

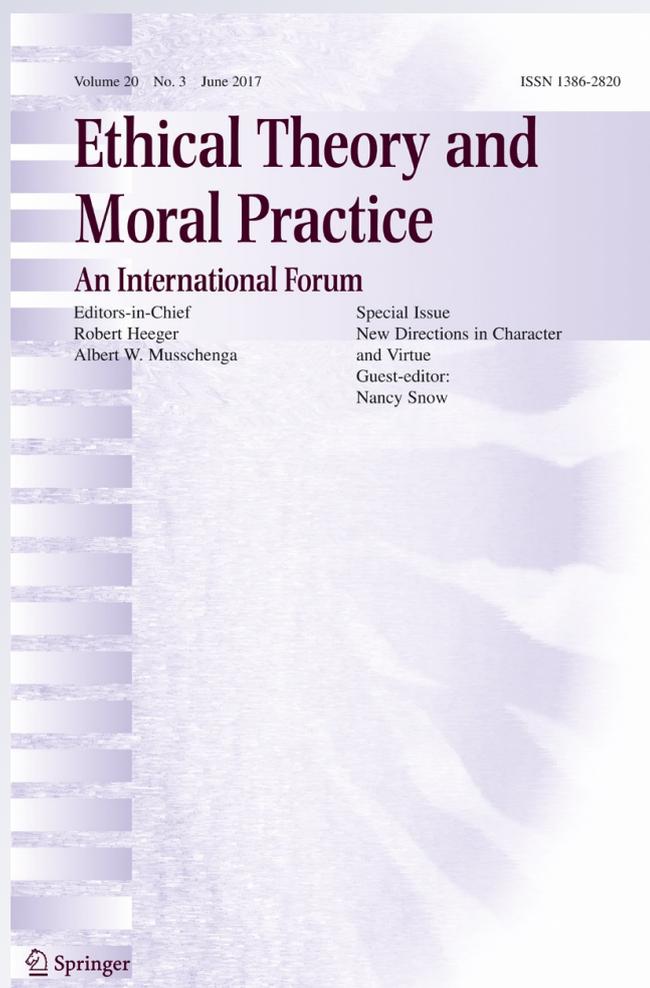
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Virtue of Self-Regulation

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Abstract This paper proposes the idea of thinking about practical rationality in terms of self-regulation and defends the thesis that self-regulation is a virtue, insofar as we have reason to think it is our highest form of practical rationality. I argue that understanding self-regulation as a virtuous form of practical reasoning is called for given the kinds of limitations we face in developing agency and pursuing our goals, and presents us with several advantages over traditional understandings of practical rationality.

Keywords Self-regulation · Virtue · Practical rationality · Generosity · Situationism · Automaticity

Philosophers have a longstanding fascination with the concept of practical rationality. There is good reason for this: it is within the human capacity to act on reasons, and to reflect on our reasons for acting, that human beings can develop and flourish as agents. Practical rationality plays a particularly important role within eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Defenders of eudaimonistic virtue ethics, such as Foot (2003), Hursthouse (1999), and Russell (2012), follow Aristotle in maintaining that our highest end is the development and exercise of practical wisdom, which involves both knowing what to do, and knowing when and how to do it.

One popular way of understanding practical rationality and cashing out what it means to be practically wise is in terms of developing virtuous character traits. On these Aristotelian-inspired views, the virtues consist in dispositions to think, feel, and respond in manners appropriate to the situation. To be practically rational, on this framework, is to exercise the virtues.

The more we learn about the nature and causes of our actions, however, the more this framework seems too thin. Dispositions don't magically translate into actions and well-known psychological research suggests that more often than not dispositions do not cause actions.¹

¹Here I have in mind situationist social psychology (e.g., Latane and Darley 1970; Ross and Nisbett 2011), which John Doris (2002) has introduced to philosophers.

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A richer theory of practical rationality would help us to understand both its nature and how we are to aspire to develop it.

In this paper, I propose the idea of thinking about practical rationality in terms of self-regulation and will defend the thesis that self-regulation is a virtue, insofar as we have reason to think this is our highest form of practical rationality.² I'll begin by introducing the phenomenon of self-regulation and some of the empirical research regarding it, before moving on to defend its status as a virtue.

1 Self-Regulation and Practical Rationality

Self-regulation refers to the psychological process through which we can alter our usual patterns of actions and redirect our efforts towards successful goal pursuit. Ongoing research on self-regulation highlights it as one of our most important capacities insofar as it demonstrates our ability to improve our behavior and to take the steps requisite to attain our goals. In this sense, self-regulation harnesses our agency in an important and distinctive way. It enables us to take control of our behavior and act in ways that reflect our commitments. For these reasons, it *prima facie* seems that self-regulation might provide a helpful framework for understanding practical rationality.

To illustrate, consider what is involved in practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is reasoning that occurs in the context of deciding what to do. Practical rationality involves the capacity to engage in the kind of first-personal, deliberative reflection that gives rise to plans, intentions, or actions. Philosophical accounts of practical rationality often take practical rationality to be a normative ideal; one that agents develop when their practical reasoning process is guided by certain norms. Understood most generally, following Svavarsdóttir we can take practical rationality to consist in “excellence in use of our cognitive capacities in one’s practical endeavors” (2008, p. 3). Typically, this is taken to be, as Svavarsdóttir does, making the most of one’s rational natures, a move with strong Aristotelian roots.

Aristotle (2014) famously highlights reason as the center point of our cognitive capacities, and emphasizes reason’s dominance over other aspects of our nature. Reason is our highest and most distinctively human capacity, he argues, and we ought to understand virtue in terms of how it is that reason stands in relation to our appetites and desires. Intellectual virtues concern the excellent use of the process of reasoning, while moral virtues concern the application of reason in our practical deliberations. Practical rationality, for Aristotle, thus has two components: reasoning about what to do, and reasoning about how to do it. It is the integration of wisdom about our final ends with the concrete knowledge about how to apply this wisdom in our actions.

Why is reason so important to Aristotle? Two interrelated explanations stand out. The first can be found in Aristotle’s *ergon* argument, which identifies our “rational element” to be the distinctive aspect of humanity, not shared by other living things. Given the distinctiveness of the rational element to humanity, Aristotle reasons that we function best when we engage reason: “the characteristic activity of a human being is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason or at least not entirely lacking” (2014, sec. 1098a7–9). The second, related, explanation, is found in Aristotle’s analysis of the soul, which he divides into irrational and rational elements (Aristotle 2006, sec. 413a23). The irrational element splits between nutrition and growth (the

² I first suggested the importance of self-regulation for eudaimonistic virtue ethics in Besser-Jones (2014).

appetitive part) and sense perception (the sensitive part), while the rational element includes both theoretical and practical reason. Aristotle argues there is a natural hierarchy within this division, such that the rational element occupies a higher degree of the soul. The rational element thus, by nature, ought to govern the irrational element, making it the case that actions are excellent or virtuous when they engage the rational element.

This style of argument is familiar: given the nature of reason, and the role it plays within our lives, it is natural to grant authority to it, and to prioritize its use as preferable to following appetites and instinctual drives.³ And the conclusion Aristotle reaches, which links the use of reason to virtue, is also plausible. But, as I noted at the outset, several recent lines of argument challenge the viability of relying on this traditional framework to deliver us normative guidance that is effective. Doris has argued that empirical research calls into question not only the causal efficacy of dispositions (Doris 2002) but the very capacity we have to act as agents (Doris 2009). The list of philosophical arguments challenging the power of reason is long and growing.⁴ We do not need to do an examination of these arguments to realize that, if we can reach a better understanding of the intricacies of practical rationality, it would be a good idea to do so.

We now have a greater understanding of our cognitive and non-cognitive capacities and the ways they interact. This understanding reveals not only the limitations noted above, but also the promise we have to overcome these limitations through harnessing our capacity to self-regulate. Reflection on the nature of this capacity, I will now argue, shows that self-regulation offers a helpful and psychologically realistic way of interpreting the excellent use of our cognitive capacities that is practical rationality.

While it would be misleading to claim that psychologists agree on the exact cognitive architecture of the brain, there is widespread agreement regarding what has come to be called “executive functioning”, a term which describes the set of cognitive skills that allow us to organize information and act on it. The skills associated with executive functioning include memory, control of emotion, problem-solving, planning, and task initiation. Psychologists Vohs and Baumeister describe the skills involved in executive functioning as those that are “essential for transforming the inner animal nature into a civilized human being” (2004, p. 1). They are, in short, the skills essential to agency, and the echoes of Aristotle voiced here are hard to miss. If we are truly interested in identifying the aspect of our nature that delivers human agency, we ought to be interested in examining the executive functioning of the self. Once we do so, we see very clearly that self-regulation, which employs the areas of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) that are widely taken to be responsible for the executive functioning of the self, is an important component of executive functioning.

Typically, there are three stages involved in self-regulation: goal selection, goal commitment, and goal pursuit. The process of goal selection and goal commitment can be linked together as comprising what Kruglanski et al. (2000) describe as the *assessment function*, through which an agent can critically evaluate alternative goals and decide which are best to pursue. It “constitutes the comparative aspect of self-regulation concerned with critically evaluating entities or states, such as goals or means, in relation to alternatives in order to judge relative quality” (Kruglanski et al. 2000, p. 794). The assessment process is conscious, active,

³ Contemporary versions of this argument can be found in Foot (2003) and Russell (2012).

⁴ Knobe and Leiter (2007) argue that practical reasoning has little impact on behavior; Prinz (2007) and Nichols (2002) challenge reason's motivational capacity and influence on our moral judgements; others (Besser-Jones 2014; Tiberius 2008) see more promise for practical reason but still emphasize the need to take seriously the limitations of reason.

and deliberate, and, indeed, quite similar to our ordinary understanding of goal selection and commitment that occurs during practical reasoning.

Once an agent selects and commits to a particular goal, the next stage is pursuit of that goal, which is where the more distinctive aspects of self-regulation lay. Again following Kruglanski et al., we can understand this stage in terms of the *locomotion function*. The locomotion function focusses on how we can move from our goal commitments to implementation of those goals: it “constitutes the aspect of self-regulation concerned with movement from state to state and with committing the psychological resources necessary that will initiate and maintain goal-related movement in a straightforward and direct manner, without undue distractions and delays” (Kruglanski et al. 2000, p. 794). Locomotion of any particular goal begins as a deliberate, active process, but it is possible for self-regulation to become automatic.

The very identification of the locomotion stage as a distinct psychological process, through which an agent can operationalize her goals, constitutes significant progress in coming to understand practical reasoning. Maintaining that locomotion is central to self-regulation reflects an awareness that goal assessment is not enough to successful goal pursuit; a point I have argued to be the essential lesson of philosophical discussions of situationist research that calls into question whether people possess robust dispositional traits (Besser-Jones 2008). On this interpretation, the fact that people often fail to act in a reliable and predictable fashion likely has more to do with their failure to operationalize their goals in the specific context than it has to do with their lack of commitment to those goals. We don't necessarily have to take a side on which is more important—goal commitment/selection or locomotion—in order to appreciate the importance of the latter, and the distinctive contribution an understanding of the ways in which we can best operationalize goals can make to understanding practical reasoning.

Ongoing research on self-regulation identifies a variety of processes that correlate with the most successful goal pursuit.⁵ One self-regulatory process that has gained some attention in philosophical discussions of action is implementation intentions (e.g. Holton 2009). Implementation intentions are situation-specific plans, specifying both what to do and when to do it. The distinctive aspect of implementation intentions, in contrast to a generic intention to pursue a goal, is that an agent forms plans for how she is going to pursue the goal. While a goal intention might be “try to be a better person”, an example of an implementation intention would be “if I see someone approaching the door behind me, hold the door open for him or her”. That the agent has specific plans in place for how to act enables her to take control of situations with which she is confronted and research on the effectiveness of implementation intentions confirms this phenomenon (e.g. Brandstätter et al. 2001).

Holton (2009, pp. 8–9) explains the efficacy of implementation intentions in allowing an agent to successfully regulate towards pursuit of the goal by appeal to the fact that when agents have formed implementation intentions, less cognitive energy is required in the moment of action:

If all one has is a goal intention, this cannot be completely controlling: one will have to do more deliberation about how to implement it. And one may either forget to do that deliberation, or having started it, one may decide to give up on the intention altogether. Alternatively, one may decide to procrastinate, and then, having procrastinated, one may never come back. In contrast an implementation intention, providing it is well chosen,

⁵ See, for example, the collected discussions of research in Vohs and Baumeister (2010).

does not require the agent to reopen deliberation. The relevant cue can simply serve to trigger the action.

Given the power implementation intentions seem to have in “triggering” actions, their development seems to be particularly efficacious in altering one’s otherwise automatic responses to situational influences and in helping one maintain focus on one’s goals and the actions requisite to their attainment (Brandstätter et al. 2001). Whereas individuals who work only with a goal in mind—say of writing a paper—often find themselves distracted by situational influences, be it external (for example, noisy officemates) or internal (for example, intrusive thoughts) stimuli, those who have formed implementation intentions find themselves able to resist the pull of such stimuli and complete the goal-directed behavior. According to Brandstätter et al.’s research, the formation of implementation intentions enables individuals to engage in the appropriate goal-directed behavior “(a) immediately; (b) efficiently (i.e. not requiring much processing capacity); and (c) without conscious intent”(Brandstätter et al. 2001, p. 947).

Another promising self-regulatory process involves the development of hierarchal knowledge structures, in which the relevant goals are conceived of as comprising a hierarchy differentiated in terms of their levels of abstraction. Abstract goals are at the top of the hierarchy, while more specific and less abstract goals make up the lower levels of the hierarchy. Thus, to draw loosely on an example from Carver and Scheier (2000) an abstract goal might be “be a good friend”. As one commits to this goal, one specifies a series of less abstract and increasingly more concrete goals, the satisfaction of which enables one to fulfill the original goal. Here again we can see the importance of goal commitment: to develop the hierarchical knowledge structures, one needs to understand the goal to which she is committing and have enough understanding of the nuances of that goal to be able to gauge the more concrete goals indicated by the abstract goal. So, for example, given the abstract goal of being a good friend, the next level of abstraction might be something like: be responsive to your friend’s needs; spend time together; be a good listener. The next level would involve more concrete ways to attain these goals, such as cooking dinner, going hiking, meeting for coffee.

The hierarchical knowledge structure built here enables an agent to self-regulate in two ways: First, the specific concrete action sequences (cook dinner) direct the agent towards exactly what she should do in order to fulfill her more abstract goal. Second, the structure itself offers a feedback mechanism: where a particular action sequence does not fulfill the goal it is intended to, such as when one cooks dinner for a friend who then turns out to have the stomach flu, the agent is alerted to the discrepancy between what she is doing (cooking dinner) and the goal for the sake of which she is doing it (being responsive to her friend’s needs). She can then modify her actions accordingly, seeking out another action sequence that fulfills the relevant goal.

These are just two examples of self-regulatory mechanisms; there are many others and, as we can imagine, some will prove more effective in certain contexts than others. Research on self-regulation continues to expand, as psychologists realize the potential these mechanisms have to help individuals improve their behavior and realize their goals. This research gives us good reason to think that self-regulation is one of our most important psychological capacities.

2 The Virtue of Self-Regulation

We are now in a position to consider the virtue of self-regulation. While little research has been done exploring self-regulation by moral goals, or more generally exploring self-regulation in a

moral context, given its fundamental role in executive functioning, and in enabling individuals to harness their agency and improve their behavior, we ought to recognize and uphold self-regulation as a model form of cognitive functioning in the moral context. Given the practical dimension of self-regulation, understanding practical rationality in terms of self-regulation promises to help us make progress in our understanding of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is engaging in cognitive deliberation about what to do, and ultimately generates plans or intentions to engage in a particular course of action. Practical rationality is the best use of practical reasoning, reasoning which follows certain norms or otherwise meets standards of practical rationality. Reflection on self-regulation research allows us to make progress in identifying the norms of practical rationality; it offers us a concrete way of understanding how we can best use our cognitive capacities in the course of figuring out what to do, and allows us to make progress towards identifying features of the best use of practical reason.

Understood as a form of practical rationality, self-regulation thus can be seen as virtuous insofar as it represents the most excellent use of our cognitive capacities. In claiming self-regulation to be a virtue, I do not mean to suggest that self-regulation is a specific character trait along the lines of generosity, temperance, and courage. Rather, the sense in which self-regulation is a virtue is simply in terms of its being *an excellent use of our cognitive capacity*. This understanding of virtue as an excellence is similar to the view Daniel Russell advocates and finds within Aristotle.⁶ Russell argues that virtue is “the excellence of the practical rationality that makes our lives distinctively human, and this practical rationality is twofold: on the one hand, we are practically rational in the sense that such rationality is a directing capacity that we possess; and on the other, we are also practically rational insofar as our emotional life is capable of being shaped by that directing capacity” (2012, p. 81).

Is self-regulation an excellence in this sense? The remainder of the paper argues that it is. I first distinguish self-regulation from the related phenomenon of self-control, and will argue that while self-control presupposes a moral deficiency within the agent, self-regulation does not, lending credence to the suggestion that it is an excellent use of our cognitive capacities. I then show, through an analysis of practical reasoning with respect to generosity, how modeling practical reasoning as self-regulation enriches and improves the traditional Aristotelian approach of practical reasoning, largely insofar as it enables us to be more successful in avoiding situational and other influences that threaten our agency and capacity to exercise the virtues.

3 Self-Regulation and Self-Control

Self-regulation and self-control are closely related phenomena: Both operations occur within the umbrella of executive functioning and both operations consist in deliberate efforts to alter one's actions for the sake of some goal. While psychologists may use the terms self-regulation and self-control interchangeably, as I'll now argue, treating the two as the different phenomena that they are helps us to appreciate the distinctive structure of self-regulation. It also helps us to see more clearly why self-regulation is an appropriate model for a virtuous form of practical reason.

Let us begin with reflection on self-control. Talk of self-control inevitably leads one to think of something like will-power; the will-power we exercise in avoiding social media until we finish grading, in having just one glass of wine, in saying no to the freshly baked cookies. One of the earliest and most influential psychological studies on self-control frames self-control in terms of delay

⁶ Hursthouse (1999, p. 12) makes a similar distinction between understanding the virtues as character traits and understanding virtue as “excellences of character”.

gratification. Mischel et al. (1972) presented a group of children with a choice between a smaller treat (one marshmallow) in the moment, or a larger treat (two marshmallows) at a later time in an effort to study which strategies would be successful in delaying gratification. The way in which self-control is framed here is explicitly in terms of impulse control. Subsequent research on self-control has likewise framed self-control in terms of impulse control. In a review of recent research on self-control, Hofmann and Van Dillen describe self-control as being “like the struggle of a rider trying to tame a wild horse, with the stronger party gaining control” (2012, p. 317).

Mischel’s research emphasizes the importance of distraction as a form of self-control. He found that the children who were able to delay gratification did so by employing a number of “cool” distraction techniques. They would cover their eyes or hide under a desk so that they wouldn’t have to stare at the marshmallow in front of them; they would sing songs; they would think about the marshmallow’s resemblance to a cotton ball, and so on. These distraction techniques proved effective insofar as they allowed the children to resist their immediate desire and wait for the larger reward. Strategies of this kind thus take the main task of self-control to be impulse control.

From this research, we can see the psychological act of self-control thus engages constructs *whose primary purpose is to prevent the individual from acting on the unwanted desire*. Consider again the strategy of self-distraction explored by Mischel: self-distraction proves to be an effective mode of self-control insofar as it enables individuals to resist their unwanted desires by redirecting their attention away from these desires and towards something else.

That self-control essentially involves the experience of unwanted desires is one reason why Kotabe and Hofmann, for instance, call for more focus on the role of desire in self-control and highlight desire as the new “hot spot” of self-control research. They claim that prototypical cases of self-control are “characterized by the intrapsychic conflict between desire (colloquially referred to as “passion”) and a higher order goal (colloquially referred to as “reason”)” (Kotabe and Hofmann 2015, p. 619).

While self-control thus presupposes unwanted desires, self-regulation does not presuppose the existence of unwanted desires and this, I’ll argue, marks a significant point of distinction between the two operations. We’ll see that while the self-controlled person experiences unwanted desires and actively strives to suppress them, the self-regulated person engages strategies because her desires aren’t sufficient to generate action due to fundamental limitations in her cognitive capacities.

As we’ve seen, the basic structure of self-regulation involves the alteration of one’s usual responses in an effort to successfully pursue a goal. Effective forms of self-regulation invoke strategies that help an agent operationalize the goal and maintain focus on that goal. To illustrate, consider again the nature of implementation intentions: these are situation-specific intentions that trigger an agent’s awareness of a goal-relevant situation and so operationalize the goal. Consider also the development of hierarchical goal structures: these identify specific plans of action needed to obtain a goal and serve as a feedback mechanism alerting individuals to any discrepancies between the actions they are pursuing and what they need to do to pursue their goal effectively. While these mechanisms can be useful forms of self-control in conditions where an agent has an unwanted desire that she needs to distract herself from, the mechanisms of self-regulation are not predicated on the assumption that there will be unwanted desires necessary to overcome. Rather, the constructs involved in self-regulation are predicated on the assumption that an agent needs to employ strategies to assist her in goal pursuit due to limits in her cognitive capacities rather than due to the existence of unwanted desires.⁷

⁷ Russell (2015) makes a similar line of argument in suggesting that our understanding of virtue can benefit from the psychology of skill. I see my argument as amenable to his overall line of argument; however, I think the particular skill in question ought to be recognized as self-regulation.

Exactly what are the limits in our cognitive capacities that make necessary self-regulation? While now is not the place to do an exhaustive survey, two such limits have gained particular attention in philosophical discussion. Both concern our capacities to exercise agency over our environment. First, situationist social psychology holds that an agent's actions are more often the product of external situational influences than they are the product of her internal mental states. As Doris (2002) and others (Harman 1999) have argued, the large body of research attesting to the situational influences on our behavior calls into question the meaningfulness of the attribution of virtue traits, where virtue traits are taken to be dispositional traits. While we tend to attribute a person's actions to her internal mental states, we more often than not are making an error when we do so. The upshot, it seems, is that we need to pay more attention to the situations we find ourselves in, and less attention to the development of dispositional traits.⁸ That we are so influenced by situational features appears simply to be a feature of our psychology.

A related body of research on automaticity, brought to light in the philosophical discussions of Doris (2009), Snow (2006), and myself (Besser-Jones 2014), also suggests that the source of our actions is beyond our conscious control, thereby also supporting the thesis that the challenges we experience in goal pursuit are not primarily ones that point to an internal flaw of the agent. According to this line of research, most notably driven by Bargh and Chartrand's (1999) work, most of our behavior results from a two stage process that evidences little room for deliberate agency. First, external stimuli are automatically perceived; second, these perceptions trigger the cognitive activity directly linked to behavior. Importantly, all of this happens outside an agent's conscious awareness. Like the influence situations have on our behavior, this tendency towards automaticity appears, again, to be a fact of our psychologies: a limitation within our cognitive capacities.⁹

Self-regulation is made necessary given these ways in which our psychologies interact with our environment. Strategies of self-regulation have as their aim allowing us to change our usual tendencies of acting, and to redirect our behavior towards successful goal pursuit. Let's think about what this really means. One example frequently discussed in the situationist literature involves a study by Isen and Levin (1972) that explores the connection between elevated mood and helping behavior. In this study, subjects' moods were primed by either finding a dime in a phone booth or not, and their helping behavior was tested by encountering someone dropping papers on the sidewalk. Their results found that an overwhelming majority of people helped after finding a dime, but did not help if they did not find a dime. As Doris notes, "the crucial observation is not that mood influences behavior—no surprise there—but just how unobtrusive the stimuli that induce the determinative moods can be" (2002, p. 30). Self-regulation strategies, such as the formation of implementation intentions, are designed to pre-empt the effect of these stimuli and so block their influence on one's behavior. A person who has formed successfully an implementation intention along the lines of "when you see

⁸ Thus, for example, Doris argues that if we want to avoid engaging in an unwanted flirtation, the best thing to do is to avoid the opportunity and to remove ourselves from tempting situations, for we can't count on ourselves to resist the temptation once we are in the situation (Doris 1998, p. 516).

⁹ While my discussion frames these features of our psychology as limitations, insofar as they limit our capacity to successfully pursue goals, neither of these capacities is inherently negative and we can certainly find explanations of how these features operate as positive mechanisms, especially given the limits of our brainpower. For example, the tendency towards automaticity allows us to expend less cognitive energy on the minutiae of everyday tasks and reserve that brainpower for more urgent and pressing tasks that require an active conscious effort (Bargh and Chartrand 1999).

someone struggle, stop and help them” will have developed a disposition that is likely to be triggered upon recognition of someone struggling. Upon seeing someone who has dropped her papers on the sidewalk, such a person will stop and help, regardless of whether she is in a good or bad mood. Her helping behavior will be triggered by her implementation intention, which in turn blocks out the influences that run counter to her goal of helping people who need help.

4 Practical Reasoning about Generosity

To see the benefits of modeling practical reasoning explicitly in terms of self-regulation, let us consider the virtue of generosity, and how practical reasoning about generosity plays out on both approaches. According to the Aristotelian framework, generosity consists in the mean between being wasteful and being stingy in one’s giving and taking of money (Aristotle 2014, sec. 1107b9–11):

So, since generosity is a mean concerned with the giving and spending of money, the generous person will give and spend the right amounts, on the right objects, in both small and large matters alike, and he will do it with pleasure (Aristotle 2014, sec. 1120b28–32).

As with many of the other virtues, Aristotle encourages us to understand the mean and what the “right” amounts and “right” objects consist in through reflection on the emotional extremes (in this case, wastefulness and stinginess), as well as through reflection on the other virtues at stake such as temperance, and a concern for the noble. Thus “wastefulness exceeds in giving and not taking, and is deficient in taking, while stinginess is deficient in giving, and exceeds in taking, but only in small matters” (Aristotle 2014, sec. 1121a12–16). Wasteful people give, but their giving is not generous “because it is not noble, nor aimed at what is noble, nor is it performed in the right way” (Aristotle 2014, sec. 1121b3–4) and “this is why most [wasteful people] are intemperate” (Aristotle 2014, sec. 1121b9).

This approach towards understanding generosity through its contrast and connections to other states reflects the kind of practical reasoning the Aristotelian picture invokes. And while these considerations are certainly important to understanding generosity, notably absent from this process are direct, concrete considerations of what to do in order to be generous, other than to not be wasteful or stingy. We find a little more positive direction in Hursthouse’s (1999) framing of generosity. She begins by describing the requisite practical wisdom in terms of “the ability to reason correctly about practical matters”, where reasoning correctly involves getting things right:

In the case of generosity this involves giving the right amount of the right sort of thing, for the right reasons, to the right people, on the right occasions. ‘The right amount’ in many cases is ‘the amount I can afford’ or ‘the amount I can give without depriving someone else’. So, for instance, I do not count as mean or even ungenerous when, being fairly poor, or fairly well off but with a large and demanding family, I do not give lavish presents to richer friends at Christmas. Nor do I count as mean or even ungenerous if I refuse to let people exploit me; generosity does not require me to help support someone who is simply bone idle, nor to finance the self-indulgence of a spendthrift. (Hursthouse 1999, pp. 12–13)

This gives us a little more insight into *how* to be generous: consider how much one can afford, and be careful about who one chooses to support, yet still leaves much unspecified.

While a defender of this approach might argue that this lack of specification tracks the fact that each situation calling for generosity is unique, and that the virtuous agent ought to have developed enough practical wisdom to respond appropriately to the uniqueness of each situation, the research we have considered suggests that this approach may be naïve insofar as it fails to take seriously the challenges that most of us face in exercising agency, challenges which require the conscious and explicit development of self-regulation strategies. Our efforts to be generous will be influenced by whether or not we have just smelled freshly baked cookies; by whether or not we share the same skin color as those we are helping; by whether or not others in our group are also acting generously and by the very membership of the group itself; by whether or not we are in the presence of an authority figure, and so on.¹⁰ These seemingly tangential factors can have a dramatic influence on our efforts to be generous, both insofar as they can determine whether or not we even try to be generous, and insofar as they can influence the form our efforts to be generous can take. We might, for instance, contribute less than would be generous to a panhandler with a different skin color than our own, or we might over-contribute to a cause when at a charity event due to the group dynamics, and end up being wasteful rather than generous.¹¹ Given these dynamics that arise from both our tendency to engage in automatic behavior, and our tendency to be influenced by situational factors, we need a more robust model for practical reasoning. We need to think more about what is involved in being generous and exactly how we ought to be generous than the initial Aristotelian approach provides.

Compare, then, the Aristotelian approach to practical reasoning to one modeled on self-regulation. The first stages of self-regulation are goal selection and commitment, and so practical reasoning about generosity begins with the reflection on how and why it is important to be generous. Certainly, considerations of the extremes will come into play here, for part of assessing generosity as a goal will be to consider its advantages over the conflicting goals of stinginess or wastefulness. But the assessment stage requires taking into account many more considerations.

Because we are assessing and not just contrasting, practical reasoning will include reflection on the reasons we have to be generous, such as the importance of helping those in need, and the importance of establishing connections with those around us. This kind of reflection allows us to see that generosity ought to be directed towards those who need it the most, and helps us to see that being generous towards others involves an extension of ourselves to others and the development of bonds that help ourselves and our communities thrive.

This kind of assessment process also encourages higher-order reflection on the role this goal plays with other goals: we will need to assess the goal of generosity against, for example, the goals of providing for one's family. We may decide that providing for one's family is more important than being generous, and this prioritization, in turn, will provide some concrete guidance about how much we can afford to dedicate towards being generous. Reflection on these kinds of trade-offs, as well as on the reasons we have to be generous, enables us to see from the start that although generosity involves sacrifice, these sacrifices are both moderated and worthwhile.¹² Recognizing, as part of the assessment process, that generosity involves a sacrifice will also tip off

¹⁰ See Doris (2002) for extended discussion of these influences.

¹¹ I am grateful to Nancy Snow for the helpful examples.

¹² Thomas Hurka also emphasizes this aspect of generosity: "A generous person tries to benefit others by giving them something that would benefit himself, usually something with a market value such as money. His generosity therefore involves a sacrifice, though a willing one, of his own instrumental good" (2000, p. 106)

a wise agent to the fact that sometimes being generous may take some extra work, and that one's natural self-interested tendencies might interfere with one's efforts to be generous. This reflective process thus alerts one to the potential challenges that one may face as one tries to alter one's usual tendencies and correct them.

Through assessing generosity as a goal, we are able to develop a greater understanding of generosity and of what it requires. We see, as Talbot Brewer describes it, that generosity "requires a capacity to see and respond to the needs of others even when this requires a sacrifice of time and material resources" (2009, p. 266). As we begin to think about committing to the goal of being generous, we clearly commit to making these sacrifices and to developing the capacity to see and respond to the needs of others. We commit to the recognition that helping those genuinely in need is a worthwhile goal, albeit one that has constraints; for example, we might decide it is secondary to providing for one's family and so see from the start that there are built-in limits to the sacrifices being generous demands.

As we move beyond the stages of goal selection and commitment and to the stage in which we operationalize our goal—the locomotion stage, we have a clear idea of what is at stake. We know that being generous will require developing more awareness of the needs of others. This means we will have to be more attuned to certain features of our environment, such as recognizing that the onset of cold weather creates more pressing needs for appropriate clothing and shelter, or making a point to read and follow international news stories that can help us identify areas of need. More concrete strategies are likely to evolve the more we start to develop this awareness of the needs of others: We might, for example, start to make a habit of periodically checking in on the community food shelf, to see what and how much is needed. Thus we might form an implementation intention: On the first of the month, check the food shelf and supply as necessary.

Because, in order to be generous, we not only need to develop an awareness of the needs of others but also need to be responsive to those needs, part of the locomotion stage will include developing strategies for responding to needs. As we know from our assessment of generosity, responding to needs will require sacrifices but is worthwhile, and so we will need to think strategically about how to prevent self-interested concerns from interfering with our efforts to be generous. We might start to think about generosity as giving rise to a hierarchy of goals that form a feedback system: when we donate to the clothing drive we contribute to higher-order goals of keeping our own needs in perspective, and of helping those less fortunate than we are. But when we hold on to cashmere sweaters that we have not worn simply because they are so valuable, if we have formed the relevant knowledge structure, we'll be alerted to the fact that this course of action stands in tension with our higher-order goals, and we can revise our actions accordingly.

The self-regulated agent, who has not only thought about the moral importance of being generous, but who has engaged practical reason to develop self-regulatory strategies, is better situated to be generous than one who has not. When, at a charity event, she is tempted to place an outrageous bid on an item just because she is surrounded by over-spenders, her understanding of generosity will trigger her to moderate her response and not be wasteful. And, moreover, she may not even experience the temptation – self-regulation could be or become automatic, influencing her to give the proper amount without ever experiencing the temptation or influences to do otherwise. Similarly, the person who has thought about the proper amount to donate towards panhandlers, and who has formed an implementation intention that specifies the appropriate range, will donate the appropriate sum automatically and will have blocked the influence of stereotype activation that would have led her to give stingily to those with

different skin colors. Developing a state of self-regulation thus enables her to exercise generosity when generosity is called for, and to successfully avoid the vices various situational and automatic processes might have stimulated.

Through this basic sketch, we can see how focusing on the virtue of self-regulation and seeing it as a form of practical rationality extends basic insights from Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian perspectives on virtue by drawing on empirical psychological research. It should also be clear how understanding practical reason as self-regulation delivers a robust understanding of the goal and of the nuances of its pursuit that places agents into an effective position to pursue that goal. This is not to say that other approaches to practical reasoning cannot be effective, or necessarily will lead to results incompatible with the approach defended here. My point is that thinking of practical reasoning as self-regulation is helpful, especially if we take into consideration the kinds of limitations all of us face in developing agency and pursuing our goals, and can be seen as an extension of the Aristotelian framework, enriched by contemporary research.

We are finally in a position to affirm self-regulation as a virtue. While, as we have seen, self-regulation does presuppose that there are limitations built into our psychologies, this should not prevent us from seeing self-regulation as an excellence of our cognitive capacities. Given what we are like, we need to employ self-regulatory strategies to be most effective in our pursuit of goals. When we employ self-regulatory strategies in the pursuit of virtue-relevant goals, we display the practical wisdom requisite to select and commit to goals, and we display exemplary forms of practical reasoning insofar as we are able to operationalize and maintain effective intentions. As we have seen, this extension of practical reasoning to include strategies of action is essential. To pursue a goal without the use of self-regulatory strategies is to overestimate our very capacity to control our behavior, and shows a failure of practical wisdom insofar as practical wisdom ought to involve knowledge of one's own limitations and how to overcome them (Tiberius 2008).

5 Conclusion

I've argued that the psychological process of self-regulation can be seen not only as a form of practical reasoning, but as a virtue – as an excellent state of our cognitive capacities. Recognizing self-regulation as a virtue is important given the inherent limits of our psychology, limitations which necessitate employing strategies to help us overcome them, which is precisely what self-regulatory processes provide. As we have seen, embracing the virtue of self-regulation opens up a new dimension from which to think about character and virtue. For instance, rather than taking as our aim the cultivation of a “disposition to think, feel and respond” in certain ways, which is the advice we get from the Aristotelian framework, we can take it as our aim to develop practical wisdom about which goals to select and how to best commit to them and then to develop concrete, specific strategies for their ongoing pursuit. This way of thinking can thus redirect conversations about character and virtue in a helpful way.

A virtuous person knows what is best to do and when to do it; and when a situation calls for the exercise of virtue, she does so without having to squash any competing desires. I've argued that given well-documented facts about the influences on our behavior, the cognitive state of the virtuous agent is best understood as a state of self-regulation, and that self-regulation ought to be seen as a virtuous form of practical reasoning. Self-regulation expresses a fundamental component of executive functioning; it is, as Aristotle might have said, a “characteristic

activity of a human being” (2014, sec. 1098a7). Most importantly, though, self-regulation allows us to harness our cognitive capacities towards virtue; it allows us to take control over our behavior and to bridge gaps between knowing what to do and doing it. It allows us to exercise virtue and to be virtuous.

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