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Temptation and Apathy

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Abstract: Self-control is deemed crucial for reasons-responsive agency and a key contributor to long-term wellbeing. But recent studies suggest that effortfully resisting one's temptations does not contribute to long-term goal attainment, and can even be harmful. So how does self-control improve our lives? Finding an answer requires revising the role that overcoming temptation plays in self-control. This paper distinguishes two forms of self-control problems: *temptation* (the presence of a strong wayward motivation) and *apathy* (the lack of commitment-advancing motivation). This distinction makes it possible to separate negative self-control (aimed at overcoming temptation) from positive self-control (aimed at overcoming lack of motivation). The paper argues that temptation should not play a central role in our conception of self-control, since overcoming temptation is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful self-control.
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1. Introduction

Self-control is an important aspect of rational agency. Traditionally defined as the ability to master motivation in the service of our commitments and values (Mele, 1987, p. 54), self-control is essential to exercising our reasons-responsive capacities, guiding action in accordance with our evaluations and values despite motivational obstacles (Sripada, 2016). Additionally, people with greater self-control have been robustly found to enjoy better health, greater wealth, and higher levels of wellbeing (Moffitt et al., 2011).

Yet, to echo a recent paper, there is room to wonder what exactly *is* so great about self-control. Evidence is mounting that people successful at self-regulation tend to use *less* self-control rather than more, partly because they experience fewer temptations in the first place (Adriaanse et al., 2014; Ent et al., 2015; Gillebaart & Adriaanse, 2017; Hill et al., 2014; Hofmann et al., 2014; Inzlicht et al., 2021); paradoxically, highly self-controlled people may actually do *worse* at resisting temptation (Imhoff et al., 2014). Moreover, being able to restrain one's impulses in the service of one's commitments seems crucial, but recent studies suggest that effortfully restraining one's impulses makes no difference to long-term goal attainment (Hofmann, Vohs, et al., 2012; Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017). In fact, resisting temptations can even do harm: it can generate negative affect (Inzlicht et al., 2015); resisting a tempting object could make us like it less, but want it more (Litt et al., 2010; for discussion see Nanay, 2020); frequently exerting self-control is linked to an inability to enjoy the present and may lead to regret (Brownstein, 2018; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Loewenstein, 2018); and more dramatically, low socioeconomic status children with greater self-control display better behavioral outcomes, but also faster biological aging (Miller et al., 2015). Resisting temptation therefore may not make a difference in attaining our long-term goals, and may even have serious costs. Thus, if self-control is identical with the effortful resistance of temptation, it is unclear how it contributes to improving our lives.

There is a tension here: on the one hand self-control seems to be a net good for individuals, and on the other it seems that resisting temptations does not make the significant positive contributions usually attributed to self-control. It can sometimes even do more harm than good. This tension gives rise to a problem in understanding the proper value of self-control. In this paper we shall argue that the tension is produced by the adoption of an overly narrow conception of self-control which puts too heavy an emphasis on impulse suppression or resistance of temptation. Our strategy is to pay close attention to an often recognized but normally overlooked kind of self-control problem: *apathy*, i.e. the inability to act in accordance with one's commitments that is not due to an overpowering wayward motivation, but rather to a lack of motivation. We believe that the theoretical significance of apathy remains under-appreciated. Cases of apathy highlight important aspects of the nature of self-control which have often been sidelined, or so we will argue. These cases show that overcoming temptation is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful self-control. This leads to a reinterpretation of what motivational mastery may consist in, which we believe will be helpful in clarifying where the value of self-control lies.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 defines two different self-control problems: *temptation* (the presence of a powerful wayward motivation) and *apathy* (the absence of a desirable motivation). Section 3 argues that apathy problems provide cases where overcoming temptation is neither necessary nor sufficient for exerting self-control. Section 4 distinguishes between *negative self-control* (i.e. self-control aimed at overcoming temptation) and *positive self-control* (i.e. self-control aimed at overcoming lack of motivation), and argues that different self-control strategy distributions are appropriate for each kind of self-control. Section 5 shows that there is a nice fit between these philosophical distinctions and common-sense thinking about self-control: we provide evidence that laypersons distinguish between temptation and apathy, and that they suggest a different mix of strategies for each in accordance with our theory.

2. Two Self-Control Problems

The ability to master motivation involves the ability to solve two distinct problems, one of them due to the presence of wayward motivations; the other due to the absence of appropriate motivations. The former we will call the problem of temptation (2.1); the latter, the problem of apathy (2.2).

2.1. Temptation

The problem of temptation is the standard problem of self-control.[2] It occurs when an agent A finds herself in a situation in which

T1) A has a commitment C,
T2) A occurrently believes that φ-ing during *t* is inconsistent with upholding C during *t*, and
T3) A's strongest motivation during *t* is to φ.

In cases such as this, A needs to exert self-control to overcome her motivation to φ, so as to behave consistently with (what she takes to be) the demands of her commitment C during *t* (where *t* is a timeframe of some definite duration).

In these cases, the *commitment* is some evaluative mental state endorsed by the agent. There is a long tradition of discussions about which form of commitment is central to self-control, particularly whether judgments or intentions are relevant (Holton, 1999; May &

[2] We will focus here on *synchronic* self-control (the ability to overcome a temptation that is currently active and motivationally strongest). However, everything we say here can be replicated in discussions of *diachronic* self-control (the ability to overcome foreseeably, but not currently, dominant temptations). Accordingly, 'self-control' will henceforth refer to synchronic self-control unless otherwise noted. For discussions of synchronic self-control see Kennett & Smith (1996, 1998); Mele (1998); Sripada (2014); Haas (2021).

Holton, 2012; Mele, 1987, 2010; Rosas et al., 2018). We will not take sides on that issue here. A commitment can be a *judgment* stating what would be best for the agent to do at *t*, an *intention* to perform a certain action at *t*, or a conjunction of both. These two commitment types allow for two ways of breaching a commitment: acting against one's best judgment (while still endorsing it) and unduly abandoning one's intention (while lacking sufficient reason to do so).

A's motivation to φ during *t* is a *temptation*, i.e. a motivation that, if strong enough, would lead A to act against C, if acting in such a way is an option.[3] We use 'temptation' broadly, to include all wayward motivations, i.e. all motivational states that move the agent towards behaving in a commitment-discordant way. Such motivations can be any one of what Sripada (2021) calls "emotion-type states", which include drives, impulses, desires, pains, emotions, etc. Thus our notion of temptation is perhaps broader than the everyday one: urges to smoke or break a diet certainly count as instances of temptation, but so do the acrophobic's fear of heights and the driver's anger when taken over by road rage. One restriction is that only non-compulsive motivations are temptations: an action counts as a failure of self-control only if the agent could have prevented it, and was therefore not compelled to perform it. Temptations motivate the agent to act intentionally against their commitment; thus, if the motivation's effect on the agent's behavior was so strong as to be irresistible, it would not count as a temptation.

2.2. Apathy

Problems of apathy also count as synchronic self-control problems, but they differ in important ways from the paradigmatic structure described above. An agent A has a problem of apathy whenever she finds herself in a situation in which

A1) A has a certain commitment C,
A2) A occurrently believes that upholding C during *t* requires that she ψ-s during *t*, and
A3) during *t*, A's motivation to ψ is not sufficiently strong.

When we say a motivation to ψ is not *sufficiently strong*, we mean that A's level of motivation during *t* to ψ would not be high enough to cause A to ψ during *t* even if there were no particular C-inconsistent temptations during *t* which A were more motivated to act on. Thus apathy is generated by a lack of motivation rather than by an excess thereof.

Of course, when in a state of apathy, A could *also* experience one or more C-inconsistent temptations. In such cases, however, these temptations would causally overdetermine A's C-inconsistent behavior, since the lack of motivation to ψ would on its own prevent A from ψ-

[3] There is an open question as to whether mere tryings amount to breakings of commitments, but we do not have space to discuss this here. So in this paper we focus on actions and leave tryings for a future work.

ing.[4] In other words: the mere presence of competing desires does not explain why A is not sufficiently motivated during *t* to ψ. Instead, what explains A's not ψ-ing when faced with an apathy problem is that A's motivation is impaired in a way that stops A from ψ-ing during *t*. The idea of motivational impairment will be discussed more thoroughly in §3.2. The important point for now is that A's motivation during *t* to ψ would be insufficiently strong to cause her to ψ *even without* reference to competing alternatives to ψ-ing. Apathy constitutes a self-control problem because, in cases of apathy, the agent must master her motivation to act in accordance with her commitment. Thus, the problem of apathy is a self-control problem due to lack of motivation.

While the discussion of apathy is rather rare in philosophy,[5] it is more frequent in psychology and psychiatry, where apathy is generally conceived as an impairment of motivation for goal-directed action. Apathy is a characteristic symptom typically accompanying a broad range of clinical disorders including Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, stroke, schizophrenia, and depression, but it is also present in the general population (Husain & Roiser, 2018; Kalis et al., 2008; Le Heron et al., 2018), and has been linked to dysfunctions in brain regions associated with the processing of reward and action evaluation (particularly the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, the ventral striatum, and regions linked to them via dopaminergic pathways).

Empirical work on apathy allows us to specify the meaning of 'lack of motivation'. Following Kalis et al. (2008, p. 405), we think about an *option* as constituted by the representation of a possible action and an estimation of its expected value. This is in keeping with a broadly accepted 'value-based choice' framework, according to which motivational strength is (at least partly) established by subpersonal expected cost-benefit calculations of the assessed action, where the strength of one's motivation to execute a given action corresponds (at least partly) to the difference between the action's expected reward (based on learning from one's past experiences in type-similar situations) and the action's expected costs, which represent the level of effort required to carry it out (Rangel et al., 2008).

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[4] Cases are possible where both a temptation to φ and low motivation to ψ are present, and both jointly suffice to prevent the subject from ψ-ing, but neither suffices by itself to prevent A from ψ-ing. In our view, these cannot be cases of apathy because, if there were no temptation, the agent's motivation during *t* would be sufficient to ψ during *t*. In these cases, the low level of motivation to ψ is merely an *enabling condition* for the temptation to do its work of generating commitment-inconsistent behavior.

[5] Problems of lack of motivation have been discussed in the philosophical literature, but mostly as possible objections to motivational internalism (Tenenbaum, 2003). Connor (2014) has discussed its philosophical relevance with respect to self-control, arguing that they can be better explained by non-actional accounts of synchronic self-control. These issues fall outside of the scope of the present article. In a discussion closer to our own, Kalis and Kaiser (2018) discuss apathy as being responsible for two forms of instrumental irrationality: failing to reach a decision regarding one's own goals, and failing to reach a decision regarding the means to attain one's own goals. We will go back to this below.

While evaluating candidates for action, apathetic agents tend to display diminished sensitivity to rewards—a trait known as *anhedonia*—and an increased sensitivity to the costs of effort. These two features (increased effort sensitivity and decreased reward sensitivity) lead them to prolong the period of deliberation about what to do, thereby postponing or avoiding action initiation (a phenomenon labeled "decision inertia", see Scholl et al., 2022); and to display a lower tendency to perform goal-directed actions, a tendency which increases with the amount of effort required for action performance.

These behavioral manifestations of apathy help explain why lack of motivation is a self-control problem distinct from temptation. First, it is worth pointing out that while temptation is a *local* phenomenon (it consists in the presence of a particular motivation to perform a specific action), apathy is mainly a *global* phenomenon (a feature of the motivational system in general that leads to low motivation not for a specific action but for goal-directed actions in general). This is how it is assessed in both the clinical and non-clinical population. That said, there can be 'regional' forms of apathy, which affect specific action domains (e.g. a student feels apathetic towards doing homework, but has sufficient motivation to advance commitments unrelated to studying) and local instances of apathy which affect motivation related to a specific commitment (e.g. a spouse is committed to doing all house chores but finds it cumbersome to do the dishes, which he finds particularly boring). In order to link apathy to discussions of self-control, while acknowledging its global sense, we will focus here on local instances of apathy in which an agent lacks motivation to act in accordance with a specific commitment during a specific time period. (In what follows, unless we mention global apathy explicitly, we refer to local instances of apathy.)

Let us contrast apathy and temptation as local phenomena originating self-control problems. While the former involves not wanting something enough to pursue it where its pursuit is required to uphold the agent's commitment, the latter involves wanting something too strongly where its pursuit goes against the agent's commitment. We can distinguish the effects of apathy and temptation on different phases of the agentive process: option evaluation, option selection, and action execution (Table 1).[6] While evaluating possible commitment-advancing actions, apathy is characterized by diminished reward sensitivity and excessive effort sensitivity, whereas temptation would instead be characterized by the opposite: excessive sensitivity to the tempting action's rewards and diminished sensitivity to its costs. These differences in option evaluation have consequences for option selection: under the influence of apathy, agents are disposed to excessively prolong deliberation, while temptation leads agents to reopen deliberations that have previously been closed, so as to revise existing intentions to perform commitment-advancing actions. And these states also have different consequences for action execution: apathetic agents tend to avoid implementing the commitment-advancing

[6] Kalis et al. (2008) divide the agentive process into three similar stages (option generation, option selection, and action initiation). We propose a different division to emphasize particular effects of apathy and temptation on the agentive process.

actions, whereas tempted agents tend to implement the tempting action all too readily. Despite their differences, both are problems of motivation, since they involve a misalignment between motivational balance and the agent's commitments. They are both therefore self-control problems, since the ability to reliably solve either of them requires motivational mastery. i.e. the agent's ability to bring motivational states in line with her commitments.

Table 1. Differences in the effects of apathy and temptation on option evaluation, option selection, and action execution.

	Effects on option evaluation	**Effects on deliberation**	**Effects on action execution**
Apathy	Blunted sensitivity to (commitment-advancing) action expected rewards, increased sensitivity to (commitment-advancing) action costs	*Decision inertia*: Excessively prolonging deliberation before a resolution is reached	*Action avoidance*: Tendency to avoid the initiation of commitment-advancing actions
Temptation	Increased sensitivity to (commitment-inconsistent) action rewards, blunted sensitivity to (commitment-inconsistent) action costs	*Decision instability*: Unduly reopening a deliberation that had already been settled	*Action proneness*: Tendency to initiate commitment-inconsistent actions

3. The Significance of Apathy

Apathy is philosophically significant because it leads to a reinterpretation of the nature of motivational mastery. We argue that in apathy cases, overcoming temptation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for exercising self-control. More precisely, apathy shows, on the one hand, that one can exert self-control without overcoming temptation, and, on the other hand, that one can fail to exert self-control even after successfully overcoming temptation.

3.1. Only Temptation

Notice, first, that in some cases apathy can lead to failures of self-control even though there is no temptation present—these are cases of what we will call *pure apathy*. For example, suppose Sanjay is committed to exercising today, but he lacks sufficient motivation to get started. It is not the case that he is tempted to watch TV (there is nothing particularly interesting on, and he is tired of watching screens all day anyway), or that he is tempted to stay on the couch (he doesn't feel tired at all). It's just that he doesn't feel motivated to start exercising, as he promised

himself to do.[7] In cases like this, if Sanjay succeeds in exercising despite the lack of motivation to do so, he will have exerted self-control without overcoming any temptation. So here self-control does not require conquering temptations; instead, what the agent must do in such pure apathy cases is not *resisting* any particularly strong motivation, but rather bolstering the motivation to act in commitment-advancing ways (e.g., by promising herself a really nice dinner afterwards, or by framing the commitment-advancing activity in a positive, intrinsically appealing light).

It might be objected that these cases do involve a temptation after all, namely a temptation to omit doing something. For instance, in our TV example, it might be said that Sanjay is tempted not to exercise, or more naturally, that he is tempted to skip exercising. This interpretation could be applied to all cases of apathy, leading to an alternative theory according to which all self-control problems, including cases we have called 'apathy', are temptation problems. It is just that in some cases we face a temptation to act in commitment-contrary ways, whereas in other cases we face a temptation to omit a commitment-advancing action. Call this account '*Only Temptation*'.

However, Only Temptation fails to properly capture the phenomenon of apathy, since it blurs a key difference between two types of self-control problems related to omission. Consider Annemarie, who is committed to walking across a glass bridge above a 500 meter precipice right about now, but as she walks closer to the bridge she becomes very afraid. As the fear increases, Annemarie becomes more highly motivated to stay planted on solid ground than to walk across the bridge, and begins to wonder whether the decision to walk across the bridge is correct.[8] Here, we argue, it makes sense to talk about a temptation because the commitment-inconsistent behavior is explained by the effect of a strong motivational state that influences the agent's deliberative and executive processes towards producing commitment-inconsistent behavior. As discussed above, this motivational state makes Annemarie prone to revising her resolution to walk across the bridge, and to execute the commitment-inconsistent action of freezing in place.

Contrast this case with our TV example, where Sanjay lacks a sufficiently strong motivation to perform a commitment-consistent action. In the latter case, the commitment-inconsistent behavior is not caused by a strong motivation to e.g. stay on the couch which leads the agent to revise her decision or to act impulsively. Instead, the commitment inconsistent behavior is caused by an apathy towards the prospect of exercising today. This may manifest at the deliberation stage: Sanjay keeps thinking about at what time exactly he should start, and

[7] See Asarnow (2019) for a sustained defense about the possibility of such cases.

[8] For this case we postulate that (1) the agent's increasing fear enters into the motivational balance providing her with an increasingly salient reason to stay still, so that if she actually stays still this counts as an intentional action; and (2) the fear, strong as it is, could nevertheless be resisted, so the resulting behavior is not compulsive.

whether he should go for a run, go to the gym, or follow an aerobics routine at home. Apathy thus leads Sanjay to continue deliberating about which candidate commitment-advancing action is better, reaching no conclusion. But even if deliberation is closed and an action is selected, Sanjay's apathy might manifest in a tendency to delay the chosen action's initiation, partly caused by a distorted evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with undertaking the selected action.

While both of these cases involve self-control problems related to omission, there is a clear difference between them: the bridge case is a self-control problem caused by the presence of a strong, commitment-inconsistent motivational state, whereas the TV case is a self-control problem caused by the absence of a sufficiently-strong, commitment-advancing motivational state. While colloquially we could describe the TV case as one in which the agent "is tempted" to skip today's workout, the contrast with the bridge makes it clear that, strictly speaking, there is no real temptation, but a lack of motivation to exercise. Only Temptation fails to properly capture the nature of apathy since it fails to distinguish these two kinds of self-control problems, grouping them together in a class of 'temptations to omit'. If this reply to Only Temptation is right, it would support the view that overcoming temptation is not a necessary condition for exerting self-control.

3.2. Weak Temptation and Pure Apathy

A proponent of Only Temptation may counter that even if Sanjay has no strong temptation, his not starting to exercise reveals that his motivation not to exercise is stronger than his motivation to do so. Temptations need not be very strong, they just have to be stronger than their competitors. Thus in cases like Sanjay's, the motivation to not-ψ is slightly stronger than the motivation to ψ. And that means that the former functions as a temptation, even if motivational levels for both are relatively low. Thus the cases we have been calling 'pure apathy' are just cases of agents acting on *weak temptations*.

This surely is an apt description of many everyday cases in which people fail to get up from their sofas to exercise. But situations of this kind should be distinguished from those best described as pure apathy, which may look indistinguishable from an external observer's perspective (since they give rise to the same behavior), but have different causes. To see the differences, consider first what occurs at the deliberation stage: temptations (weak or strong) affect deliberation by leading the agent to reopen an already settled deliberation (Holton, 2003). In contrast, apathy leads the agent to prolong deliberations that have not yet been completed, deliberations about the ways and means of realizing the commitment. Further, consider what occurs at the action execution stage: temptation disposes the agent to initiate the commitment-inconsistent action immediately; but apathy leads the agent to avoiding the initiation of the commitment-advancing action.

Thus, a weak temptation would influence Sanjay towards reopening a previously closed

deliberation and reconsider his previous decision to exercise today ("Perhaps tomorrow is better"; "I could make up for it working out extra hard on the weekend"; etc.). The weak temptation would then lead Sanjay to choosing not to work out, and intentionally engaging in the corresponding behavior. In contrast, a state of apathy would lead Sanjay to spend more time and energy deliberating about how to execute his commitment ("Should I go to the gym or go for a run?"; "Should I go in five minutes, or after the next episode is over?"; etc.). This prolonged indecision about the means and ways of executing his commitment then leads Sanjay to postpone deciding, and thus to postpone the intentional initiation of action. He stays on the couch not because he chose to do so, but because he is 'stuck' in the process of choosing how to act.

Thus, the situation can seem identical for an external observer: the agent stays on the couch in either case. But the mental processes that explain this behavior are different. This discussion reveals a crucial point, namely that apathy affects agency by leading agents toward *inaction*. It does this either through prolonging the deliberative stage and making it harder to reach decisions about action implementation, or by postponing the initiation of intentional action. Such are the consequences of a lack of motivation, which is generated by an over-sensitivity to the commitment-advancing action's costs and a blunted sensitivity to its rewards.

The arguments above are intended to show that apathy can generate self-control problems even in the absence of temptation. If such pure apathy problems exist, it follows that overcoming temptation is not always necessary for successfully exerting self-control. Sometimes what is needed is not mastering a strong, commitment-contrary motivation, but rather getting a weak commitment-advancing motivation to conjure action.

3.3. Hybrid Cases

In §§3.1–3.2 we defended the idea that, given the existence of pure apathy cases, overcoming a temptation is not always necessary for successfully exerting self-control. We now investigate whether overcoming a temptation is always *sufficient* for successfully exerting self-control. To address this question, consider a version of the TV case that involves both apathy *and* temptation. In this version of the case, I still lack the motivation required to start working out, but I also have a wayward desire to keep watching TV. I am really enjoying watching reruns of my favorite show on Netflix, and I am more motivated to keep watching instead of starting my exercise routine. This case involves both apathy and temptation: I am apathetic towards working out, and I am tempted to watch TV. What's important to notice about hybrid cases like this one is that successfully resisting the temptation does not fully solve my self-control problem. I may muster up the willpower to turn off the TV, thereby successfully overcoming my temptation. But turning off the TV solves *only* the temptation portion of my problem; it does not solve the apathy portion of the problem. In other words: just because I have successfully overcome my temptation does not mean I simultaneously gained sufficient motivation to start working out. Chances are, I'll need to employ a *different* self-control strategy aimed towards

increasing my motivation to exercise (such as reminding myself of the health benefits or promising myself a reward) if I have any hope of keeping my commitment today. Thus, in cases of apathy, merely overcoming temptation is not sufficient for successfully exercising self-control. In addition to resisting or avoiding any temptations that conflict with my commitment, I also need to boost my motivation to carry out the commitment-advancing action. And this is extra work—above and beyond resisting the particular temptations I feel.

In sum, you can fail at self-control even if you succeed at resisting temptation, and you can also succeed at self-control without overcoming any temptation. Thus, overcoming temptations is neither necessary nor sufficient for self-control. While the ability to master motivation sometimes requires overcoming temptations, other times it requires nurturing and bolstering commitment-advancing motivations.

4. Two Sides of Self-Control

The contrast between two motivational problems allows us to distinguish two forms self-control might take. When self-control is aimed at overcoming temptation, we call it *negative self-control*; and when it is aimed at overcoming apathy, *positive self-control*. This provides a novel, broader, *two-sided* account of self-control, according to which motivational mastery involves not only the ability to overcome temptation, but also the ability to bolster commitment-advancing motivation.

To be clear, the distinction between positive and negative self-control is *not* the same as the initiatory/inhibitory distinction sometimes discussed in the self-control literature. The latter is a distinction between two different *behavioral strategies*; the focus is placed on what the agent does or does not do. Initiatory self-control activates certain behaviors, and inhibitory self-control suppresses certain behaviors. Our distinction between positive and negative self-control, however, is not determined by types of behavior. Rather, the relevant difference is found in the agent's commitment and what is preventing her from fulfilling that commitment. For example, if someone has a temptation to smoke a cigarette despite her commitment to quit, she might overcome that temptation *either* by inhibiting a behavior (e.g., stopping herself from lighting up) *or* by activating a behavior (e.g., going for a run instead). This means that an exertion of negative self-control could consist of initiatory *or* inhibitory self-control—and the same for positive self-control. Overcoming temptation sometimes requires initiating a behavior (e.g. in the glass bridge case), and overcoming apathy sometimes requires inhibiting a behavior (e.g. an apathetic person may spend a long time mindlessly scrolling down their social media feed instead of going to sleep). In short, the initiating/inhibiting distinction is at the level of *strategy* (what are you doing to exert self-control?), whereas the positive/negative distinction is at the level of *function* (what are you using self-control *for*? What problem are you trying to solve?).

But positive and negative self-control are different in more than just their function.

While this is not a distinction between strategy types, we argue there is a difference regarding *which strategy type tends to be more effective* for exerting positive vs. negative self-control. Following Duckworth and colleagues (2016), we can distinguish two broad families of strategies. *Intrapsychic strategies* are aimed at solving motivational problems by modifying the agent's own psychological processes or representations. These may take the form of directing attention away from a tempting stimulus or toward a commitment-reinforcing one, cognitively reframing one's representation of the situation or the task at hand, or putting the brakes on the behavioral responses that have been already primed by the motivational states. And *situational strategies* are aimed at solving motivational problems by modifying one's environment. These include situation selection (moving oneself from one environment to another) or situation modification (i.e. removing, rearranging, or introducing elements to one's environment).[9, 10]

Intuitively, situational strategies seem particularly convenient for negative self-control. This is because temptations are often triggered or sustained by features of one's environment: the perceived presence of chocolate cake in the room may trigger (and sustain) a temptation to break my diet; being surrounded by people smoking may give the recovering smoker an urge to light up. In these scenarios, situational strategies are likely to be especially effective because eliminating the stimulus that triggers or sustains the temptation makes it unnecessary to exert further resistance. Walking away from the group of smokers, for example, seems like an effective way to overcome the temptation to join in. Moving the cake out of sight, similarly, will surely help minimize my craving for the cake. Once environmental triggers like these are gone, it generally becomes easier to uphold one's commitments. When it comes to negative self-control, it's as they say—out of sight, out of mind.

The same may not be true for positive self-control, however. Since the motivational problem of apathy cannot be solved by merely overcoming a temptation—but rather requires strengthening a weak motivation—intrapsychic strategies may frequently need to play a larger role. The agent will need to find ways to motivate herself to perform the commitment-advancing action. Boosting motivation can sometimes be achieved situationally (e.g. by bringing

[9] One may worry that using a synchronic situational strategy also requires deploying one or more intrapsychic strategies. After all, even situational strategies require some mental effort to stop oneself from acting on one's already-existing impulses, or to come up with a plan about what aspect of the environment to change. One may thus suspect that intrapsychic strategies are more basic or central to self-control. However, while situational strategy implementation may require the use of cognitive capacities, it is important not to confuse the use of a cognitive capacity with the deployment of a self-control strategy. For detailed discussion see Sripada (2021).

[10] It is worth noting that the inhibitory/initiatory distinction cuts across the intrapsychic/situational distinction. Intrapsychic strategies can be inhibitory (e.g. using behavioral suppression to avoid smoking) or initiatory (e.g. cognitively reframing a task to find starting a task less daunting). Likewise, situational strategies can be inhibitory (e.g. Ulysses getting tied to the mast) or initiatory (e.g. recruiting social support to overcome a fear).

in social support), but intrapsychic strategies seem particularly well-suited for apathy problems. After all, when we lack motivation to do something, changing the way we are conceptualizing the task can often help. Disengaged from the class and finding the subject matter uninteresting, a student feels writing a term paper a dull activity, so they postpone getting started. A young musician finds the rudiments uninspiring, so she lacks the motivation to practice her basics. Intrapsychic strategies could be really useful for each of these agents. The student could reconceptualize their task by redefining the goal (proving the teacher wrong about their ability, starting with the part of the essay that seems less uninteresting). Promising oneself a post-workout treat could be an effective way to convince oneself to exercise. The young musician, similarly, might get more inspiration if they give their repetitive rudiment exercises the structure of a game.[11]

Thus, negative self-control seems to lend itself to a different distribution of strategies than positive self-control. Given the fact that temptations tend to be elicited and sustained by external circumstances, attempting situational strategies makes sense in overcoming problems of temptation. But since there is no external source of temptation that can be targeted in cases of apathy, intrapsychic strategies should be more pervasive when attempting positive self-control. Given the difference between the kinds of mechanisms that trigger each type of motivational problem, we believe it is rational to attempt a different combination of strategies for each. This is not to say that we should use *only* situational strategies for temptations and *only* intrapsychic strategies for apathy. Each case is different, and agents often use multiple strategies for each self-control problem (Milyavskaya et al., 2021). Selecting an appropriate combination of strategies for a specific problem is part of what the skill of self-control is about (Bermúdez, 2021). The specific claim we defend here is that, given the structural differences between the two kinds of self-control problems, it would be rational to attempt more intrapsychic than situational strategies for apathy problems, and more situational than intrapsychic strategies for temptation problems.

It may seem like in some apathy cases the natural thing to do is execute a situational strategy. To revisit Sanjay's pure apathy case, tackling the problem situationally (e.g. by promising a friend to meet at the gym or start by putting on the gym outfit) may seem more effective than doing things like redirecting attention.[12] We would like to say two things in response. First, there may indeed be cases of apathy where situational strategies would work

[11] How do we know that in these cases the agents are not in the grip of some strongly motivating emotion, analogous to the glass bridge walker's fear? While the same outward behavior can be caused by temptation or apathy, a possible clue to distinguish them is that in cases of apathy the agent does not give signs of feeling strongly repelled from the commitment-advancing action or attracted by a commitment-inconsistent action—they simply seem unmoved either way. In cases of temptation, the agent would tend to display repellence from the commitment-advancing action or attraction towards a different action path. (We thank an anonymous referee for raising this point.)

[12] We thank an anonymous referee for posing this challenge.

better for some agents as mechanisms of positive self-control. Our claim is only about the distribution of these cases: in most cases, intrapsychic strategies will tend to be more effective than situational cases for exerting positive than for negative self-control. This leaves the possibility open that in some exceptional cases situational strategies will work better for positive self-control exertion. Second, Sanjay's case is not necessarily one of those exceptional cases. Restructuring the goal from going to the gym to at least putting on gym clothes is an intrapsychic strategy (specifically, a case of cognitive reframing). Sanjay can also promise himself a nice treat after he goes to the gym; focus on the fun audiobook he can hear while working out; think that while he exercises he has a valid excuse to forget about work; or add more detail to his intention (I will leave at 3:15pm; go to this room; first do this exercise and then that one; listening to this playlist; and son on). There is evidence to recommend these strategies (Bélanger-Gravel et al., 2013; Kirgios et al., 2020). Whether intrapsychic strategies like these are more effective to tackle apathy in boosting exercise is an open question for future research.

While we have focused on the differences between positive and negative self-control, it is worth pointing out what unites them. In our view, both are species of a unified kind, namely self-control, which is the skillful use of cognitive control capacities to solve motivational problems, i.e. problems in which the agent's motivation does not align with their commitments (Bermúdez, 2021; Sripada, 2021). The fact that the same strategies (intrapsychic and situational) can be used for both forms of self-control indicates that they are unified both at the mechanistic level—they both rely crucially on cognitive control—and at the functional level—they both instantiate attempts at solving motivational problems. What distinguishes them is the type of problem they aim at solving.[13]

5. Folk Psychology

We believe the two-sided account of self-control fits nicely with common sense, and that the distinctions between apathy and temptation, and positive and negative self-control, are consistent with folk psychology. That is, we believe that people respond differently to temptation and apathy problems, and that they tend to associate different strategy profiles to each problem type. In this section we provide evidence that this is indeed the case: laypeople report different responses to apathy and temptation problems, and they tend to propose a different mix of self-control strategies to solve each problem type.

We recruited participants online via Prolific Academic (n = 25, age_m = 34, SD = 5.2), and showed them a series of vignettes, each one describing a situation in which an agent faces a self-control problem. Each participant saw two apathy-problem vignettes and two temptation-problem vignettes. After reading each vignette, we asked participants to describe what they would do to uphold the commitment if they were the agent in the story. Each participant provided five different self-control strategies for each vignette, for a total of twenty

[13] We thank an anonymous reviewer for inviting us to address this point.

responses per participant. External classifiers blind to the study's hypotheses classified each response according to a version of Duckworth et al.'s (2016) taxonomy.[14]

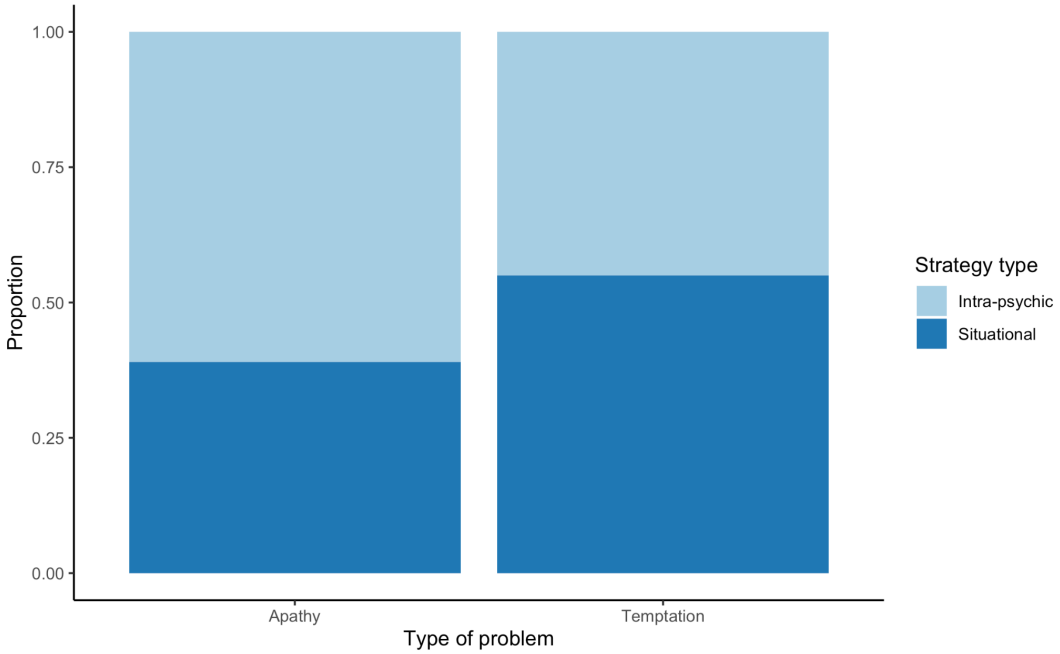

Figure 1: Proportion of strategies per problem type

In accordance with our analysis, we expected participants to propose more intrapsychic strategies for apathy problems, and more situational strategies for temptation problems. This is indeed what we found (see Figure 1 and Table 1). The proposed strategies for each problem type were significantly different (χ^2 = 12.7, *df* = 1, p < 0.001; the effect size was moderate: Cramér's V = 0.17). To cope with apathy problems, participants proposed significantly more intrapsychic than situational strategies (χ^2 = 13, *df* = 1, p < 0.001; medium effect size: Cramér's V = 0.23), while they proposed more situational strategies to deal with temptation (in this case the effect was smaller and only marginally significant: χ^2 = 2.64, *df* = 1, p = 0.1; Cramér's V = 0.11).

For temptation cases, the strategy most frequently proposed was removing something from the situation. By contrast, removal was the strategy least frequently proposed for apathy problems. The most common intrapsychic strategy for apathy scenarios was cognitive reframing (also known as 'cognitive reappraisal'). This reflects participants' tendency to propose ways to restructure the task representation by proposing plans, providing new incentives, or breaking down a large task into smaller chunks.

For our purposes, these findings are relevant because they corroborate, first, that folk

[14] Preregistration, study materials, classification instructions, and statistical analyses can be found in https://osf.io/2k3d9/?view_only=fd5d241171be4f0b9f9e899b4b3a9bf5.

psychology is sensitive to the distinction between temptation and apathy problems, and moreover, that laypersons tend to use different types of self-control strategies for each problem type.

6. Conclusion: Redefining Motivational Mastery

In this paper we have argued that an analysis of apathy as a type of self-control problem leads to a reinterpretation of the nature of self-control itself. The concept of self-control should let go of its traditional focus on the effortful resistance of temptation and incorporate the bolstering of commitment-advancing motivation as an equally central element. This echoes Donald Davidson's point that there are "plenty of cases where we act against our better judgment and which cannot be described as succumbing to temptation" (2001, p. 29). We argued that the kinds of self-control required for solving each problem are different, since they require a different mix of strategies. To exert negative self-control, agents can rely more on situational strategies, particularly those that remove the tempting objects from the situation. But exerting positive self-control tends to require more intrapsychic work to bring about the extra motivation required to perform one's commitment-advancing actions wholeheartedly.

Thus, discussion of apathy leads to a reinterpretation of the traditional view of self-control as the ability to *master motivation* that is contrary to one's commitments (Mele, 1987, p. 54). While there is significant debate surrounding the nature of self-control, many accounts coincide in this general idea that self-control makes commitment-concordant action possible in the face of motivational obstacles. Literature has gravitated towards identifying temptations as the only relevant motivational obstacles. Our analysis shows that this interpretation should be abandoned, because the insufficiency of a commitment-advancing motivation is also a motivational obstacle that generates self-control challenges. Thus motivational mastery, the ability to reliably overcome motivational obstacles, involves not only suppressing problematic motivations, but also increasing beneficial motivations.

This new interpretation of motivational mastery can help us shed light on the problems surrounding the value of self-control. While research shows that resisting temptation does not contribute to long-term goal attainment (Hofmann, Baumeister, et al., 2012; Hofmann, Vohs, et al., 2012; Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017), and may even be harmful to agents (Brownstein, 2018; Nanay, 2020), some evidence suggests that positive self-control is particularly relevant to self-control's long-term impacts on wellbeing. It has been recently shown that a greater tendency toward planning behavior is linked with greater self-control (Ludwig et al., 2018; Sjåstad & Baumeister, 2018), and also with long-term goal attainment (Ludwig et al., 2019). Relatedly, the construction of implementation intentions (detailed intentions specifying the what, how, and where, of one's action) leads to increased goal attainment (Gollwitzer, 2014). These are the kind of strategies that may be prioritized to deal with apathy, in order to make commitment-advancing action more likely by increasing motivation.

We thus suggest that positive self-control may be a crucial missing piece in our understanding of how self-control produces its valuable outcomes: how it makes it possible for us to act rationally in the face of motivational obstacles, and to successfully achieve our long-term goals, despite motivational obstacles. This claim is yet to be tested directly; we have only provided an initial case for it, and invite researchers to further investigate positive self-control to help clarify the puzzles surrounding the value of motivational mastery. This seems to be a promising path in principle because, while negative self-control is all about not behaving in accordance with temptations (which, as mentioned above, can generate negative affect and regret), positive self-control is about effectively pursuing the actions one considers most valuable (which we propose can lead to positive affect and increased satisfaction).

Additionally, as mentioned above, apathy is a feature common to many mental health conditions, but it is not clear how widespread apathy is in non-clinical populations, and how significant it is as an obstacle to long-term goal attainment. Through this paper we hope to help in motivating researchers to investigate the nature and pervasiveness of apathy as an everyday motivational problem for goal-attainment in non-clinical populations. Only thus will we be able to fully grasp the value of self-control.

Producing such research will probably require innovation, both conceptual and methodological. It will require conceptual innovation because we must identify more precisely how diminished motivation works, and how intrapsychic cognitive strategies interact with it. Particularly, it has been argued that synchronic exertions of positive self-control are better explained as "non-agential" processes rather than as intentional actions (Connor, 2014). It remains to be seen whether actional accounts of synchronic self-control can offer a strong reply, and if not, what the consequences of this are for theories of synchronic self-control.

Secondly, further research will require methodological innovation because most of the psychological methods to study self-control aim at studying how people manage problematic impulses. For instance, in experience sampling studies people observe self-control in the moment by asking participants whether they are feeling a desire that conflicts with one of their goals (Converse et al., 2019; Hennecke & Bürgler, 2020; Milyavskaya et al., 2021). This directly precludes the possibility of observing apathy problems. Creating novel methods that can observe how agents solve apathy problems is crucial to move the field forward.

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