

Self-Control for Hyperopics like Me

2,987 main text words (including footnotes)

1. My Hyperopia

In elementary school I made budgets to determine how to use my allowance. In junior high I wrote lists of my daily tasks that included “wake up” and “eat breakfast.” By college I had schedules for when I would finish which homework assignments mapped out for the whole semester. I treated deadlines like contracts punishable on pain of death. These days I try to be a little more spontaneous, but often this desire amounts to a self-defeating effort to “pencil in” some time for spontaneity three Thursdays from now at 1:30 PM.

I can also relate to “Alfred” in the following vignette, written by Jason D’Cruz (2013, 37-38):

Alfred: What shall we have for supper tonight, dear?

Belinda: I have an idea: let’s forget about cooking supper and just eat ice-cream!

Alfred: But we have plenty of groceries in the fridge that we should use before they spoil.

Belinda: They won’t spoil in one day. We can cook with them tomorrow.

Alfred: I guess you’re right. But surely eating ice-cream for supper isn’t good for our cholesterol levels?

Belinda: But Alfred, we so rarely do such a thing. Skipping supper just once isn’t going to kill us.

Alfred: I guess you’re right. But what if the kids come home and there’s no ice-cream left? They might be cross.

Belinda: Alfred, they’ll understand when we tell them that their parents have decided to go on a little binge. They’ll probably find it quite funny.

Alfred: I guess you’re right again, Belinda, all things considered. Our diet won’t be seriously compromised, the groceries won’t be wasted, and the children won’t be cross. Yes, you’re quite right. Ice-cream for dinner it is!

Belinda: Oh, Alfred, forget about it. We'll just put in a roast and boil up some cabbage.

As D'Cruz puts it, Belinda has better “instincts” for when to act on a whim, while Alfred, who seems deliberative to the point of being stultified, acts like “a Prufrock.” In particular, by deliberately considering whether to make a spontaneous choice to eat ice cream for dinner, Alfred ruins the idea of spontaneously eating ice cream for dinner.

The aim of this paper is to illuminate a way of decision-making that Alfred and I appear to share. We are engaged in *hyperopic* decision-making. “Hyperopia” literally means far-sightedness, that is, the medical condition in which distant objects are seen clearly but close objects are not. The opposite of hyperopia—myopia, or near-sightedness—is sometimes used metaphorically to describe impulsiveness in judgment and behavior. So-called myopic decision-making virtually exhausts the objects of study in research on self-control, which focuses on procrastination, cheating, addiction, and so on.¹ Hyperopic decision-making, of the sort Alfred and I exhibit, is largely invisible in both the philosophical and psychological literature (with a few exceptions, discussed below). But this should not be, for hyperopia—which I define provisionally as excessive deliberative far-sightedness (§2)—has ramifications for well-being (§3), for the conceptualization of self-control that predominates in the contemporary psychological literature (§4), and for practical reason itself (§5).

2. Terminology

To my knowledge, extant research on hyperopia is limited to a few papers in the consumer behavior literature (see §3). I borrow the term from these papers, but give it a broader characterization. In my sense, hyperopics are too focused in decision-making on their distal goals and reflective values. This comes at the expense of being spontaneous.

Here and throughout I use “spontaneity” in the folk sense (rather than the Kantian sense), to mean things done or said without planning or deliberation. In §4 and §5 I discuss reasons to value spontaneity in this sense and reasons to think that hyperopic deliberativeness inhibits spontaneity. I adopt Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder’s definition of deliberation as “bringing to mind ideas or images meant to have some rational relation to the topic being considered, in the service of reaching a conclusion about what to think or do” (2012, 212). In hyperopia, the ideas or images one brings to mind have to do with one’s distal goals or reflective values. By distal goals, I mean states of affairs that an agent desires that are removed from the agent in time and space, such as “being a continent

¹ For use of the term “myopia” in the self-control literature, see for instance Steele and Josephs (1990) on “alcohol myopia.”

shopper” rather than “satisfying my desire for a Twinkie.” By reflective values, I mean judgments and beliefs that an agent takes to be supported by “overall” reasons.²

3. Experiential CVs, Regret, and Anger: Hyperopia and Well-Being

Imagine later on that night . . .

- Alfred: Belinda, I was thinking about what we should do when we retire. What would you like to do?
- Belinda: I’m not sure. Perhaps visit friends, or get a timeshare in Florida. It would be nice to be near to home so that we can babysit the grandchildren.
- Alfred: Hmm . . . but what about something more exciting? Wouldn’t you like to sleep in an ice hotel, or try eating chocolate-covered grasshoppers, or visit all 50 states in the USA?

It may appear in this add-on to D’Cruz’s vignette that Alfred’s exotic suggestions are out of step with his deliberative sensibility. Ordinarily we think of the pursuit of unusual experiences in terms of thrill-seeking and impulsivity. Much of the self-control literature follows suit, treating “sensation seeking” as a product of myopia.³ However, it may be that Alfred here exhibits what Anan Keinan and Ran Kivetz (2011) call a “productivity orientation” in his choices about leisure activity. People with such an orientation are more concerned than others with being productive, making progress, and accomplishing more in less time. Keinan and Kivetz show that people with a productivity orientation tend to view free time as a way to “collect experiences” and build their “experiential CV.” Visiting ice hotels, eating exotic foods, and travelling comprehensively allows Alfred to check items off his list of planned indulgences.

Keinan, Kivetz, and Itamar Simonson are responsible for a small stream of research on hyperopia, in particular on the negative effects of hyperopic consumer behavior on well-being. Kivetz and Keinan write, “hyperopic consumers deprive themselves of indulgence and instead overly focus on acquiring and consuming utilitarian necessities, acting responsibly, and ‘doing the right thing’” (2006, 274). For example, while people with productivity orientations may be professionally successful and accomplished, they also tend to make choices that they themselves predict will be unpleasant (2011, 945). This is because they struggle to “take a break from self-evaluation” (2011, 936). Kivetz

² Hyperopia may sound reminiscent of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), but it is not equivalent to it. OCD, unlike hyperopia, is what Hannah Pickard (2013) calls a “disorder of agency.” The closer analogue to hyperopia is perhaps what psychologists call the “need for cognition” (Cacciopo & Petty, 1982).

³ See, for instance, Barratt and Patton (1983) and Zuckerman (1994).

and Keinan (2006) also show that hyperopic decision-making can lead to regret, particularly the farther away in time one is from a past decision. Given enough time, most of us wish that we had worked less and indulged more in pleasurable activities. Hyperopics are particularly prone to this “self-control regret.”

Of course, one limitation of this research is that it is narrowly focused on consumer choices and indulgences. A broader effect of hyperopia on well-being may be anger. There is considerable research showing that effortful self-control can lead to feelings of anger.⁴ And it is clear that excessive anger, hostility, and aggression can lead to poor physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Johnson, 1990; Phillips et al., 2006).⁵ The presumption here is that hyperopic decision-making involves effortful self-control (see §4). But is it hard to imagine Alfred getting frustrated and angry after realizing that his well-intentioned effort at controlled deliberation undermined the pleasure of spontaneously eating ice cream for dinner?

Belinda: Oh, Alfred, forget about it. We’ll just put in a roast and boil up some cabbage.

Alfred: But Belinda, I thought you wanted to get ice cream? I just don’t understand you at all!

(Alfred stomps off and sulks.)

4. Hyperopia and the Nature of Self-Control

Hyperopia has not only gone virtually unnoticed as an explanandum in the empirical literature,⁶ but it also conflicts conceptually with the predominant way in which researchers conceptualize self-control in *normative* terms. The most typical framework conceives of self-control as impulse-inhibition, such that self-control dilemmas involve a conflict between one’s proximal and distal desires (e.g., between a desire for a piece of chocolate cake now and a broader, more abstract desire to eat healthy food). Choosing to act on the basis of one’s distal desire (e.g., eating healthy) is coded as self-control success, while choosing to act on the basis of one’s proximal desire (e.g., for cake) is coded as self-control failure.⁷

⁴ See Stucke and Baumeister (2006), Finkel et al. (2009), and Gal and Liu (2011).

⁵ This is not to say, of course, that anger is not a fitting emotion in some circumstances. Nor is it to say that well-being ought not be trumped by other values that anger may serve well, such as fighting for justice.

⁶ For example, the four chapters dedicated to “Common Problems with Self-Regulation” in Vohs and Baumeister’s *Handbook of Self-Regulation* (2011) focus on substance addictions, impulsive eating, impulsive shopping, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

⁷ See Mischel et al. (1989), Rachlin (2000), and Tangney et al. (2004). See also Baumeister and Hetherington (1996) and Fujita (2011) for discussion.

Self-control ought to be conceived in instrumental terms, however, as something that can be used to benefit or harm oneself. Research by Catherine Rawn and Kathleen Vohs (2011) makes this clear. Their “self-control for personal harm” model proposes that “a meaningful proportion of ill-advised behaviors that are normatively coded as self-regulation failures are in fact self-regulation attempts with the goal of interpersonal inclusion” (2011, 267). Rawn and Vohs focus on smoking, heavy drinking, binge eating, self-sabotaging intellectual performance, drug use, extreme violence, and consensual unwanted sex, arguing that these behaviors are often motivated by desires for social inclusion and require considerable self-control. Teenagers start smoking to “fit in,” for example, and in order to do so, must overcome initial impulses to avoid what they know to be risky behavior (in addition to overcoming their initial dislike of cigarette smoke).

While this research shows that self-control can be used for self-harm, it is also true that impulsivity can contribute to well-being.⁸ Jack Block and colleagues’ model (Block & Block, 1980; Block, 2002), which the authors present as an alternative to the dominant impulse-inhibition conception of self-control, identifies two central variables: “ego-control” (EC) and “ego resiliency” (ER). EC refers to an agent’s degree of impulse inhibition/expression and ER refers to “the dynamic capacity to contextually modify one’s level of ego-control in response to situational affordances” (Letzring et al., 2005). In other words:

Highly ego-resilient individuals are characteristically able to modify their level of control, either up or down, as may be appropriate or necessary according to the situational context. Individuals with a low level of ego-resiliency are more restricted to the same level of impulse containment or expression regardless of situational demands (Letzring et al., 2005).⁹

ER is a normative ideal on Block’s model and self-control is the means for attaining this ideal. Crucially, low ER takes two forms: “undercontrol” and “overcontrol.” Undercontrolled individuals are those commonly described in the self-control literature. They tend to experience fluctuating emotions, are easily distracted, and express and act upon their impulses even when doing so may be personally harmful or socially inappropriate. Overcontrolled individuals are the opposite. They are *not* resilient, but rather are . . .

. . . inhibited in action and affect-expressiveness to the point of at times being excessively constrained. They have difficulty making decisions, may unnecessarily delay gratification or

⁸ To my ear, “impulsivity” is the negatively valenced parallel to “spontaneity,” which usually carries a more positive valence.

⁹ Note that Block’s model is a personality measure rather than specifically an account of self-control.

deny themselves pleasure, are tightly organized, are insulated from environmental distractions, and are able to continue even repetitive tasks for long periods of time (Letzring et al, 2005).

Situations demanding impulsivity can be dramatic or mundane, ranging from rescuing someone in danger to eating ice cream for dinner now and again.¹⁰ Many valuable social behaviors are also best when spontaneous. When a friend is visibly upset, a comforting gesture like a gentle touch on the elbow is most meaningful if it is immediate and uncalculated.¹¹

On this model, hyperopia appears to be a particular form of overcontrol that inhibits ER by preventing agents from being impulsive in the right ways. Hyperopia is just that form of overcontrol tracing back to an excessive deliberative attending to and weighting of distal goals and reflective values. (One could be overcontrolled for other reasons, such as a deep and pervasive distrust of other people.) But this conception of control is very much at odds with the dominant one in the contemporary empirical literature.

5. Hyperopia and Practical Reason

What I have said thus far leads to the conclusion that there are sometimes significant practical reasons to be spontaneous. These involve enjoying pleasurable activities and avoiding regret and anger (§3), as well as reacting appropriately to situations demanding uncalculated and impulsive reactions, such as rescuing someone in need (§4). Some scholars have addressed broader reasons to be spontaneous too. D’Cruz discusses feelings of freedom that can only be found when one eschews deliberation and acts with abandon (2013, 37), and some have argued that the value of spontaneity animated classical Chinese ethics (e.g., Slingerland, 2003, 2014).

But as scholars like D’Cruz and Slingerland have discussed, spontaneity is self-deflecting. That is, once considered in deliberation, reasons to be spontaneous are no longer reasons to be spontaneous. D’Cruz calls this “deliberation-volatility.” If the value of a decision stems from making that decision spontaneously, then one cannot reason one’s way to that decision, on pain of destroying reasons.¹² Belinda’s abandonment of the idea of eating ice cream for dinner illustrates this. She sees that the reasons to eat ice cream for dinner have been destroyed once Alfred has reasoned his way to them, and so she abandons the idea.

¹⁰ On spontaneous decisions to act heroically, see [removed].

¹¹ This is reminiscent of Michael Stocker’s (1976) point that a friend in the hospital would prefer that you visit her out of an immediate reaction that it is *her* in the hospital, and not because you have consulted your moral duties and found that one of them demands that you visit her.

¹² Cases in which reasons to be spontaneous are deliberation-volatile are unlike more familiar cases found in the moral psychology literature—e.g., in Arpaly (2004)—because those that are deliberation-volatile are constitutively spontaneous. In the cases of concern to me here, one *cannot* deliberatively consider one’s reasons to be spontaneous, on pain of deliberation-volatility. See D’Cruz (2013) for discussion.

While on the one hand there are deliberation-volatile reasons to be spontaneous, on the other hand, there are serious, pervasive, and obvious risks to acting impulsively. These risks are known to common sense (“think before you act”) and are catalogued in the self-control literature (addiction, procrastination, etc.), are central in research on heuristics and biases in cognitive and social psychology (e.g., implicit bias), and indeed, are rife throughout much of the history of moral philosophy. One way to characterize hyperopia is as a way of being averse to these kinds of risks. Rather than leave themselves vulnerable to the possibility of doing something that they ultimately disfavor, hyperopic agents try to ensure through deliberation that their spontaneous actions concord with their overall reflective judgments.

This suggests the existence of a *hyperopic’s dilemma*.¹³ Anyone acutely concerned to act in accord with her overall practical reasons must choose between trying to reason her way to spontaneous decisions, which will destroy her reasons for being spontaneous, or risk acting in a way that she will ultimately regret. The hyperopic chooses the first horn of this dilemma, expending effort at risk-minimization through more and better deliberation, which destroys her reasons to be spontaneous. Is there a better way?

One possibility might be to deliberately embrace plans to be spontaneous. In a cool moment of reflection, can’t one make a choice to favor spontaneity from time to time in the future? I don’t think this response helps very much. If one makes very specific plans about when and where to be spontaneous, then one is no longer acting spontaneously when the time comes. And if one makes unspecific plans about when and where to be spontaneous, committing to the abstract notion that “being spontaneous once in a while” is a good idea, then the actual decision about whether to act spontaneously in *this* particular moment will not have been rationalized by a past decision. In short, planning either overspecifies or underspecifies when and where to be spontaneous.

A more compelling response to the self-deflecting nature of spontaneity focuses on nondeliberative routes to reasons-responsiveness. Above I noted that Belinda has better “instincts” than Alfred for when to act on a whim. Others have discussed similar notions of cultivating the skill of knowing how and when to act with spontaneity (e.g., Tiberius, 2008; Railton 2009, 2014; [removed]). The challenge facing this response is that it requires *trust* in one’s nondeliberative decision-making skills. Indeed, it is this trust—a sense that one will make good decisions without knowing through deliberation that one’s decisions are good—that hyperopics appear to lack.

Lest you think, though, that only uptight hyperopics face this dilemma, I ask what justifies the trust you have in your decisions to be spontaneous (if you make them). Given the perils there are in “just doing it,” surely one wouldn’t want to blindly hope that one is acting well. Or does this thought not occur to you unless you are hyperopic like me?

¹³ Thanks to Jason D’Cruz for suggesting this phrase.

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