



## Beyond Individual Agency: Rotter's Locus of Control Reconsidered through Indian Philosophical Frameworks

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### Abstract

Western psychology often equates mental health with individual control. Julian Rotter's Locus of Control theory suggests that believing in one's own power leads to success. While this model works well in individualistic societies, it often fails to capture the experience of people in non-Western cultures. It overlooks the reality of shared lives, systemic limits, and the role of fate. This article reconceptualizes human agency by comparing Rotter's theory with Indian philosophical frameworks. We specifically examine the concepts of *Karma* (causality), *Dharma* (ethical duty), and the relational self. We argue that true agency is not just about controlling external outcomes. Instead, it is about acting ethically within a complex web of relationships and cosmic laws. Recent research in rural India supports this view, demonstrating that social factors like employment status fundamentally shape one's sense of control. Furthermore, integrating Indian Knowledge Systems with modern psychoanalysis reveals that accepting one's limits can be a source of profound strength rather than passivity. Based on this synthesis, we propose a new model of *Ethical Interdependent Agency*. This model values both personal effort and the acceptance of circumstances beyond one's control. It suggests that well-being arises from aligning one's will with moral duty rather than fighting for total dominion. This offers a more culturally valid approach to psychological flourishing.

**Keywords:** *Locus of Control, Rotter, Indian Philosophy, Agency, Karma, Dharma, Cross-Cultural Psychology.*

### 1. Introduction

Modern psychology often presents a specific view of a healthy life. In this view, a healthy person controls their own destiny. They make choices, take action, and shape their future. If they fail, they try harder. This idea is central to Western culture. It suggests that individual control is the key to well-being. However, this view encounters a cross-cultural tension.

Millions of people around the world live differently. They see themselves as part of a larger whole. They accept that many things are beyond their control. Yet, they still live moral and active lives. This article explores that contradiction. It looks at how we define human agency, the power to act.

Julian Rotter developed a famous theory about this in 1966. He called it the "Locus of

Control" (Rotter, 1966). This theory measures how much control people think they have. People with an *internal* locus believe they control their life outcomes. People with an *external* locus believe that luck, fate, or others control outcomes. Western psychology generally favors the internal view. Studies often link an internal locus of control to better health and success (Galvin et al., 2018; Mallick, 2025). Conversely, researchers often view an external locus as a weakness. They associate it with passivity or poor coping skills (Cheng et al., 2013).

However, this preference for individual control reveals a cultural bias. It assumes the self is separate from others. It ignores social and cosmic contexts. Critics argue that this model does not fit many non-Western cultures (Christopher et al., 2014). Recent research in rural India demonstrates that external factors, such as employment status, significantly shape one's sense of agency, suggesting that control is not just a personality trait but is deeply rooted in social realities (Mallick & Thakur, 2025). In these cultures, an *external* view does not always mean passivity. It can reflect a mature understanding of reality. For example, recognizing that nature or society limits our choices is not a failure. It is a fact of life. Ignoring these limits can lead to stress and unrealistic expectations.

Indian philosophical traditions offer a different perspective. They do not see the self as a lonely actor. Instead, they view the individual as connected to a vast web of causes. This requires a bridge between Western psychoanalytic concepts of the ego and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) that emphasize metaphysical conditioning (Mallick & Mallick, 2025). Two key concepts define this view: *karma* and *dharma*. *Karma* is often misunderstood as fate. However, scholars define it as a law of moral causation (Bilimoria, 2021). It connects past actions to present circumstances. *Dharma* refers to ethical duty or cosmic order. In texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, agency is not about controlling results. It is about doing one's duty without

attachment to the outcome (Sargeant, 2009). This is a different kind of agency. It focuses on the quality of the action, not just the result.

This article compares Rotter's theory with these Indian frameworks. The goal is to rethink how we understand control. The author argues that Rotter's binary, internal versus external, is too simple. It fails to capture *secondary control* or *relational agency*. In Indian thought, accepting limits is not giving up. It is aligning oneself with a larger order. This alignment requires active ethical choices. Therefore, a person can have high agency without needing total control over outcomes.

This article reconceptualizes psychological agency by dialoguing Rotter's locus of control theory with Indian philosophical frameworks. It reveals that agency operates not merely through individual control but through ethical alignment (*dharma*) and an understanding of interdependent causality (*karma*). First, we will analyze the limitations of Rotter's model. Next, we will explain the Indian view of the self and action. Finally, we will propose a new model of *ethical interdependent agency*. This model integrates personal effort with an acceptance of universal laws.

## 2. Rotter's Locus of Control Theory: Foundations and Critique

Julian Rotter introduced the concept of Locus of Control in the mid-20th century. It emerged from his *Social Learning Theory* (Rotter, 1954). Rotter wanted to understand how people learn behaviors. He proposed that people act based on their expectations. If a person expects a specific action to lead to a reward, they will likely do it. A key part of this expectation is the source of control. Rotter (1966) defined this as a 'generalized expectancy'. This means it is a broad belief that people carry into many situations.

The theory divides people into two main categories: internal and external.

**Internal Locus of Control:** These individuals believe that their own choices shape their lives.

They attribute success or failure to their own ability and effort.

**External Locus of Control:** These individuals believe that outside forces dictate outcomes. They attribute events to luck, fate, powerful others, or complex circumstances.

Western psychology places high value on the internal orientation. Researchers view it as a predictor of success. Studies consistently show that an internal locus correlates with higher motivation and better academic performance. It also links to positive mental health. For instance, recent research in India confirms that youth with an internal locus of control experience higher psychological well-being (Mallick, 2025). This aligns with global findings that associate perceived control with lower stress and higher life satisfaction (Galvin et al., 2018). Consequently, psychologists often treat an external locus as a deficit. They view it as a barrier to personal growth that needs correction.

**Embedded Assumptions:** Rotter's theory is not neutral. It rests on specific cultural assumptions. These assumptions reflect the individualistic values of the West.

**Individualism:** The most obvious assumption is individualism. The theory views the self as a separate unit. It assumes that a healthy person acts independently. This view ignores the reality of shared lives. In many societies, the family or community makes decisions, not the individual. Rotter's model treats this interdependence as a lack of personal agency. It fails to see the strength in collective decision-making.

**Instrumentality:** The theory focuses on *instrumental* control. This means using control as a tool to get a specific result. The value of an action depends on its outcome. If an action fails to produce the desired result, the theory suggests the person lacks control. This overlooks the value of the action itself. It ignores the moral weight of trying, regardless of the result.

**Moral Neutrality:** Rotter's model is largely silent on ethics. It implies that having control is good, no matter what. It does not ask if the goal

is moral. A person can have a high internal locus of control but use it to harm others. The theory measures the *belief* in control, not the *virtue* of the action.

**Linear Causality:** Finally, the theory assumes a straight line between cause and effect. It suggests that *I do X, so Y happens*. This is a linear view of the world. However, reality is often complex. Multiple factors interact to cause an event. The belief that one person is the sole cause of an outcome is often an illusion.

**Cross-Cultural Critiques:** When researchers apply Rotter's theory outside the West, cracks appear in the model. In collectivist cultures, an external locus of control does not always predict poor mental health. It can have a different meaning.

**Context Matters:** In many parts of the Global South, external constraints are real and powerful. Poverty, political instability, or social rigidities limit individual choice. In these contexts, believing one has total control is unrealistic. It can even be harmful. Acknowledging external factors is a sign of wisdom, not weakness. For example, recent empirical work among rural Indian youth shows that employment status directly shapes locus of control. Unemployed youth exhibit a higher external locus not because they are passive, but because their environment restricts their agency. This suggests that *external* beliefs often reflect social realities rather than psychological flaws.

**Relational Agency:** Critics argue that the binary of internal versus external is too simple. It misses the nuance of *relational agency*. People in India and similar cultures often exercise agency *through* their relationships (Christopher et al., 2014). They may defer to elders or follow social norms. Rotter's scale might code this as "external" or weak. However, this behavior often requires active self-regulation and emotional intelligence. It is a choice to maintain social harmony.

**The Need for Synthesis:** The limitations of the Western model do not mean we should discard it.

Instead, we must expand it. We need to bridge the gap between the *bounded ego* of Western psychology and the 'relational self' of Indian systems (Mallick & Mallick, 2025). A truly global psychology must recognize that agency exists in many forms. It involves not just changing the world, but also adapting to it with dignity.

#### 4. Indian Philosophical Frameworks: Understanding Agency and Causality

Western psychology typically draws a straight line between an individual's effort and the result. However, Indian philosophical traditions draw a circle. In these frameworks, human agency does not exist in a vacuum. It operates within a complex web of past actions, ethical duties, and cosmic laws. To understand agency in the Indian context, we must explore three foundational pillars: *Karma* (causality), *Dharma* (ethical duty), and *Atman* (the nature of the Self).

##### The Concept of Karma and Causality

The concept of *Karma* is perhaps the most misunderstood term in Indian philosophy. In popular culture, people often equate it with fatalism or a pre-destined future. This view suggests that human effort is meaningless. However, scholarly analysis reveals the opposite. *Karma* literally means *action*. The *Law of Karma* is a principle of moral causation (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). It states that every action produces a result. This result may appear immediately, or it may manifest much later.

**Non-Mechanistic Causality:** Western causality is often mechanistic. It assumes that if I push a button (cause), a light turns on (effect). If the light does not turn on, I lack control. *Karma* introduces a more sophisticated, *multifactorial* view of cause and effect. An outcome is not just the result of present effort. It is the sum of present effort (*Purushartha*) and past momentum (*Prarabdha*) (Bilimoria, 2021).

This distinction is crucial for psychology. It separates *control over outcomes* from *control over actions*. A person may work hard but fail due

to past conditions or environmental factors. In Rotter's model, this failure might foster an external locus of control and helplessness. In the Karmic model, the failure is simply the ripening of past causes. The individual retains full agency in the present moment. They choose how to respond to that failure. This response creates new karma for the future.

**Intention and Agency:** Agency in this system resides in *Sankalpa* (intention or will). The physical action is secondary to the mental intent behind it. Recent comparative studies highlight this internal dimension. Western psychoanalysis focuses on strengthening the ego to manage external reality. In contrast, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) focus on purifying the *Citta* (mind-stuff) and *Samskaras* (mental impressions) that drive our intentions (Mallick & Mallick, 2025). Agency is the power to cleanse these past impressions. Therefore, a person who accepts a difficult situation with a calm, positive mind is exercising high agency. They are breaking the chain of negative causality.

##### Dharma: Ethical Duty and Relational Agency

If *Karma* explains how things happen, *Dharma* explains how we should act. *Dharma* translates to duty, law, or cosmic order. It is the moral glue that holds society and the universe together. In Western psychology, agency is often synonymous with autonomy. A *free* agent acts according to their own desires, often independent of social expectations. In Indian thought, true agency is the capacity to align one's will with *Dharma*.

**Agency as Duty:** This framework shifts the focus from *rights* to *duties*. A person derives their sense of control not from bending the world to their will, but from fulfilling their role perfectly. This role depends on one's stage of life and social position. For example, recent research on rural Indian youth suggests that employment is not just about income. It is a way to fulfill one's social role. When youth are employed, they feel aligned with their duty to family and society. This alignment significantly boosts their internal locus

of control. Conversely, unemployment disrupts this dharma, leading to psychological distress.

**Nishkama Karma (Detached Action):** The *Bhagavad Gita* provides the ultimate definition of Indian agency: *Nishkama Karma*. This means *action without attachment to the fruit*. Lord Krishna advises the warrior Arjuna to fight not for victory or personal gain, but because it is his duty.

Your right is to the action alone, never to its fruits. Do not let the fruit of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction. (Sargeant, 2009, 2.47).

This presents a conceptual tension for Western theoretical frameworks. Rotter's model assumes that we act *because* we want a specific result (instrumentality). If we remove the desire for the result, why act? The Indian answer is that we act for the sake of the action itself and for the welfare of the world (*Lokasamgraha*). This form of agency is resilient. If a person is attached to the result, failure destroys their motivation. If a person is dedicated to the duty, failure does not stop them. They continue to act because the action itself is right. This is a *secondary control* strategy that maintains morale even in uncontrollable situations (Sedlmeier & Srinivas, 2016).

### The Self (Atman) and Interdependence

The final piece of the puzzle is the definition of the *Self*. Rotter's Locus of Control assumes a bounded, separate self. This self ends at the boundary of the skin. It competes with the environment for control. Indian philosophy proposes a radical alternative: the *Atman*.

**The Illusion of Separation:** According to Vedanta and other Indian schools, the sense of a separate, isolated ego (*Ahamkara*) is an illusion (*Maya*). The true self (*Atman*) is fundamentally connected to all other beings and the cosmos (*Brahman*). Suffering arises when we forget this connection. We try to control the world as if it were an enemy or an object. This struggle is futile because the individual wave cannot control the ocean.

**Agency via Interdependence:** When we redefine the self as relational, agency changes. It becomes *participatory*. We do not act *on* the world; we act *with* the world. Scholars call this the *dividual* or *relational* self, as opposed to the Western *individual* (Christopher et al., 2014). In this view, relying on others is not a sign of an external locus of control. It is a recognition of reality. For instance, seeking guidance from a guru, obeying parents, or trusting in God are active choices. They acknowledge that the self is embedded in a larger support system.

**Bridging the Gap:** This perspective challenges the *pathology* of the external locus. In the West, saying *It is in God's hands* is often coded as passive coping. In the Indian context, it is often an active surrender (*Prapatti*). It requires great strength to surrender the ego. It reduces the anxiety of *doership* (*Kartrutva*). When the individual stops believing they are the sole cause of everything, the burden of the world lifts. This leads to *Sama-bhava* (equanimity), a state of stable mental health that remains unshaken by success or failure. Thus, Indian philosophy offers a model where one can have low *control* over outcomes but high *agency* over one's internal state and ethical choices.

### 5. Comparative Analysis: Reconceptualizing Agency

This section compares the Western view of agency with the Indian view. It looks at four key areas: the definition of control, the nature of cause and effect, the source of well-being, and the structure of the self. By placing Rotter's theory alongside Indian philosophy, we can build a richer understanding of human action.

#### Agency as Individual Control vs. Ethical Alignment

The most fundamental difference lies in the definition of agency itself. In Rotter's Locus of Control theory, agency is synonymous with control. A person has agency when they believe their actions directly determine outcomes. The goal is to maximize this control. The ideal person acts on the world to shape it to their desires. If

they cannot control the outcome, their agency is diminished. This view is instrumental. It values action primarily for what it achieves.

In contrast, Indian philosophical frameworks define agency as alignment. Agency is not about bending the world to one's will. It is about aligning one's actions with *Dharma* (ethical duty) and cosmic order. Here, the *rightness* of an action does not depend on its success. It depends on its moral quality. This is the principle of *Nishkama Karma* (detached action). A person exercises agency by doing their duty perfectly, without worrying about the reward.

Recent research supports this distinction in practical settings. For example, a study of rural youth in Jharkhand found that employment status significantly predicts locus of control (Mallick & Thakur, 2025). However, for these youth, employment is not just about financial control. It is about fulfilling a social role. Their sense of agency comes from participating in the community structure. When they work, they align with social expectations. This suggests that agency is not a private trait. It is a social and ethical activity.

We can reconceptualize agency here. It is not just *I control*. It is *I participate*. True agency involves releasing the need for total control. It requires acting ethically even when the outcome is uncertain. This shifts the focus from *success* to *integrity*. In this view, a person who fails to achieve a goal but acts with honor still possesses high agency. Rotter's model struggles to explain this. It might classify such a person as having an *external* locus if they accept failure calmly. The Indian model sees this acceptance as a sign of strength, not weakness.

### Causality and Responsibility

Rotter's theory relies on linear causality. This is the belief that A causes B in a straight line. If I study hard (A), I will pass the exam (B). If I fail, it means I did not study enough. This view places the entire burden of the outcome on the individual. It assumes that the environment is passive and waiting to be conquered. This can

create a heavy psychological load. It leads to guilt and anxiety when things go wrong.

Indian philosophy proposes a *multifactorial* causality. The Law of Karma states that any event is the result of many factors. These include present effort (*Purushartha*), past actions (*Prarabdha*), and environmental context. The individual is only one part of this complex web. Therefore, the individual is not the sole cause of the outcome.

This changes the nature of responsibility. In Rotter's model, we are responsible for the *result*. In the Indian model, we are responsible for the *response*. We are *response-able*. We must respond ethically to whatever situation our past *karma* presents. We cannot control the hand we are dealt, but we must play it well.

This nuance is critical for mental health. It allows for a form of *secondary control* (Rothbaum et al., 1982). When primary control (changing the world) is impossible, the individual changes their internal attitude. Western psychology often sees this as a backup plan. Indian psychology sees it as a primary skill. Recent theoretical work comparing psychoanalysis and Indian systems highlights this. Western ego-psychology tries to strengthen the self to manage reality. Indian approaches try to purify the mind to accept reality without suffering. This purification removes the false burden of doership. It allows the person to act freely, without the crippling fear of failure.

### Well-being and Flourishing

Western psychology generally links an internal locus of control to well-being. The logic is simple: people who feel in control are happier. They are less depressed and more anxious to succeed. Empirical studies confirm this link. For instance, research on youth in Dumka shows that an internal locus of control is a strong predictor of psychological well-being (Mallick, 2025). Youth who believe in their own power feel more optimistic and capable.

However, there is a limit to this logic. Life is inherently unpredictable. Illness, loss, and

pervasive barriers are real. If we base our happiness solely on control, we become fragile. When control breaks, our well-being breaks. This is where the Indian model offers a corrective. It defines well-being not as happiness derived from success, but as *Sama-bhava* (equanimity).

*Sama-bhava* is a balanced state of mind. It remains stable in both victory and defeat. It is grounded in the knowledge of the Self (*Atman*), which is distinct from the changing world. This type of well-being is resilient. It does not depend on external circumstances. It integrates the benefits of an internal locus (action) with the wisdom of an external locus (acceptance).

Cross-cultural psychology calls this *active surrender*. It is not giving up. It is entrusting the outcome to a higher power or cosmic order while continuing to work. This reduces stress. It prevents the burnout that comes from *overcontrolling tendencies*. Research in positive psychology suggests that this combination, high effort plus low attachment, leads to *flow* states. The individual is fully immersed in the task but free from anxiety about the future. By ignoring this dimension, Rotter's theory misses a vital path to human flourishing. It pushes people to seek control even when acceptance would be healthier.

### The Relational Self vs. the Autonomous Self

Finally, we must compare the *who* behind the agency. Rotter's theory assumes an autonomous self. This self is a bounded entity, separate from others. It competes for resources and control. Independence is the ultimate goal. Dependency is seen as a failure of development.

Indian philosophy posits a *relational self*. The individual is fundamentally connected to family, community, and the cosmos. The boundary between self and other is porous. In this framework, autonomy is not the highest value. Interdependence is essential.

This has profound implications for how we interpret behavior. In a Western context, a young adult asking their parents to choose their spouse might seem to have a low internal locus of control. They are *giving away* their agency. In an Indian context, this same act might be an expression of high agency. The person is actively choosing to honor their relationship and trust their family's wisdom. They are exercising agency *through* the relationship, not against it.

Recent studies warn against applying Western standards blindly. When we use tools like Rotter's scale in rural India, we might misinterpret cultural values as psychological deficits (Mallick & Thakur, 2025). We might see a lack of individual assertiveness as weakness, rather than seeing the strength of social cohesion. The relational self finds resilience in connection. When the individual fails, the network supports them. The autonomous self stands alone. When it fails, it falls alone.

By integrating these views, we arrive at a model of *Ethical Interdependent Agency*. This model accepts that we are individuals who must act. But it also accepts that we are parts of a whole. We are responsible for our efforts, but we must trust the process of the universe for the results. This synthesis offers a more compassionate and realistic guide for living.

## 6. Synthesis and Implications

This article has explored two very different views of human agency. Rotter's Locus of Control focuses on the individual's power to change outcomes. Indian philosophy focuses on the individual's duty to align with a cosmic order. This section combines these views. It proposes a new model called *Ethical Interdependent Agency*. It also looks at how this model helps psychologists and researchers.

### Toward a Reconceptualized Understanding of Agency

We often see *control* and *surrender* as opposites. Rotter's model suggests that a healthy

person takes control. If they surrender to external forces, they are weak or passive. Indian philosophy suggests the opposite. A wise person knows that total control is an illusion. Surrender to the law of *Karma* is an act of wisdom.

We propose a third way. Agency is not just about controlling the result. It is about controlling the intent. A person can work hard (internal locus) while accepting that the outcome depends on many factors (external locus). We call this ***Ethical Interdependent Agency***.

In this model, the individual is active, not passive. They perform their duty (*Dharma*) with full effort. However, they define success differently. Success is not just getting what you want. It is acting ethically within a web of relationships. Recent theoretical work supports this synthesis. It argues for bridging the *bounded ego* of Western psychology with the *relational self* of Indian systems. This bridge allows us to see agency as a partnership between the individual and the world.

### Implications for Psychology and Practice

This new understanding has real-world benefits. It changes how we treat mental health and how we understand social behavior.

**Clinical Psychology:** Many clients suffer from anxiety because they feel they must control everything. When they fail, they feel guilty. Therapists can use the Indian model to help them. They can teach *secondary control*. This means changing the self when the world cannot be changed. Accepting limits is not failure. It is a healthy adaptation. It builds resilience and equanimity (*Sama-bhava*).

**Organizational and Social Psychology:** We must also rethink what motivates people. Western theories assume people work primarily for individual gain or control. However, research in India shows that motivation is often social. For example, a recent study of rural youth found that employment status shapes their sense of control deeply (Mallick & Thakur, 2025). Employment was not just about money. It was about fulfilling a social role. This suggests that organizations

should emphasize duty and social contribution, not just individual targets.

**Cross-Cultural Validity:** Finally, this synthesis warns us against using Western tools blindly. If we use Rotter's scale without context, we might misjudge people. We might label a community-focused person as having a *low* locus of control. This is a mistake. We must recognize that relying on others can be a form of strength. Psychological constructs must respect the local ontology, the local view of reality (Christopher et al., 2014).

### Limitations and Future Directions

This article is a theoretical start. It proposes ideas that need testing. The main limitation is that this is a philosophical comparison. We have not yet measured *Ethical Interdependent Agency* with a scale. We need to know if people who hold this mixed view are actually happier or healthier than those who hold a pure Western view.

**Future Research:** Researchers should develop new scales that measure *Dharmic Agency*. These scales should ask about duty and acceptance, not just control. Empirical studies are already showing the value of local context. For instance, recent data confirms that locus of control predicts well-being in specific Indian populations (Mallick, 2025). Future studies should expand this. They should compare how *surrender* affects well-being in individualistic versus collectivist cultures.

**Dialogue:** We need a continued dialogue. Western psychology has tools to measure behavior. Indian philosophy has deep insights into the mind. By combining them, we can create a psychology that is both scientifically rigorous and spiritually profound.

### 7. Conclusion

Julian Rotter's Locus of Control theory has shaped psychology for decades. It taught us that believing in one's own power is the key to a good life. However, this article has shown that this view is incomplete. It reflects a Western culture that prizes the individual above all else. It

assumes that a healthy person must always be in the driver's seat. This creates a problem. It undervalues the wisdom of accepting what we cannot change.

We have proposed a new way to look at agency. We examined this through the lens of Indian philosophy. Concepts like *Karma* (moral causality) and *Dharma* (ethical duty) offer a richer picture. In this view, agency is not just about controlling outcomes. It is about understanding one's connection to the whole. As recent theoretical work suggests, we must bridge the gap between the *bounded ego* of the West and the *relational self* of Indian thought.

This comparison leads us to a concept of *Ethical Interdependent Agency*. This is a form of agency that integrates effort with acceptance. A person acts with full energy to fulfill their duty. Yet, they remain calm about the results. They know that outcomes depend on a complex web of causes, not just their own will. Recent research on rural Indian youth confirms this reality. It shows that external factors like employment status deeply shape a person's sense of control. This proves that agency is not just a private belief. It is rooted in social realities.

This reconceptualization is vital for modern psychology. We must stop seeing *external* beliefs merely as deficits. Sometimes, surrendering control is an act of strength. It relieves anxiety and fosters resilience. This is crucial for well-being, as demonstrated by the link between locus of control and psychological health in Indian populations.

Psychologists and philosophers must continue this dialogue. We need models that honor diverse ways of being human. Beyond the narrow goal of individual control lies a broader possibility. It is the wisdom to act ethically, meaningfully, and compassionately within a world we do not fully own.

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