**Continence, Temperance, and Motivational Conflict: Why Traditional Neo-Aristotelian Accounts are Psychologically Unrealistic**

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**Abstract**

Traditional neo-Aristotelian accounts hold that temperance and continence are distinct character traits that are distinguished by the extent to which their bearers experience motivational conflict. In this paper, I formulate two pairs of necessary conditions—which, collectively, I call the *conformity thesis*—that articulate this distinction. Then, drawing on work in contemporary social and personality psychology, I argue that the conformity thesis is false. Being highly self-controlled is the best, psychologically realistic candidate for continence. However, our best evidence suggests that highly self-controlled/continent people do not experience more or stronger desires that conflict with their evaluative judgments than others, and they are not particularly good at directly resisting these desires. In this way, actual continent people exhibit motivational harmony that is more similar to the traditional picture of temperance. On the other hand, they achieve this harmony because they are able to effectively employ indirect strategies for handling motivational conflict. These strategies are correctly associated with continence. Recognizing that temperance and continence are overlapping character traits puts us in a better position to understand, and design interventions to improve, the neuropsychological capacities that enable humans to intelligently manage their desires.

According to a traditional view that descends from Aristotle’s work, temperance and continence are categorically distinct, mutually exclusive character traits that are distinguished by whether their possessors experience motivational conflict.[[1]](#footnote-2) Many philosophers think that drawing a clear distinction between temperance and continence is a “major achievement in the reflective study of human conduct” since, in their view, it shows that there are “two different kinds of moral goodness” (Hardie, 1968, pp. 139, 138) or that “there is more than one [kind of] life governed by reason” (Gould, 1994, p. 186).

In this paper, I argue that a core component of this traditional view—what I call the *conformity thesis*—is not psychologically realistic; it does not reflect the actual neuropsychological capacities that allow humans to intelligently manage their desires. Given that psychological realism is a constraint on ethical theorizing, we should reject the conformity thesis and traditional accounts of continence and temperance from which it follows.

Drawing on recent studies in social and personality psychology, I argue that if some people have a stable psychological trait that enables them to avoid pursuing things that conflict with goals that they value, then this trait straddles the traditional gulf between temperance and continence.[[2]](#footnote-3) The best candidate we have for the psychologically realistic trait of continence—having high trait self-control—does not satisfy the conformity thesis’s necessary conditions on continence. Highly self-controlled people have a kind of motivational harmony that is more similar to the traditional picture of temperance than it is to continence. However, they achieve this motivational harmony by employing *indirect* resistance strategies—like those that Odysseus used to evade the dangers of the sirens’ song—that some traditional views correctly take to be characteristic of continence. If temperance is to be psychologically realistic, it is likely that these indirect strategies are *also* characteristic of temperance.

Thus, we should be open to the empirical possibility that temperance is simply a kind of continence or even that there is a single psychological trait that is equally deserving of both names (if indirect resistance strategies turn out to be the best and most effective means of achieving motivational harmony). I conclude by briefly discussing some implications for future work in this area and for which interventions are likely to be most successful at improving our capacities to act in accordance with our evaluative judgments.

***1. Some Preliminaries***

***1.1. Psychological Realism in Moral Psychology***

Among both proponents and critics of virtue ethics, some degree of psychological realism is widely accepted as a constraint on ethical theorizing. Put very generally, psychological realism demands that our ethical theories be constructed “in accordance with actual human capacities” (Kristjánsson, 2008, p. 60).[[3]](#footnote-4) Theorists disagree, however, about how stringent this constraint should be and what exactly it requires.

I think that an adequate psychological realism constraint should require that living human beings possess the central psychological features (states, traits, etc.) to which a successful ethical theory appeals. Further, I think that psychological realism should demand that the psychological features that a successful ethical theory claims drive normal human behavior are measurable by the methods of contemporary psychology and neuroscience. Since the virtues, and a clear-cut distinction between virtue and continence, are central to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, these theories will be successful only if some living human beings are virtuous, and other living humans are continent. If the virtues are extremely rare, then perhaps none of the samples of people used in psychological and neuroscientific experiments have ever contained (or ever will contain) any virtuous individuals. However, if virtue ethics is to be psychologically realistic, these samples should contain people with the psychological traits that are claimed to drive normal behavior. In particular, I take the traditional Aristotelian view to endorse the plausible claim thatthe average person has a trait that is intermediate between continence and incontinence (see Aristotle, 1984, 1152a25-27; Miller, 2014, p. 204, n.55). Given this claim, the studies and methods used by the sciences of the mind should be able to detect (between-individual differences in) this trait.[[4]](#footnote-5) (More on this below.)

Strictly speaking, these constraints are more demanding than other proposed realism constraints. For instance, Christian Miller (2014, p. 203 n.50) claims that the best formulation of the “minimal degree of psychological realism that virtue ethics needs to accept” is Diana Fleming’s claim that “it should be possible, in principle[,] for a human being to become a virtuous agent, even if there do not happen to be, or to have been, any living human beings who are capable of doing so” (2006, p. 27).[[5]](#footnote-6) However, I think that any differences between theories that accept only Fleming’s realism constraint and those that accept my apparently stronger constraints are not very interesting or important. If a virtue theorist balks at the claim that realism demands that they correctly attribute the *virtues* to some living humans, then I am happy to weaken my constraint so that it concerns only *approximations* of the virtues. I think that any psychologically realistic form of virtue ethics must allow that some living humans have at least approximated the virtues.[[6]](#footnote-7) For brevity’s sake, and because I think that these approximations really deserve to be called virtues (if they are as good as humans can get), I will drop the talk of approximation in what follows. However, those who are keener on the use of idealization in ethics should feel free to insert it where appropriate.

The main argument of this paper can be thought of as extending the “realism challenge” that Christian Miller puts to traditional, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics (2014, pp. 207-12). Not only does virtue ethics need to provide “realistic and empirically informed ways” for most human beings to improve the character traits that they actually have (2014, p. 210); it also needs to provide realistic and empirically informed accounts of the virtues that such improvement strategies aim at. (Nothing really important changes, in my view, if we weaken this and demand only that humans can realistically aim merely to approximate the virtues.) In particular, I argue that traditional, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics does not have a psychologically realistic account of temperance or continence.

***1.2. The Traditional View and the Conformity Thesis***

According to the traditional, Aristotelian view, temperate people differ from the merely continent in lacking desires that conflict with their evaluative judgments—what I will call “conflicting desires,” for short. According to this view, temperance and continence are two different kinds of “fundamental psychic structures” (*hexeis*) and not merely “developmental stage[s]” or “temporary condition[s]”(Gould, 1994, pp. 180, 176).[[7]](#footnote-8)

If temperate people are distinguished from continent people by a *complete* lack of conflicting desires, then the traditional view would be correct to accept what Karen Stohr calls the “harmony thesis”—the claim that the virtuous person’s (but not the continent person’s) “feelings and inclinations [are] in harmony with her considered judgments about what is good or right to do” (2003, p. 339). Stohr claims that the harmony thesis is nearly universally accepted by contemporary virtue ethicists, and she also attributes it to Aristotle himself (2003, p. 340; see also Mele (2016, pp. 169-70); Miller (2017, p. 147)). However, in a nod toward psychological realism, we might want to allow that temperate people can sometimes have conflicting desires and yet remain temperate. As Al Mele remarks: “Since no actual human being … always desires in accordance with what he judges best, any account of [temperance] that successfully treats [it] as [a trait] of actual human beings must allow for … motivational imperfections” (2016, p. 170). Thus, Mele suggests that “temperate individuals are characterized by a remarkable but imperfect conformity of their appetitive desires to their relevant evaluative judgments, whereas [continent] persons, though they are subject to temptation [i.e., conflicting desires] significantly more often, are very good at resisting” (ibid.).

Mele’s suggested necessary condition on temperance is logically weaker than the harmony thesis in that it requires that temperate people have only “remarkable,” not perfect, assessment-desire conformity. Thus, it should be equally, if not more, widely accepted. Elaborating a bit on Mele’s suggested modification of the traditional view, I claim that the traditional distinction between continence and temperance entails what I call the

*conformity thesis*: Temperance requires (Temp1) remarkable conformity of one’s occurrent desires for appetitive pleasures to one’s assessments of their value, which (Temp2) would hold in a greater number and wider variety of situations than the conformity required by continence,whereas continence requires (Con1) less than remarkable conformity of one’s occurrent desires for appetitive pleasures to one’s evaluative assessments but (Con2) an excellent ability toresist these conflicting desires.[[8]](#footnote-9)

What is it to have “remarkable” assessment-desire conformity? Mele writes the following a little below the passage quoted above:

Temperance is plausibly regarded as entailing a supranormal conformity of one’s desires for appetitive pleasures to one’s assessment of their value. The trait is legitimately distinguished from [continence]; and even if Aristotle was overly demanding in drawing the line at perfect conformity, the notion of assessment-desire conformity is central to a proper distinction. (2016, p. 171)

If having remarkable assessment-desire conformity requires having “supranormal” assessment-desire conformity, and “supranormal” just means “above average,” then whether a given individual is temperate or not would depend on the assessment-desire conformity of the *other* individuals in the relevant population to which she belongs. This would seem to rule out a world in which everyone is temperate (to the same degree), for, in that world, no one would have above average assessment-desire conformity.[[9]](#footnote-10) To avoid relativizing temperance in this way, I will take “remarkable” assessment-desire conformity to be defined in absolute terms, e.g., having at least a certain percentage of one’s occurrent desires conform to one’s evaluative assessments.[[10]](#footnote-11) An individual can meet any such absolute threshold regardless of what the average assessment-desire conformity in her relevant population is.

I assume, as the traditional view does, that the average level of assessment-desire conformity in actual humans has *not* been remarkable; average humans in the past and present have not been temperate. I also assume, again following the traditional view (see Section 1.1 above), that the average ability to resist conflicting desires (among actual humans past and present) is *not* excellent; it does not meet the threshold required for continence. In line with Mele’s suggestion above, we could adopt a very relaxed absolute threshold for remarkable assessment-desire conformity: having assessment-desire conformity that is greater than what the assessment-desire conformity of the average actual human has happened to be.[[11]](#footnote-12) So, for example, suppose we use a simple measure of assessment-desire conformity—the percentage of one’s occurrent desires (over a certain time period) that conform to one’s evaluative assessments—and suppose that 53% of the average person’s occurrent desires conform to her evaluative assessments (see Hofmann et al. (2012, p. 1325)). Then, on this proposal, individuals who have *more than 53%* of their occurrent desires that conform to their evaluative assessments will have remarkable assessment-desire conformity. Alternatively, we could adopt a somewhat more stringent absolute threshold for having remarkable assessment-desire conformity: having assessment-desire conformity that is (statistically) significantly higher than what the average for actual humans has happened to be (e.g., one standard deviation above the mean, or above a value associated with a statistical test at a typical level of significance, say, 0.05 or 0.01). Similarly, we could adopt a relaxed absolute threshold (in (Con2)) for what counts as having an excellent ability to resist conflicting desires: being better than average *actual* humans have been at resisting conflicting desires. Alternatively, we could adopt a more stringent absolute threshold: being (statistically) significantly better than average actual humans have been at resisting conflicting desires.

In Section 2, I argue that the conformity thesis is false, whether we adopt relaxed or more stringent thresholds for temperance and continence.

***1.3. Trait Self-Control***

Self-control has long been a topic of study in psychology and other sciences of the mind. In the last few decades, psychologists and sociologists have focused on what is taken to be a stable personality trait concerning self-control, which can be thought of as a capacity to manage (standing and occurrent) motivational conflict “in the service of personally valued goals and standards” (Duckworth and Kern, 2011, p. 260; Fujita, Carnevale, and Trope, 2018, pp. 283-4). Self-control does not concern all kinds of motivational conflict. As Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross note, self-control “is called for when [and only when] we [have standing or occurrent desires for] two mutually exclusive options, one expected to bring immediate gratification and the other expected to further more enduring and important goals” (2016, pp. 37-8). By contrast, choosing between two outcomes that are judged to be equally valuable is not an exercise of self-control (2016, p. 38).

Among the most widely used measures of trait self-control is the *Self-Control Scale*, a set of thirty-six self-report items such as “I am good at resisting temptations,” “I am able to work effectively toward long-term goals,” and “I sometimes drink or use drugs to excess” (Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone, 2004).[[12]](#footnote-13) Trait self-control is also measured in other ways, including observational ratings, reports from others (like parents or teachers), and smartphone-based experience sampling that tracks, e.g., real-life self-control failures and experiences of conflicting desires (e.g., Ent, Baumeister, and Tice, 2015; Hofmann, Vohs, and Baumeister, 2012; Moffitt et al., 2011, Supplemental Materials, p. 2). I will refer to people who score high on the Self-Control Scale or any of the other measures of trait self-control as “highly self-controlled” individuals or as having “high trait self-control.” (The studies I rely on below use one-standard-deviation--above-the-mean as a threshold for having high trait self-control.)

***2. Against the Conformity Thesis***

***2.1. High Trait Self-Control, Continence, and the Conformity Thesis***

Being highly self-controlled has many of the important features associated with continence. Highly self-controlled people are good at delaying gratification—at successfully pursuing “larger, later” rewards rather than tempting “smaller, sooner” ones—by having a capacity to avoid or resist these temptations (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez, 1989). Further, being highly self-controlled seems to be a trait that remains fairly stable throughout much of one’s lifespan and is correlated with a wide variety of beneficial life outcomes—such as better health, greater wealth, lower levels of criminal behavior, and feeling happier in the moment—even when controlling for potentially confounding variables such as socio-economic status (see, e.g., de Ridder et al., 2012; Hofmann et al., 2014; Moffitt et al., 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone, 2004).

Given these findings, it is plausible that high trait self-control just *is* the trait of continence that is possessed by actual humans. However, if we identify continence with high trait self-control, then we must also reject (Con1) in the conformity thesis. For, highly self-controlled people do not exhibit less than remarkable assessment-desire conformity: in fact, just the opposite; they seem to have remarkable assessment-desire conformity. Highly self-controlled people report experiencing significantly *fewer* conflicting desires than average and significantly *fewer* episodes of engaging direct, effortful, inhibitory self-control than average (Galla and Duckworth, 2015; Grund and Carstens, 2019, pp. 66, 68; Hofmann et al., 2012; Imhoff, Schmidt, and Gerstenberg, 2014). (As I discuss in Section 2.2, this suggests that continent people often satisfy one of the supposed necessary conditions on *temperance*, (Temp1).)

This goes along with evidence that highly self-controlled individuals are excellent only at *indirectly* (but not *directly*)resisting conflicting desires. Althoughthe paradigm mode of resistance is *directly* overriding or inhibiting a conflicting desire—“the capacity to effortfully resist temptation” (Levy 2017, p. 201; cf. Fujita, 2011), there are also “indirect” forms of resistance, which include “organizing one’s environment so that either one doesn’t encounter temptations or so that when one encounters temptations there are barriers to consumption” (Levy, 2017, p. 201).[[13]](#footnote-14) Importantly, although direct resistance requires an occurrent conflicting desire, indirect resistance strategies do not. This is true even of the “intrapsychic” indirect strategies of cognitive change (construal) and attentional deployment (self-distraction) (see note 13). That is, one can use indirect strategies (e.g., construe a second glass of wine as a dangerous, toxic substance or distract oneself from it) either to prevent an occurrent desire for the wine from arising in the first place or to prevent oneself from acting on the occurrent desire once it has arisen.

There is not strong evidence that high trait self-control correlates with an excellent ability to directly resist conflicting desires.[[14]](#footnote-15) In fact, there is emerging evidence that highly self-controlled people are poor at directly resisting conflicting desires; continent people seem to have less “willpower” than average. Not only are highly self-controlled individuals worse at directly resisting temptations when they are encountered in an **“**ego depleted” state, they are also not good at directly resisting temptations in a non-depleted condition (Imhoff, Schmidt, and Gerstenberg, 2014; see also, Lindner et al., 2017).[[15]](#footnote-16) Further, a recent student found that people who scored high on a measure of trait self-control “typically engage *less* in the actual execution of [direct] self-control” (Grund and Carstens, 2019, pp. 68, 73). These results suggest that highly self-controlled individuals do not have “stronger wills” than low trait self-control individuals.

I think that this undermines (Con2) in the conformity thesis. For, (Con2) should be read as demanding that continent people are excellent at *directly* resisting conflicting desires (while either remaining neutral on, or perhaps also demanding, that they be excellent at *indirectly* resisting conflicting desires; more on this below). On the traditional view, the paradigm of continence is being especially good at directly overriding or inhibiting conflicting desires: the continent person is, above all, strong willed (which, of course, is why she, the *enkratic*, traditionally contrasts with someone who is weak-willed, the *akratic*). The evidence surveyed above suggests that this aspect of the traditional view is also false.

Both the fact that highly self-controlled people have remarkable assessment-desire conformity and are not particularly good at directly resisting conflicting desires can be explained by the fact that they *are* excellent at employing *indirect* self-control strategies, such as avoiding environments in which temptations are likely to arise or using various “pre-commitment” strategies that block access to temptations if they are encountered (e.g., de Ridder et al., 2012; Ent, Baumeister, and Tice, 2015; Hofmann et al., 2012; Imhoff, Schmidt, and Gerstenberg, 2014, Study 3).[[16]](#footnote-17) For, highly self-controlled people seem to achieve their remarkable assessment-desire conformity *by* avoiding (or modifying) situations in which conflicting desires are likely to arise in the first place, and if they encounter conflicting desires less often, they will have had less opportunity to practice directly resisting them (cf. Levy, 2017, p. 203).

Further, at least some proponents of a traditional account (correctly, in my view) acknowledge that employing indirect resistance strategies *is* characteristic of continence. For example, Amelie Rorty writes that “exercising forethought,” as Odysseus does when he had “himself bound and gagged, knowing that when he heard the song of the sirens he would head for the rocks,” is “a form of *enkrateia*” (continence) (1980, p. 274). If the studies reviewed above are correct, continent people are excellent *only* at employing these indirect forms of resistance (and not at directing resisting conflicting desires). Thus, we should modify part of the conformity thesis and conclude that high trait self-control/continence requires:

(Con2\*) an excellent ability to indirectly, but not directly, resist conflicting desires.

One objection to my use of the results concerning trait self-control to undermine the conformity thesis’s necessary conditions on continence is simply to *deny* that high trait self-control is continence. For example, Levy suggests that we may want to deny that a person with high trait self-control possesses the character trait ‘self-control’ (i.e., continence) because such a person (a) is not especially good at directly resisting temptations and (b) does “not have internal states that dispose them directly to engage in behaviors that we would appropriately described [sic] as self-controlled” (2017, pp. 203-4). Levy suggests that a highly self-controlled person is just as likely to pursue indirect strategies *implicitly*, “[buying] the smaller tub of ice cream *because that’s the right size*, avoid[ing] the bakery on the route home habitually, and so on,” as she is to effortfully and “deliberately” employ direct or indirect strategies, i.e., to do something “we would [correctly] describe as ‘exercising self-control’” (p. 204, italics in original).

A full reply to this objection would require determining when something is “appropriately described” as the character trait of self-control (i.e., continence) which hinges in part on difficult questions concerning reference, meaning, and concept individuation in the philosophy of language and mind. I will not attempt to resolve such questions here, but simply indicate the kind of naturalistic approach to definition and categorization I adopt and why that approach (together with the psychological realism constraints and the empirical work surveyed above) supports identifying high trait self-control and continence.

In the above discussion, Levy appeals to “how the folk construe talk about self-control” and what “we seem to have in mind” when “we talk about character traits” to raise doubts about whether highly self-controlled people have the trait of continence (2017, p. 204). I am not concerned with the folk concepts of ‘self-control’ or ‘continence’ in this paper. Rather, I am interested in the actual psychological capacities that allow people to rationally manage their desires. The term “high trait self-control” seems to capture an important cluster of such capacities, a cluster that also satisfies some of the central features of continence. For example, trait self-control seems to be relatively stable over an individual’s lifetime and is at least correlated with greater well-being. Further, it seems that being highly self-controlled consists at least in part in being able to effectively employ indirect resistance strategies.

Given these findings and my psychological realism constraint, a number of prominent theories of reference support the claim that ‘high trait self-control’ and ‘continence’ co-refer—i.e., that high trait self-control is continence. For example, I think that both a moderate, “cluster” descriptivist theory of reference and a theory that puts more emphasis on causal-historical factors in determining reference support this identification.[[17]](#footnote-18) In any case, in my view, one cannot appeal to alleged facts about analyticity or the “meaning” of the term ‘continence’ (e.g., that continent people are *by definition* strong willed or must have internal states “directly” tied through effortful, deliberate action to relevant behavior) to successfully block the identification of high trait self-control and continence. Instead, we should allow for the surprising discoveries that continence does not consist in being strong willed but rather in a disposition to (often implicitly or habitually) employ indirect resistance strategies (cf. Galla and Duckworth, 2015; Gillebaart and de Ridder, 2015).[[18]](#footnote-19)

***2.2. High Trait Self-control, Temperance, and the Conformity Thesis***

I have argued that (Con1) and (Con2) are false. Psychologically realistic continence does not require less than remarkable assessment-desire conformity nor an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent conflicting desires. Instead, if being highly self-controlled just is being continent, then continence often involves:

(Temp1) remarkable conformity of one’s occurrent desires for appetitive pleasures to one’s assessments of their value.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Indeed, the studies discussed above suggest that when continent people satisfy (Temp1) this is because they are excellent at using *indirect* resistance strategies to prevent occurrent conflicting desires from arising in the first place. That is, continent people satisfy (Temp1) because (Con2\*) is true of them. Reliably and effectively using indirectresistance strategies to prevent occurrent conflicting desires from arising is simply *one way* of achieving remarkable assessment-desire conformity, of minimizing the presence of occurrent conflicting desires. Thus, we should abandon the traditional view’s claim that a difference in assessment-desire conformity is “central to a proper distinction” between temperance and continence (see the block quotation from Mele above). The fact that continence in actual people often satisfies part of the traditional account of temperance puts pressure on the idea that temperance and continence are mutually exclusive character traits—two different “fundamental psychic structures” (*hexeis*).[[20]](#footnote-21)

If (Temp2) is true, i.e., if temperate individuals exhibit assessment-desire conformity in a greater number and wider variety of situations than continent people, then temperance may still be a distinct character trait from continence. However, as I’ll now argue, (Temp2) by itself does not provide a good explanation or account of *why* temperance and continence are distinct character traits, if they in fact are. Claiming that (Temp2) *alone* distinguishes temperance from continence makes the distinction between these character traits ad hoc, unmotivated, and unexplained.

Two people may have the same level of assessment-desire conformity but differ in how *stable* or *reliable* that assessment-desire conformity isor in how *effective* that conformity is at ensuring that their behavior accords with their evaluative judgments (within and across situations). For example, it may turn out that assessment-desire conformity that is the product of indirect strategies is more or less stable than conformity that is “built into” a person’s affective/desiderative capacities. That is, it may turn out that someone who needs to distract herself from chocolate cake (when she judges that she should not eat another piece) in order to prevent an occurrent desire for another piece from arising would exhibit assessment-desire conformity in a greater or fewer number (or greater or lesser variety of kinds) of situation(s) than someone who did not have to regularly rely on indirect strategies to prevent the occurrence of a conflicting desire for the cake. Or, it may turn out that assessment-desire conformity that is the product of indirect resistance strategies is more or less effective at producing evaluative-judgment-concordant behavior than assessment-desire conformity that is not brought about in this way.

If (Temp1) and (Con1) were true, and temperate people had *greater* assessment-desire conformity than continent people, then this would be a good explanation for why temperate people were more effective at acting in accordance with their evaluative judgments or were able to do so in a greater number or a greater variety of situations (supposing that they were). However, once we have granted that (Con1) is false and that continent people often satisfy (Temp1), this explanation is no longer available. The assessment-desire conformity of a temperate person *may* be more reliable and stable than the conformity of a continent individual and hence may be exhibited in a greater number and wider variety of situations (i.e., (Temp2) may be true). If (Temp2) *is* true, then temperance and continence occupy disjoint regions of a continuum concerning the stability, reliability, and effectiveness of (a given level of) assessment-desire conformity. That is, (Temp2) implies that temperance and continence are mutually exclusive character traits. However, (Temp2) itself provides *no* reason to think that the assessment-desire conformity of temperate individuals *is* more stable or reliable than the assessment-desire conformity of continent individuals. (Temp2) provides no explanation for why temperance and continence are distinct character traits (if they are). Without such a reason or explanation, we need not accept (Temp2)’s proposed mapping of temperance and continence onto disjoint regions of the assessment-desire conformity continuum. We are equally justified in claiming that temperance and continence are overlapping character traits, e.g., that “continence” refers to the entire continuum and “temperance” refers to one of its extremes, or even that both terms pick out the *same* region of this continuum.

Someone might grant that (Con1) is false and that continent people often satisfy (Temp1) but still insist that temperate and continent people achieve their remarkable assessment-desire conformity in *categorically different ways*. For example, they might claim that temperate people would *never* need to rely on *any* form of resistance (whether direct or indirect) to achieve assessment-desire conformity in any possible situation but rather accomplish this entirely via past training and habituation of their appetitive capacities.[[21]](#footnote-22) By contrast, (the response continues) the continent need to rely on indirect strategies because they have more unruly, poorly habituated appetitive capacities. This is one way of spelling out the idea thattemperance requires a kind of assessment-desire conformity that has “matured with practice and habit, becoming more stable, effective, and self-aware” than the conformity of the merely continent (Scarre, 2013, p. 3). This response is already a significant departure from the traditional view (in that it rejects (Con1) and allows that continent people often satisfy (Temp1)), but it would provide an informative account of temperance and continence as categorically distinct character traits, and it is plausible to think that it would provide an explanation for why (Temp2) is true (if it is).

Unfortunately for those attracted to the traditional view, this attempt to salvage the claim that temperance and continence are categorically distinct character traits is psychologically unrealistic. EvenRorty, who supports the traditional distinction between temperance and continence, recognizes this when she grants that there will be

… times when even the phronimos [the person who has practical wisdom, and thus, if the virtues are unified, is also temperate] *might have to act as if he were an enkrates, exercising forethought as a form of enkrateia*, to avoid putting himself in a position of naturally strong temptation, a position in which predictably he would at best be conflicted or at worst behave as an akrates. (1980, pp. 274; italics added)[[22]](#footnote-23)

So, there are some empirically possible situations in which even the temperate person must rely on indirect strategies to achieve assessment-desire conformity.[[23]](#footnote-24) Once this is granted, the proposed response offers no reason to think that temperance is a distinct kind of character trait (psychic structure or hexis) than continence. For, the response now grants that temperate and continent individuals may have the *same* level of assessment-desire conformity but differ only in how frequently they need to use indirect strategies to bring about that level of assessment-desire conformity. That is, this response is consistent with temperance just being a particular form of continence, with temperate individuals being those who are continent but who rarely need to rely on indirect resistance strategies to achieve assessment-desire conformity.[[24]](#footnote-25)

*If* temperance and continence are categorically distinct character traits, they are not distinguished by the temperate having greater assessment-desire conformity than the continent nor by the temperate never needing to use indirect strategies to achieve their remarkable assessment-desire conformity. There may still be a clear, categorical difference between temperance and continence, but those who are attracted to the traditional view have yet to provide a psychologically realistic one. In the next section, I argue that no such difference is likely to be forthcoming. For, there is some reason to think that indirect resistance strategies are the most effective and reliable psychologically realistic way of achieving assessment-desire conformity. If this turns out to be the case, then ‘continence’ and ‘temperance’ may *both* be labels forindividuals who have the same (remarkable) level of assessment-desire conformity.

***3. Temperance, Continence, and Indirect Resistance Strategies***

In a recent paper, Al Mele argues that “the acquisition of temperance is a process of adopting and internalizing rules and policies regarding appetitive pleasures” (2016, p. 169). One such rule might be: Never have more than one alcoholic drink every two hours if one is going to drive (2016, p. 177). Once this rule has been internalized, acting in conformity with it can take many forms. As Mele suggests, being guided by the rule may be “relatively automatic” and “may not require [conscious] reflection” (2016, pp. 173, 178); perhaps the temperate person acts in accordance with this rule simply because she thinks “that’s the right amount to drink” (see the quotation from Levy above). When offered a second glass of wine within a two-hour period, a temperate agent may simply decline it by saying “No, thanks” (2016, p. 177). Since she is temperate, she experiences no conflicting desires strong enough to require direct resistance to overcome, and this may be because “she internalized her policy about drinking and driving in a way that prevents contrary [strong] desires from emerging” (2016, p. 178). In having a certain kind of evaluative habit, the temperate agent “effortlessly abides by her policy” (2016, p. 178).

Importantly, though, this description applies *equally well* to a person who is highly self-controlled/continent, given the evidence discussed above. The highly self-controlled/continent person experiences few conflicting desires because she (often habitually) follows rules that make such desires unlikely to occur. Indeed, because of the importance of indirect resistance strategies, Levy suggests that self-control may best be improved by explicitly teaching certain skills (such as “environmental management, self-distraction, and construal”) and “developing and transmitting” appropriate “rules of thumb”—just like the one Mele invokes regarding drinking and driving (2017, p. 207).

It may turn out that employing indirect resistance strategies that prevent occurrent conflicting desires from arising in the first place is the *most* reliable and effective way of achieving assessment-desire conformity. Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross suggest that indirect strategies will be more reliable and effective than direct resistance: “[P]rompt intervention, when the impulse to eat donuts is still nascent, is wiser than waiting until the impulse has grown so strong that Herculean efforts are required to make a healthier choice” (2016, pp. 39-40). By this reasoning, an even better strategy is to intervene (perhaps through habitual or implicit means) before the occurrent conflicting impulse is present at all, e.g., by eating a nutritious lunch in order to avoid craving a donut later in the afternoon (2016, p. 41). This suggestion is further supported by evidence that people tend to overestimate how virtuously they will behave, especially in demanding situations (e.g., Epley and Dunning, 2000; van Boven et al., 2012).[[25]](#footnote-26) So, it may be wisest to mold our environments so that such demanding situations do not arise.

If indirect strategies turn out to not only be better than direct resistance, but also better than all other ways of achieving assessment-desire conformity, then the best and most effective form of continence may turn out not to be a “second-best” fallback in comparison to temperance but merely another way of describing temperance itself.

An objector may insist that, although the temperate person may employ *some* indirect resistance strategies, there are other indirect strategies—such as selecting or modifying one’s environment—that are incompatible with temperance. According to this objection, saying that someone is temperate because she is disposed to avoid the bar at house parties would be as misleading as saying that someone is courageous because they have a disposition to wear “peril-sensitive sunglasses” “that turn totally black and thereby prevent the person from seeing anything that might be frightening” (Levy, 2017, p. 204).

I have three things to say in response. First, portraying situational selection and modification as mere external crutches (like the “peril-sensitive” sunglasses) likely mischaracterizes and underestimates the extent to which internal capacities are involved in their exercise. For example, there is emerging evidence that conscientiousness (which overlaps significantly with high trait self-control) is correlated with only the *task-switching* component of executive function (and not inhibitory or updating components) (Fleming et al., 2016; Umemoto and Holroyd, 2016). This suggests that effectively selecting and modifying one’s environment relies on an ability to flexibly shift (not necessarily consciously) between different intermediate rules or policies rather than mechanically following a single such rule. Second, even if this response fails, we could take the purported objection to instead merely show us that temperance is more situationally dependent than has been traditionally thought. Again, there is no reason to take agreement with our folk concepts to be a constraint on determining what the actual underlying capacities of temperance are. (See the discussion at the end of Section 2.1 above and note 2.)

Finally, the suggestion that situational selection and modification are incompatible with temperance is (perhaps unintentionally—see note 22) belied by the quotation from Rorty above. It is not that the temperate person will sometimes have to fall back on strategies of a supposedly wholly distinct trait of continence (i.e., act *as if they were* continent). Rather, the temperate person (as a phronimos) *actually exercises* forethought (as a form of continence) and selects and modifies her environment as a result of an accurate understanding of the kind of person she is (one who would experience “naturally strong temptation” in certain situations).

Once the traditional view has conceded that indirect strategies that rely on foresight about one’s own behavior are a core characteristic of *both* temperance and continence, the former cannot be wholly distinct from the latter.[[26]](#footnote-27) If temperance nevertheless categorically differs from continence, we have yet to see what this difference consists in.

***4. Conclusion***

I have argued that the best current candidate for a psychologically realistic trait of continence (high trait self-control) does not satisfy the conformity thesis: actual continent people do not have less than remarkable assessment-desire conformity ((Con1) is false) and are good only at indirectly (but not directly) resisting conflicting desires ((Con2) should be revised to (Con2\*)). Further, there is good reason to think that (at least) the best and most reliable form of *continence* requires one of the conformity thesis’s necessary conditions on temperance (Temp1). Proponents of the conformity thesis may insist on its last remaining component, (Temp2)—and thereby maintain that temperance and continence are mutually exclusive character traits. However, without the difference in motivational conflict marked by (Temp1) and (Con1), or any other explanation, this move is ad hoc and unmotivated. This at least shifts the burden of proof to those who claim that temperance is categorically distinct from continence to provide another account (aside from differences in motivational conflict) of what that distinction is.

It may turn out that there are only two empirically plausible necessary conditions that emerge from a critical examination of the conformity thesis—(Temp1) and (Con2\*)—and that they are satisfied by *both* temperance and continence. In that case, temperance may be merely a particular kind of continence, or, if indirect strategies are the best way of achieving assessment-desire conformity, there may be just a single trait here that equally deserves both labels.

Rethinking the relation between temperance and continence so that it accords with our best empirical evidence should reorient future work in this area. Instead of assuming that temperance and continence are categorically distinct psychological traits and arguing about how best to spell out that distinction (e.g., Baxley, 2007; Stark, 2001; Stohr, 2003) or trying to solve the “problem” of which trait is morally better (cf. Hardie, 1968, p. 139), we should instead try to understand the executive function and motivational capacities that seem to underlie the successful use of indirect strategies that are *common* to temperance and continence (if these continue to be thought of as distinct traits at all). Further, the best way of ensuring that our behavior accords with our evaluative judgments in a way that promotes well-being may not be training our appetitive capacities so that they are always meek and mild (cf. Aristotle, 1984, *NE* IV.5, 1125b27-1126b10, pp. 1776-7) or developing one’s direct resistance abilities.[[27]](#footnote-28) Rather, if this paper is on the right track, we would be better off nurturing the kind of foresight grounded in an awareness of our own limitations (and the indirect strategies and rules of thumb that go along with this) that cuts across the traditional distinction between temperance and continence.

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1. As W.F.R. Hardie puts the contrast: “The man who does what is right in spite of opposing desires is given by Aristotle the name conventionally translated ‘continent’ (*enkratēs*). He is distinguished from the man who is temperate (*sōphrōn*), whose desires are in harmony with the right rule, being neither excessive nor defective” (1968, p. 138). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In what follows, I will set aside general worries about the existence of character traits or their causal efficacy (such as those motivated by situationism) and assume that character traits do exist and causally contribute to our behavior. This will allow me to avoid conditional claims like the one to which this footnote is appended. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Kristjánsson offers this as a gloss on Owen Flanagan’s “principle of minimal psychological realism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. To anticipate the discussion in Section 2, I am not claiming that psychological realism, as a methodological constraint, itself demands that measures of trait self-control turn out to measure traits that lie on the continence/incontinence spectrum. Rather, I am claiming that, given the facts about highly self-controlled people, high trait self-control is our best current candidate for the trait of continence. This claim depends on empirical facts about this particular case, not merely on a general methodological constraint. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. If it is “possible in principle” for humans to be virtuous, then aren’t living human beings in some sense “capable” of becoming virtuous? Fleming could appeal to different kinds of modality to address the apparent inconsistency in her claim. Earlier in her article she indicates that “in principle” possibility, in this case, is determined by the “sort of creatures that we are” (2006, p. 27), whereas she could claim that the “capabilities” of actual humans reflect a more restricted kind of modality than this, one that is limited by the capacities that living humans contingently have happened to have. This strikes me as an odd, overly idealized view of “human nature,” however. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Fleming claims that a conception of virtue is psychologically realistic if “the condition that it models is such that some number of human beings might, with sufficient training and so forth, achieve, or at least hope to approximate, it” (2006, p. 31 n.11). I assume that Fleming’s “might” here refers to what living humans are capable of, not to what is supposedly only “in principle” possible for us. See previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Aristotle claims that temperance concerns only those pleasures that humans share with other animals, which he claims are the “pleasures of touch” (*NE* III.10, 1118a23-b8; p. 1765) or what are often called “appetitive pleasures.” For some nice discussion of this point, see Young (1988). There are disputes about (1) whether Aristotle takes continence to be properly contrasted with virtue in general (the “broad scope” view) or only with temperance (the “narrow scope” view) and (2) regardless of which view Aristotle held, which is the correct view of continence. I am neutral regarding the correct interpretation of Aristotle, and, although I lean toward the broad scope view, none of my discussion depends on it. For more on these disputes, see Gould (1994, p. 177), Stohr (2003), and Baxley (2007, p. 421, n.17). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. There are at least three dimensions of assessment-desire conformity: (1) the *likelihood* that a conflicting desire will occur: according to the conformity thesis, temperate people will be unlikely to experience conflicting desires in a given situation; (2) the *number* and *variety* of objects of occurrent desire that (fail to) conform to one’s assessments of value: according to the conformity thesis, temperate people will have *a small number* and *few kinds* ofoccurrentconflicting desires; (3) the *strength* of the occurrent desires in (2): according to the conformity thesis, temperate people will have *weak* occurrent conflicting desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. I thank an anonymous referee for this point, which prompted me to modify my initial formulation of the conformity thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. One might want to adopt a more complicated, multi-dimensional account of “remarkable” assessment-desire conformity that incorporates more of the dimensions discussed in note 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. This proposal for what counts as “remarkable” assessment-desire conformity is *co-extensive*, in the actual world, with the claim (discussed above) that one has “remarkable” assessment-desire conformity if and only if one’s assessment-desire conformity is above average (assuming that the average assessment-desire conformity remains constant). However, it avoids making one’s temperance (or lack thereof) a property that one has only relative to a population to which one belongs. For example, *everyone* in a given world could have more of their occurrent desires conform to their evaluative assessments than the average percentage of occurrent desires that have conformed in the *actual* world (say, 53% or whatever). It also allows that everyone in the future (in the actual world) could be temperate (if they all have assessment-desire conformity above 53%). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The last item is “reversed,” as psychologists say. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Mele draws a similar distinction between “brute” and “skilled” resistance (1987, p. 26). Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross’s (2016) distinction between “situational” and “intrapsychic” strategies of self-control is also relevant here as it, in effect, provides a finer-grained taxonomy of indirect resistance. Only one of the intrapsychic strategies (response modulation) counts as direct or brute resistance; the other two intrapsychic strategies (cognitive change (also known as ‘construal’) and attentional deployment) and both of the situational strategies (situation selection and situation modification) are indirect forms of resistance. See Levy (2017, p. 206) on construal as an indirect self-control strategy, which has been emphasized by Kentaro Fujita and colleagues (see, e.g., Fujita 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See, e.g., Gillebaart and de Ridder (2015) and Lindner et al. (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The phenomenon of ego depletion has been proposed as part of the highly influential “strength” or “resource” model of self-control and is supposed to be a state in which one’s limited self-control resources are depleted. Whether self-control really depends on a limited resource is a controversial issue (see, e.g., Inzlicht, Berkman, and Elkins-Brown (2016) for just one of many critiques). My argument is independent of this debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Levy (2017, pp. 201-3) for discussion of the latter three of these studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. In order to justify identifying high trait self-control with continence, a descriptivist theory may need to claim that it is more important for theorizing in moral psychology to keep the concept of *continence* tied to an ability to delay gratification (and the prudential benefits that brings) than to any particular way in which that ability is manifested. By contrast, Levy seems to take continence to be (analytically? necessarily?) tied to being good at *directly* (or at least deliberately or effortfully) resisting conflicting desires (2017, pp. 203-4). Using a more causally-historically oriented theory of reference would require that ‘high trait self-control’ and ‘continence’ are at least similar to natural kind terms in that we can use them to refer to *those* people (pointing at the highly self-controlled), who we have now discovered are, contrary to the stereotype of continence, not strong willed. This does not, however, imply that high trait self-control/continence is a natural kind, and I do not assume that it is. Cf. Herdova (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Those who think that analyticity is more philosophically important than I do may take this paper as an exercise in “conceptual engineering,” whereas I see it as a project in naturalistic metaphysics. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. It is not clear that high trait-self control/continence *requires* (Temp1). E.g., the continent person *may* experience a significant number of conflicting occurrent desires but use the indirect strategies of cognitive change/construal and attentional deployment/distraction to avoid acting on them. However, if Duckworth et al. (2016, pp. 39-40) are right and “earlier intervention is best,” then a form of continence that does satisfy (Temp1) is likely to be more effective than one that does not, since it involves intervening before occurrent conflicting desires even arise. I return to this point below and in Section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Levy comes close to drawing a connection between high trait self-control and temperance in the passage quoted above. His emphasis on habituallyacting based on a correct perceptionof the situation (buying “the smaller tub of ice cream *because that’s the right size*) sounds very much like temperance. Indeed, Levy uses the word “moderation” (usually taken to be synonymous with “temperance”) in the title of his paper, although, strangely, he does not explicitly discuss moderation/temperance (particularly its relation to high trait self-control) anywhere in the paper itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Thus, on this view, temperate people would differ from the continent in *not* satisfying (Con2\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Note that the first part of the italicized portion of the above quotation is in tension with the second. If forethought were *only* a form of enkrateia (and not a form of phronesis) and the phronimos merely “acts as if he were an enkrates,” then Rorty should have written that he merely *simulates* forethought, acts “as if” he had it. Instead, she (correctly) writes that the phronimos actually exercises forethought. Callard also emphasizes that one component of phronesis is a kind of self-aware foresight that consists in an agent’s“acting in accordance with a general – and future oriented – understanding of the kind of thing he is” (2017, pp. 51-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. I agree with the traditional view that temperance is a mean between having excessive (self-indulgent) desires and deficient ones (being insensible) (see Aristotle (1984, *NE* 1107b6-8, 1119a11-20, 1151b23-32; pp. 1749, 1819-20); Baxley (2007, p. 406); Scarre (2013, p. 15); Stark (2001, p. 449); Stohr (2003, p. 357). It seems that if, for *every* empirically possible situation, someone did not need to use indirect strategies to act in accordance with their evaluative judgments, then they would be insensible to the relevant object of desire (rather than temperate). For, if the object is valuable at all, there will be *some* possible situation in which that value conflicts with (but is outweighed by) the value of virtue and thus in which the corresponding conflicting desire is “naturally strong” and needs to be indirectly resisted if one is to act virtuously. See Baxley (2007, pp. 406, 415). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this. Note that the passage I quoted from Rorty by itself does not result in temperance collapsing into a form of continence. For, she is assuming that (Con1) is true and that no continent individuals satisfy (Temp1), which I argue against above. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Of course, one could claim that temperate people are not overly optimistic in this way since they are truly virtuous. However, I suggest that the better self-understanding that is part of phronesis consists in knowing their own limitations (including their tendency to be overly optimistic): hence the need for foresight about how they would act in a position of “naturally strong temptation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Jeffrey Scarre seems to be saying that temperance is a variety of continence when he writes that temperance “is continence that has matured with practice and habit” (2013, p. 3). However, he also continues to use the term ‘continence’ in narrow sense that *contrasts* with temperance and is associated with effort and direct resistance and which he claims that the temperate person will never fully “move beyond” (2013, pp. 6, 8, 15, 17). This suggests an alternative reading of the p.3 quotation, according to which the temperate person *was* continent but is no longer (just as a butterfly “is a caterpillar that has matured” but is not, thereby, a kind of caterpillar), even though she can never fully “move beyond” some narrow-sense continent (caterpillar-ish) ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. There is evidence that “acting self-controlled,” by directly resisting conflicting desires, is not only negatively correlated with trait self-control but also negatively correlated with individual well-being (Grund and Cartens, 2019, p. 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)