

Locus Determines All



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

The ultimate direction your life will take depends upon, more than any other factor, how much you perceive yourself to be in control of your own actions. All other perceptions of self become meaningless without a feeling of control in life. It won't matter how smart you see yourself to be, nor how talented in any aspect of life. So long as a man believes more strongly in the influence the external flow of things has on him than in his ability to choose, he cannot master his own life. We all fall somewhere on a spectrum of either feeling in control of what we do, or of being controlled.

Take a moment to picture this principle extrapolated outward from the individual, to the whole of global civilization. The world we live in is a society of individuals who have accepted that they are not in control over the circumstances of their own lives. When most people fail, they consider themselves victims of circumstance, or worse, they blame some other individual in a position of higher authority. When they succeed, it's luck and chance that brought fortune to them, and they can't begin to know how to re-create and maximize the effects of that success.

Psychologists call this aspect of self-perception the “locus of control,” meaning the primary location of influence in someone's life. Individuals who adhere to an external locus of control will depend upon other people, invented concepts, and even random natural forces to make the important decisions in their lives. They'll live with a mindset to always follow the path of least resistance, because they don't even know how to go about going after what they really want. If social forces make it easy to follow one path, and difficult, or requiring great amounts of strategy, to follow another, they'll almost always pick the easier one.

Conversely, people with a primarily internal locus of control begin to consider external circumstances only after they've first determined what they actually want. They place their own priorities above whatever might be easy or convenient, because they believe it is

within their ability to alter circumstances enough to get what they are really going after. These people are the ones who set extremely high goals for themselves. As soon as they accomplish one thing, they seek to trump themselves by going after an even loftier desire. They generally don't delude themselves into thinking that they are all-powerful, or that limitations don't exist in reality. They set their minds on figuring out, through personal experimentation, exactly where those limits lie.

Your locus of control has defined your actions since childhood. It's biologically necessary for each of us to be born with an external dependence on others. We are physically feeble and mentally uninformed on the ways of the world as infants. As we get older, the natural order of things is to learn to internalize control and responsibility. Our parents, in an ideal world, having in their childhood years been influenced to take control of life and enter psychological adulthood, would pass these traits onto us. But this cycle was broken long ago, by who or what I cannot say, and most adults have failed to outgrow the helplessness of childhood. They still look for someone to call the shots for them, and to determine what the "right" thing to do is.

When you look around and see the intellectual zombies and the passionless shells of people inhabiting your town and our world, now you know why. On the whole, they believe it is not within their power to do anything more than to maintain their present form of marginal comfort. They think change comes from without, and so direct whatever upset they have with the way things are toward some imagined personification of injustice. If they want to influence society, they vote, and hope the elected leaders will take care of the problem. If something is wrong, but they can't quite figure out what or why, they march and protest against an ill-defined social monstrosity. For problems for which they cannot even begin to grasp, they resort to the most ambiguous form of self-consolation: prayer. They'll do everything except devote the effort required to logistically work through the root of the problem and devise a working solution.

When we watch movies where the protagonist is put in a position of danger or difficulty, we don't feel the same sense of helplessness on his behalf that we would likely feel for ourselves in the same position. We get excited. We sit on the edges of our seats waiting to see what fancy footwork and strategy our hero will come up with to get himself out the mess he's in. In a situation with an infinite number of ways to fail, he'll always find the one course of action which works – and which gets him where he needs to be. We know this will happen, because the ending has already been written.

In our own lives, there is no predetermined ending which we are unavoidably moving toward. It's dependent on us to choose an ending, and to make sure that everything that happens to us moves us ever closer to its unfolding. It's entirely up to us to think hard enough, or utilize available resources intelligently enough, to make sure we always find the one path that takes us closer to our destination. Transforming yourself from an externally-

guided lifestyle to internally-driven one has to happen in small steps.

It starts with noticing the victories. Not the luck, or the chance, or the gifts bestowed on you, but the things you make happen for yourself through intention and action. It's arrogance to attribute favorable circumstances of birth or chance to yourself, but it's pride to recognize the things you make happen through your own actions. The difference between arrogance and pride is night and day. The greatest leaders, generals, heroes, and problem-solvers earn their merit because they don't ever give up. They know it's only a matter of time until they identify a solution to their problems, and they take healthy pride in this tenacity.

A society composed of internally-driven individuals will be a world where people take responsibility for their own actions, and stop depending upon others to fix their problems. People will one day come to realize that they have no real incentive to invent enemies, or to come up with phony feel-good answers to the presently unknown questions of our age. We will all be pushed to make real progress in everything we do, because only real progress will ultimately bring us closer to our goals. Scientists, philosophers, entrepreneurs, inventors, and other instigators of productive change will abound, because they will be naturally lauded and rewarded for their work. It will quickly become the most peaceful, technologically advanced, and emotionally well-adjusted variant of human life ever to exist on this planet.

This principle is already plainly visible to those who look, with a discerning eye, at the nations of the world. Third world and socialistic countries tend to reek of helplessness and complacency. On the whole, their inhabitants fail to try to accomplish anything greater than their immediate neighbors, because they don't see how it's possible. The ones whose inhabitants are unhappy enough to take actions, only know how to do so in a short-term and ultimately retrogressive manner. They think violent overthrows of reigning political institutions will bring them the freedom over their own lives that they seek. They can't see that it has to start internally with each of them.

The better elements of the so-called "American way" evolved as a direct result of the increased opportunity our pioneers saw for themselves here. They learned to work hard and attempt new journeys, because there was hardly anyone to tell them it couldn't be done, or to impose force against them when they tried. Live your life as they did: as though there was nothing to stop you from doing what you really want, if only you are willing to try hard enough. If you fail a thousand times before you succeed, the experience you'll have gained along the way will be what you need to become the person you want to be. In turn, you'll be contributing to a world where others can more easily follow their own paths to becoming ambitious creatures of internal mastery. Everything depends upon this.