AN ANTHOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES VOLUME 11

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Edited by
Patricia Hanna

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Patricia Hanna

This volume is a collection of papers selected from those presented at the 11th International Conference on Philosophy sponsored by the Athens Institute for Research and Education (ATINER), held in Athens, Greece, 23-26 May 2016.

This conference provides a singular opportunity for philosophers from all over the world to meet and share ideas with the aim of expanding the understanding of our discipline. Over the course of the conference sixty-three papers by philosophers from twenty-six countries were presented. The nine papers in this volume were selected for inclusion after a process of blind-review.

The papers chosen for inclusion give some sense of the variety of topics addressed at the conference. However, it would be impossible in an edited volume to ensure coverage of the full extent of diversity of the subject matter and approaches brought to the conference itself by the participants, some of whom could not travel to one another's home countries without enormous difficulty.

Since its inception in 2006, the conference has matured, reaching what might be seen as adolescence. Part of this maturity is reflected in the nature of the proceedings. We now have a group of dedicated philosophers who serve as the reviewers for the proceedings. They are committed to raising the standards of this publication; as a result, we are now able to ensure that each submission if blind-reviewed by at least two readers, as well as the editor and/or a member of the Editorial Board. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their extraordinary work.

C H A P T E R TWO

Rational Self-control

Atli Harðarson

Introduction

Imagine a man watching a child, say a two-year-old, running down a slope towards a river. This is a fast-flowing and treacherous stream. He knows that down by the riverbank the path is wet and slippery, and has good reasons to believe that the child may fall into the water. He is standing beside a fence. It would take him two or three minutes to climb over it and reach the child.

On the other side of the fence a few long-horned bulls are grazing. The man is afraid of the animals, although he knows that they are supposed to be harmless.

The brave and right thing to do is obviously to run past the cattle and save the child. There are, however, a number of different ways in which our protagonist might fail:

- He could misconstrue the situation, convincing himself that it is not as serious as it seems. He could, for instance, say to himself that most children know how to swim and the water is probably quite shallow near the bank. This seems crazy, but so are many real life examples of delusion and self-deception.
- It is also possible for him to decide not to bother. He might assess the situation correctly and know that the right thing to do is to save the child, but decide not to inconvenience himself. If he does this, then he is selfish and callous rather than deluded.
- He could jump over the fence but give in to fear and turn back when one of the horned beasts looks up.
- He might muster up all the courage he has, climb over the fence and attempt to go past the animals, but be too late to reach the child because of, say, a fainting fit or a panic attack.

In what follows, I will argue that these four examples of how one can fail to be brave belong to four different categories of how rational self-control can be deficient or inadequate. I will call these different types of failures type i, ii, iii and iv.

It does not follow from my analysis that lack of self-control is always involved when people fail to be virtuous. Nevertheless, actions often run contrary to virtues other than courage for reasons similar to i–iv above. As

regards i, self-deception makes people, for instance, fail to be temperate when they believe that excess is laudable, and unjust treatment of others is, at least sometimes, due to cognitive failures where their rights, interests or needs are not seen for what they are. It is also easy to imagine examples of how people fail to be temperate or just in ways similar to ii, iii and iv.

What is Rational Self-control?

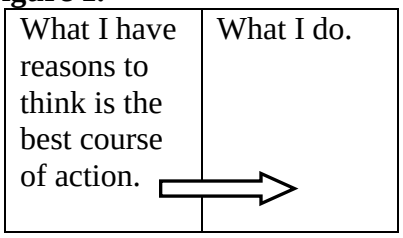
In the seventh book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2009, p. 1150b) writes about lack of rational self-control. The word he uses is *akrateia* (ακράτεια), sometimes written *akrasia* (ακρασία) that means literally lack of strength or control. He says that akrateia is of two types, weakness (αδυναμία) and impetuosity (προπέτεια).

> For some men after deliberating fail, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion (Aristotle, 1941, 1150b).

In both cases one is led by emotion to do something reason does not endorse. The word that is here translated as *emotion* is *pathos* (πάθος), which can also refer to misfortunes, sufferings and accidents. Jumping over the fence and then giving in to fear when a bull looks up would be an example of weakness whereas a rash or impetuous person would probably be impelled to keep away from the animals and not even attempt to save the child.

If my understanding of Aristotle is right, he took rational self-control to involve, primarily, the ability or good fortune to do what one has reasons to think is the best course of action. Figure 1 shows a schematic view of Aristotle's theory. As in the figures that follow, what the arrow points to is determined by what it points from.

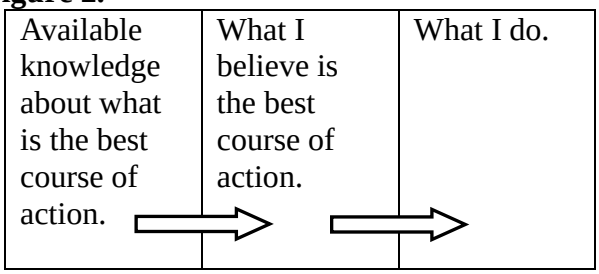
Figure 1.



This simple schema does not help us much to distinguish between different ways in which rational self-control fails. Some contemporary accounts are a bit more complex. In a recent publication, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2013) describes rational self-control as two relations: on the one hand between what an agent has a strong overall reason to do and what she believes she has a

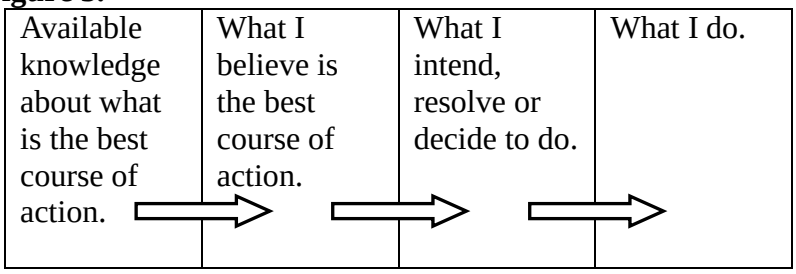
strong overall reason to do; on the other hand between what she believes and what she does. His view is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2.



This model allows us to distinguish between failures of type i that are due to self-deception and the remaining three types. A more nuanced account is presented by Richard Holton (2009) who argues that paradigm cases of self-control involve an ability to form intentions and stable resolutions and act on them in spite of contrary desires or temptations. If this insight is added to the model presented in Figure 2, we get Figure 3.

Figure 3.



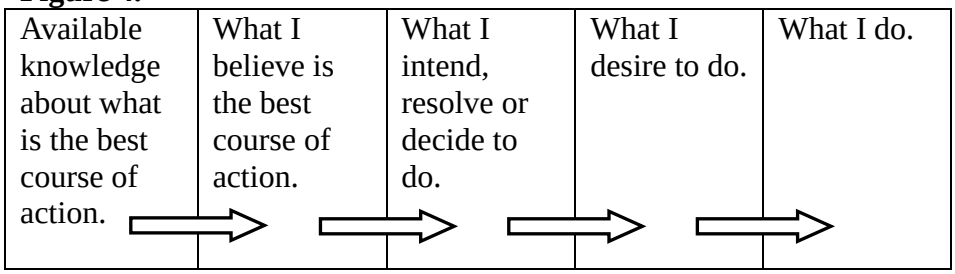
With this diagram we can distinguish failures of types i and ii from the remaining two possibilities. It does not, however, help us to distinguish between failures of type iii and type iv. The difference between possibilities iii and iv in the story is that in iii our hero yields or gives up because of a desire he cannot resist, namely a fear-induced desire to stay away from the bulls, whereas in iv the strongest desire of the agent may very well be in accord with his resolution. A fainting fit or a panic attack does not exclude a strong desire to continue.

To accommodate all four types of failures we need a diagram with at least four arrows and five boxes, and the box that is missing in Figure 3 should contain what I desire to do.

In the light of what I have said so far, it may seem tempting to represent rational self-control as in Figure 4, i.e. think of it as the ability to: let the best overall reasons control what one believes; one's resolutions be determined by such beliefs; one's desires be controlled by such resolutions; and actions by what one desires. This can, however, not be the whole story because, as Holton (2009) has argued, I can have full self-control even though my actions run counter to my strongest desires. If someone, for instance, resolves to quit

smoking, and consequently does so, that person shows self-control even though the desire for tobacco is not subdued.

Figure 4.



Sometimes all sorts of preferences are lumped together and called desires. If we do that, we may think of a firm resolution as some sort of a calm desire. On such a view it is an empty tautology to say that no one willingly does anything other than she desires. If, on the other hand, we think that nothing can be called a desire unless it is experienced as a longing, then we can distinguish, as Holton (2009) does, between actions that are controlled by our resolutions and actions that are controlled by our desires.

Those who think actions are always guided by desires, in a substantive and non-tautologous sense, may suggest that when I act on my resolutions I am driven by a desire to stand by my decisions. If I point out that I do not experience any such desire, they may claim that it is an unconscious desire. I would respond by asking whether that claim is supported by anything other than a general belief to the effect that all actions are driven by desires. If it has no other support then it cannot be used as a premise to argue for that very generalization. The truth seems to be that if we do not call anything a desire unless it is felt as a desire then it is not plausible at all that each and every action is caused by a desire. When people say something like ”I didn’t really want to but I had promised”, then they do, at least sometimes, seem to mean frankly that their actions are guided by resolutions rather than desires. The burden of proof rests on those who gainsay such honest reports.

If what I have said is right, and a resolution can guide action without intervening desires, there should be a fifth arrow on Figure 4, a long one connecting what I resolve or decide and what I do. As far as I can see, we should also draw a long arrow from what I believe to what I do, because sometimes action seems to be guided by cognitive content without any intervening desires or resolutions. Suppose for instance I am adding two numbers,

```
    123
+   256
```

Below the rightmost column I write 9. I do this almost automatically and without stopping to think or form any resolution or desire. Writing the number 9 is still a voluntary action and it is guided by my knowledge that 3 + 6 = 9.

Finally, it seems that some desires are guided by knowledge without any intervening decisions or resolutions. My knowledge that there is chocolate in a box can, for instance, give rise to a desire to open the box. This completes the diagram:

Figure 5. *Rational Self-control*

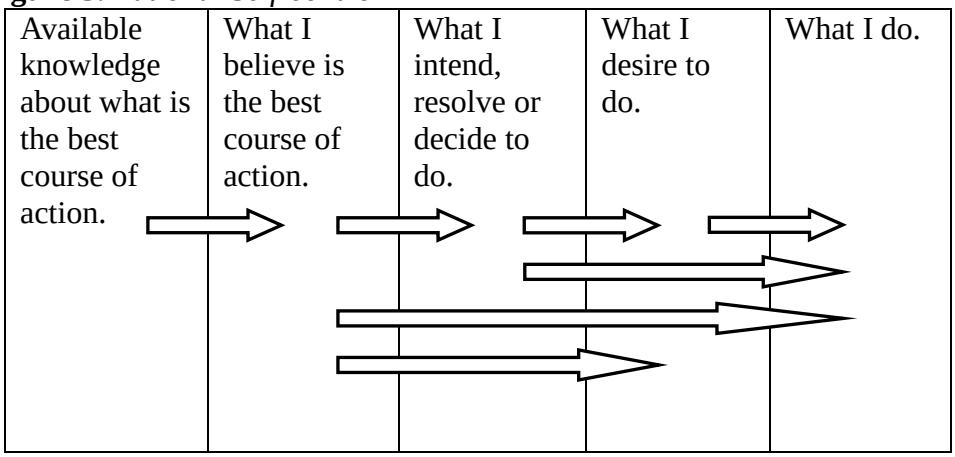
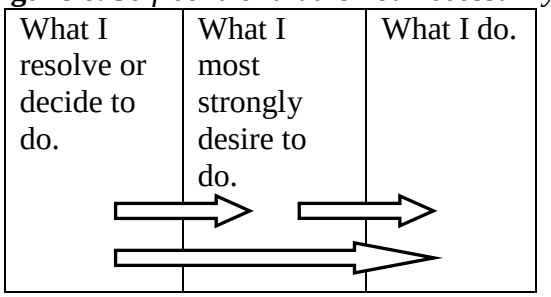


Figure 5 is meant to show that I have rational self-control if and only if I can go from the box farthest to the left to the one farthest to the right by following arrows that signify determination, i.e. where what an arrow points to is determined by what it points from.

As Holton (2009) argues, one has self-control if what one does is determined or controlled by what one resolves or decides. Someone who either does not bother to save a child that is about to fall into a river or interprets the situation in some irrational way, may resolve to leave the scene and act on that resolution without losing control. Such self-control (depicted by Figure 6 that is identical to the last three boxes on Figure 5) is however not fully rational.

Figure 6. *Self-control that is not Necessarily Rational*



From what I have said it follows that an agent, A, has rational self-control if and only if all the following four conditions hold:

- A's belief about what is the best course of action is determined by available knowledge, i.e. by what A has strong overall reason to do.
- If A has made a decision or formed an intention or resolution it is determined by A's belief about what is the best course of action.
- If A's action is determined by a desire, that desire is determined by what A intends, decides or resolves, provided A has made a decision or formed an intention or resolution, or else by A's belief about what is the best course of action.
- A's action is determined by what A believes is the best course of action or by what A intends, resolves or decides to do or by what A desires.

The failures of type i, ii, iii and iv correspond to these four conditions, i.e. we have failure of type i if condition i does not hold and so on.

To have rational self-control all the four conditions have to be satisfied. That an action is right, in the sense of being justifiable by appeal to available knowledge, does not suffice. The following example, borrowed from Alfred Mele (2010) shows why this is the case: A man resolves to break into a neighbour's house with his friends although he decisively judges it best not to do so. At the last minute he refuses to enter and leaves the crime-scene, simply because of fear.

What the man does can be justified by appeal to available knowledge. If, however, his running away is induced by fear rather than apprehension of how stupid and wrong it is to break into the house, he does not have rational self-control because conditions ii and iii both fail. Number ii fails since his resolution is not determined by what he believes is the best thing to do and number iii fails because his action is determined by a desire that is not determined by his resolution.

That completes my explanation of what rational self-control is. I shall now consider how it fails.

How does Rational Self-control Fail?

For ordinary humans rational self-control often fails: Sometimes people quarrel when they intend to have good time together; students sleep in although they want to get up early and read for an exam; in spite of intentions to the contrary smokers fail to quit smoking; good people want to forgive but can't get rid of angry thoughts. We have all sorts of plans that do not succeed because our minds are restive and ungovernable.

Most philosophical accounts of rational self-control highlight some, and only some, of the four types I have described. In her paper on where the akratic break takes place, Amélie Rorty (1980) describes for instance weaknesses of types i, ii and iii. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith (1993) discuss frailties similar to types ii and iii. Annemarie Kalis, Andreas Mojzisch, Sophie Schweizer and Stefan Kaiser, who draw simultaneously upon research in

philosophy, psychology and biology, argue that "dysfunctional decision making can be organized within a common theoretical framework that divides the decision making process in three different stages: option generation, option selection, and action initiation" (Kalis, Mojzisch, Schweizer and Kaiser, 2008, p. 402). The first stage in their framework corresponds to type i, the second stage to types ii and iii, and the third one to type iv. Holton (2009) presents an analysis of the roles played by decisions and resolutions. Mele (2010) portrays two types of incontinence that he calls *evaluative* and *executive*, the former corresponding to types i and ii and the latter to iii and iv. As I have already mentioned Sinnott-Armstrong (2013) defines self-control as involving two factors, where one is similar to i and the other lumps together ii, iii and iv.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has described self-control as four different abilities as I do. It does not follow from this that I have any profound disagreement with the authors mentioned above. Different descriptions of how action is, or is not, guided by knowledge, do not have to be contradictory any more than two different maps of the same terrain with different elevations between successive contour lines. The pathways through the mind connecting knowledge and action can be segmented in different ways. I think, though, that the fourfold distinction I have made is helpful to understand some of the conceptual issues involved in psychological research on self-control. This applies both to psychological descriptions of addiction and to general accounts of abilities to exercise will-power and delay gratification.

Some authorities on addiction and substance dependence, such as George Ainslie (1999), maintain that addicts fail to form resolutions that accord with their knowledge of what is for their own good because they discount future wellbeing or exaggerate the value of short term pleasure. Think for example of a cigarette smoker who values pleasure today more than an equal amount of pleasure in the future. Suppose he also knows that in the long run his life will be more pleasant if he quits smoking. For such a person the options may be, in order of preference:

A. Smoke today and quit tomorrow.
B. Quit today.
C. Continue to smoke.

If the smoker resolves every day to opt for A, he ends up with the worst option, namely C. The tendency to see A as the most desirable option leads to a new resolution every day that makes the smoker act contrary to what he believes is best for him. On this account, the addict's problem is of type ii. Some other researchers describe addiction as failure of type iv. One of them is Timothy Schroeder (2010), who argues that addictive behaviour is typically much less rational that Ainslie maintains.

Schroeder's account is based on a biological account of how the reward system of the brain uses dopamine. We tend to repeat acts that lead to an increase in dopamine levels. Since the level normally rises when something has better effects than we expected, this tendency normally makes us learn to do

again and again what is good for us. Some substances make the brain produce dopamine regardless of whether or not the consumer experiences any good effects. These substances tend to be addictive because they trigger a tendency to repeat the consumption even though the afflicted person does not expect any benefits from it. If we think of desires as involving two factors, where the first one is some uneasiness or craving and the second one expectation of some pleasure or benefit, then we can simplify Schroeder's theory by saying that it describes craving after addictive substances as something less than a fully-fledged desire, since the second factor is missing.

These two different descriptions of what goes wrong when people get hooked on tobacco or other addictive substances do not contradict each other. We know from Mele's example of the man who ran away instead of breaking into his neighbour's house that rational self-control can fail simultaneously in two different ways. It seems plausible to me that Ainslie's and Schroeder's accounts both contain important elements of truth. It also seems plausible that distinctions like the ones I have drawn are needed as a preliminary to combining the insights provided by these two approaches.

I hope my analysis is also relevant to psychological work on the interplay of trait self-control as defined by Walter Mischel (1996), and what Roy E. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Mark Muraven and Dianne M. Tice (1998) have described as ego-depletion.

In the 1960s, Mischel developed methods to measure what is called trait self-control, i.e. the ability to delay gratification of a desire when it is in one's own best interest to do so. Much later, in the 1990s, Baumeister et al. published results showing that soon after people have resisted one temptation they are less likely to hold out against a different temptation. This gave them reason to think of self-control as analogous to a muscle that gets tired after work. This self-control fatigue is called ego-depletion in the psychological literature, and psychologists have developed methods to measure resistance to ego-depletion. Research published by Baumeister and his co-workers indicates that this ability can be improved through training (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall and Oaten, 2006). We, therefore, have two different psychological measures of self-control. To the surprise of some researchers, there are people who soon get depleted when they use the self-control "muscle" but who nevertheless score high on tests of trait self-control (Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs and Baumeister, 2014; Imhoff, Schmidt and Gerstenberg, 2014; Hofmann, Kotabe, Vohs and Baumeister, 2015). If we think of self-control as a single ability, these results seem contradictory. Once the concept has been analysed the way I do, they can be shown to be compatible. Those who are less likely to yield to "fatigue" (i.e. be depleted) are good at forming firm resolutions. In them the connection shown by the arrow from the 3rd and the 5th box on Figure 5 is strong. Those who score high on tests of trait self-control seem to be good at using knowledge to modify their desires. For them the connection shown by the arrow from the 2nd and the 4th box on Figure 5 is strong. People who are better able to modify their desires have less need to work against them so it

should not come as a big surprise that those who do well on tests of trait self-control rarely train the ability Baumeister et al. compare to a muscle.

Much of the philosophical literature on rational self-control emphasises failures of types ii and iii. In my view, types i and iv are no less interesting. I will conclude with a few remarks about failures of these two types.

Failures of type iv occur when people do something they neither intend nor desire. In some such cases, like when someone faints, we are not talking about voluntary actions. We are, however, still talking about self-control because self-control is not limited to control over voluntary actions. Suppose for instance I have to break some bad news to somebody. I intend to speak calmly but as I speak, I tremble and tears spring to my eyes. I may also intend to relate some incident in a serious tone of voice and start laughing. Being unable to control tears and laughter exemplifies lack of self-control even though crying and laughing may not be voluntary. To some extent people can learn to control such non-voluntary behaviour. It may also be possible for some people suffering from anxiety disorders, like in example iv, to learn to decrease the frequency and severity of panic attacks (Wesner et al., 2014).

A panic attack or a fainting fit are not actions in the ordinary sense. There are, however, examples of actions that people are responsible for although they are neither guided by belief, intention nor desire. Many examples of inadvertent or thoughtless behaviour fall under this heading. One such example would be a driver who has always driven on the right side of the road. She travels to the UK, rents a car and knows of course that she should stick to the left side, but one day she forgets and drives on the right side as she is accustomed to. To have full self-control it is not enough to have one's beliefs, intentions and desires guided by sound knowledge. One also has to be alert.

This was about failures of type iv. Let's look at type i.

In the heroic literature of ancient Greece, persons distinguished by courage and nobility fail because they lose their proper reserve. One instance of this is in the 19th book of the *Iliad* where king Agamemnon apologises for his lack of self-control, saying:

> Zeus, Fate, and the Fury who walks in darkness are to blame, for blinding my judgement that day in the assembly when on my own authority I confiscated Achilles' prize. What choice did I have? There is a goddess who decides these things, Ate, Zeus' eldest daughter, blinds us all, accursed as she is. Those tender feet of hers never touch the ground, but pass through men's minds causing harm, ensnaring this one or another. (Homer, 2009)

The weakness Agamemnon describes is clearly of type i. He lost his clear-sightedness and sound judgement. Similar thoughts about delusions leading to wayward conduct can be found in Sophocles' play about Antigone where king Kreon brings destruction to his family because of his pride and lack of judgement. The choir comments on this and reminds the audience that "if God

wishes to guide a man to ruin, that man will see good in evil" (Sophocles, 2004).

Homer and Sophocles describe loss of self-control as, primarily, an epistemic failure. Still today, people sometimes look back on what they have done wrong and say "how stupid I was". In my view, one of the interesting questions about virtues that require self-control is how they overlap with epistemic or intellectual virtues. It seems as true now as it was in ancient times that illusions and self-serving beliefs stand in the way of virtuous conduct no less than selfish desires.

This overlap between moral and intellectual virtues is pointed out by Aristotle towards the end of the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he says that moral virtues, in respect of which a man is called good without qualification, are not possible without practical wisdom, and with practical wisdom "will be given all the virtues" (Aristotle, 1941, 1145a). This seems to imply that no one can have one virtue without having them all. I do not know whether Aristotle meant this quite literally but I am fairly sure that nothing I have said here supports such a sweeping generalization about the unity of all the virtues. Nevertheless, my account of self-control makes it at least plausible that to be brave, temperate and just one needs self-control that involves many virtues, and hence learning to be virtuous requires cultivation of diverse intellectual abilities and moral qualities. In order to do what is right under difficult conditions, one may need to be simultaneously astute, resolute, firm and alert.

Acknowledgments

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