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Self-Control and Overcontrol: Conceptual, Ethical, and Ideological Issues in Positive Psychology

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Abstract 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." This claim is widely endorsed in the research literature. I argue that it is false. My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I identify conceptual confusion in the definition of self-control, specifically as it pertains to the claim that you cannot be too self-controlled. Second, I consider 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. Third, I raise worries about the social and political values embedded in the science of self-control. Self-control as it is understood in the positive psychology literature benefits some people more than others, depending, for example, on their race and their socio-economic status. I conclude by briefly outlining an empirical framework for understanding self-control in traditional virtue theoretic terms as something that admits of deficiencies and excesses.

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

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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]

[1] See discussion in §2 on the difference between state and trait self-control.

This claim—that one cannot be too self-controlled—is false. My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I identify conceptual confusion in the definition of self-control, specifically as it pertains to the claim that you cannot be too self-controlled (§2). Second, I consider 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 (§2). Third, I raise worries about the social and political values embedded in the science of self-control (§3). Self-control as it is understood in the positive psychology literature benefits some people more than others, depending, for example, on their race and their socio-economic status. I conclude by briefly outlining an empirical framework for understanding self-control in traditional virtue theoretic terms as something that admits of deficiencies and excesses (§5).

Psychological research on self-control is widely influential. It has, for example, helped to reshape mainstream trends in education policies (Tough 2012). The large public charter school group known as KIPP ("Knowledge is Power Program") cites character-building through the promotion of self-control as one of its core 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 et al. (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 (2016) 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

[2] See, for instance, Neil Levy's 2015 Leverhulme Lectures at the University of Oxford, described here: <http://www.practicalethics.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 #9). In doing so—in particular in ignoring Hagger 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.

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.

Perhaps the best way to capture self-control in the relevant sense is by looking at the scales used to measure it. Angela Duckworth's self-control scale for children, for example, asks how often a child 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.[5] The more a child does these things, the less self-control she is thought to have. Similarly, the brief version of Tangney et al.'s (2004) Self-Control Scale asks adults 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)

People who agree strongly with these statements, and disagree strongly with those that are reversed scored (R), are thought to have high trait self-control. They are disposed to act in ways researchers consider to be more self-controlled than others.

One thing to notice about Tangney and colleagues' scale—which is the most commonly used—is that some of the statements thought to reflect self-control describe it as a kind of skill or capacity (e.g., I am *good* at resisting temptations), while others suggest that self-control is a kind of trait or personality type (e.g., *I* am lazy), while others still suggest that it is a tendency or behavioral disposition (e.g., I *often* act without thinking through all the alternatives).[6] This renders the construct a bit of a muddle. Moreover, specifically for adjudicating the claim that you cannot be too self-controlled, this ambiguity seems problematic. The claim entails strikingly different things depending on whether self-control is a skill, a personality trait, or a tendency. There might be nothing wrong with having self-control in spades if self-control is a kind of skill or capacity. Compare to being an excellent marksman or a smooth rhetorician, skills one could deploy for laudatory or nefarious ends, but which are

[5] This version of the scale—formally known as the Domain-Specific Impulsivity Scale for Children (DSIS-C)—is formatted for self-report. Two other versions are formatted for teacher-report and parent-report. See https://upenn.app.box.com/DSIS-C.

[6] Thanks to Eugene Chislenko for pushing me to clarify this point. I note that additional distinctions might be made here, for example, between skills and capacities, and between behavioral tendencies and dispositions.

arguably unproblematic in themselves. But if self-control is a trait or a tendency, things may not be so simple. It is one thing to have good aim shooting a gun; it is quite another to *like* shooting things a lot or to be a person who *often* shoots things. Ditto for rhetoric. It is one thing to have great capacity for the art of persuasion; it is another to like it so much, or be so disposed to it, that one becomes a Frankfurtian bullshitter.

This being said, I'll assume in what follows that self-control is some kind of behavioral disposition.[7] The deeper conceptual worry is about how researchers understand *what* self-control disposes people to do. Several related descriptions have been offered. According to what might be called the classic conception of self-control, self-controlled behavior involves the effortful inhibition of preferences for small immediate rewards over larger delayed rewards (e.g., Mischel 1974; Thaler & Shefrin 1981). This way of understanding self-control appeals to the folk concept of willpower. Paradigmatic examples involve resisting one's desire to eat sugary foods or to spend money impulsively. Walter Mischel's famous "Marshmallow Studies" seem to illustrate the classic conception. 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 treat for 10–20 min, two treats (Mischel 1974; Mischel et al. 1989). Those who waited were thought to display greater self-control.[8]

But there is a well-founded concern that the classic conception of self-control is too narrow. Actively resisting one's impulses isn't the only way that people avoid temptations. 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 likely to be more effectively self-controlled than one who is frequently at war with her impulses (Fujita 2011; Duckworth et al. 2016). To this point, Michael Ent et al. (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* that people who score lower on the measure.[9]

Taking this point on board, some researchers have dropped the insistence that self-controlled behavior necessarily involves impulse-inhibition, while maintaining that it does involve managing conflicts between immediate and delayed rewards. Call this the temptation avoidance view. For example, Angela Duckworth and Laurence Steinberg

[7] Baumeister and Alquist write, "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" (2009, 116).

[8] I say that the marshmallow studies only "seem" to illustrate the idea that self-control involves impulse-inhibition because, while the most commonly cited explanation of Michel's findings focuses on the impulsivity of the children who couldn't wait for a second marshmallow, another possibility is that the marshmallow experiment gauges the degree to which children trust the experimenter (e.g., to follow through on her promise of two marshmallows if the child waits 15 min). See, for instance, Kidd et al. (2013). Thanks to Robin Scheffler for pointing out this possibility to me.

[9] 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, alongside recent findings that—unlike physical strength—self-control doesn't seem to improve with repeated practice (Miles et al. 2016). 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. Thanks to Alex Madva for pointing out this ambiguity.

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 involves resisting temptations but not necessarily by stifling them in the moment: "[self-control is] the voluntary regulation of behavioral, emotional, and attentional impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations or diversions."[10] The person who avoids the candy shop altogether exerts self-control in this sense, but not necessarily by stifling occurrent impulses. Instead, one might imagine that they make a plan to avoid the street on which the candy shop sits.

But what counts as a temptation? Imagine Blossom, a teenager who knows that smoking is bad for her long-term health, and finds the smell and taste of cigarettes disgusting. However, Blossom wants to fit in with the cool kids and thinks that taking up smoking will make her seem cool. So she starts smoking. At first glance, Blossom's behavior seems to represent a failure to be self-controlled. She succumbs to the temptation to give in to peer pressure. But why code this as a failure to be self-controlled? Blossom has to overcome significant hurdles in order to start smoking. She finds the smell and taste of cigarettes disgusting and she knows that smoking is dangerous. Nevertheless, she triumphs over these barriers to fulfilling her goal of fitting in with the cool kids! Compare Blossom to her friend Six, who doesn't start smoking in the same situation. Why not think that Six succumbs to the temptation to avoid disgusting and dangerous things and thereby fails to achieve her goal of fitting in?

Blossom's case isn't fanciful. Presenting data reminiscent of virtually every Very Special Episode from 1980s and 1990s sit-coms,[11] Catherine Rawn and Kathleen Vohs (2011) argue that many of the behaviors that are typically coded as failures of self-control—like smoking cigarettes—can be understood as *utilizing* 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, like Blossom, are often motivated to do these things on the basis of social inclusion goals. And meeting these goals requires self-control, since cigarettes and alcohol, for example, are generally perceived to be unhealthy and are often, at least initially, unpleasant (Fallon and Rozin 1983; DiFranza et al. 2004). Rawn and Vohs' "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).[12]

Cases like these pose a problem for psychologists who believe that you can't be too self-controlled. If they accept the self-control for personal harm model at face value, then they must accept that people can harm themselves by being very self-controlled. On this interpretation, Blossom has more self-control than Six, and this is all the worse for Blossom. However, if defenders of the claim that you can't be too self-controlled reject the self-control for personal harm model, and reinterpret these cases, such that Blossom fails to exert self-control while Six succeeds, they avoid accepting clear

[10] <https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/duckworth/pages/research>. See footnote #30 for brief discussion of Duckworth's related research on "grit."

[11] See < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Very_special_episode>

[12] Rawn and Vohs use self-control and self-regulation synonymously. See also footnote #16 on using self-control to maintain a self-harming addiction.

counterexamples to their claim, but they do so at the cost of purchasing what philosophers call the problem of identification. Let me explain.

The problem of identification is the problem of understanding which desire or goals or values are an agent's "own." Defenders of the claim that you can't be too self-controlled purchase this problem in the sense that reinterpreting Blossom and Co.'s cases requires some criterion on the basis of which one can say that Blossom fails to act in a self-controlled way. Blossom's case, and all of those that seem to demonstrate self-harm due to self-control, are ambiguous. They are "dual-motive" conflicts and it isn't obvious which motive represents a temptation and which represents the agent's deeply held values or goals. To resolve this ambiguity, there needs to be some principled way of saying that Blossom fails to exert self-control, so that researchers aren't interpreting the case this way just because doing so saves their claim about the impossibility of overcontrol. The characterization of self-control in the temptation-avoidance view does not offer such a principle. It simply defines self-controlled behavior in terms of the apparently intuitive difference between temptations and personally held goals. But this intuitive difference equally allows seeing Blossom as succeeding and failing to behave in a self-controlled way. The difference isn't all that intuitive, in other words.[13]

Here is a worrying possibility: there is reason to think that researchers' normative coding of self-control successes and failures may simply reflect their own moral values. Consider what George Newman et al. (2014) call the theory of the "good true self." This theory suggests that people's feeling about whether an agent has acted in accordance with or in conflict with their "true self" depends upon the moral beliefs of the person evaluating the agent's actions. For example, liberals who 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 researchers' judgments of the outcome—smoking is bad!—drive their interpretation of the case, such that Blossom fails to act in a self-controlled way, since she is the one who starts smoking, and Six succeeds in acting in a self-controlled way, since she doesn't

[13] In describing the dangers of willpower, George Ainslie (1999, 74) borrows an example from Jon Elster to illustrate the difficulty or ranking competing long term interests: I might wish to eat cake because I like cake, wish to not eat cake because I'm vain, and wish to not not eat cake because I wish I wasn't vain. What determines which of these is my more deeply held value may not be "how much it pays," Ainslie argues, but how enforceable the intention is. Rules proscribing overeating seem more enforceable, for example, than rules proscribing vanity. But this doesn't seem like a good reason to rank the desire to avoid cake over the desire to avoid vanity in the ledger of my desires.

smart smoking. This would of course be bad practice, and it would also make a mess of the view that you can't be too self-controlled, revealing it to reflect researchers' moral beliefs rather than reflecting psychological reality.

Some researchers have attempted to address this problem, rather than rely on an intuitive distinction between temptations and valued goals. For example, Kentaro Fujita identifies self-controlled behavior with decisions and actions that reflect an agent's "global goals and values" (2011, 252). This might be called the capacious conception of self-control, since it defines self-control in terms of neither impulse-inhibition, nor in terms of temptation-avoidance, but rather more broadly in terms of actions that reflect a certain set of goals and values. 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. The goal of being healthy is abstract compared to the goal of eating cake, in the sense that "health" is a concept and cake is a delicious thing sitting right there in front of you. And health is distal compared to cake, in the sense that the benefits of healthy eating come later in time, while the enjoyment of cake comes now.

But the capacious conception falls prey to the same problems as the temptation-avoidance view. On the one hand, there appear to be cases in which the more effectively self-controlled one is—understood as acting on the basis of global goals and values—the more one harms oneself. Alfred (§1) seems to harm himself, however trivially, by acting on the basis of some abstract and distal desire to be prudent. He'd be better off enjoying an indulgence like ice cream for dinner from time to time.[14] Or consider 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.[15] Ceteris paribus, she would be better off eating.

On the other hand, one could interpret these as cases in which the agent fails to act in accord with her global goals and values. But in this case, we need a reason to believe that global goals and values represent what the agent *really* wants. Unsurprisingly to philosophers of action, this isn't a satisfying way to solve the problem of identification. Abstract and distal goals and values don't necessarily stand for the agent. They don't have inherent special authority in the guidance of behavior. Numerous examples illustrate this: Alfred, Arpaly's sufferer of anorexia nervosa, children and elderly people who may lack the capacity to form abstract and distal goals yet may still have authentic selves (Jaworska 1999; Shoemaker 2015), people who act on the basis of implicit biases that conflict with their abstract and distal goals yet still seem responsible for those biases (Holroyd 2012; Brownstein 2015), and so on.

Perhaps, though, it is too much to expect that psychological theories of self-control deliver answers to philosophical puzzles. Philosophers themselves can't seem to agree about how to solve the problem of identification! In principle, positive psychologists could avoid this problem by making an agent-neutral claim about the difference between self-control success and self-control failure. That is, perhaps self-controlled

[14] See further discussion of the value of spontaneity in §3.

[15] 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). Anorexia nervosa is just one potential example of what Arpaly labels "inverse *akrasia*," or acting rightly in spite of one's all-things-considered best judgment. For another example, Arpaly offers Huckleberry Finn, who she argues deserves praise for giving in to the temptation to not turn in his friend Jim, as escaped slave. See discussion in Brownstein and Madva (2012).

behavior has some set of defining features which are independent of what any particular agent wants or believes or values. For example, perhaps the subjective experience of effort is a necessary and sufficient feature of acting in a self-controlled way. The problem here is that (a) this way of thinking isn't remotely reflected in positive psychologists' own definitions of self-control, which are formulated in agent-relative ways (i.e., in terms of agents' values and desires) and (b), this way of thinking would almost certainly evoke counterexamples involving agents who wholeheartedly value and desire X yet counterintuitively act in a self-controlled way in pursuit of not-X. People suffering from unwanted drug addiction, for example, exert tremendous effort in finding their next score.[16] It would be odd to say that their actions exemplify self-control. And if it does, again, they would present a striking counterexample to the claim that you can't be too self-controlled.

However, none of this impugns the finding that high scores on measures of self-control predict a number of outcomes that many people, at least, think are positive—good test scores, high salaries, successful relationships, and more (Tangney et al. 2004). So whatever self-control is, the scales used to measure it predict many seemingly good things (assuming the large reviews of the scale's predictive validity are themselves valid[17]). 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 perhaps they are not looking everywhere they should.

3 Disadvantages Associated with Overcontrol

Tangney et al. (2004) examine the effects of self-control on five kinds of outcomes:

- Achievement and task performance, operationalized using grade point average in a sample of college students
- Impulse control, operationalized using an alcohol use screening inventory and an eating disorder inventory
- Psychological adjustment, operationalized using several indices, including somatization, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism, and also a self-esteem scale
- Personality features, specifically conscientiousness and perfectionism
- Interpersonal relationships, operationalized using measures of family cohesion, family conflict, attachment style, empathy, perspective taking, and anger
- Moral emotions, specifically propensities to feel guilt and shame

[16] In "Addiction and Authorship," Crispin Sartwell writes, ". . . addicts often suffer from an excess of will. Ask yourself what it takes to do that, say, every day. I tell you what it takes: it takes will-power. You have absolutely got to stop listening to your body; you have to overcome a thousand bodily recalcitrances and make yourself keep pouring. Ask yourself what it takes to keep doing this even while everyone around you is telling you that you need to stop, and so on. It takes a masterful will." See < http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol_4/sartwell.htm>

[17] See footnotes #4 and #9 on the replication crisis in psychology. Also note: I do not offer my own definition of self-control. Hereafter, when I refer to self-control, I refer to whatever behavioral disposition(s) are captured by the self-control scale.

Tangney and colleagues' find that high trait self-control predicts positive outcomes in these domains and conclude as a result that their tests "failed to indicate any drawbacks of so-called overcontrol" (2004, 271).[18]

Similar points as those I made in §2 apply here, however. What counts as a positive outcome in Tangney and colleagues' review is questionable. For example, the correlation between high trait self-control and empathy is given as evidence for the benefits of self-control on interpersonal relationships. But whether empathy is itself good for interpersonal relationships is contestable. Persuasive arguments have been given that empathy is biased, short-sighted, innumerate, and more (Bloom 2016). Similarly, Tangney and colleagues take guilt to be an "adaptive response to sin and failure" that motivates people "in a constructive, future-oriented direction" when they have behaved badly. Shame, on the other hand, "brings with it a panoply of psychological and social hidden costs" (2004, 281). Thus the comparatively stronger correlation of high trait self-control with guilt than with shame is taken as evidence of the value of self-control. However, while it might be right that feeling guilt is often preferable to feeling shame, it isn't remotely clear that guilt is, in all cases, a positive moral emotion and shame is, in all cases, a negative moral emotion. Shame may have value in many cultural contexts (cf. Vanderheiden and Mayer 2017). Moreover, it isn't even clear that shame and guilt are comparable; some argue that they operate in orthogonal contexts (e.g., shame may be a fundamentally social emotion, whereas guilt may not be (Teroni and Deonna 2008)).

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 family cohesion and so on, and we commonly raise our children with these outcomes in mind. But sometimes these outcomes are in tension with other things people care about. For example, people sometimes feel a tension between professional achievement and spending time with their families. Perhaps people with high trait self-control sacrifice time with their families, vacations, play time, etc. in order to achieve more. Maybe on sum this is a good thing. But maybe not. The answer isn't obvious.

Apropos of this possibility, there is research suggesting, albeit somewhat indirectly, that highly self-controlled people are disposed to make these kinds of sacrifices. Anan Keinan and Ran Kivets identify consequences of overcontrolled—or what they call "hyperopic"—decision-making in consumer behavior, for example.[19] Keinan and Kivetz (2011) show that people with high scores 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 and 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

[18] de Ridder et al. (2012) divide many of the same kinds of outcomes into nine categories (school and work performance, eating and weight behavior, sexual behavior, addictive behavior, interpersonal functioning, affect regulation, well-being and adjustment, deviant behavior, and planning and decision making) and come to similar overall conclusions about the benefits of self-control. de Ridder and colleagues find greater variety than Tangney and colleagues in the effects of self-control across outcome domains, however (e.g., they find strong correlation with school and work performance but relatively weak correlation with eating and weight behavior).

[19] 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.

"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 being disposed to act in self-controlled ways leads 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. A hyperopic person isn't too self-controlled; rather, she is using the wrong self-control strategies or has adopted problematic goals.[20]

Along these lines, 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 other faults an agent might have, 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 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 one 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.

[20] 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. However, I'm skeptical about this claim too, given evidence linking intelligence to worrying and rumination (Penney 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).

As Rawn and Vohs (2011) point out—and is consistent with Newman and colleagues' findings about folk beliefs about the good true self—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!" In some sense, 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 acted in a self-controlled and (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 stifling impulses. 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 frequently strategize about eating in this way.)

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 when I make a good plan for dumpling-eating, despite being flawlessly self-controlled.[21] In other words, planning to be spontaneous is, in some cases at least, self-defeating. (Consider the irony of the *Slate* headline, "Hillary Clinton Hatches Plan to be More Spontaneous."[22]) There is a particular feeling of freedom, as D'Cruz points out, that can only be found when one

[21] The value of acting spontaneously, without planning or explicit practical reasoning, 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 2006), 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).

[22] See <http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/09/08/ hillary_clinton_reboot_the_nyt_reports_ she_ will_show_more humor_and_heart.html>

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 φ that are destroyed by deliberating about whether to φ.

Another way to understand the tension between even flawless self-control and spontaneity[24] 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.

My point is not that it is definitely a good idea to "just do it" and act for no reason sometimes. Rather, my point is that acting spontaneously in this sense is plausibly a good thing from time to time, and even beginning to consider how to manage the tension between the value of acting spontaneously and the value of acting in a self-controlled way is not possible if it is true that one cannot be overcontrolled.[25]

[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. Here's a related way of expressing the 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 argues that the solution might be learning how to engage in activities that are *not* driven by means-ends reasoning. 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 valued ends and 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. This isn't exactly the same idea as acting spontaneously—in principle, one could plan to act in atelic ways—but it seems to me there is a family resemblance between these ideas. I suspect that people with too much self-control are liable to struggle to engage in or appreciate atelic activities.

[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).

[25] Thanks to Jason D'Cruz for helping me to see this point.

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.[26] 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 et al. (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').

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."[27]

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).[28] Consider research suggesting

[26] Of course, it is possible, in principle, that the causal arrow goes in the other direction too.

[27] See also Bulley et al. (2016).

[28] I doubt this to be uniquely true of self-control. Other traits, such as being witty or intelligent, may be differentially beneficial to individuals depending on the environment in which they live. Being perceived as "smart" can be a liability in some contexts, for example. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for helping me to see this point.

See footnote #20 for related discussion about the benefits and consequences of intelligence.

that the benefits of self-control are mixed for low SES youth, in particular for low-SES black youth. Gregory Miller et al. (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 agent). "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 et al. (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. An alternative interpretation of this scale—alternative to the idea that it measures self-control per se—is that what it captures is a disposition to be "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.[29] These will likely be parents or teachers in childhood, and social norms of various kinds, depending on one's social environment, as one ages.

This isn't just armchair speculation. There is robust evidence for the ease with which self-control becomes moralized (i.e., the ease with which people see self-control goals as matters of moral rightness and wrongness rather than as personal preferences; Rozin 1999; Mooijman et al. 2017). Marlon Mooijman et al. (2017) present persuasive evidence that self-control moralization occurs primarily in order to bind individuals together in collectives. Moreover, trait self-control is almost identical to conscientiousness in the "Big Five" personality inventory. The items used to measure both are strikingly similar, and trait conscientiousness predicts most of the positive life outcomes that trait self-control predicts (see Roberts et al. 2012). 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). Roberts et al. (2012) define conscientiousness as "the propensity to be self-controlled, responsible to others,

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

hardworking, orderly, and rule-abiding" (1).[30] Compare this to what Tangney et al. (2004, 272) say when introducing their research on self-control:

> 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 et al. 1982). Indeed, the self's capacity to inhibit its antisocial 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 et al. (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.

These ways of thinking of self-control—in terms of being obedient, conscientious, and deferential to perceived sources of authority—point back in time in 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.[31] 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 and personality psychology has come since Milgram. The obedience experiments were meant (in part) to help explain how ordinary people can perpetrate horrors like the Holocaust.[32] 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

[30] 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. 2017). The size of the correlation between grit scores and overall conscientiousness is $\rho = .84$ (Credé et al. 2017). For broad critical discussion of research on grit, see Engber (2016).

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

[32] As Timothy Snyder (2012) writes in a review of Pinker (2012), "some of the very traits that maintain social order, such as the habit of obedience to authority, also make total wars and policies of mass killing possible." Pinker claims that violence has declined dramatically over time and that the chief psychological virtue associated with this decline is self-control. But as Snyder aptly points out, "Mastery of self was not the Nazis' problem; self-control was in fact a major element of the SS ethos, as preached by Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler. Even Adolf Hitler practiced his emotive speeches. Lack of self-control was also not the problem for Joseph Stalin's executioners, or for Stalin and Stalinists generally. Individual Soviet NKVD men killed hundreds of people, one by one, in a single day; this can hardly be done without self-control of a very high order."

room for another virtue. In short: sometimes one ought not alter oneself to fit the world, but should 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.[33] 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 water in Flint, MI with lead. I hope they become so upset by learning the history of slavery in the United States that they have trouble concentrating in class.

Without more careful and wider appreciation for the downsides of self-control, positive psychology threatens to become a form of respectability politics in disguise.[34] It recommends, notably to marginalized people, to learn essential tools for success within the current status quo. For example, recall the public charter school KIPP's mission to improve education by focusing on building strengths of character. KIPP was developed in collaboration with leading positive psychologists Duckworth, Seligman, and Peterson and is explicitly based on their research. In addition to self-control, KIPP's founding mission names zest, grit, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity as the core strengths of character. There is a deafening silence here. There is nothing speaking to the importance of promoting a disposition to be outraged over injustice, to challenge the status quo, to be an active bystander, or to fight to change mainstream values, when they are exclusionary.

This is by no means the *end* of the story. If my and others' children are to be effective activists, they will surely need self-control, and will need to cultivate sensitivity about when and where it is helpful to resist temptations. 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 doing so, 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.[35] The current emphasis on resilience and self-control and the like, Parul Sehgal writes, is

[33] Perhaps it would have taken self-control for her to stand up to the teacher? This ambiguity mirrors the discussion in §2 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.

[34] Thanks to Alex Madva for this suggestion.

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

"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."[36] I think this claim is overstated. Self-control has undeniable benefits, and teaching children and others to be effectively self-controlled, in the right context, is a good thing. 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 importance of being self-controlled in the right contexts (including, but not limited to, one's social, political, and cultural context). This is, of course, another way of saying that self-control ought to be thought of in virtue theoretic terms. Positive psychologists hold that there can only be deficiency of self-control, not excess. But this is both false and dangerous. Empirical research should be concerned with both deficiencies and excesses of self-control.

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).[37] 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).

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 (sometimes) to assume that people aren't reliable. These students are in different situations and

[36] See <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/the-profound-emptiness-of-resilience.html?_r=0>. See footnote #30 for brief discussion of research on "grit" (which I take to be more or less synonymous with research on "resilience").

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

ought to adjust their impulsivity and delay-discounting accordingly.[38] 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. Rather than think of being self-controlled as itself hitting the mark in achieving *eudaimonia*, empirical researchers should acknowledge this and reconsider the distinctive threat overcontrol poses to the well-being of both individuals and their communities.

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[38] Block and colleagues' model also strikes me as more evolutionarily plausible than the theories of self-control in vogue today. For example, consider Pinker's (1997) account of anger as a signaling device. In a competitive environment, it is a liability to be known as the person who can always control her feelings and act reasonably. Better to be known as the person who, when transgressed against, is disposed to *lose* control and sacrifice anything in the pursuit of revenge. Strong emotions like anger act like doomsday machines, as depicted in the classic film *Dr. Strangelove.* They signal a willingness to go to irrational ends to protect oneself. This isn't an argument for the value of losing control *now*, as compared to losing control in the environment of early human evolution. Rather it is an argument that modeling self-control as having excesses and deficiencies is more naturalistically plausible than modeling self-control as a virtue with no excesses. Thanks to David Pereplyotchik for this suggestion.

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