

UNITED WISDOM

Freedom to choose and the ability to carry out a choice

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *“Ability to carry out plans.”*

John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Part IV, Section III, What is Freedom?, paragraph on three elements of freedom, printed pages303–304. Primary text.

What this article is about

An invitation to choose often conceals an assumption: the person will be able to carry out any of the named options. Yet agreeing to an alternative and being able to implement it are different events. We may freely indicate a preferred date without access to registration, choose a way of working without the tool, or accept a responsibility without information about its scope. The difficulty then arises before the first result: the set of options itself needs clarification.

This article concerns precisely that gap. We will not measure the strength of desire by successful execution or treat every obstacle as identical. Through deliberately invented hypothetical cases, we will trace how an alternative becomes action, which conditions belong to the participant, which depend on others, and what changes after new experience. Our philosophical interlocutor is Dewey, who examined freedom among actual circumstances, including carrying out plans, changing them, and desire's role in events. Our practical conclusion will remain limited: before requiring an answer at a fork, it helps to understand whether the proposed paths really exist and what accessibility means for this person in each case.

I. An alternative's name does not yet describe an action

Imagine a hypothetical work situation. A participant is offered a choice: prepare a text or run a meeting. The wording seems clear because it names two familiar kinds of work. Yet one text might mean a short message and another a substantial piece with checked sources. A meeting might take an hour without preparation or require coordination with several people. Until the scope is disclosed, the participant chooses names rather than comparable actions. This does not mean the proposal is necessarily dishonest. It may be well intended but insufficiently detailed for an answer.

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The first clarification therefore concerns the task: what will count as completed? We do not need every conceivable detail, but those that change the decision. The deadline, anticipated scope, involvement of others, necessary information, and available resources may matter more than the attractiveness of the name itself. If preparing the text requires restricted material and the meeting requires a room that is currently unavailable, the list says nothing about either option's real feasibility. The right to state a preference remains, but an agreement about execution has not yet arisen. Distinguishing these moments prevents consent from becoming a promise to perform an unknown task.

Clarification need not become an endless demand for guarantees. Every action involves uncertainty: a conversation may go differently, or material may require additional work. A decision remains possible under reasonably understandable conditions even when the outcome is undetermined. What matters is knowing which uncertainty the person accepts and which concealed unknown changes the subject of the choice itself. A small additional revision, for example, differs from an unexpected duty to manage the whole project. Distinguishing them gives initiative a subject rather than destroying it with detail. Choice begins where a participant can imagine the first step and the main scope of the action accepted, retaining the opportunity to ask a significant question before agreeing. Two names then become two sufficiently understandable routes rather than two forms of the same undisclosed demand.

II. The execution chain reveals where an obstacle lies

Once the task is clarified, we can trace the sequence of execution. A text requires information, access to it, time to work, and an understandable means of delivery. A meeting requires coordination of participants, a place or communication channel, time, and at least a general intention. A detailed diagram is unnecessary. It is enough to see which transition comes first and what supports it. Someone may be able to perform the final task without having the authority to obtain an intermediate resource. A general question about ability then conceals the more precise distinction between skill and access.

Suppose a participant knows how to work with the material, but only the supervisor can obtain it and has not yet confirmed a date. Choosing the text in this case involves dependence on someone else's action. That does not make the text impossible forever or excuse declining all preparation. The topic can be clarified or open information found in advance. But material that remains inaccessible cannot be considered provided merely because another person possesses it. The transition needs a separate agreement: who supplies what and when, whether an alternative route exists, and what happens if delivery is delayed.

This description helps avoid assigning the entire cause of difficulty to the final executor. It also prevents the executor from treating external dependence as an explanation for every subsequent step. Once the material arrives, personal actions may remain for which they are

responsible. The chain distinguishes particular stretches rather than assigning complete blame either to the person or to circumstances. Sometimes only the first transition is blocked; sometimes the whole way of working is unavailable. Understanding this requires a question about action rather than a final verdict on character. Clarified dependence makes a limited promise possible: do the available part now and return to the next after a stated condition. That promise does not guarantee that the condition will arise, but tells others precisely which contribution is already possible. Freedom of choice becomes connected to an execution sequence that can be examined.

III. The same offer can have a different cost

Even an identically described task is accessible to different people in different ways. One already has a tool and a free evening; another must first find the tool and reschedule a commitment. The options remain the same, but the cost of implementing them differs. This need not mean that the offer itself is unjust: a shared procedure may have legitimate limits. However, the difference in cost needs to be visible before people's answers are treated as evidence of equal ability or identical interest. A choice can be self-directed despite a high cost, but that cost does not disappear because it is self-directed.

In a hypothetical case, two participants are offered either an evening meeting to lead or a text to write over the weekend. For the first, both fit an ordinary schedule. The second is responsible for an agreed undertaking with someone else in the evening and already has work over the weekend. The first person's enthusiastic choice of the meeting does not imply that the second must do the same. An outwardly similar set of alternatives does not reveal how time and duties are distributed. The organizer nevertheless need not guess the whole picture. One significant boundary can be discussed without requiring disclosure of someone's entire private life.

A useful arrangement may provide an accessible form of response: say that neither proposed time currently works and identify an option the person is actually willing to consider. This response does not guarantee acceptance of the new option. Shared work may have deadlines that cannot be changed. But declining two unavailable paths should not be described as refusing to choose altogether. It may be a sufficiently precise choice about this particular offer. If an alternative exists only at the cost of breaking an earlier commitment, that cost should also be named rather than presented as a free resource. We retain responsibility to others when we consider competing undertakings instead of quietly funding a new initiative with their time. The ability to carry out a choice includes assessing a cost we can actually accept, not merely agreeing to an attractive result.

IV. Skills can be acquired, but an instruction cannot cancel their absence

Another kind of obstacle concerns skill. Someone has access to material and time but does not yet know how to do the task. This differs from a lack of desire and from an external prohibition. A skill can sometimes be acquired during work, especially where a limited trial or explanation is available. Yet the possibility of learning does not mean every demand is already feasible. The pace of learning, the action's complexity, and the consequences of error matter. An invitation to try becomes more honest when it distinguishes a learning step from a duty to perform immediately at a fully developed level.

Suppose someone is invited to run a meeting independently using a new communication tool. They can learn a few simple functions but do not yet know how to restore a connection or manage access. For an informal short trial, assistance and a small scope can be agreed. If another person's significant arrangement depends on the meeting, the missing skill cannot simply be called a chance to leave the familiar behind. Preparation, a different facilitator, or a changed format is needed. Pointing to development does not remove the responsibility of the person assigning the task who knows its requirements.

On the other hand, incomplete skill does not require permanently closing the path. An action for which preparation is already sufficient can be identified, along with a next learning step. Self-directed choice sometimes expands through gradual learning, but this concerns a specific possibility rather than promising universal learnability within any deadline. A person may decide that they do not currently want to learn this or accept the cost of a trial. A helper can offer an option while retaining the right to refuse. Learning then increases feasible actions without turning every skill gap into a moral failing. The useful question is not a demand to prove ability but a clarification: which part of the task can be performed now, what assistance is needed, and where does the promise end? This distinction opens a space between immediate execution and permanently abandoning a direction.

V. Dewey considers freedom among actual conditions

In What is Freedom?, Dewey distinguishes carrying out plans, being able to change direction, and one's desire having a role in events. For him, these aspects do not reduce to an abstract independence of the will from circumstances. This is an early twentieth-century philosophical position, not a contemporary empirical model of choice. It helps pose a narrow question: does a decision have a continuation in the world of action? If someone only states a preference while no available path can express it, the description of freedom needs clarification.

Efficient execution of another's wishes nevertheless does not automatically become self-directed choice. Someone may perform an assigned sequence well without participating in setting its goal or having the right to reconsider. Dewey attends to this difficulty, and our practical reflection preserves it as a distinction: effectiveness in a required action and ownership of a decision are separate questions. Being able to do much does not prove freedom to choose what to do. Conversely, the right to prefer a direction does not prove the presence of sufficient resources. Both aspects need examination within a particular offer rather than being inferred from each other.

The philosophical text has boundaries that should remain visible. Historical appraisals of character and harsh wording about failure to use circumstances are not adopted here as contemporary judgements about people facing obstacles. Dewey's attention to foresight does not imply that every failure results from insufficient intelligence. The unexpected remains possible, and access to conditions is distributed unevenly. The source's value for this article lies in its question about feasible paths and changing plans, not a right to classify people by their results. We use it as an interlocutor for a distinction while retaining an independent authorial limit: successful execution measures neither the whole person nor how free the initial decision was. A philosophical foundation becomes more precise when its useful question is separated from historical generalizations that have not undergone contemporary examination.

VI. A shared procedure can enable action while also limiting it

Choice often depends on a shared procedure: a schedule, a distribution of tools, an application sequence, or a registration rule. A procedure can reduce arbitrariness because people know what to count on. It can also close a path for those whose circumstances do not fit the ordinary way of participating. We therefore cannot assess an arrangement solely by the presence or absence of rules. We need to see which action they enable, for whom, at what cost, and with what possibility of change. A clear procedure can support freedom without securing it in every respect.

In a hypothetical joint project, several participants need one tool. If it always goes to whoever arrives first in the morning, the rule is formally identical for everyone, but access depends on schedules. Booking in advance might make the time more predictable. Yet complicated booking can itself become a new obstacle if it is unclear how to use it. The procedure alone cannot be promised to remove disagreement. A particular transition can be examined: do participants understand how to obtain the tool, and can they report changed circumstances without having to seek someone's personal favour?

Dewey's question about consequences in assessing organization is useful here. Assessing consequences does not mean a shared procedure must satisfy every individual desire, however. It calls for comparison with actually available methods, considering both the

organizer's resources and participants' situations. Sometimes improvement means a small change in instructions; sometimes it means acknowledging that no accessible solution currently exists. A truthful limitation is preferable to an endless promise because it prevents people planning around a resource that is absent. But a limitation can also be reconsidered when new resources appear. A shared procedure is neither an unconditional enemy of freedom nor its automatic guarantee. It remains a way of coordinating actions, to be examined through particular work and how clearly it distinguishes an available possibility from one that is not yet available.

VII. A decision between imaginary paths should not be required

Sometimes a person receives two formulations of which only one is actually available. Another time may be chosen but requires an already occupied room; one duty may be declined, but then a different undertaking must be performed without the necessary resources. The proposal retains the outward shape of a fork. In substance, only one path remains accessible, or none does. This may result from inattention, limited resources, or deliberate pressure. The proposal's form alone does not reveal the cause, but the set of possibilities itself can be clarified.

A participant may ask how each alternative is supposed to be implemented. They need not first agree to an option or prove their decisiveness to ask. Information about an obstacle belongs to the decision's content. If a different time is only being considered, for example, it should be named as a possible future option rather than an already open alternative. The expectation then becomes honest: a person may agree to wait, select the existing path, or decline the offer. The organizer need not like any of these answers, but each will address the actual situation.

Precision matters especially when new conditions emerge after an answer. If someone chooses a text and subsequently learns they must also run a meeting, the agreement's subject has changed. Not every clarification is a breach: some details naturally emerge through work. But an additional responsibility substantially changing the cost deserves fresh discussion. Earlier consent should not be used as proof of consent to everything subsequently added. Discussion nevertheless does not require an accusation or a general refusal to cooperate. The initial scope, the new request, and the available part can be stated calmly. The question of choice then returns to real actions. It ceases to be an examination in readiness to submit to a fork and becomes a way of checking which paths exist before making a promise. If there is no path yet, naming that is already a substantive answer.

VIII. First experience supplies new information about feasibility

Even a sufficiently understandable path can prove harder once begun. Someone chose to prepare a text, received the material, and set aside time, but discovered that the source needs clarification that is currently unavailable. Feasibility does not automatically disappear, but the plan needs changing. This change does not prove that the original choice was unfree or dishonest. It shows that action includes acquiring information unavailable before starting. The ability to carry out a choice remains connected to responding to that information rather than merely remaining faithful to the original route.

It helps to distinguish three situations. In the first, an obstacle can be removed through available effort; in the second, a separate contribution from someone else is needed; in the third, continuing exceeds the accepted cost. These are not a ready classification of every difficulty in life. They merely help avoid giving the same answer to different changes. An additional examination of material, a request for clarification, and declining to continue require different promises. Stopping cannot be declared correct in advance, just as continuing cannot be demanded under every new condition. The decision depends on what changed and whom the next step affects.

If others expect a result, reconsideration should, where possible, be communicated promptly. This does not guarantee freedom from hurt or a convenient exit. Notice nevertheless distinguishes a new limitation from a participant's disappearance without explanation. Sometimes an intermediate result is available, sometimes a postponement, and sometimes an honest refusal. No form cancels the specific consequences of a promise, but consequences do not make the impossible possible. Precise reconsideration connects responsibility with actual capacity: someone says what they can do, acknowledges what remains, and does not promise completion at the cost of indefinite self-denial. In this sense, carrying out a choice includes returning to the conditions rather than merely acting without stopping. New experience changes the map of possibilities, and that change deserves consideration before the next commitment.

IX. Support expands a path while preserving ownership of the decision

Another person may be able to supply a missing link: explain a procedure, provide information, temporarily make a tool available, or help someone learn a first step. Such support can make the chosen path feasible. But assistance's usefulness does not imply a right to replace the recipient's decision entirely. If only one response is permissible and reconsideration is forbidden, increased efficiency does not yet show autonomy. Support therefore needs to be described by its subject: which specific condition does it provide, and which agreed commitments arise with it?

In the abridged text on freedom of contract, Green connects social freedom with conditions for developing capacities. This neighbouring philosophical question complements rather than repeats our examination of an execution chain. In assistance with a particular task, a limit should remain: providing access to action does not mean determining its entire subsequent meaning for another person. In a hypothetical project, a colleague can demonstrate a tool and offer support, while a participant retains the right to prefer another method where this fits the understandable requirements of the shared undertaking. Not every personal option is feasible, but an assigned option cannot be called one's own merely because it is convenient.

Reciprocity also applies to the helper. They need not endlessly support every sequence someone else chooses. The time, scope, and limits of assistance can be named in advance without treating refusal of further help as the person's failing. The participant then knows which condition is actually provided and which remains their task or requires fresh agreement. This arrangement does not promise equal opportunity in every respect. It makes one transition clearer without turning support into unlimited control or an unlimited duty. The ability to carry out a choice often has a shared character, but ownership of the decision does not disappear because others are present. It is preserved through understandable limits to contributions and the right to recognize that the offered path does not fit, even when the assistance was well intended and required effort.

X. Feasibility is examined within one action

We can now separate several questions often combined in a general discussion of freedom. What exactly is being chosen? What does the first transition to execution look like? Which resources are available, which actions depend on someone else, and which cost can the person accept? Are learning, clarification, and reconsideration possible? These questions do not create a universal measure. They concern one offer in specific circumstances. Their purpose is to make a decision sufficiently understandable that consent means particular participation and refusal addresses an actual option rather than an assumption about someone's character.

Even after this examination, a result cannot be guaranteed. We can understand the path and still encounter the unexpected, receive a different answer, or fail to complete the action. A feasible choice is not an infallible choice. It means that, at the moment of deciding, a sufficiently understandable possibility of acting exists, not merely one of stating a preference. If circumstances later change, failure alone cannot automatically rewrite the initial knowledge. It is better to examine the earlier conditions, the new fact, and the step available now separately. Both responsibility for the decision and honesty about what could not have been known beforehand are then preserved.

Finally, understanding feasibility does not require taking every open road. A suitable option may be declined because it does not match a desire or another undertaking currently matters more. In that case, assistance, description, and learning were not wasted: they made the answer more definite. The participant knows what they are not choosing, and others can make their own plans. Freedom to choose and the ability to implement a choice are connected through a particular action, but neither completely proves the other. Clarifying the path respects a decision enough not to replace it with the name of an alternative. Preserving the right to refuse remembers that an accessible opportunity remains an opportunity until a person accepts a specific commitment. This distinction makes an invitation to choose substantive and limits the transformation of choice into a demand to prove one's usefulness immediately.

What this means in practice

If you wish, consider one small offer that does not yet require an immediate answer. Do not use this exercise in a situation of threats, violence, or a need to disclose someone else's information. You may write nothing down and stop at any time. Name the proposed options so that at least each first action is understandable. If the content is unknown, select one significant question about scope, timing, or access rather than trying to guess the entire future path.

Then identify one condition already present and one that still depends on a separate action. Distinguish your own skill, access to a resource, and someone else's involvement. There is no need to assess your whole self through a missing link. If a question is safe to ask, you can clarify that link alone. The other person may decline to provide what you want, and their answer may show that no suitable path currently exists.

After clarification, possible responses include agreeing to a limited scope, proposing another feasible option, pausing, or declining. None guarantees a convenient result. If a commitment has already been accepted, consider whom reconsideration will affect and, where possible, communicate it. The exercise neither proves maturity nor removes real limitations. It only helps check which action the choice concerns, retaining the right not to conduct the check or accept a new commitment.

Key quotation

> *“Practicable alternatives.”*

John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Part IV, Section III, paragraph on assessing the consequences of organization, printed pages307–308. The context compares actually available options rather than abstract principles alone. Primary text and context.

Connections between traditions

Dewey examines the execution and reconsideration of plans among real circumstances. Green connects freedom with social conditions for developing capacities. Their shared question concerns freedom's continuation in human action. The boundary matters: we examine a particular execution sequence rather than derive a single programme of government or a general psychological model from it.

The nearest UW:A21 article, Understanding Without Changing, examines obstacles between understanding and action. This topic asks an earlier question: how are alternatives arranged before consent, and do paths to carrying them out exist? UW:A03 separately considers the absence of interference, personal direction, and limits to assistance. These neighbours connect questions without making the texts interchangeable.

Sources

1. John Dewey. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt,1922; Project Gutenberg41386 electronic text, released17 November2012 and updated23 October2024. Part IV, Section III, What is Freedom?. The entire section on printed pages303–313 was read. The distinctions between execution, changing a plan, and effective choice inform this article, along with a limited question about feasible routes. Historical generalizations about character are not presented as contemporary empirical findings.

2. Thomas Hill Green. *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*. Hanover abridgement. The published excerpt was read in full; the paragraph on supporting conditions for developing capacities is used without direct quotation. Hanover's heading gives1861, while the edition catalogue gives1881. The complete printed lecture was not read, and the discrepancy is not concealed.

Tags

freedom to choose, feasibility, action, alternatives, capacity, access, conditions, John Dewey, pragmatism, Thomas Hill Green, plan, execution, sequence, resource, time, skill, learning, assistance, commitment, reconsideration, right to refuse, reciprocity, organization, information, uncertainty, first step, cost of choice, hypothetical example, personal decision, responsibility

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