

Can you be too self-controlled?

Conceptual, ethical, and ideological issues in positive psychology

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1. Self-Control and Overcontrol

As a child 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 began each semester by mapping out all of my assignments for the term. 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’m probably a paragon of self-control, in the sense psychologists mean it, more adept than most at delaying gratification, resisting temptation, and making decisions carefully. In fact, I may be *overcontrolled*. For example, I can relate to the way that Jason D’Cruz (2013) channels the stultified soul of J. Alfred Prufrock in the following vignette:

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. (2013, 37-38)

As D'Cruz puts it, Belinda has better “instincts” than Alfred for when to act on a whim. By carefully considering whether to make a spontaneous choice to eat ice cream for dinner, Alfred ruins the idea of spontaneously eating ice cream for dinner. I myself have also ruined many occasions for spontaneity.

According to leading theorists of self-control, however, one *cannot* be overcontrolled. In what they call their “manual of the sanities”—a positive psychology handbook describing contemporary research on strengths of character—Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman argue that “there is no true disadvantage of having too much self-control” (2004, 515). Likewise, in the article introducing one of the central measures used in the field—the Self-Control Scale—June Tangney and colleagues claim that their tests “failed to indicate any drawbacks of so-called overcontrol” (2004, 271). Noting the distinction between “state” and “trait” self-control, Roy Baumeister and Jessica Alquist (2009) argue that “trait self-control . . . appears to have few or no downsides.”¹

This claim—that one cannot be too self-controlled—is false. My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I show that the psychological literature is problematically conflicted about the definition of self-control (§2). This is a problem not only because researchers should not unequivocally recommend something without understanding what it is, but also because how people evaluate self-control—how they value its effects—is at the heart of some of the key points of tension between competing theories. Second, I enumerate specific disadvantages to having too much self-control, several of which point to the value of acting spontaneously from time to time, in a pointedly uncontrolled way (§3). Third, I raise worries about the social and political values embedded in the science of self-control (§4). I conclude by briefly outlining a framework for understanding self-control as a capacity that admits of deficiencies and excesses (§5).

¹ Trait self-control is a disposition, as compared to state self-control, which refers to any token act of self-control (or any token self-controlled act). Psychologists tend not to specify whether exerting state self-control means doing a particular thing—that is, that exerting self-control is itself an action—or whether it is rather a characteristic given to particular actions—for example, ordering lunch in a self-controlled way. Baumeister and Alquist (2009, 116) somewhat unhelpfully say the following: “State and trait aspects of self-control can be distinguished. The state is the current act. The trait would be the broad, dispositional tendency to exert self-control.” I will not take up the question of whether state self-control refers to an action, a feature of an action, or something else (perhaps some kind of basic action). Any of these options will be consistent with the claims I make in this paper.

Psychological research on self-control is widely influential. It has, for example, helped to reshape mainstream trends in education policies (Tough 2012). In New York, the public charter school “Knowledge is Power Program” (KIPP) cites character-building through the promotion of self-control as one of its five guiding principles. Research on self-control has profoundly affected contemporary approaches to criminology (e.g., Pratt 2016), addiction and other psychopathologies (e.g., Sayette & Griffin 2011), health behavior (e.g., Herman & Polivy 2011), and more. The science of self-control has also influenced research in practical ethics.² Large grants have been awarded to study the intersections of the philosophy and science of self-control.³

Given this influence, it is important to consider whether self-control has any downsides. I will not dispute the upsides. Multiple meta-analyses have found consistent positive effects of self-control across a range of behavior (Tangney et al. 2004; de Ridder et al. 2012).⁴ In a striking field study, Terrie Moffitt and colleagues (2011) followed a cohort of 1000 New Zealanders from birth to age 32. Childhood self-control predicted physical health, substance dependence, financial success, and criminal offenses, controlling for other factors like intelligence and social class. In another cohort of 500 sibling pairs, siblings with lower childhood self-control tended to have worse outcomes along these lines later in life. Nevertheless, one can have too much of a good thing.

2. What is Self-Control?

The terms “control” and “self-control” have many meanings in philosophy and psychology. Jules Holroyd and Daniel Kelly (forthcoming) count at least 13 distinct usages of these terms in recent philosophical writing, ranging from the sense of ultimate control determinists deny people have over themselves to the kind of autonomy autocrats wrest from populations. In psychology it is a similar story. Controlled actions can refer to those that reflect coordination between cognition and muscle movements (i.e., motor control); it can serve as a defining characteristic of hypothesized mental systems, as in the case of “System 2” in dual process theories; and much else. In some sense these are all related meanings, having to do with the self-management of a system or entity. But what positive and social psychologists mean by self-control is more specific than this, having to do with a particular way of managing one’s own behavior.

Roughly, self-control in positive psychology is thought of as a resource agents have for regulating conflicting desires. This is a rough characterization, however, as will be clear below. Paradigmatic examples of self-control dilemmas that appear to fit this form have to do with saving money rather than spending it impulsively or eating healthy rather than sugary and fatty foods. In

² See, for instance, Neil Levy’s 2015 Leverhulme Lectures at the University of Oxford, described here: http://www.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/latest_news/2015/2015_leverhulme_lectures

³ <http://philosophyandscienceofself-control.com/>

⁴ I will ignore the recent replication crisis in psychological science (but see footnote #5). In doing so—in particular in ignoring Haggard and colleagues’ (in press) seemingly devastating finding of *zero* “ego depletion” effects in over 2000 subjects tested at 24 labs—I am giving researchers who trumpet the categorical benefits of self-control a large benefit of the doubt.

cases like these, a person is thought to use self-control to resist impulses, temptations, and the like. Whether these *ought* to be the paradigm cases for self-control research is up for grabs. In some sense, this question frames the disagreement between psychological theories of self-control.

Situations involving resisting impulses and temptations are most at home in what might be called the classic conception of self-control. On this view, self-control is defined in terms of the effortful inhibition of preferences for small immediate rewards over larger delayed rewards (e.g., Mischel 1974; Thaler & Shefrin 1981). Walter Mischel’s famous “Marshmallow Studies” are paradigmatic of this view. In the basic experimental scenario, Mischel and colleagues offered children one treat right away—a marshmallow, pretzel, mint, etc.—or, if they could resist the urge to eat the marshmallow for 10-20 minutes, two treats (Mischel 1974; Mischel et al. 1989). These studies exemplify the intuitive connection between self-control and willpower. The classic conception of self-control, to which these studies gave rise, also helpfully defines self-control narrowly, identifying it with a very specific phenomenon—exerting effort to restrain one’s desires for immediately rewarding things.

A powerful objection to the classic conception of self-control, however, is that there are many situations in which a person seems to exert self-control but not by effortfully inhibiting her impulses (Fujita 2011; Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross 2016). The person who acts on her desire to eat healthy food by avoiding the candy shop altogether—rather than entering the shop and repressing her desire for sweets—seems to exert self-control. Indeed, this person is perhaps more effectively self-controlled than one who is frequently at war with her impulses. To this point, Michael Ent and colleagues (2015) show that high trait self-control is associated with avoiding, rather than inhibiting, impulses (see also de Ridder et al. 2012). People who score highly on a measure of trait self-control, that is, report the need to stifle their impulses and temptations *less often* than people who score lower on the measure.⁵

Taking this point on board, some researchers have dropped the insistence that self-control necessarily involves impulse-inhibition, while maintaining that self-control is for managing conflicts between immediate and delayed rewards. Call this the temptation-avoidance view. For example, Angela Duckworth and Laurence Steinberg write that “self-controlled behavior refers to voluntary actions in which individuals engage to advance personally valued longer term goals despite conflicting urges that are more potent in the moment” (2015, 32). Elsewhere, Duckworth again emphasizes that self-control is for resisting temptations but not necessarily by stifling them in the moment: “[self-control is] the voluntary regulation of behavioral, emotional, and attentional

⁵ Ent and colleagues are proponents of the “strength model,” which conceptualizes self-control as analogous to a muscle (Baumeister et al. 2000; Muraven et al. 1998). In short, self-control is depletable, just like physical strength. I avoid discussion of this model of self-control, given recent replication worries. Note also that Ent and colleagues’ study does not distinguish between people who avoid temptations in order not to be tempted—continent people, in Aristotelian lingo—and people who avoid temptations because they do not find them tempting—that is, temperate people. See footnote #13. Thanks to [name removed] for pointing out this ambiguity.

impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations or diversions.”⁶ The person who avoids the candy shop altogether exerts self-control in this sense, but not by stifling their impulses. Instead, one might imagine that they make a plan to avoid the street on which the candy shop sits.

The temptation-avoidance view of self-control faces challenges too, however. One is that there are apparent counterexamples to it. A person in a dangerous situation, for example, needs self-control to master her fear, not to overcome temptation (Holton & Shute 2007; Henden 2008). A second, deeper problem is that the central measures of trait self-control used by researchers do not seem to merely reflect how one regulates one’s behavior in the face of temptations and diversions. First consider Duckworth’s trait self-control scale for children.⁷ It includes eight questions which ask a child how often she forgets something she needs for class, interrupts other students, says something rude, can’t find something because her desk is messy, loses her temper, can’t remember what the teacher told her to do, mind-wanders, and talks back to teachers or parents when upset.⁸ These tendencies don’t seem obviously to do with giving in to temptation or diversion. Mind-wandering and forgetfulness, for example, seem to reflect something like one’s ability to stay focused on a task, while saying rude things and losing one’s temper seem to have different psychological causes, perhaps having to do with latent anger or frustration.⁹ All of these tendencies *can* be glossed in terms of giving in to temptation; maybe mind-wandering involves giving in to the temptation of fleeting thoughts, rudeness involves giving in to the temptation to disregard others’ feelings, and so on. But in this broad sense, any action could be glossed as giving in to temptation. Brushing my teeth before a date is perhaps giving in to the temptation to self-consciously worry about the normal smell of human breath. Muttering to myself about the guy who bumped into me on the crowded subway is perhaps giving in to the temptation to feel indignant about non-culpable harms. True, I value self-acceptance in the face of olfactory norms, and I value the idea of accurately deploying reactive attitudes like indignation, but my failure to act in accord with these values does not seem best characterized as giving in to a potent momentary temptation.

Rather than capture how one regulates one’s behavior in the face of temptation, the self-control scale for children seems more accurately described as reflecting a person’s disposition to “be good.” Doing what the teacher says, keeping a tidy desk—kids recognize these descriptions of those

⁶ <<https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/duckworth/pages/research>>. See footnote #12 for brief discussion of Duckworth’s related research on “grit.”

⁷ The Domain-Specific Impulsivity Scale for Children (DSIS-C), available at <<https://upenn.app.box.com/DSIS-C>>

⁸ This version of the scale is formatted for self-report. Two other versions are formatted for teacher-report and parent-report.

⁹ Perhaps it is a virtue of the measure that a connection between its items and the construct it putatively operationalizes is not obvious. Researchers might obtain a more accurate representation of participants’ dispositions to act in self-controlled ways if participants don’t recognize what’s being assessed. (Think here of an analogy to measures of racial attitudes, which often strive to be indirect in this sense.) But a measure must make sense of its operationalization *somewhere*, either theoretically or in its items or in the outcomes it predicts. Below I propose an alternative interpretation of what the items in trait self-control scales operationalize which I claim better explains what kinds of outcomes they predict. Thanks to [name removed] for pushing me on this point.

who do what they ought and toe the line.¹⁰ As above, one can gloss questions about doing what one's supposed to do in terms of avoiding the temptation to do what one shouldn't, but that presupposes, rather than demonstrates, that the function of the underlying psychological construct is to help agents avoid temptation, rather than help them act in accord with standard behavioral norms. (It also presupposes that doing what one shouldn't is inherently tempting.¹¹)

Doing what one ought to do is a much broader, and more normatively intricate notion, that simply avoiding temptation. This same issue arises in the most commonly used measure of trait self-control: Tangney and colleagues' (2004) Self-Control Scale. The brief version of the Self-Control Scale asks participants to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. I am good at resisting temptations
2. I have a hard time breaking habits (R)
3. I am lazy (R)
4. I say inappropriate things (R)
5. I do certain things that are bad for me, if they are fun (R)
6. I refuse things that are bad for me
7. I wish I had more self-discipline (R)
8. People would say that I have iron self-discipline
9. Pleasure and fun sometimes keep me from getting work done (R)
10. I have trouble concentrating (R)
11. I am able to work effectively toward long-term goals
12. Sometimes I can't stop myself from doing something, even if I know it's wrong (R)
13. I often act without thinking through all the alternatives (R)

At first glance, these items do seem to home in on temptation-avoidance more than the items on the self-control scale for children. However, it is notable that the items on the Self-Control Scale are

¹⁰ Baumeister and colleagues (2007) make this explicit in their definition of self-control as “the capacity for altering one's own responses, especially to bring them into line with standards such as ideals, values, morals, and social expectations, and to support the pursuit of long-term goals” (351). I say more about the normative values embedded in this research in §4.

¹¹ In their study of the relationship between trait self-control and impulse-inhibition, Ent and colleagues (2015) follow administration of the Brief Self-Control Scale by asking participants how much they engage in the following behaviors: (1) I avoid situations in which I might be tempted to act immorally; (2) I choose friends who keep me on track to accomplish my long-term goals; (3) when I work or study, I deliberately seek out a place with no distractions; (4) in my life, the line between right and wrong is very clear and sharply drawn; and (5) when I want something, I work out a systematic plan for how to get it. If the Self-Control Scale reflects a person's disposition to act in accord with what they think they ought to do, then it is unsurprising that people with a lot of self-control (in this sense) will carefully choose their friends and situations. If trait self-control is in some sense basically a concern with doing what one thinks one ought to do, in other words, then people with high self-control will surely be concerned with having the friends and picking the situations that they think they ought to have and to pick.

almost identical to those used to assess one of the “Big Five” personality traits: conscientiousness (Roberts et al 2012). Trait conscientiousness also predicts most of the positive life outcomes that trait self-control predicts (see Roberts et al 2012 for review). Personality researchers tend to think of self-control as a component of conscientiousness, along with responsibility, orderliness, industriousness, formality, appearance, punctuality, conventionality, and cleanliness (Jackson et al 2010). Brent Roberts and colleagues (2012) define conscientiousness as “the propensity to be self-controlled, responsible to others, hardworking, orderly, and rule-abiding” (1). Note how these descriptors go far beyond temptation-avoidance; conscientiousness is clearly not just temptation-avoidance. If the Self-Control Scale and measures of conscientiousness are nearly identical, and they predict the same or similar outcomes, then we should hesitate to think that the Self-Control Scale is a measure of temptation-avoidance alone.¹²

One way of avoiding this problem is to conceptualize self-control more capaciously, emphasizing neither impulse-inhibition nor avoiding temptations. For example, Kentaro Fujita defines self-control as “the [ability] to make decisions and act in a manner consistent with one’s global goals and values” (2011, 352). While this definition leaves the relationship between self-control and personality traits like conscientiousness still unclear, it does seem to more accurately reflect what’s represented on measures like the Self-Control Scale, presuming that “global” goals and values reflect something like one’s sense of what one ought to do. Likewise, in their meta-analysis of the effects of trait self-control, Denise T.D. de Ridder and colleagues say that, despite important differences between competing theories, “researchers agree that self-control focuses on the efforts people exert to stimulate desirable responses and inhibit undesirable responses and that self-control thereby constitutes an important prerequisite for self-regulation” (2012, 77). Here too there is mention of neither impulse-inhibition nor resisting temptation. Rather, there is just what Fujita calls “dual-motive conflict.” That is, a person desires two incompatible things, and acting with self-control means choosing the thing that one really wants. De Ridder and colleagues don’t make this explicit, since they say that self-control simply reflects effort exerted in pursuit of desirable rather than undesirable responses. But it is clear in context that they don’t count effort in pursuit of just any desires as self-controlled; rather, only those efforts in pursuit of something like one’s considered (or “global”) desires reflect self-control. Moreover, de Ridder and colleagues don’t define “self-regulation,” but Fujita does, writing that self-regulation refers to the general process of managing one’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior in light of goals and standards (e.g., Carver & Scheier 1982; Fujita 2011). So the thought seems to be that self-control represents the effort expended (following de Ridder) or the ability (following Fujita) to act in accord with something like one’s considered

¹² Another construct advanced by positive psychologists, which bears resemblance to trait self-control, is “grit.” Duckworth and colleagues define grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (2007, 1087). Grit is operationalized as comprising two lower-order features: perseverance of effort and consistency of effort. Much of the popular embrace of research on self-control has been extended to research on grit. It is notable, then, that, according to a large-scale meta-analysis, “grit as currently measured is simply a repackaging of conscientiousness or one of the facets of conscientiousness” (Credé et al. forthcoming). The size of the correlation between grit scores and overall conscientiousness is $\rho = .84$ (Credé et al. forthcoming). For broad critical discussion of research on grit, see Engber (2016).

desires, rather than acting in accord with some other, competing desires. But these other desires needn't be experienced as temptations, nor is one's only route to avoiding them inhibiting an impulse to pursue them.¹³

Of course, one hulking challenge for the capacious conception of self-control is the problem of identification, that is, the problem of understanding which desires or goals or values are an agent's "own." Fujita defines global goals in terms of their being abstract and distal from the self, rather than concrete and proximal. It's clear enough what Fujita means. A desire to be healthy is abstract compared to a concrete desire for cake, in the sense that "health" is an idea and cake is a thing sitting right there in front of you. And a desire to be healthy is distal compared to a proximal desire for cake, in the sense that the benefits of healthy eating come later in time, while the enjoyment of cake comes sooner. But these characterizations can be reversed in way that's problematic for the capacious conception of self-control. For Alfred (§1), the desire to be healthy appears concrete and proximal, compared to his desire for ice-cream, which seems abstract and distal. Similarly for the sufferer of anorexia nervosa, as described by Nomy Arpaly (2004), who desperately wants to eat, but can't bring herself to do it on account of some abstract sense of thinness and beauty.¹⁴ In both of these cases, it's unclear why the agent's abstract and distal desires ought to count as reflecting her global goals. What this points to—unsurprisingly to philosophers of action—is that abstract and distal desires don't reliably represent what the agent *really* wants. They don't necessarily stand for the agent or for her considered values. They don't have inherent special authority in the guidance of behavior.

But so be it, the defender of the capacious conception might say. Psychological theories of self-control needn't deliver the answer to philosophical puzzles. The capacious conception of self-control doesn't owe us an account of what an authentic desire is. Maybe abstract and distal desires reflect what you really want. Maybe not. But if agents who act in ways that are consistent with their abstract and distal desires have certain predictable and valuable characteristics, then that is an important trait to understand (namely, the trait of acting in ways that are consistent with one's abstract and distal desires). Let's just call this trait self-control, the defender of the capacious conception might say.

But now the claim that there are no downsides to self-control cannot be right. For surely there are sometimes downsides to acting on the basis of abstract and distal desires, as the examples above show. Alfred would be better off enjoying ice cream for dinner from time to time. A person suffering from anorexia nervosa would be better off eating. Both of these agents should override their abstract and distal desires. And the defender of the capacious conception of self-control cannot agree with this on the grounds that, in these cases, the agents' concrete and proximal desires

¹³ As Holton and Shute (2007, ff 19) point out, the capacious conception of self-control is reminiscent of what Aristotle calls continence, as compared to temperance. See footnote #5.

¹⁴ Although it is not clear that Arpaly's interpretation describes the typical sufferer of anorexia nervosa. The etiology of this and other eating disorders is not clear. See Fischer & Munsch (2012).

happen to reflect what they really want. For to say that would be to do precisely what I granted a psychological theory of self-control need not do: answer the problem of identification.¹⁵

So the first chink in the armor of the claim that there are no downsides to self-control is that it is simply not clear what self-control is. Each of the leading definitions faces serious challenges. Moreover, each of the three theories I discussed—the classic conception of impulse-inhibition, the temptation-avoidance view, and the capacious conception—renders the question differently. Whether there are any downsides to stifling your impulses for an immediate reward in order to receive a larger delayed reward is a very different question from whether there are any downsides to acting in conflict with your global goals (assuming this is even possible). One thing that makes these questions different is the role of what one takes to be a downside, that is, how one evaluates the effects of being self-controlled. So the truth of the claim that one cannot be too self-controlled depends deeply on which of these theories one prefers.

But this ambiguity doesn't obviate the fact that high scores on measures of trait self-control predict a number of outcomes that many people tend to think are positive—good test scores, high salaries, successful relationships, and more (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone 2004). So the scale measures *something* important, assuming the large reviews of the scale's predictive validity are themselves valid.¹⁶ And researchers seem to be thus far unable to find any outcome predicted by high trait self-control that people tend *not* to want. But it is worth considering what these measures might exclude.

3. Disadvantages Associated with Overcontrol

Presenting data reminiscent of virtually every Very Special Episode from 1980s and 1990s sit-coms,¹⁷ Catherine Rawn and Kathleen Vohs (2011) show how many of the behaviors that are typically coded as failures of self-control actually *utilize* high levels of self-control. Rawn and Vohs focus on smoking, heavy drinking, binge eating, self-sabotaging intellectual performance, drug use, extreme violence, and consensual unwanted sex. They argue that people are often motivated to do these things on the basis of social inclusion goals. And meeting these goals requires self-control. For example, teenagers start smoking to fit in, and in order to do so, must overcome a desire to avoid cigarettes (either because they know that cigarettes are dangerous or because they initially find cigarette smoke disgusting).¹⁸ Rawn and Vohs' "self-control for personal harm" model proposes

¹⁵ Of course, the specific defenders of the capacious conception I've discussed—Fujita and de Ridder—haven't claimed that there are no downsides to self-control. My aim in this section, however, is to search for a definition of self-control that makes sense of this claim. The capacious conception can't do this.

¹⁶ See footnotes 4 and 5 on the replication crisis in psychology.

¹⁷ See < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Very_special_episode>

¹⁸ As Rawn and Vohs discuss, people do in fact find alcohol initially distasteful (Fallon & Rozin 1983) and tobacco unpleasant (DiFranza et al. 2004).

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).¹⁹

These data present a *prima facie* case that there may be disadvantages to high levels of trait self-control. Imagine Blossom, who knows that smoking is bad for her long-term health, and finds the smell and taste of cigarettes disgusting, but is compelled to smoke to fit in with the cool kids. On the classic conception, it seems that social inclusion is a larger reward for Blossom than avoiding disgusting things. And she thereby appears to represent self-control success. The same can be said on the temptation-avoidance model and on the classic conception. Blossom’s long-term goal, or her global goal, can be understood as social inclusion, and on this interpretation, she seems very self-controlled. Perhaps she avoids the temptation to not smoke by making a plan to ditch her old uncool friends, or perhaps she simply stifles her disgust reaction to cigarette smoke. Compare Blossom to her weaker-willed friend, Six, who doesn’t smoke. Six might avoid smoking because she simply gives in to her desire to avoid disgusting things like cigarette smoke. Blossom seems more self-controlled than Six, and so much the worse for Blossom.

To obviate this *prima facie* challenge, proponents of the view that there are no downsides to self-control might propose that the larger reward for Blossom, or her long-term goal, or her global goal, is physical health rather than social inclusion. In this case, Blossom seems less self-controlled than Six, and, again, so much the worse for Blossom. But on what grounds are Blossom’s goals being fixed? Explicitly, all the theories of self-control I’ve discussed fix the positivity or negativity of outcomes to the agent’s own evaluation of those outcomes. Whether physical health is more important than social inclusion is up to Blossom, in other words. But as I said above, to know how Blossom truly compares these outcomes is to know what she *really* wants, deep down, and knowing this is beyond the purview of theories of self-control.

Another way of dealing with this *prima facie* challenge is to appeal to the apparent fact that smoking *just is* self-harming. Because cigarette smoking is nearly universally understood to be unhealthy, that is, then we can code Blossom’s behavior as lacking in self-control. This intuition appeals to the sense of health that isn’t up to Blossom. Regardless of what she wants, smoking is bad for her. But this kind of normative analysis—in which what is good for a person is not up to them—is not countenanced by any of the theories of self-control discussed above, at least not explicitly.

My sense—which I mentioned above and will return to in §4—is that if you, like me, are inclined to see Blossom as acting against her global, long-term, and larger values, and thus as lacking in self-control, this may be because you and I think that smoking is bad. Psychological research on folk theories of the “true self” supports this. George Newman and colleagues (2014) have shown that people’s feeling about whether an agent has acted in accordance with or in conflict with their “true self” depends upon their moral evaluations of the agent’s actions. For example, liberals, who

¹⁹ Rawls and Vohs use self-control and self-regulation synonymously.

tend to think that homosexuality is morally acceptable, are more willing than conservatives, who tend to disapprove of homosexuality, to say that a person's feelings of attraction to another person of the same sex represent that person's true self (Inbar et al. 2012). Newman and colleagues extend this to cases of dual-motive conflict. They find that when a person is described as feeling attracted to others of the same sex, despite reflectively believing that homosexuality is wrong, liberals say that the person's feelings represent their true self more than their reflective beliefs do. Conservatives say that the person's reflective beliefs represent their true self more than their feelings do. But when the story is flipped, and a person is described as believing that homosexuality is perfectly acceptable, but has negative feelings about same-sex couples, Newman and colleagues find the exact opposite pattern of judgment. Liberals say that the person's reflective beliefs represent their true self and conservatives say that the person's feelings represent their true self. It is easy to imagine the analogous case involving Blossom and Six, in which people's judgments of their self-control are determined by their judgments about the relative merits of smoking and social inclusion.

The upshot is that proponents of the view that there are no downsides to self-control cannot easily redefine cases like Blossom's as evidence of self-control failure. Like Newman's subjects, they do so at the risk of making ad hoc adjustments to their beliefs to accommodate the data. The same worry is relevant when one considers the outcome variables examined in reviews of the effects of trait self-control. For example, Tangney and colleagues (2004) examine the effects of self-control on five kinds of outcomes: achievement and task performance, impulse control, adjustment, interpersonal relationships, moral emotions, and two personality features (conscientiousness and perfectionism). Because they find that in every case, high trait self-control predicts positive outcomes in these domains, Tangney and colleagues conclude that their tests "failed to indicate any drawbacks of so-called overcontrol" (2004, 271). But not included in their review is consideration of how participants evaluate these outcomes. How important is professional achievement, for these participants, for example, compared to other goals they might hold, such as having time for their families?

There is, of course, ample reason to believe that people *do* value the outcomes associated with high trait self-control. Most of us want impulse control and healthy relationships and so on, and we commonly raise our children with these outcomes in mind. But even ignoring how these outcomes are sometimes in tension with other things we care about, it is clear that these are not the *only* things people value. Examining five outcome variables (as in Tangney et al. 2004, or even 12 outcome variables as in de Ridder et al. 2012) is too limited to justify the conclusion that downsides to high self-control don't exist. There are, in fact, data—not considered in these reviews—that suggest that high trait self-control does harm other goals that people might have.

Anan Keinan and Ran Kivetz identify consequences of overcontrolled—or what they call “hyperopic”—decision-making in consumer behavior, for example.²⁰ Keinan and Kivetz (2011) show that people who score high on a “productivity orientation measure” struggle to “take a break from self-evaluation” and are prone to experience “self-control regret,” that is, regret over lost opportunities to enjoy oneself (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). The productivity orientation measure reflects concern with being productive, making progress in daily life, and accomplishing more in less time. While there is no doubt that being productive, etc. is often valuable, being stuck in “production mode” all the time can make free time difficult and unpleasant, their research suggests. People with strong productivity orientations tend to think of vacations as opportunities to build their “experiential CV” rather than as opportunities to relax; they tend to think of food choices in terms of check-lists rather than as sources of pleasure.

Some researchers who defend the claim that high self-control has no downsides recognize that certain exercises of self-control can lead to undesirable outcomes (perhaps akin to those identified by Keinan and Kivetz). But their analysis of these cases putatively preserves the idea that one can’t be overcontrolled. It does so by interpreting cases in which exercises of self-control lead to undesirable outcomes as stemming from either using the wrong self-control strategies or from using self-control to misguided ends. In this case, self-control itself isn’t (apparently) to blame. The problem is putatively with one’s strategies or one’s goals. Peterson and Seligman (2004) analogize self-control to intelligence. While one can endeavor to be intelligent in the wrong ways, and one can intelligently pursue dastardly ends, one can’t be too intelligent in itself, they argue. Both self-control and intelligence are intrinsically valuable instruments for pursuing our goals, in other words.²¹

Similarly, Baumeister and Todd Heatherton (1996) distinguish “misregulation” from “underregulation” (i.e., having too little self-control). They note three forms of misregulation, none of which have to do with “overregulation,” of course, and all of which appear to point to an agent’s faults, not to faults with self-control. First, one might “misunderstand contingencies.” This involves having false beliefs about oneself or the world. For example, you might be irrationally hopeful that an unrequited love will change his or her mind about you because you have overestimated your attractiveness. In this case, your actions might be flawlessly self-controlled (i.e., your irrational hope is not due to giving in to tempting feelings) but you fail to reach your goal anyway, due to your self-deception. Second, one might attempt to “quixotically attempt to control the uncontrollable.” Thought suppression is an instance of this. So too, says Baumeister and Heatherton, is choking in sports. On their view, choking is the result of trying to consciously control a certain class of overlearned skilled actions which can’t be consciously controlled; such skills need to run on “autopilot.” Both thought suppression and attempting to consciously control

²⁰ In psychological literature, “myopia” is sometimes used metaphorically to describe a kind of impulsiveness, in which one is too focused on one’s proximal goals and desires (e.g., “alcohol myopia”). “Hyperopia” is meant as the inverse; a tendency to focus too much on one’s abstract or distal goals and desires.

²¹ I’m skeptical about this claim too, given evidence linking intelligence to worrying and rumination (Penny et al. 2015), to the blind spot bias (West et al. 2012), and to specific financial difficulties (in particular, Zagorsky (2007) finds that people with an IQ of 140 are twice as likely as those with average IQs to max out their credit cards).

overlearned skilled actions can have predictably deleterious results for achieving one's goals, but the problem here is putatively with the way one uses self-control, not with self-control itself. Finally, the third form of misregulation—giving too much priority to the regulation of affect—has to do with expending effort to control the wrong feelings. Baumeister and Heatherton's central example is procrastination. In procrastinating, a person might successfully control her momentary anxiety by avoiding work, but thereby exacerbate the panic she will feel later on when the deadline approaches. Giving too much priority to the regulation of affect really means giving too much priority to the regulation of salient feelings. This is a mistake of self-control strategizing. Again, apparently not a problem with self-control itself.

As Rawn and Vohs (2011) point out—and is consistent with Newman and colleagues' findings about folk true self judgments—these claims confuse process and outcome. Consider thought suppression. Say I want to suppress my thoughts about the soup dumplings I plan to eat tonight, in order to finish grading papers. Over and over, I think to myself, “papers! not dumplings!” This works. I stave off the craving long enough to finish grading. But once finished, I rush out and eat so many soup dumplings that I make myself sick. While grading, I effectively inhibited an impulse for an immediate reward; I resisted temptation; and I acted in accord with my abstract and distal goals. The only reason to consider this an act of misregulation is because the outcome was bad, either from an agent-neutral perspective about health or from the perspective of a more global goal I have to avoid overeating (i.e., more global than my abstract and distal goal of finishing grading). But both of these are bad interpretations. Self-control research can make no claim to agent-neutral values. And who knows which of my goals is most global, finishing grading or avoiding overeating. The better interpretation is that I successfully used self-control in a (somewhat) self-harming way.

Proponents of the temptation-avoidance view of self-control might offer a ready practical solution: how about having a snack while grading to stave off my soup dumpling cravings? This strategy seems superior in that I might finish grading without experiencing an amplified rebound effect of cravings. This then might capture the intuition that the most successful exercises of self-control don't involve avoiding temptations. I can have my paper-grading and eat it—dumplings—too. Indeed, as a hyperopic person, in Keinan and Kivetz' sense, this is the strategy I'm likely to use. I'd have made a good plan too. I'd consider exactly how long grading will take, how big of a snack I can get away with and at what time I should eat it, all in order to hit the mark of finishing grading and being hungry again at the same time. What could be wrong with this? (Continuing the confessional streak in this paper: I strategize about eating in this way all the time.)

Perhaps part of the pleasure I get from eating soup dumplings involves eating them on a whim. If so, even the most flawlessly executed temptation-avoidance plan will entail downsides for me. Like Belinda (§1), who abandons the idea of eating ice cream for dinner once doing so is no longer a spontaneous act, perhaps I will be inclined to drop the idea of soup dumplings once they no longer represent an indulgence. Or perhaps I will simply enjoy them less. In either case, if part of

the value for me of doing something is tied to doing it spontaneously, without planning or practical reasoning, then I am bound to sacrifice something of value to me when I make a good plan for dumpling-eating, despite being flawlessly self-controlled.²² In other words, planning to be spontaneous is, in some cases at least, self-defeating. There is a particular feeling of freedom, as D’Cruz points out, that can only be found when one acts with abandon—by skipping one’s stop on the train and having an unplanned adventure, for example (2013, 37). This feeling of freedom arguably derives precisely from the fact that one is being a little reckless. Another way to put this is that the value of spontaneity has something to do with acting *for no good reason*.²³ Alternately one could call this acting for unreasoned reasons, or acting for what D’Cruz calls “volatile reasons,” which are reasons to ψ that are destroyed by deliberating about whether to ψ .

Another way to see this tension between even flawless self-control and spontaneity²⁴ is by way of analogy to the tension Susan Wolf (1982) describes between moral and nonmoral reasons for action. In arguing against “moral saintliness,” Wolf points out that valuing nonmoral activities for moral reasons can lead to an impoverished experience of the things we value. If you love playing music because you think it is your moral duty to do so, your love of music would seem to be impoverished. It seems good and true that the David Bowies of the world love music on its own terms, rather than for moral reasons. Just so, making even an ideally self-controlled choice to be spontaneous would seem to express a way of valuing spontaneity under the wrong description. It would be akin to loving music for moral reasons. In both cases, you are assimilating value A (music, ice cream for dinner) into value B (moral reasons, reasonable plans) when part of the value of A is precisely that it is *not* B.

Here’s a final related thought. Kieren Setiya (2014) argues that “atelic” activities are an important part of a well-led life. Telic activities are those that you can complete, like writing an essay or walking from A to B. Atelic activities are ones that you cannot complete. Hanging out with friends, or going for a walk with no destination in mind, are atelic. You can cease doing these things, by moving on to something else, but you cannot complete these activities, in the sense of reaching a terminal point that satisfies the aim of the activity. Setiya argues that atelic activities may be an antidote to at least one form of the “midlife crisis.” That is, people who have been relatively successful at meeting their goals sometimes find themselves dissatisfied around midlife, and Setiya

²² The value of acting spontaneously, without planning or explicit practical reasoning, also arguably animates some of the world’s great ethical traditions, such as Confucian and Daoist theories of virtue (e.g., Slingerland, 2003, 2014). There is also some related empirical research, based on the “Spontaneity Assessment Inventory” (Kipper & Shemer 2007), suggesting that dispositions to act spontaneously correlate positively with measures of well-being (Friedman, 1994) and negatively with several indices (Spielberger et al., 1983; Foa et al., 2002).

²³ I mean this in the ordinary, non-technical sense. If one thinks that all action is done for reasons, then spontaneous actions, like eating ice cream for dinner, will be done for reasons (or for good reasons, depending on the agent’s attitudes). But people often say, “I did it for no good reason” or “I just did it,” and this is the sense in which I mean that the value of spontaneously eating ice cream for dinner is tied to doing it for no good reason.

²⁴ I find it intuitive that people with high trait self-control are liable to be less spontaneous. But this appears to be supported empirically too. As measured by an Implicit Association Test and an Affective Misattribution Procedure, spontaneous impulses predict behavior much better for people with low trait self-control than with high trait self-control (Friese & Hofmann, 2009).

argues that the solution might be learning how to engage in activities that are *not* driven by goals.²⁵ If Setiya is right, it seems that people with high trait self-control may be particularly prone to midlife crises and particularly poorly suited to overcome them by engaging in atelic activities. Such people are liable to treat atelic activities as accomplishments or goals. Recall that every definition of self-control considered in §2 involves striving toward goals. Hyperopic people like me might be prone to think of taking walks and hanging out with friends as another item to check off the list. But the very point about atelic activities is that you can't check them off the list. Their value is in being unfinished. Unfinishable. Unamenable to goal-striving. People with too much self-control are liable to experience a meaningful loss in proportion to whatever value atelic activities have in life.

4. The Politics of Self-Control

A final set of concerns about the view that there are no downsides to self-control focus on the kinds of interests this claim expresses. One worry stems from research on the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and trait self-control. People who are low SES tend to score lower on trait self-control than people who are high SES (Evans et al. 2005; Evans & Rosenbaum 2008). One reason for this, it seems, is that people who are low SES may not have the luxury to think about the future in the same way that people who are high SES do. If you're financially strapped, you probably have to spend comparatively more of your money for, and give comparatively more of your attention to, your present needs (Thompson 2014). People who are low SES also tend to live in a relatively unstable world (Evans et al. 2005). Sara Heller and colleagues (2015) provide an illustrative vignette of the comparative benefits and consequences of delay discounting for advantaged and disadvantaged people:

. . . imagine a relative promises to pick up a teenager from school, but right now it is not working out—15 minutes after school lets out, the ride is still not there. For a youth from an affluent background the adaptive response is probably to wait (persist), because the adult will eventually show up and the teen will be spared the cost of having to walk or bus home. In school, if that youth is struggling to learn some difficult material the optimal response is also to keep trying (persist); if needed, eventually a teacher or parent or peer will help the youth master the material. Now imagine a youth from a disadvantaged area where things can be more chaotic and unpredictable. When the youth is waiting for a ride after school that is running late, the adaptive response to things not working out may be to start walking home (explore a more promising strategy). When the youth is struggling with schoolwork the automatic response could be either to just move on, or to persist, depending partly on whether they think of this as the same situation as someone being late picking them up from school (for example if they think 'this is yet another situation where I can't rely on others').

²⁵ Heinzelman and King (2016) find that scoring highly on a "meaning in life" scale is positively correlated with reliance on "gut feelings." Setiya isn't talking about gut feelings, of course, but one can sense a relationship between atelic activities and actions that one just does, without a goal in mind.

Or as Linda Tirado (2014) puts it more succinctly: “[Poor people] don’t plan long term because if we do we’ll just get our hearts broken. It’s best not to hope. You just take what you can get as you spot it.”²⁶

This suggests that there are social and political dimensions to the promotion of the virtues of self-control. In particular, high self-control might be more effectively beneficial for some rather than others (namely for those with the freedom to choose delayed rewards and for whom waiting for rewards is optimal). Related research suggests that the benefits of self-control are mixed for low SES youth, in particular low-SES black youth. Gregory Miller and colleagues (2015) show that for low-SES black teenagers, high trait self-control predicts academic success and psychosocial health, but at the expense of epigenetic aging (i.e., a biomarker for disparities between biological and chronological age). “To the extent that they had better self-control,” the authors write, “low-SES children went on to experience greater cardiometabolic risk as young adults, as reflected on a composite of obesity, blood pressure, and the stress hormones cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine” (10325). Brody and colleagues (2013) arrive at similar conclusions, finding that low-SES black youth with high self-control, while achieving more academically than low-SES black youth with low self-control, also experience more allostatic load (i.e., stress on the body, which in turn predicts the development of chronic diseases and health disparities).

These findings are worrying at face value. And they demonstrate downsides of high trait self-control. But they do more than this too. They suggest that embedded in self-control research is the presumption that what’s good for one set of research subjects is good for everyone. This ignores the socioeconomic (and racial) hierarchies in which we (in the United States, at least) live. It ignores the social and political facts that make exercises of self-control possible.

More specifically, the presumption seems to be that what’s good for everyone is a form of *obedience*. Recall Duckworth’s self-control scale for children, which queries children about whether they interrupt, keep their desks tidy, control their emotions, don’t talk back, and so on. What this scale seems to measure is how “well-behaved” a child is, or how concerned a child is with being well-behaved. And here I mean well-behaved in (what feels to me) the old-fashioned sense; to be well-behaved is to be obedient to the most relevant sources of authority.²⁷ These will likely be parents or teachers in childhood, and social norms of various kinds, depending on one’s social environment, as one ages. In introducing their research on self-control, Tangney and colleagues (2004, 272) make this notion explicit:

People are happiest and healthiest when there is an optimal fit between self and environment, and this fit can be substantially improved by altering the self to fit the world (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Indeed, the self’s capacity to inhibit its antisocial

²⁶ See also Bully et al. (2016).

²⁷ This thought was partially inspired by this blog post: <<http://hotelconcierge.tumblr.com/post/113360634364/the-stanford-marshmallow-prison-experiment>>

impulses and conform to the demands of group life has been proposed to be the hallmark of civilized life (Freud, 1930).

Similarly, in defining the “desirable behavior” that trait self-control promotes, de Ridder and colleagues (2012, 83) write:

Desirable behavior is conceptualized as any behavior that contributes to people’s goals to meet their obligations, duties, and responsibilities and adjust to social norms of living happy, successful, and healthy lives.²⁸

These ways of thinking of self-control—in terms of obeying perceived sources of authority—point back in time in a two ways. First, as Tangney and colleagues note, self-control research points back to the Freudian conception of the “super-ego” as an engine for the internalization of cultural norms. Of course, Freud (1930) recognized that a hypervigilant super-ego had downsides.²⁹ Second, self-control research points back to Stanley Milgram’s (1963) (in)famous experiments on obedience to authority. They do so by illuminating just how far social psychology has come since Milgram. The obedience experiments were meant (in part) to help explain how ordinary people can perpetrate horrors like the Holocaust. They suggested a deep concern about the dangers of “altering the self to fit the world” in the wrong circumstances. Forgetting about this danger is particularly worrying in a world rife with injustice. For presumably altering the self to fit the world leaves the world as it is. Another way to put this is that the unequivocal promotion of self-control makes insufficient room for another virtue. In short: sometimes one ought not alter oneself to fit the world, but rather try to change the world to fit oneself.

Here’s a minor example. My children make art at school which is sometimes put onto mugs and water bottles for fundraisers. My daughter painted a skull and crossbones for her mug, but was told to start over by the art teacher, because “your grandmother wouldn’t want to look at that.” My daughter drew a flower instead, and then asked us not to buy the mug. In this situation, I wish she would have talked back! I wish she would have been less self-controlled in that moment, less cowed by the importance of controlling her feelings.³⁰ And this translates, of course, to other, more consequential dispositions considered indicative of low trait self-control. I want my children to lose their tempers when they learn about city managers poisoning the children of Flint, MI with lead. I hope they become so upset by learning the history of slavery in America that they have trouble concentrating in class.

²⁸ See footnote #10 for another statement of this kind, which stresses the element of “meeting social expectations” embedded in self-control research.

²⁹ In making this point, I am not endorsing a Freudian conception of the mind.

³⁰ Perhaps it would have taken self-control for her to stand up to the teacher? This ambiguity mirrors the discussion in §3 about Blossom. Future research should consider means for interpreting cases like these. For example, perhaps certain physiological correlates could be identified with self-control and thereafter used to distinguish cases of self-control failure from cases of self-control success (with negative outcomes) Also, a point of information: my daughter’s grandmother would have surely preferred a skull and crossbones over a boring flower picture.

This is by no means the *end* of the story. If my children are to be effective activists about these things, they will surely need self-control, and will need to cultivate sensitivity about when and where it is helpful to express or stifle their feelings. But it is clearly an open possibility—and a likely one to my mind—that having too much self-control may inhibit the motivation, outrage, and rejection of unjust norms that effective activism also requires. More broadly, as Freud suggested, altering the self to meet the demands of group life is immensely valuable. And people benefit in important ways from having the ability to do so in high degrees, as self-control research suggests (even the research on racial and SES disparities). Other critics have argued that the more researchers try to solve social problems by teaching people how to be self-controlled, the more we are likely to ignore social and political solutions to those problems.³¹ The current emphasis on resilience and self-control and the like, Parul Sehgal writes, is “indistinguishable from classic American bootstrap logic when it is applied to individuals, placing all the burden of success and failure on a person’s character.”³² I think this claim is overstated. Self-control has undeniable benefits, and teaching children and others to use self-control effectively is a good thing (with due sensitivity to socioeconomic and racial context). But it is something else besides to say that self-control has no downsides. It does, and we must teach (and learn) about these too.

5. Outline of an Alternative

I have endeavored to recognize the virtues of self-control, while rejecting the claim that these virtues are unequivocal. An alternative model needs to recognize both the possibility of deficiencies and excesses of self-control as well as the relationship between the effective use of self-control and one’s situation (including, but not limited to, one’s social, political, and cultural context). An older theory in personality psychology is promising in this regard. Jack Block and colleagues’ model (Block & Block, 1980; Block, 2002), which the authors presented as an alternative to the then dominant impulse-inhibition (or classic) conception of self-control, identifies two central variables: “ego-control” (EC) and “ego resiliency” (ER).³³ 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.

³¹ This idea has been developed in response to research on implicit bias in particular. See, for instance, Haslanger (2015).

³² See <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/the-profound-emptiness-of-resilience.html?_r=0>. See footnote #12 for brief discussion of research on “grit” (which I take to be more or less synonymous with research on “resilience”).

³³ My aim is not to defend Block’s model of self-control per se, but I think its framework has much to offer.

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).

Cultivating high ER is essentially what Heller and colleagues recommend in the case of both the advantaged student who can count on people coming through for them and for the disadvantaged student for whom it's adaptive to assume that people aren't reliable. These students are in different situations and ought to adjust their impulsivity and delay-discounting accordingly. Of course, someone from a disadvantaged background who wants to (for example) succeed in college might have to recalibrate their habitual ways of deploying EC. But this is precisely what high ER represents: the ability to adjust one's EC to situational demands.

ER is a normative ideal on Block's model. Self-control—or EC—is the means for attaining this ideal. Crucially, on this model, 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 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).

Overcontrolled people sound hyperopic like me, in other words.

Philosophers will rightly sniff an Aristotelian sensibility here. Rather than think of being self-controlled as itself hitting the mark in achieving *eudaimonia*, we must recognize that self-control, like most things, admits of deficiencies and excesses.

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