

UNITED WISDOM

Discipline without self-punishment

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *habits are arts*

John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Part I, chapter I, p. 15. In the surrounding argument, arts means learned ways of acting that involve materials, tools, and environment. It concerns more than the fine arts and is not a contemporary experimental finding.

What this article is about

Discipline helps us return to a chosen activity when initial enthusiasm is insufficient. A rule can acquire another function, however: instead of supporting action, it becomes a daily means of passing judgement on ourselves. A missed practice then means more than the absence of a particular result; it becomes a declaration of personal inadequacy. These assessments need distinguishing.

Consider Anton, a hypothetical person who voluntarily studies a foreign language to read books that interest him. He works through his chosen textbook in the evening. After missing one session, he assigns himself twice the amount and calls himself lazy for several days. The new requirement takes more time, yet the exercise he did not understand remains unclear. The rule has become stricter; the quality of his reading has not thereby been established.

This article considers discipline as a manageable way of supporting an endorsed goal: specifying action, preparing conditions, checking results, and reconsidering the routine when circumstances change. This is an editorial definition for the discussion, rather than a unified scientific theory. The sources help distinguish autonomy, habit, circumstances, and ethical choice. They do not establish a universal method that will free everyone from pressure or make every activity enjoyable.

I. When a rule begins judging a person

Yesterday Anton did not complete an exercise. This is a fact about one action that can be clarified: which exercise, under what conditions, and by what deadline? A statement that he is generally incapable of studying has a different scope. It requires far more grounds and does not follow automatically from one date. Still less does a missed session measure a person’s overall worth.

The distinction does not remove consequences. If the exercise was required for a shared meeting, Anton may have been inadequately prepared. If he promised to send a translation,

another participant may have been waiting. Those consequences call for a specific response. Yet acknowledging an unfulfilled agreement does not turn humiliation into a way of checking a text’s quality or preparing for the next meeting.

In this hypothetical account, self-punishment means deliberately added humiliation or burden whose purpose is retribution against oneself for failure. Not every additional task serves that purpose. Sometimes an error needs correcting, a promise needs completing, or unclear material needs repeating. The distinction concerns purpose: what result should the additional amount produce, and why does it fit the problem identified?

Anton can repeat a particular exercise if it helps him understand a construction. He can clarify an agreement if he delayed a translation. Doubling every task merely because yesterday is blank does not establish a connection with understanding. Examining that connection makes discussion of discipline substantive. A general verdict gives way to a question about the result, conditions, and a proportionate response to what actually happened.

II. What the chosen routine is for

A routine has a function worth identifying before assessing its strictness. Anton wants to read particular books, understand constructions, and gradually need fewer aids. Ten completed exercises may help that purpose or become merely a convenient reporting figure. The amount of work alone does not show what he learned or what task he can now perform.

A substantive criterion need not involve a complex measurement. Anton can check whether he understood a brief passage, explained a new construction, or noticed an earlier mistake. Such a check concerns his chosen goal. It does not guarantee an accurate forecast of further learning or replace pedagogical assessment when that is needed. It nevertheless links action to its purpose more directly than judging his own severity.

The cost of a routine also belongs in its assessment. Time, materials, attention, and agreed activities do not become unlimited when a goal is chosen. If evening practice repeatedly displaces a necessary conversation or available rest, it helps to notice this as a real condition rather than an excuse automatically forbidden. The article’s sources establish no universal amount of work or rest for every reader.

A chosen routine can have a clear stopping point. Anton can finish a particular exercise and note what it produced. This is neither a duty to do less every time nor permission to ignore substantial standards. A boundary helps prevent each completion from becoming another demand to prove the goal’s seriousness through an additional task. The amount can change when grounds arise concerning learning and present conditions.

For example, Anton translates five sentences without understanding a new construction. The number of completed lines has risen, but his chosen task remains open. Next time, he can analyse one sentence, explain how its parts relate, and check his explanation against the textbook. Fewer lines would then involve more substantive work. Additional repetition may really be needed in another exercise. The difference depends on a checkable result and the task's nature, rather than always preferring smaller amounts. Such assessment preserves a demand for understanding without requiring that its seriousness be proved by quantity every evening.

III. Endorsing a goal differs from having no difficulty

In self-determination theory, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci distinguish forms of action regulation and ways in which action is endorsed. Autonomy here means neither total independence from others nor immediate enjoyment of every action. A person may accept the value of an activity initially proposed externally and willingly pursue it for an intelligible result.

Anton can want to read a book while disliking a particular exercise. An unpleasant evening does not prove that the goal is imposed. Tiredness does not establish a type of motivation either. The Ryan and Deci passages read here help frame a question about endorsement and pressure; they do not justify diagnosing an individual from one omission or feeling.

He can clarify his grounds for choosing. Why does the language matter to him now? Does he accept the cost he can manage? Which parts of the routine seem useful, and which does he perform chiefly to avoid his own condemnation? The answers can be mixed and change. Perfectly pure motivation is not a prerequisite for using a textbook; what matters is retaining the possibility of distinguishing a goal from demands that have accumulated around it.

If endorsement remains, difficulty with an exercise can be addressed as a practical task: perhaps an example, explanation, or different sequence is needed. If the goal is no longer wanted, a regularity technique cannot decide the matter for Anton. It can support action without creating its compulsory value. A voluntarily chosen activity remains open to revision; where shared agreements apply, the form of revision is discussed with participants separately.

Endorsement can also appear in the choice of tools. Anton chooses a clearer textbook although he previously associated seriousness with the hardest material. This does not establish that every difficult book is unsuitable; he is assessing a particular route to an explanation. Discipline supports a meaningful goal when its form can be justified by its purpose. If a tool is retained only because its difficulty seems like deserved punishment, the routine's function raises a separate question. The sources do not identify Anton's motive for him; the distinction remains an invitation to his own assessment.

IV. Effort and added humiliation have different functions

Learning an unfamiliar construction can be difficult. Returning to an unclear example, checking a translation, and carefully correcting it require effort. It does not follow that a good routine must always be easy. Proportionate discipline can include repetition, patience, and performing an unpleasant part of an endorsed activity. The question concerns the result towards which the effort is directed.

When Anton calls himself incapable, his translation's quality becomes no clearer. An additional judgement may accompany work, but it does not establish that work was performed. We make no empirical promise that abandoning a harsh phrase immediately improves performance. The point is a logical distinction between checking action and passing a global verdict: the latter does not replace the former.

The same applies to workload. Repeating only an incorrect construction with a new explanation may give Anton a useful check on understanding. Indiscriminately doubling all exercises as punishment leaves the connection to his problem unclear. Doubling is not always harmful; reducing is not always helpful. Purpose and consequences need assessment in the particular activity rather than a universal arithmetic of strictness.

A more precise response to a missed session might describe what happened: there was no exercise yesterday, one task with a clear purpose is available today, and the reason for the delay needs checking. This is no new compulsory formula for self-support. Readers can choose their own words. The point is to stop treating humiliation as a prerequisite for taking an activity seriously or replacing an observable result with the intensity of dissatisfaction with oneself.

V. Discipline works among materials and conditions

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey considers habits as ways of acting that involve relations with the environment. His image of arts concerns mastery of materials and tools. Anton's table, dictionary, available light, and understandable textbook can therefore be discussed as part of his practice rather than incidental details that must yield to pure will.

This is Dewey's philosophical reasoning rather than confirmation of a modern technique for organising a workspace. It helps raise a question: what makes the chosen action possible? If a dictionary is unavailable, instructions are unclear, and starting is constantly interrupted, demanding greater strictness does not by itself repair these conditions. Relevant access, explanation, or agreement about timing is needed.

Anton can prepare one exercise beforehand, leave the relevant reference nearby, and choose an available moment. Preparation neither guarantees performance nor removes every

difficulty. It makes the relationship between action and tools visible. If the obstacle concerns understanding the material, moving a book does not replace an explanation. A change should address the identified problem rather than assigning universal power to every convenience.

Social conditions also belong to the environment. Another person may use the evening table, or study time may overlap with a shared activity. Anton cannot regard agreement as unnecessary merely because he has decided to be disciplined. Dewey discusses changing personal and social elements of a situation. For this story, that provides grounds to examine circumstances without promising that rearranging objects will automatically change any habit.

VI. A familiar sequence supports an operation

Wood and Rünger describe how repeating a response in a stable context can support habitual initiation. Anton may spend less time looking for his textbook or choosing a moment again when an ordinary situation helps him open the relevant page. This is a possible advantage of a prepared arrangement. Automatic initiation establishes neither accurate understanding nor present endorsement of the goal.

He can open a book quickly and mechanically copy an example. He can begin with deliberate effort every time and still understand a difficult construction. Ease and quality therefore merit separate assessment. A familiar arrangement helps insofar as it supports a relevant operation; it should not be given a question that requires a new explanation, fresh information, or other participants’ agreement.

If a task’s difficulty changes, the familiar form may need adjusting. Vocabulary repetition and analysing a new text involve different manageable demands. Keeping the same exercise count daily does not necessarily maintain an equal amount of work. The sources supply no universal way of translating this difference into minutes; Anton can observe what is possible under present conditions.

A stable routine does not require a complete reassessment every day. A prepared form can remain workable until relevant reasons arise to change it. A brief check of the result at a chosen time can reveal a mismatch without turning the whole activity into endless debate over the routine. This is an editorial proposal about feedback rather than a proven scheme that guarantees habit formation.

VII. Proportion involves attending to circumstances

In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle relates ethical action to choice, knowledge, and circumstances. Proportion is not determined by simply halving the distance between extremes. It cannot become advice always to complete precisely half an assignment or an identical number of minutes. The philosophical question concerns an appropriate action in a particular situation.

Aristotelian character formation also differs from psychological habit in Wood and Rünger's review. A shared interest in repetition does not make the concepts identical. For Aristotle, an outwardly identical act does not exhaust assessment of how and why it was chosen. The comparison helps avoid reducing discipline to mechanical frequency; it does not turn automaticity research into proof of virtue.

Anton can retain a serious commitment to the language while changing the form of a difficult evening. Instead of several new exercises, he might carefully check one unclear example if it fits the current task. A larger amount may be available and useful another day. Neither reduction nor increase gains moral value from its size alone. Purpose, method, and actual consequences are assessed.

Such a measure cannot be assigned to another person from one outward observation. Brief visible work may involve considerable difficulty; long work may have little connection with the goal. Where an agreed educational standard applies, its requirements need a separate discussion. The article concerns voluntary personal practice; the philosophical comparison does not permit disregarding mandatory requirements or treating every workload as arbitrary.

The same rule can cost different people different amounts, or cost one person differently on different days. One understands the terminology; another first needs to understand the instructions. An equal exercise count does not establish equal effort or quality. Anton can take that distinction into account in his personal practice. Changing a course requirement calls for discussing its standards rather than unilaterally declaring any task excessive. Proportion attends to concrete circumstances and substantial standards together.

VIII. A missed occasion supplies limited information

Lally and colleagues studied the growth of self-reported automaticity in selected everyday actions. Their discussion of one missed opportunity does not support the unconditional idea that a single gap destroys the process. The result has narrow limits: such cases were few, automaticity was the subject, and a longer absence is a different question. No interruption is declared safe for every skill.

For Anton, yesterday’s missed practice does not make an earlier passage unread or establish that understanding disappeared. A skill requiring a check is assessed through relevant action. A particular lost opportunity is not concealed. Yesterday’s session cannot be recovered by adding a new calendar mark. Actual continuation can include both a gap and a retained result.

The cause needs examination to the extent that it helps the next action. Unavailable time, unclear instructions, and an absent current wish to study call for different responses. One date does not allow a cause to be chosen in advance. Recurring obstacles provide grounds to examine the routine. This is no duty to investigate an entire personality each time; the relevant condition may be enough.

Returning can begin at the next suitable opportunity through a feasible action. Increasing the amount to repay a calendar debt is not necessarily needed. If a real delay requires extra work, its purpose is identified separately. Lally’s study neither tested our language practice nor established an acceptable frequency of omissions. The continuation trial therefore remains editorial and limited by a person’s own circumstances.

IX. Who else bears the cost of a strict rule?

A personal routine uses shared time, space, and attention when a person lives and acts among others. Anton can assign himself an additional evening, but that evening may already include an agreed conversation or help. Self-imposed punishment would then distribute part of its cost to another person. Calling the decision exclusively personal would be inaccurate.

He can clarify what was actually promised and what change is possible. If a translation is delayed, a timely message helps another participant make decisions. If practice needs new time, that time is agreed when it affects shared activities. Someone else need not regard increased severity as a persuasive explanation for absence. Information about the particular agreement and an available way of fulfilling it matter.

This responsibility does not require retaining an earlier form of study indefinitely. Conditions can change, an amount can become unavailable, and a task can lose its purpose. Reconsideration can preserve facts about consequences and expectations. In voluntary practice, the choice belongs to Anton; an existing shared agreement does not automatically vanish with a new explanation.

Boundaries particularly matter for treatment, safety, and mandatory procedures. The philosophical and psychological sources read here do not determine acceptable omissions or compensation in those areas. The article does not propose changing such routines independently. Relevant information should come from a competent source. This limits the transfer of our personal trial rather than declaring every ordinary exercise dangerous.

X. Workable discipline leaves an available response

Let us return to Anton. He retains the missed date, stops making it an assessment of his entire person, and examines the obstacle. The new exercise was unclear, and the increased requirement merely multiplied equally unclear tasks. He seeks an explanation of the particular construction, chooses one feasible example, and checks whether he can understand its meaning. The change now addresses the identified task.

If understanding improves, that is a result of this work rather than proof that every difficulty is finally solved. If it does not, he can clarify the explanation, materials, or study form. The absence of a result is retained as information. It does not require automatically increasing humiliation or claiming that abandoning punishment should already have guaranteed success.

At a chosen time, Anton checks whether the routine helps him read the wanted book and fits available conditions. He can keep a stable arrangement when useful, change the amount, agree on timing, pause, or end a voluntary activity. The sources prescribe no single outcome. They help distinguish endorsement, habitual initiation, circumstances, and substantive assessment of action.

Discipline in this discussion means being able to use a chosen way of working. Its seriousness appears in its connection to a goal, attention to results, and actual responses to difficulties. It may require effort and patience. Added humiliation does not become a measure of quality simply because it accompanies work. Anton gains a more specific question: which action is available, what is it for, and what will help check its result today?

What this means in practice

For one voluntary, safe practice, try a modest editorial arrangement. It is not a validated research method or a compulsory workload standard.

Identify a goal and one observable result related to it. For Anton, that is understanding a brief passage rather than proving his severity. Specify a feasible action, the necessary tools, and a clear stopping point. The amount depends on the task; neither reducing nor increasing is automatically useful.

Check a condition that actually interferes: timing, access, an explanation, agreement, or present endorsement. Choose a change suited to that condition. Do not regard every difficulty as deficient willpower. At the same time, preserve the consequences of unfulfilled agreements and others’ expectations where they exist.

Separately ask what an additional workload or harsh judgement is for. Does it correct a particular error? Does it help complete a promise? Or does it serve as retribution for a blank

date without a clear link to the result? In the latter case, a more specific response is available without demanding immediate relief or guaranteed success.

Choose a time for a brief routine check. Consider results and conditions rather than calendar continuity alone. Recurring mismatches allow change and a pause. Treatment, safety, and mandatory standards have their own rules: this personal trial does not replace them or determine acceptable omissions.

Key quotation

> *they can be modified*

John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Part I, chapter I, p. 16. The pronoun refers to habits, including virtues and vices. In the surrounding sentence, modification involves changing personal or social elements of the situation. This is a conditional philosophical position rather than a promise of easy, automatic change in any practice.

Connections between traditions

1. **Conditions and learned action.** Dewey considers habits among materials and social relations. Wood and Rünger explain contextual associations of repeated responses. The comparison draws attention to environment while preserving the distinction between philosophical and research approaches.

2. **Difficulty and endorsement.** Ryan and Deci do not equate autonomy with constant enjoyment. An endorsed activity can be difficult; unpleasantness alone does not establish an imposed goal.

3. **Frequency and the quality of choice.** Aristotle relates ethical action to knowledge, choice, and circumstances. His concept of character does not reduce to a contemporary automaticity model.

4. **Omission and retained result.** Lally provides a limited observation about automaticity following isolated missed occasions. External products and particular skills require separate assessments; no absence-of-loss guarantee follows.

5. **Strictness and function.** Distinguishing correction, additional work, and self-punishment is this article’s editorial reasoning. The sources establish no universal discipline method and do not decide a reader’s workload.

Sources

1. Dewey, J. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922). Primary text, Project Gutenberg 41386. Selected introduction and Part I passages were used, including the full surrounding context for the fragments on pp. 15–16; the entire book was not read.

2. Ryan, R. M.; Deci, E. L. *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being*. American Psychologist 55 (2000), 68–78. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68. Author copy. The abstract, introduction, and selected autonomy and regulation discussions were used; the whole text was not read.

3. Wood, W.; Rünger, D. *Psychology of Habit*. Annual Review of Psychology 67 (2016), 289–314. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033417. University copy. The preliminary 2015 Review in Advance version was used: introduction, automaticity, and selected material on formation, goal inferences, and changing habits.

4. Lally, P.; van Jaarsveld, C. H. M.; Potts, H. W. W.; Wardle, J. *How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World*. European Journal of Social Psychology 40 (2010), 998–1009. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.674. Research text. The abstract, introduction, methodological context, and discussion were used; not all results and figures were read in full.

5. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, especially chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6. English translation by W. D. Ross. Internet Classics Archive. The complete Book II page was read rather than the whole work. Philosophical positions are used through original paraphrase.

Tags

discipline, self-punishment, effort, goal, endorsement, autonomy, self-determination, habit, context, conditions, environment, action, repetition, consistency, missed occasion, learning, understanding, feedback, result, proportion, choice, voluntary action, responsibility, agreement, pause, John Dewey, Aristotle, Ryan, Deci, United Wisdom

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