are framed by forces we did not *directly* control: our genes, parents, cultures, and governments—forces and worlds given us by our predecessors just as their worlds were given to them by theirs. That is what Dewey meant in averring that “It is of grace, not of ourselves that we lead civilized lives” (Dewey, J. 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 actions by generations of predecessors. Without their insight, innovation, and persistence, we might still be chasing deer on the savannah. Each of us stands on their shoulders. We are better off than folks during the Great Plague, not because we are more worthy, but because we had three hundred and fifty years of innovation between them and us, innovation that made our world more receptive to *our* choices and actions. No one born then would own a computer factory, neither would many of these people today:

1. A New Guinea villager.
2. A poor and uneducated Syrian immigrant in Madrid.
3. A Harlem vagrant with a crackhead mother and no identifiable father.

Although one *could* happen, it would be rare, and then only because of serendipitous intervention of others. We do not have to go to extremes to understand the point. Who has a better chance of becoming a partner in an esteemed law firm: a child of bright, wealthy lawyers and physicians, or the child of an elementary school teacher and a carpenter? That is not to say the former will make it and the latter cannot; it is to say the former’s making is unsurprising and the latter’s rare.

These facts are often masked in public imagination. If you google “the best predictors of success,” you find studies identifying characteristics of successful people: intelligence, hard work, persistence, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, etc. These traits are important. However, debates about which is most crucial does not show that someone can pursue a life of her making. Nor does it explain *how* these traits matter, or how these people acquired or deployed them.

Although some intelligence and persistence are necessary for success, they are insufficient. My parents were intelligent, tireless workers. However, neither attended college; neither was wealthy. They lacked options we think given.

### Setting the Stage

No one’s traits arise in a vacuum. We are shaped by our genes, families, and friends, as well as the culture, political, and business institutions in which we live. However, this does not show that choice and action\ are meaningless. We are *better* off because of choices and actions of our predecessors, just as they were better off because of actions of theirs. None made the world anew; rather each generation transmitted what they were given, usually improved. We can do the same. Knowing that changes how we should understand choices, actions, and responsibility. It shows *that*, *how,* and why they matter—that and how we can shape our own lives. To explain the process, I outline ways we each develop genetically, psychologically, and socially.

**The Shape, Options, and Control of People to Come**

The Importance of Genes

Some physical features are writ in our genes. Fixed or heavily shaped features include eye color, general height, early onset myopia, and facial structure. Some are trivial: can you roll your tongue? Others—some diseases or the predilection to develop them—are life-shattering: some cancers and most degenerative diseases. Many cannot be conquered; some are bested only by luck or acute attention to diet and lifestyle.

Genes also influence intelligence. “Geneticists have isolated genes responsible for half of someone’s intelligence” (Plomin, R. and von Stumm, S. 2018). That said, most genetically based traits do not result from a single gene but the interactions and expression of several. This is true of not only intelligence but personality traits such as tendences to depression and outgoingness.

That is why we are unsurprised when some parental trait is replicated in their children. If parents are moody or pensive, we plausibly expect their children will be as well. We expect continuity, although no one needs think genes are the sole factor. An adequate explanation requires identifying environment forces too. If the child’s parents are constantly depressed or quick to anger, that environmental element means children are more likely stressed or withdrawn. Were children not shaped by their upbringing, we would not be so concerned about the nature and stability of the family. Nor would we think formal education mattered as much. Otherwise, why seek locales with fine public—or affordable private—education? Doing so would waste time and money.

Other traits alter what children can do easily or only with extreme effort. We expect children of musical prodigies can carry a tune, while ones with short, stubby fingers cannot be a concert pianist. Someone born with essential tremors should not pursue neurosurgery or defuse explosives.

Of course, there are legions of lives these children might live, careers they could pursue. My point is not that my size, dexterity, personality, intelligence, and eyesight *dictate* the way my life goes. However, these features open some options, foreclose others, and make achieving some easier or more difficult.

### The Time and Location of Our Birth

Although genes limit the kinds of people we can be, the time, location, and circumstances of our births are likely more significant. Each element is vital. Recall Dewey’s claim about “grace.” Someone born in 500 CE anywhere in the world could not drive a car, have a computer, attend a state-sponsored university, have open heart surgery, be vaccinated against polio, or read a paperback. Not only were these not options fifteen hundred years ago; they were possibilities few could imagine. We have these options now because generations of predecessors made them imaginable and possible. People then lacked options simply because they were born at the wrong time. Many today who lack them because they live in the “wrong” part of the world. Someone in the slums of Mumbai or on the Mongolian Steppes lacks options afforded most in Western industrialized society. That is not to say all in an industrialized country have the same options. That varies according to the circumstances of *their* births.

### Social Structure influence Us

Businesses and social structures influence us in ways often escaping notice. I realized how substantially during the family’s first year in Scotland. Our flat had a small (“dorm room”) refrigerator. Why? We did not need a large one. We had three bakers, a fishmonger, two butchers, and a vegetable/fruit stand, as well as an all-purpose grocer, within walking distance. Each day one of us would make the rounds to purchase food for that day. We used the refrigerator for staples (margarine) and some leftovers. Once every few weeks we would drive two miles 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 caught or picked) *that* day is viable for few Americans. The design of towns and the location of food stores requires virtually all of us to drive to purchase food; therefore, virtually everyone needs a large refrigerator. What eludes most of us is that relying on large grocers and refrigerators is not a choice we made. It was set by economic arrangements and business practices.

### Business Influences

Businesses shape what we perceive to be needs and interests, and then shape available means for achieving them. In so doing, they frame how we spend our time. There are many things we would have never dreamed of wanting sans advertising. Then, once we are accustomed to a device or service, we cannot envision life without it. Other social influences also create and then shape or reshape options and means.

### Other Social Influences

The lives of most of us are further framed by friends, schools, and churches. Affluent parents often live in communities with better public schools or affordable private ones; they can also obtain special assistance for their kids. Their children usually do not *have* to work for money and can devote more time to studies. Thus, they tend to be better educated, intellectually curious, well-read, better at math; and they often speak and write grammatically, even elegantly. In contrast, children in poorer families usually must work while in school; and their schools are usually not best. Finally, their parents are unlikely to model academic excellence, even if they model other valuable traits.

Collectively these factors shape not only what people can or will do, but what they consider options. My parents were lower middle class with eighteen years of education between them. They wanted me to go to college because they thought it was a ticket to “a better life”—where that phrase was parsed as meaning “one with more money.” However, they did not grasp the nature of higher education and what it could provide. Nor did I. Hence, I never considered leaving the state for college. Like my parents, I did not know why attending an elite college could create more options or help me embody abilities to see and act on my choices or achieve their ends.

In short, the view of choice and action many endorse ignores incontrovertible facts about ways that time and place expand or limit our options. It is not just that parental intelligence influences the child’s intelligence; their intelligence and socio-economic status influence their child’s socio-economic status (Strenze, T. 2007: 411–414). Sure, some who started out poor can succeed. However, when they do, we can usually point to genetic or environmental factors explaining that success.

### Religious and Social Influences

Our beliefs are also shaped by the environments in which we grew up and live. As Mill explains, most of us never noticed that factors explaining why he was a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: 20). Most people assume they examined the evidence and rationally adopted their beliefs. For some that is partly true. However, it is not entirely true for any of us and largely untrue for most. To employ Mill, why are most East Indians Hindu rather than Christians? Did they examine competing holy books and adopt Hinduism? Although that happens, it is rare. Most of us do not believe that is true of vast swaths of people who hold views we find mysterious or repugnant. If that is true of people brought up as Hindus or Muslims or Confucians, what *reason* would have for thinking that it is not also true of ourselves, our Christian friends, and our family members?

Or consider cultural norms. Why do Japanese have an especially tight bond of extended family that many westerners do not share? Is it that they considered various social arrangements and settled on the one in which they were reared? Or why, for a century did a majority of white Southerners support slavery? Dud we think African Americans were equals of Caucasians, and then decided, on available evidence, that African Americans were, by nature, members of a slave class? No.

The most plausible explanation is that we were reared in environments where these views were the norm; and we lacked the impetus (and sometimes the opportunity or ability) to seriously examine what we learned. Or, we went through the motion of questioning our views: we asked simple-minded questions to which we thought we already know the answers (LaFollette, H. 2017: 13–15).. Although we acknowledge human fallibility in the abstract, we think we are largely spared flaws inflicting others.

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)

What is true of our beliefs is also true of the way our lives unfold. If we are rich, we often assume wealth is mostly of our making, although it usually a product of the homes in which we were reared. Of course, there are some “self-made people.” But most thoughtful people see that many of their options are not of their making.

There are two ways to see this. One, were we to pick up a currently wealthy person and magically transport her to a peasant’s household in the 1600s, would she have the life or riches she now has? No. Each person builds her life on foundations erected by those who lived before. If her parents were educated, smart, wealthy, and/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 never made it to the mid-middle-class, but not because they were lazy or dullards. Their options were set by their genes, parents, and world. My mother graduated high school; my father made it through six years of schooling. They were never given opportunities for a higher education; nor did either inherit more than a pittance. They began their adult lives during the Great Depression. What is amazing is not that they were not wealthy, but that they made it so far.

What about education? I inherited my initial view from culture and parents. They viewed it as a ticket to a better economic life for someone like me. Fortunately, I also had a cadre of teachers who challenged me to think for myself. In so doing, they opened my eyes to options I had not seen. Nonetheless, my high school degree and finances limited my options. I never considered anything more than two local colleges. It was not that I examined options and chose local. I never looked further. I originally assumed I would pursue engineering at a local technological university. That was viable given my coursework and homelife. I ended up being a journalist and then a professor. Why and how? Did I survey options and select those for which I was best suited? No. As I neared graduating college, a faculty friend introduced me to the local newspaper editor; suddenly something I never considered became viable. What about being a college professor? I never thought about it until, while engaged in a political campaign, I met a local philosopher who thought I had talent. That led me to take some graduate courses. Initially, I had no plan to get a degree. Then I discovered: “I love this.” Both turned out well, although initially not part of a plan. The outcome was not entirely of my making since the options were not of my making.

Put differently, although I had to be able to pursue options that became visible and viable, I rarely created them intentionally. Others—and other factors—did. Especially my culture and government. However, ff some commentators are correct, government is of little help. We can do what we want only after besting *the deep state*.

### The Deep State

Donald Trump, along with many conservative commentators, claim a “deep state” controls us. It acts insidiously, against our interest. Is there a deep state (and what counts as evidence?). There is a mundane sense in which there is. However, it ignores ways that government is valuable and business acts insidiously. I elucidate both in further work. Here, I identify forms of control we have given forces shaping our options.

## The Control We Can and Do Have

Most of us have some control; the aforementioned factors do not eliminate it. Still, they do change how we should understand and exercise it.

### Giving to Posterity

Dewey avers that gratitude is the root of all virtue. The significance of this claim escapes us until we team it with the truth and importance of his explanation of “being civilized,” and ways in which all forces are amplified by serendipity. We can act to make the world better or worse than what we inherited. But not by ourselves or directly. Thinking we can is hubris. We can, though, influence ourselves, our children, and grandchildren in ways that predecessors and contemporaries shaped *our* worlds. We can make it worse, by damaging the environment or vital institutions. Or better by protecting and enhancing the environment and the institutions essential for democracy.

### Control of Our Own Lives

Most of us have some control over our lives (although in dire circumstances, we may not). I think people of moderate means in developed societies with active democracies often have considerable control—albeit not to the degree, and almost never the kind—they suppose. We do not carve futures from vapor. Our control requires working within and manipulating the world we inherited. As I explain below, we may a) see options others miss, b) pursue some, and sometimes c) cobble them from remnants. Likely most causes are indirect: we create options for others, just as our ancestors created them for us. Some (the destitute, mentally challenged, or those with uneducated parents) may lack them entirely. Those we have are not in direct control.

As I explained, one reason some are unavailable is that we never considered them. For instance, the idea that I might attend an Ivy League college never crossed my mind, in part because I did not understand that there were such colleges or what the benefits of attending them might be. We can shape our lives by seeing options we previously missed . . . and then pursue some. We can help others do same.

It is an error, though, to think this is a singular ability;, it is a constellation of them: to understand the world as it is, to envision a somewhat different world, to see ways to move from here to there, and to discern how actions can hinder or facilitate movement. Living in an environment with vibrant general education and decent medical care, basic amenities, and food make these available to most of us. Whether these are available, depends on work by others. Knowing that helps us discern our responsibilities.

### Responsibilities to Others

Since our predecessors gave us advantages, we can sometimes directly “repay them,” by ensuring they have adequate finances and medical care in retirement. Mostly we “pay it forward” by supporting a vibrant government. Some do not agree.

**The Nature and Role of Government**

Appropriate Limits on, and Essential Roles of, Government

The world seems divided into those who think government is invariably evil and those who think it is invariably good. Both sides know these are exaggerations. The difficulty comes in specifying appropriate limits on—and crucial roles of—government. The notions of ‘grace,’ ‘gratitude,’ and ‘serendipity’ give us direction. They reveal that and how government is important, and good government is essential for flourishing.

I saw the notion of serendipity at work when reflecting on how I became a reporter for *The Tennessean* and later came to travel extensively—and then live—outside the United States. Neither were possibilities I entertained as a teenager. Both resulted from options others created or helped me envision. I also need an ability to pursue options successfully. The options and abilities emerged from my background. A chance meeting led to my being a reporter; then, years later, a seemingly insignificant decision to make a telephone call led to a string of visits and lectures I gave throughout Europe. Then, 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 reveals the importance of having and seeing options; and then having the ability to exploit them. These are forms of control most of us do have. Actions of government power both forms.

*.*

*Proper limits on and roles of government*

Before specifying why government is essential, we should identify proper limits on it and its agents. It should not rifle through a person’s home, papers, finances, phone calls or emails without compelling and transparent reasons. Nor should it imprison us simply because we criticize it or its agents.

In deciding precisely 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 ask relative to that in the United States (before Donald Trump). It we take Dewey’s claims and the previous argument seriously; government should be at least—and arguably more—robust than currently. It can and should provide significant options to all citizens, by:

1. Protecting, providing, and expanding public health, including robust safety nets.
2. Making us more mobile with accessible roads, bridges, trains, etc.
3. A liberal education for all to empowering us and exposing us to the arts
4. Support the expression of opposing ideas via a free press, free assembly, and public radio. C and B give us a common vocabulary of history arts, and ethics
5. Doing each of the above in ways that encourage civic friendship.

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

*What governments sometimes do badly*

That said, even the best governments are far from perfect. They are sometimes ineffectual, run by incompetent or selfish representatives or administrators. Such a government harms citizens overtly, and by its failures.to do what it ought, covertly. The eventual book will enumerate a number of these, drawing on previous work, reading, and my experience working with city government and in politics. Here I sketch the outline of a ideal government.

*A Broadly Ideal Government*

As I mentioned, an ideal government empowers all (most) citizens to flourish, by protecting them from harm, by not harming them, and, importantly, by enabling them to have skills and knowledge required to achieve their goals. As I mentioned earlier, this includes providing or making health care possible, including basic medicine; dental, and eye care, access to specialists; and prescriptions. It also includes environments to support children with and from parents, say, by protecting them from abuse and neglect.

**Getting from here to there**

By saying we should do this does not explain how to do it. Three is no simple roadmap, in part cause times and contours are always-changing.: Each change and movement alters the landscape, and so shifts the ways to move to a desired end. That said, it seems there are factors we must consider: It is not just individual actions that enable us but action groups and democratic processes and elections, open legislative meetings, a vigorous press, and a fair criminal justice system. Each can protect and empower us. Doing each equally helps us navigate treacherous terrain.

## Sources

Dewey, J. (1922) *Human Nature and Conduct.* New York: Henry Holt.

LaFollette, H. (2017) "The Greatest Vice?" *Journal of Practical Ethics* **4** (2), 1-24. [Online] Available at: <http://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/the-greatest-vice/>. [Accessed: 1 January 2017].

Mill, J.S. (1985/1885) *On Liberty.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Nozick, R. (2013 / 1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia.* Kindle edn. New York: Basic Books.

Plomin, R. and von Stumm, S. (2018) "The New Genetics of Intelligence." *Nature Reviews Genetics* **19**, 148–159.

Promin, R. (2018) "In Intelligence Hereditary?" *Scientific American Mind*. New York: Scientific American. [Online] Available at: [https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-intelligence-hereditary/#](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-intelligence-hereditary/). [Accessed: 11 March 2018].

Strenze, T. (2007) "Intelligence and Socioeconomic Success: A Meta-Analytic Review of Longitudinal Research." *Intelligence* **35** (5), 401-426. [Online] Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160289606001127>. Accessed.