

UNITED WISDOM

Historical guilt: what belongs to our choice today

Relationships and Intimacy

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

“It only locates it.”

John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, chapter VII, printed page 163; a short clause about attending to a particular moral situation. The second pronoun refers to responsibility, and the first to the argument about a situation's unique character, rather than someone's ancestry. Primary text.

What this article is about

In an invented scene, Anton has inherited the family workshop. While preparing an account of its history, he finds documents suggesting that its former owner, his great-grandfather, acquired the premises after another family was forcibly removed. The circumstances still need checking; this is not an established history of an actual business. Yet a question has already appeared. Anton did not carry out that removal. Today he uses the premises, controls certain documents, and decides what account will appear on the workshop's website. Where does someone else's act end and his own responsibility begin?

One response asks him to accept guilt for the entire past as a personal attribute. Another asks him to close the subject because he was not alive then. Both too quickly reduce different relationships to a single answer. Who acted then, what is known about the circumstances, which consequences continue, what someone controls today, and what they have already promised are separate questions. An answer to one does not replace the others. Age, surname, and intense feeling alone do not supply all the information needed.

This article considers moral choice in the present. It gives no legal ruling about property, inheritance, or compensation, and establishes no historical facts through its invented scene. Its purpose is to make the present part of an action visible while distinguishing participation in the past, use of its consequences, and a decision being taken now. We can acknowledge injustice without declaring our own existence a wrongdoing. We can avoid attributing someone else's act to ourselves while also declining to continue a convenient distortion.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

I. A surname does not make a past act ours

The first distinction concerns the person acting. The great-grandfather may have made a particular decision; Anton does not become a participant retrospectively. Kinship identifies a relationship between people without establishing identical intentions, knowledge, or actions. If descendants are said to be guilty simply through birth, the subject of examination disappears. It becomes unclear which act can be checked and what specifically could be corrected. Every present action risks becoming evidence for a predetermined attribute that can neither be clarified nor brought to an end.

This distinction does not confer approval on the entire family history. Anton's lack of personal participation tells us nothing about whether his great-grandfather acted fairly. It also says nothing about the accuracy of the account. The document may have been misread, concern other premises, or require additional sources. It may be corroborated. Both possibilities need consideration through their content, rather than a desire to defend the family name or deliver a persuasive admission. Checking the past and identifying the person acting today remain different tasks.

We can describe our position directly: I did not perform that act; I am considering information about it and my relationship to its continuing consequences. This is no universal formula releasing us from every obligation. Obligations may arise from a present role, agreement, ownership, or specific promise, and their grounds require separate consideration. Yet this description preserves a boundary in time. Someone answers for their current account of the past because they are preparing that account, rather than because they somehow lived another person's life.

Anton need not begin by deciding whether he deserves to run the workshop at all. A more specific question is whether the website should continue claiming that the premises were always acquired voluntarily if the documents challenge that claim. Until circumstances are checked, a response might involve marking uncertainty and declining to present a confident promotional history. This is already a current decision. It does not require a final verdict on every generation first, or turn family origins into an accusation without an end.

II. Consequences and participation connect in different ways

Using the result of an earlier act does not automatically mean performing that original act. Yet using it may raise questions that do not arise for someone simply reading the history. Anton can alter the public account, preserve accessible documents, and discuss the use of the premises. Another relative who neither owns the workshop nor manages its website occupies a different position. Sharing a surname does not give them identical opportunities. Moral discussion becomes clearer when the connection with a consequence is specific, rather than absorbed into the general category of descendants.

Our scene does not yet establish which advantages survive from the earlier decision. The workshop's existence alone does not prove that its present prosperity has a single cause. Later work, changes to the building, and market conditions might have played a part; these possibilities are not established either. But multiple causes do not disprove a particular historical connection if it is confirmed. We can examine its extent without choosing between two excessive pictures: everything was acquired unjustly, or the earlier event no longer matters at all.

Not every continuing consequence is within one person's control. Documents may belong to different people, decisions about the premises to several owners, and information to an inaccessible archive. These limits should be named rather than hidden behind a promise to put everything right. Equally, incomplete influence should not be reduced to none. If Anton writes the website, that is a specific area of choice. If he can propose discussion to the other owners, making a proposal differs from having authority to decide for them.

This raises a question of proportion without supplying a fixed scale of merit. Which trace of the past actually continues? What is known about it? Which action concerns my current role? Who else is affected? Answers may require time and specialist information. This article calculates no share of compensation and determines no rights to the property. It helps distinguish origins from control: present ownership, knowledge, or public representation can matter even when there was no personal participation in the earlier event.

III. An uncomfortable feeling does not identify the action needed

Anton may feel shame, anxiety, sadness, anger at the document, or relief that a more honest account is now possible. These possibilities are not an established psychological biography. Neither the intensity of a feeling nor its absence measures the extent of a historical obligation. Someone may be deeply distressed by information over which they have little influence. Someone else may calmly control something they can change. Making a choice requires considering acts and grounds, while attending to feelings without making them the sole judge.

A wish to stop feeling guilty quickly can lead to a dramatic gesture. Anton might publish an admission on behalf of the whole family, promise to hand over the premises, and ask descendants of the displaced people to confirm his sincerity. In our invented scene he has not yet established the facts, his authority, or their wish to participate. Visible decisiveness cannot replace that information. A compelling statement can create fresh uncertainty, particularly when its recipient is asked simultaneously to listen, evaluate, and relieve someone else's distress.

Another possibility is defending himself against discomfort so thoroughly that every investigation feels like an accusation. Then the question about the document quietly becomes a question about Anton's right to be a good person. Someone must reassure him before the letter's content can be considered. This too is a possible turn in the scene, rather than a diagnosis. We can notice the subject of the conversation: are people discussing information and present acts, or must someone's innocence first be confirmed before another person may describe what happened?

A feeling can be named separately: this is difficult for me to read. We can then ask separately what needs checking or changing now. Complete calm is not required before correcting an inaccurate sentence. A new promise is not required to reduce shame. If distress persistently disrupts life, suitable support may help; this article offers no treatment. The distinction serves moral clarity: caring for our own state and attending to affected people need not be the same action or have the same recipient.

IV. Dewey directs attention towards a particular decision

In selected paragraphs of chapter VII of Reconstruction in Philosophy, John Dewey discusses a moral situation requiring inquiry, judgment, and choice. He challenges subordinating an individual case to a general outcome fixed in advance. His argument does not remove responsibility; it connects moral consideration with circumstances and possible action. This is a particular author's philosophical position in its historical setting. It is not a historical investigation of our workshop, a legal inheritance rule, or a validated method for relieving guilt. Source.

For the invented scene, this direction of attention helps by asking about the act ahead. Anton is choosing between specific ways of handling the material, rather than between permanent purity and permanent guilt. He could continue the confident old account, mark what remains unknown, check the document, or propose another account. These options have different grounds and consequences. Dewey supplies no ready answer here; the article uses his distinction editorially to prevent examination of the situation from being replaced by a single gesture demanded beforehand.

Attention to a case does not mean that general principles disappear. Anton may hold convictions about wrongful displacement, truthful public accounts, and respect for other lives. These convictions help identify questions without establishing the document's authenticity, present ownership, or the other family's wishes. Specificity requires further information. It does not turn moral assessment into an arbitrary mood or suggest forgetting previous commitments whenever a new situation makes doing so convenient. The circumstances have to be understood alongside the commitments already made.

In the context read, Dewey also connects a decision with attention to its consequences. Our discussion uses that as a limited reason to return to what was done: has the account become more accurate, has an unauthorized promise been created, has access to someone else's information been expanded? Such a check does not measure a person's moral worth and does not guarantee a correct outcome. A decision may prove insufficient. Being able to revise it differs from having to repeat an admission until every trace of inner unease disappears.

V. History can be checked without demanding a convenient result

Anton begins with the document's origins: who produced the record, which address it concerns, and whether the available text is an original or a later retelling. If he has read only a family message about a discovered paper, he cannot present that as personally reading the paper itself. This clarification does not dismiss the message. It preserves a route back to the grounds and prevents a confident public assertion from being built over an unknown link. Historical seriousness begins by describing accurately what is actually accessible.

Information may conflict. One letter describes forced departure, while another record calls the transfer voluntary. Neither family closeness nor an official-looking form should decide which version is chosen. It matters whether event, time, participants, and the meanings of the words coincide. A signature might establish formal transfer without answering how it was accepted. Equally, presumed pressure cannot be declared established merely because it fits a present suspicion. What remains unknown should remain unknown, rather than being filled with whichever account feels more morally convincing.

Checking can change the initial account in either direction. If the document concerns another building, the claim about the workshop needs revision. If doubts are resolved and the circumstances confirmed, that too needs acknowledgement. Moral participation does not require retaining an error for the sake of persuasive repentance. Family loyalty does not require maintaining a refuted defence. The work concerns particular information, rather than achieving an emotional destination selected beforehand, where one side must emerge entirely right and the other entirely wrong.

Descendants may need help with an investigation. Archival language, provenance, and links between events might require a competent historian; particular property consequences might require an appropriate specialist. Seeking help does not remove our choice about how to describe what has been established. Anton can honestly say the material is being checked. Immediate publication of private papers is not required. Waiting for verification differs from convenient indefinite concealment: the former names a task and real constraints, whereas the latter merely preserves an advantageous certainty.

VI. Acknowledgement gives no duty to forgive

If Anton considers contacting the other family, he must separately consider the purpose, access, and safety of approaching them. A historical connection does not mean that descendants he finds are ready to discuss it with him. They may lack details, decline publicity, or prefer another channel. Silence cannot be treated as agreement, denial of the event, or evidence of hidden severe experience. No response leaves the response unknown; it does not supply the desired acknowledgement in another form or authorize an interpretation convenient to the sender.

A possible message should be distinguished from a request to ease its author's feelings. Acknowledging particular information and proposing discussion of a specific act is one task. Asking someone to confirm that Anton is a good person who need no longer worry is another. A recipient need not accept the second task as the price of speaking about the first. This is an editorial moral distinction, rather than a universal script. In some circumstances a direct approach may itself be unwelcome or unsafe and need a different assessment.

Even an accurate acknowledgement grants no right to demand forgiveness. Someone can hear it and still consider the proposed participation insufficient. They may not represent the whole family or have authority to close a dispute in its name. Anton does not represent every descendant of his great-grandfather through one message either. Discussion becomes clearer when each speaks in their own role without presenting a personal decision as general historical peace. One participant's goodwill establishes no agreement from everyone whose life or interests are involved.

Acknowledgement can matter without a happy ending. It may change a public sentence, provide access to particular material, or stop repetition of an inaccurate story. These are limited results that should not be exaggerated. They do not restore an earlier life or guarantee trust. If Anton offers them only in return for gratitude, the act becomes a conditional arrangement that should be described honestly. Moral responsibility does not always receive a reply confirming its adequacy or removing all uncertainty about what remains to be done.

VII. A promise has a present object

Being willing to put history right is too broad a statement for someone else to rely on. Anton cannot undo the displacement or promise to restore everything lost. He can undertake a particular task: check certain material, amend the description within his role, or discuss a further step with fellow owners. Feasibility and timing require real consideration. If others begin planning on the basis of his words, a present responsibility arises from that promise, independently of how his great-grandfather's guilt has been assessed.

Feasibility does not mean choosing only what is convenient. Checking facts, relinquishing an advantageous embellishment, or discussing property use can have a cost. Yet not every expenditure is automatically a sound contribution. We need to understand whom and what it helps, whether our impressive project substitutes for someone else's task, and whether we have authority over the resource. A donation of our choosing and a decision about particular disputed premises address different questions. Neither automatically closes the other through a single arithmetic of moral credit.

In the invented scene Anton promises to check the address on the document and prepare an amended website text. This is not yet a promise to transfer the premises. If checking takes longer, the change should be communicated rather than hidden behind initial sincerity. If material is inaccessible, the obstacle can be named. A promise need not become heroic performance at any cost, but it cannot quietly be replaced by general regret. Someone else needs to know which support remains and which result has not been obtained.

We may also decline a proposed form of participation. Anton might consider public disclosure of private letters inappropriate without separate agreement, even while supporting historical clarity. That limit should not be presented as proof of indifference or complete release from every question. Another way to clarify the account may preserve access conditions and authority. Declining one act, accepting another, and not yet deciding have different meanings. Honest discussion permits those differences without assigning the same gesture to everyone or treating every limitation as a refusal to care.

VIII. Continuing a distorted account is a new choice

Suppose checking confirms the connection between the premises and displacement. Anton still does not become the author of the old decision. But he now knows that the earlier promotional claim about voluntary transfer lacks adequate grounds. If he retains it as established history, there is a present object of assessment. It relates to the past while being performed now. Responsibility for his own statement need not be proved through an inherited personal attribute: the statement has an author, content, and available material against which it can be examined.

Not every shortened history is an intentional lie. The workshop's website need not contain an entire archival investigation, and a short account necessarily chooses a scale. Brevity nevertheless gives no grounds for adding a confident assertion contrary to checked information. We can remove an unsupported embellishment, offer a limited description, and identify its grounds. Different editorial decisions should be assessed through what they actually tell readers. Leaving a period undescribed and directly characterizing an event falsely do not become identical acts simply because both are uncomfortable.

Influence can also arise outside ownership. A relative speaking at a public evening chooses whether to repeat a family legend as fact. An employee may know about the problem and have only a limited route for reporting it to a responsible person. They should not be assigned an owner's power or required to make a risky public intervention. Role, consequences, and available routes matter. Where threats, violence, or dependence on essential resources are involved, direct confrontation is not prescribed; appropriate support and protection may be needed first.

Declining to continue a distortion does not cleanse the whole history. Other accounts, disputes, and inaccessible information will remain after the website changes. This limitation does not make correction meaningless. It protects against two exaggerations: one step has redeemed everything, or one step means nothing because the past remains. The result can be described precisely enough: within his public decision Anton stopped presenting a particular version as established. Further questions remain separate, rather than being automatically settled by the goodness of his intentions.

IX. Responsibility permits limits without ending history

No one can endlessly investigate every act of every ancestor. Choosing an area of attention is unavoidable. A reason may be a concrete connection with a present act: a resource we control, an account we repeat, or material we discover. This is no universal list of duties for every descendant. It is a way to name why a particular task has appeared now. A limit chosen solely to escape an accessible uncomfortable fact can be reconsidered; genuinely restricted possibilities do not have to be denied.

Limits can be stated alongside the participation accepted. Anton is prepared to clarify the workshop's history without promising to represent all relatives or end a dispute between several families. He can propose discussion with co-owners without promising their agreement. This description is less impressive than a sweeping pledge, but preserves the distinction between influence and power. If a new role or obligation appears later, consideration changes. A present limit does not become permanent permission to ignore everything that might subsequently emerge from the same history.

Investigation and communication can be tiring. Fatigue describes a person's state without proving that a task is completed or wrongfully imposed. Sometimes a pause, help, or a narrower period of work is needed. Sometimes an unfulfilled promise must be acknowledged. Endless self-punishment cannot be required as certification of seriousness. Equally, wishing to rest cannot be presented as evidence that no one may ask further questions. Different circumstances require different decisions; pausing, declining, and completing a particular task do not mean the same thing.

The end of one stage may be modest for Anton: material has been checked as far as currently possible, the website changed, discussion proposed to co-owners, and certain questions left open. He may continue today's work without waiting for complete historical reconciliation. This is no confirmation of moral faultlessness. It acknowledges the scale of what has been done. Life continues alongside unresolved questions, and being able to revisit them does not require constantly proving his surname through either accusation or defence against every new piece of information.

X. We can inherit an ability to answer differently

At the start Anton thought he must either accept personal guilt for the old displacement or deny all connection with it. Other relationships are now visible. His existence is not his great-grandfather's act. His present use of the premises needs specific information and separate assessment. His public account already has an author of its own. His promise to check material provides present support for someone else's expectations. These distinctions give no ready property ruling, but help identify which questions are actually addressed to him and why.

A relationship with family need not become a single verdict either. We can remember a relative's care while acknowledging a particular unjust action if confirmed. A good episode does not cancel a bad one; a bad episode does not permit declaring the rest of a life fictitious without evidence. This possibility is not an excuse. It preserves specificity and does not force a choice between complete idealization and destruction of every family feeling. Moral accuracy sometimes requires holding several inconvenient pieces of information about the same person together.

Other participants may assess the result differently. A descendant of the displaced people might consider a changed website insufficient, and a co-owner excessive. This article does not prescribe compromise as the mandatory answer or equate a confirmed fact with a convenient denial. Disagreement needs examination by subject: is it about circumstances, extent of participation, or conditions for further action? Respect for someone does not require accepting every conclusion. Our own decision, in turn, gives no right to prevent someone else from assessing its consequences or describing its limitations.

Present responsibility need not begin with a final feeling of guilt and end with final relief. It can appear in a more accurate account, a fulfilled promise, refusal to repeat a distortion, and attention to people affected by a decision. These acts have limits and may need revision. Their meaning concerns real grounds and possibilities rather than proof of pure origins. History does not become our personal biography in its entirety; today's response to it can indeed belong to our own choice.

What this means in practice

For a small, safe situation, we can voluntarily make one written note. This is an editorial exercise for considering choice, rather than diagnosis, therapy, or an established procedure for historical compensation. There is no need to start with the most difficult family event or publish the result. We can stop and keep private information undisclosed. Where threats exist, direct contact or dispute is not offered as proof of independence; actual options for support and safety come first.

Name the past act and how far it is established: which material you have personally read, what is available only through a retelling, and which circumstances remain unknown. Separately write your present connection: ownership, use, public account, document access, or a promise. Do not fill gaps with intense feeling or derive identical roles for all descendants from kinship. Then choose one question actually within your area of decision. It might concern accuracy of a statement, preserving certain material, or clarifying words already offered for someone else to rely on.

Before promising, identify a possible result, your authority, and its limits. Who else will be affected? Are disclosure agreement, specialist information, or a co-owner's participation needed? If approaching someone is under consideration, distinguish its purpose from a desire for confirmation of your innocence. A reply may not come, and forgiveness is no required outcome. After the chosen step, check one observable change: a statement became more accurate, a promise was fulfilled, or an obstacle named. Historical peace and disappearance of guilt are not mandatory signs of success.

Key quotation

> *“Judgment and choice”.*

Dewey, the same passage, page 163; a phrase from the next sentence about a moral situation before overt action. It identifies the task of consideration here, rather than a ready measure of inherited responsibility. Primary text.

Connections between traditions

Dewey's selected philosophical perspective connects moral consideration with particular circumstances. It allows a question about present action without supplying an answer about our invented workshop or a universal norm for descendants.

A family account connects people through memory and belonging; historical inquiry considers the grounds of particular assertions; a current promise creates another relationship, an expectation of future action. This is an editorial map of distinctions, not evidence that all traditions agree or understand guilt identically.

The comparison replaces neither historical checking, professional assessment of a particular property issue, nor support for serious distress. Moral acknowledgement, a legal conclusion, and psychological relief have different grounds.

Sources

1. John Dewey. Reconstruction in Philosophy. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920. Project Gutenberg 40089. Personally opened title information, web lines 0–27, and selected continuous paragraphs of chapter VII, Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions, lines 660–676, printed pages 161–164. Selected passages were read, rather than the whole chapter or book. Primary text.

The short Russian quotation translations were prepared editorially from the identified English text. The philosophical argument is distinguished from the invented scene and editorial practice; the source validates neither their effectiveness nor historical or legal circumstances.

Tags

history, guilt, responsibility, inheritance, descendants, family, memory, choice, action, consequences, property, workshop, documents, testimony, checking, provenance, acknowledgement, forgiveness, promise, authority, limits, agreement, public account, truthfulness, Dewey, philosophy, ethics, United Wisdom, Maria Method, practice

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.