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# What is Self-Control?

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*What is self-control and how does the concept of self-control relate to the notion of will-power? A widespread philosophical opinion has been that the notion of will-power does not add anything beyond what can be said using other motivational notions, such as strength of desire and intention. One exception is Richard Holton who, inspired by recent research in social psychology, has argued that will-power is a separate faculty needed for persisting in one's resolutions, what he calls 'strength of will'. However, he distinguishes strength of will from self-control. In this paper I argue that will-power is essential also to a certain form of self-control. I support this claim by arguments showing that the traditional philosophical accounts of self-control run into difficulties because they pay insufficient attention to will-power as an independent source of motivation.*

*Keywords: Acrasia; Intention; Motivation; Self-Control; Will-Power*

Will-Power is to the mind like a strong blind man who carries on his shoulders  
a lame man who can see.

(Arthur Schopenhauer)

A central concept in the debate about responsible agency is the concept of self-control. But what is self-control and how does it work? Roughly, we can distinguish three different approaches to self-control in the philosophical literature, what I shall call 'the desire account', 'the cognitive-dispositional account' and 'the volitional account'. While the first two accounts explain self-control in terms of either a special kind of desire or style of thinking, the third explains it in terms of a volition or act of will. Curiously, one notion that appears to have been absent in the ensuing debate between these accounts is the notion of *will-power*. I use the word 'curiously' here because from a commonsense point of view, will-power is exactly

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what self-controlled individuals have more of than individuals who lack self-control. Yet a widespread philosophical opinion holds that will-power warrants no special theoretical attention, because it adds nothing beyond what can be said using other motivational notions like *strength of desire* or *intention*. A recent exception to this trend can be found in the work of Richard Holton.

Inspired by research in social psychology, Holton (2003) argues that people's actions are not determined simply by the strength of their desires and their intentions, but also by a separate faculty of will-power. Experimental evidence suggests that this faculty works in many ways like a muscle; it cannot be exercised indefinitely, and if it is used for too long, the agent will burn out (Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice, 1994; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice, 1998). Holton argues that will-power is needed for persisting in one's resolutions, what he calls "strength of will". However, he distinguishes strength of will from self-control and appears to hold that will-power is only needed for the former.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the concept of self-control and its relation to the notion of will-power. I argue that will-power is essential not just to what Holton calls 'strength of will', but also to a certain form of self-control. In support of this claim, I examine and criticize some versions of the traditional philosophical accounts of self-control and argue that difficulties arise for these accounts precisely because they pay insufficient attention to will-power as an independent source of motivation. Instead of trying to reduce self-control to a matter of possessing some isolated trait, as these accounts tend to do, I argue that it should be viewed in terms of the interplay and combination of several distinct traits, linked together by the agent's faculty of will-power. If this is correct, it calls for a different characterization of will-power than the one offered by Holton, one that allows that will-power can play many roles in our mental lives. In the paper I suggest such a characterization and explore some of the roles will-power may have.

The paper divides into three sections. In the first, I consider the idea that self-control is a capacity 'to master' competing motivations. There are different ways one might want to cash out this idea. In the second section, I examine and criticize the claims that exercises of self-control are realized by a special desire or style of thinking. In the third section, I suggest a version of the view that self-control is a volitional capacity. The aim of this section is to get a clearer grasp of the connection between the concept of self-control and the related notions of 'will-power' and 'strength of will'.

## 1. The Concept of Self-Control

Self-control is a capacity most people have to a larger or lesser degree, but what kind of capacity is it? In the philosophical and psychological literature a typical self-control problem involves the need to suppress an immediate urge to consume. Resisting cigarettes, alcoholic beverages or fatty food are common examples, and agents are claimed to show self-control when they prefer larger rewards in the future (i.e., longer lives, better health etc.) to smaller rewards in the present (the immediate

pleasure of satisfying an urge).<sup>1</sup> But this may be too narrow a conception of a self-control problem. Suppose I am in a dangerous situation and feel paralyzed with fear. In this situation I don't need self-control to resist a temptation. I need it to master the fear that otherwise will paralyze me (Holton & Shute, 2007). Generally, we tend to use the concept of self-control for a wide range of cases, many of which do not easily fit into the category of succumbing to temptation. What may still be claimed to be common to all cases of self-control is that they involve an attempt to master actual or expected competing motivation that would otherwise move us (Mele, 1987). One simple thought, then, might be that the concept of self-control is the concept of a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's intentions in the face of competing motivation. For example, the self-controlled agent forms the intention to resist another cigarette and, as a result, resists the cigarette, despite having a strong desire to smoke.

Now, self-control is clearly a form of intentional control over behavior, so it seems plausible that it must involve a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's intentions. But this cannot be the whole story, for at least two reasons. First, it is not clear that a failure of self-control need be a failure of intentional control over behavior. Suppose an agent fails to control her desire for another cigarette despite having decided to quit, and as a result, smokes a cigarette. This is a classic case of a failure of self-control. But it is not obvious that it is a failure of intentional control over behavior. On the contrary, it might plausibly be argued that the agent's smoking a cigarette is something she intentionally does; it is *her bringing about* that she smokes a cigarette. Smoking a cigarette, therefore, is under her intentional control, i.e., the initiation and execution of this action is up to her.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the concept of self-control is a concept of a special form of control: since an agent might exercise control over her action, yet fail to exercise *self-control*, a capacity for self-control must involve more than an ability to initiate and execute an action. Second, it is not clear that a failure of intentional control over behavior need be a failure of self-control. Suppose an agent intends to buy a Colombian Decaf from the vendor machine in front of her in spite of a desire to buy a Cappuccino, but to her own surprise finds that she has pushed the button for Cappuccino instead. This is an example of a failure of intentional control over behavior (Zhu, 2004). Is it a failure of self-control? Not if the reason why she did something other than what she intended to do was that she was not paying proper attention to what she was doing. Failures of self-control are not 'slips' that occur automatically in the absence of proper attention and awareness. In cases where an agent fails to exercise self-control, e.g., smokes a cigarette despite having decided to quit, she is not caught by surprise by her own action. On the contrary, failures of self-control tend to be quite deliberate. The agent who fails is fully aware that she is giving in to a rebellious desire.

The main difficulty with the suggestion that self-control is a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's intentions is that it does not capture what is involved in 'mastering' competing motivation. One natural thought is that this is because intentions, though in general more fully under an agent's control than desires (whose strength may fluctuate in unforeseeable ways), still might be caused by desires over

which she lacks control. However, if ordinary intentions fail to fit the bill, what about intentions having some further, special feature? One view could be that self-control is a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's *resolutions*, where a 'resolution' is a special kind of commitment, part of whose function it is to remain firm in the face of competing motivation the agent may expect to arise. According to this view, we form resolutions to protect the outcome of earlier reasoning from later temptation (Bratman, 1995; Holton, 2003; Holton & Shute, 2007).<sup>3</sup> Unlike ordinary intentions, therefore, it seems that resolutions by their very nature rule out that they can be caused by desires over which the agent lacks control.

While it seems true that a self-controlled person holds steadfastly true to her resolutions, come what may, it is problematic to simply *identify* the concept of self-control with the concept of a capacity to stick with one's resolutions. It seems possible to show self-control by performing a certain action in the absence of a prior resolution, as well as to show a lack of self-control by failing to perform some action without thereby violating a prior resolution. Suppose Jones is offered a drink and is overwhelmed by a sudden and totally unexpected desire to take it. Suppose he judges at that very moment that he should abstain, and consequently refuses the offer. Assuming that resolutions are a special form of intentions whose function it is to defeat contrary inclinations that the agent expects he may come to have, it does not seem plausible that Jones had to form a prior resolution in order to turn down the drink. Instead, it seems sufficient that he, at the time that he was attacked by the desire for another drink, judged that he should abstain; a judgment that, in combination with a momentary intention, defeated his desire for another drink. It might be added that if he had *failed* to abstain in these circumstances, he would seem guilty of a lack of self-control even if he did not violate a prior resolution not to drink. Cases like this suggest that many instances of self-control may occur without any prior commitment or resolution.

Instead of starting with the notion of 'intention' to elucidate the concept of self-control, an alternative approach might be to start with the notion of 'self' lying behind our concept of self-control. Thus, self-controlled actions typically seem to be governed by motives constitutive of something deserving to be called the 'self' in *some sense* of this word. For example, an agent's failure to exercise self-control appears to be a failure to do what she wants *herself* to do where there is a conflict between this 'self' and a desire or impulse from which it is detached. This suggests that self-control, in addition to being control by the agent over her action, also must be control by the agent over her self. But in what sense does the self-controlled agent exercise control over her self? The answer must be that she controls it by ensuring that her acts derive *from* her self and not from a desire from which she wants to dissociate herself; by ensuring that her acts derive from her self, the agent preserves her integrity as a self, i.e., keeps her self intact and uncorrupted. From this perspective, the difficulty with the suggestion that self-control is a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's intentions is that an agent's intentions need not derive from her self, which means that bringing her actions into line with them need not reflect control over her self. The difficulty with simply replacing 'intention'

with ‘resolution’ in this picture is that, even if a capacity to bring one’s actions into line with one’s resolutions (unlike with one’s intentions) might reflect control over the self, it seems possible that *some* self-controlled acts might derive from one’s self even in the absence of a prior resolution. But what exactly is this notion of ‘self’ lying behind our concept of self-control?

One plausible and familiar view in moral psychology is that some desires or motives are privileged in representing an agent’s moral or psychological self, namely the ones which are formed by a process of reflective deliberation and which the agent herself endorses and is prepared to defend with reasons against competitors (Frankfurt, 1971; Watson, 1975; Taylor, 1982; Ekstrom, 2005; Schechtman, 2005). According to this view, what constitutes a person’s moral or psychological self is therefore associated with the point of view from which she makes rational judgments about the world. This notion of the self might also shed light on the concept of self-control since being a self on this view requires reason-responsiveness, that is, a capacity to regulate behavior by the light of what one takes to be one’s better reasons. Reason-responsiveness, in turn, seems necessary for the feeling of being ‘in control’ because desires, beliefs or attitudes which appear *unresponsive* to reasons are the ones over which one typically feels one *lacks* control (Raz, 1997; Wallace, 1999). If self-control involves control over self, it seems plausible, therefore, that it must involve reason-responsive action, i.e., action in accordance with judgments about what one has most reason to do. Thus, the desires, values and motives which make up what one takes to be one’s better reasons appear to be the states by which one makes sense of oneself and the world, and by which one, in general, guides one’s behavior. Hence we arrive at the view that self-control is a capacity to bring one’s actions into line with one’s self as it is embodied in what one takes oneself to have most reason to do.<sup>4</sup> I think this is a plausible view of self-control. It is hard to imagine an agent who has a capacity to bring her actions into line with what she takes herself to have most reason to do, and yet who lacks a capacity for self-control.

Does this mean that it is not possible to exercise self-control in support of acts that *go against* what one takes oneself to have most reason to do? Alfred Mele has argued that it does not, and supported it with the example of a youth who joins some wayward Cub Scouts in breaking into a neighbor’s house, although he takes himself to have most reason not to do so (Mele, 1995, p. 60). However, since the youth is very nervous, he has to steel himself for the deed. According to Mele, he exercises “errant self-control”, i.e., self-control that is not performed in the service of what he takes himself to have most reason to do. I think this is a misdiagnosis. The reason is that self-control involves more than control over action; it also involves control *over self*. I have already suggested why, but let me give a very simple argument. A plausible view, as we have seen, is that an agent exercises ‘control over self’, i.e., keeps her self intact and uncorrupted, by ensuring that her act derives from herself and not from a desire from which she wants to dissociate herself. Now, in exercising self-control, an agent is doing what she wants *her self* to do. But an agent can only be doing what she wants herself to do by ensuring that her act derives *from her self!* Hence self-control must involve control over self. If we add to this that

the self is constituted by desires, values and motives the agent endorses and is prepared to defend with reasons against competitors, we arrive at the view that the self must be embodied in what the agent takes herself to have most reason to do. Returning to Mele's example of the youth, we see that if this view is assumed, the youth cannot be demonstrating control over his self in bringing his action into line with his desire to break into the neighbor's house. This is because his desire is pulling him away from doing what he takes himself to have most reason to do and, therefore, pulling him away from his self. Mele's youth, although being in control of his action, is simply not in control of himself. It follows that he cannot be exercising self-control (however, an alternative description of this case, which I shall explore later, may be that he is exercising his faculty of will-power).<sup>5</sup> A further question is what psychological mechanism realizes a particular instance of self-control. It is to this explanatory question I shall now turn.

## 2. Self-Control and Explanatory Mechanisms

To make the explanatory question a bit more precise, suppose two agents are in exactly the same type of circumstances that call for self-control. However, while one agent exercises her capacity for self-control, the other does not. The question then is what the relevant difference is between these agents' psychologies that explains that one exercises her capacity when and as she does, while the other does not. The answer will tell us something about what psychological mechanism explains or realizes a particular act of self-control (Pettit & Smith, 1993).

Note first that self-control can be exercised in two different ways depending on whether it occurs at the same or at different times as the rebellious desire (Mele, 1987). When self-control occurs across time it is called 'diachronic' self-control: we anticipate at an earlier time ourselves losing control at a later time, and seek to avoid this by so arranging the circumstances at the time of action as to remove the possibility of our then losing control. For example, someone wanting to quit smoking may now make sure there are no cigarettes in her house since she knows that if there are she will be unable to resist the temptation to have a cigarette after her coffee the next morning.<sup>6</sup> But self-control may also occur when we are already in the grip of a rebellious desire, and seek, at that very moment, to avoid losing control by exercising self-control. Self-control that occurs at the same time as the rebellious desire is called 'synchronic' self-control.

Much of the philosophical controversy has centered on the notion of *synchronic* self-control. While there seems to be wide agreement that exercises of diachronic self-control typically are actional events (one performs certain actions now to prevent one's later self from caving in to a rebellious desire<sup>7</sup>) which requires that there must be some independent source of motivation present for those events, there have been considerable disagreement over whether exercises of synchronic self-control can be explained in a similar way. To illustrate this disagreement, consider first Sue, who has two conflicting desires, to smoke the cigarette in front of her and not to smoke the



cigarette in front of her, and who takes herself to have most reason not to smoke the cigarette. We may assume that Sue has a capacity for self-control, e.g., that she has learned various cognitive skills from her therapist, such as to visualize a pair of cancerous lungs every time she feels an urge for a cigarette. Let's suppose that on this particular occasion she is exercising her capacity, that is, when she is attacked by the desire for the cigarette in front of her, she immediately starts thinking about cancerous lungs, a thought she finds so revolting that she refrains from smoking the cigarette. In the philosophical literature there have traditionally been two competing accounts of such cases. While both accounts hold that achieving self-control is a matter of influencing causally the motivational strength of the desires to which one is subject, they differ in their view of what kind of mental state this requires. On the one hand, there is what might be called 'the desire account', according to which the mental state that explains an exercise of self-control is an extra intrinsic desire of the agent to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do (see Brandt, 1988; Mele, 1987, 1998, 2003). In Sue's case, this extra intrinsic desire causes her to exercise self-control by employing a self-control technique she is familiar with, namely to think about cancerous lungs which, in turn, causes her to desire more to refrain from having the cigarette, and so, when she acts, she refrains from having the cigarette. On the other hand, there is what might be called the 'cognitive-dispositional account' according to which what explains an exercise of self-control is that the agent possesses various cognitive skills, such as a disposition to think about cancerous lungs every time she feels an urge for a cigarette (see Pettit & Smith, 1993; Smith & Kennett, 1996; Kennett, 2001). In Sue's case, this disposition is triggered by her desire for the cigarette in front of her, i.e., she starts thinking about cancerous lungs, which in turn causes her to desire more to refrain from having the cigarette, and so, when she acts, she refrains from having the cigarette. Proponents of the cognitive-dispositional account claim that cognitive skills are sufficient for exercises of self-control, i.e., they claim they do not depend on any prior motivation, such as an intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what one takes to be one's better reasons. This, they argue, is because thinking a certain thought, although *a doing*, is not *an intentional action*, since it is not a causal consequence of a desire. Thus, the agent may have this thought, not because of any desire, but because of her tendency to have the thoughts that it is rational for her to have in the circumstances (Kennett & Smith, 1997, p. 128).

I am not here going to discuss the various arguments that have been appealed to in favour of one or the other view in this debate.<sup>8</sup> This is because I believe reflection on possible cases demonstrates that neither of these views in fact succeeds in capturing what explains particular instances of self-control. Let me start with the desire account. According to this account individual exercises of self-control are realized by an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what one takes to be one's better reasons when one has a relatively stronger inclination to act otherwise. It is important to keep in mind here that the extra intrinsic desire is held to be a sufficient realizer only given that the agent already has the capacity for self-control. Of course, it seems perfectly possible to imagine that Sue has an extra intrinsic desire to bring her



conduct into line with what she takes herself to have most reason to do, yet that she fails to exercise self-control. One familiar reason might be that she is misled by her desire for the cigarette into selective attention to various attractive features of smoking (its stimulating effect, say), and ignores the unattractive ones, e.g., the danger of cancer. Perception of salience or biased interpretation is a well studied mechanism that explains many failures of self-control (Rorty, 1980; Mele, 1987; Gardner, 1993). However, if we assume that Sue *does* possess the capacity for self-control, say, the ability to narrow her focus of attention so as to block out all thoughts of the attractive features of smoking, then, given that she has the relevant intrinsic desire, she *will* exercise self-control on this particular occasion.

The consequence if the desire account is true seems to be that if Sue lacked the extra intrinsic desire she would be literally unable to exercise self-control. But what would be an example of such a case? One example that has been mentioned is the case of depression (Mele, 2003, p. 222). So, returning to Sue who has two conflicting desires. Suppose that, due to a severe depression, she doesn't really care how her life goes. Consequently, she doesn't care which of her desires wins out, whether it is the one supported by what she takes herself to have most reason to do, or the other one.<sup>9</sup> Proponents of the desire account must hold that Sue is literally unable to exercise her capacity for self-control in these circumstances. In the absence of the extra intrinsic desire, there is just no way she can even get started making herself do what she takes herself to have most reason to do.

I don't find this consequence very plausible. Although Sue's depression no doubt makes it harder for her to exercise self-control than it otherwise would have been, and perhaps even likely that she will fail, the claim that she is literally *unable* to exercise self-control does not seem true. Even severely depressed people occasionally succeed in exercising self-control, e.g., get themselves to engage in enabling styles of thinking (Beck, 1976; Meichenbaum & Gilmore, 1982). How can they do that if they lack an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what they take themselves to have most reason to do? Proponents of the desire account must assume that the extra intrinsic desire somehow resurfaces, perhaps because of treatment, with the result that the depressed person can bring it about that she does what she takes herself to have most reason to do. The trouble with this view is that it turns the depressed person into a passive and helpless victim of her own illness; she herself can do nothing other than wait for the extra intrinsic desire to mysteriously reappear. Yet, psychological treatment of depressive disorders tends to focus on developing the person's own sense of efficacy by teaching her skills for exercising control over dejecting ruminative thought, precisely in order to make her able herself to alleviate her depression by influencing her affective and motivational states (Bandura, 1997, pp. 343–349). Do we have to assume that in order to exercise this kind of thought control the person *already* has to possess an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do? If so, she cannot have been *that* depressed; deep down she must have cared about her own life after all. Although there might be no way to prove it, a more plausible view is that caring about her own life is something she gradually learns as a result of experiences

associated with successful exercises of self-control. Of course, if this is correct we need some other way to explain how she can exercise self-control than that she has an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do. Proponents of the cognitive-dispositional account will explain this by arguing that the enabling styles of thinking are cognitive activities that are not actions, and therefore do not require any independent source of motivation. For reasons to which I shall return, I do not find this very plausible. A better explanation, I think, is that an intention or commitment might exert a motivational influence on an agent's behavior even in the absence of the desires that initially motivated her to form that intention or commitment.<sup>10</sup> This explanation allows for the possibility in principle that a severely depressed person, like Sue in our example, might retain her intention to bring it about that she does not smoke even after the desire that gave rise to this intention is lost. How can she retain this intention if she no longer has any desire to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do? One possibility is that some intentions or commitments have a kind of inertia unless acted upon by the agent; that is, they may retain some of their motivational influence until reconsidered or revised (Wallace, 2006, p. 91). In other words, if Sue, in her state of depression, does not bother to reconsider her intention to bring it about that she does not smoke, it seems possible that this intention might continue to motivate her to exercise self-control, even in the absence of an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do.<sup>11</sup> In general, while this view is consistent with the possibility that a person already suffering from depression might benefit from psychological treatment she received *before* she became depressed, e.g., make her able to help herself by using coping strategies learnt in therapy, the desire account seems to rule out that treatment of non-depressed persons with previous histories of depression can have any positive effect if depression were to strike again, since then only some form of external therapeutic intervention would appear capable of re-igniting the agent's extra intrinsic desire.<sup>12</sup> Although the clinical evidence in this area may not be unanimous, it seems to me drastic and not very plausible to rule out, on purely theoretical grounds, the possibility of this kind of self-help based on previous experience with therapy.<sup>13</sup>

So far the objection to the desire account has been that an agent who has a capacity for self-control might exercise it even if she lacks an extra intrinsic desire to act in accordance with what she takes herself to have most reason to do. But it also seems possible to imagine an agent who has this extra intrinsic desire and a capacity for self-control, and yet who *fails* to exercise her capacity. What is sometimes referred to as 'perverse cases' appear to have this sort of structure.<sup>14</sup> Consider the following example: suppose Joe possesses normal capacities of self-control and cares how his life goes, a caring that takes the form of something describable as a general desire to bring his conduct into line with what he takes himself to have most reason to do. One evening an old friend calls Joe and asks him to join her for a couple of drinks at a nearby bar. Weighing the considerations for and against, Joe eventually concludes that it would be best to stay home since he is afraid a couple of drinks will jeopardize his efforts at work the day after. Now, it seems possible to imagine that Joe,

while being fully aware that he is doing something other than what he cares about most deeply, nevertheless plumps for the fun of going out drinking with his old friend. Is he guilty of a failure of self-control? It seems plausible, I think, that he is. He is acting against what he takes himself to have most reason to do; he knows that he may be criticized for what he does and he knows that he ought to have exercised his capacity for self-control. Yet, he didn't. Why not? Clearly, not because he didn't have the capacity for self-control; it was perfectly within his power to resist the desire to see his friend. Neither, we may assume, was it because his general desire to bring his conduct into line with what he takes himself to have most reason to do was particularly weak on this occasion. So, how can we explain his failure of self-control?

One possible explanation could be the following. First, we need to assume, I think, that 'practical decidings', i.e., making up one's mind about what to do or committing oneself to certain courses of action, are a form of momentary mental actions, or at least, that the practical decidings we make to resolve uncertainty about what to do, are such actions. Being themselves actional, i.e., something we actively do, rather than just passively acquired on the basis of evaluative reflection, this means that practical decidings cannot simply be caused by desires or evaluative judgments about what it would be best to do.<sup>15</sup> Second, if we assume this view of practical decidings, it seems possible that a person may step back from, or turn himself into a passive observer of, the internal processes leading up to his own action. Although such a person may take himself to have most reason to do one thing, and even desire to act in accordance with what he takes himself to have most reason to do, he may still not *decide* to do that thing, that is, he may not make up his mind to do it. Instead, he may simply let himself be moved by what happens to be his strongest desire. I think Joe's 'plumping' can be described in this way. Although Joe believes he has greatest reason to stay home, that staying home would be best, he doesn't decide to stay home. Neither, in fact, does he decide to go out drinking with his friend or, if there is such a decision in the process leading up to his action, it is passively acquired, caused by his desire to go out drinking with his friend without his active participation. On this particular occasion, Joe simply lets himself be moved by his strongest desire because it is fun, thrilling or whatever. Thus, it is not that he decides *not* to exercise self-control; he simply fails to decide to exercise it. His failure is therefore not a failure in desire, but a failure in decision, a kind of volitional defect.<sup>16</sup>

Although none of this criticism of the desire account is conclusive, it could still be taken as an argument for preferring the cognitive-dispositional account. According to this account, it is cognitive skills, i.e., dispositions to think in certain ways, which explain individual instances of self-control, not any extra desires. What characterizes these 'styles of thinking', according to proponents of the cognitive-dispositional view, is that they involve a differential focus of attention, e.g., the agent who is in the grip of a desire for a cigarette may *restore* her focus of attention by reminding herself how irrational it would be to have one; she may *narrow* her focus of attention so as to block out all thoughts of how nice it would be with a cigarette, or she

may *expand* her focus of attention by finding additional reasons to refrain from having a cigarette, such as thinking about the danger of cancer (Kennett, 2001, pp. 135–147).

It is plausible that cognitive skills in one form or another must play an essential role in exercises of self-control (a point to which I shall return in the next section). However, it is not correct, I think, that they do not require any independent source of motivation. Thus, it may well be correct that thinking a certain thought is not, in general, an intentional action and as such, does not require any independent source of motivation, but it does not follow that the styles of thinking required for self-control according to the cognitive-dispositional account, are not intentional actions. This is because the relevant styles of thinking involve a differential focus of attention, that is, they involve the agent restoring, narrowing or expanding her focus of attention, which is not simply a matter of the occurrence of certain thoughts. In contexts where the agent's attention, due to strong opposing desires, is naturally drawn to some thoughts or aspects of thoughts (as in typical self-control problems), a differential focus of attention is a matter of the agent *forcefully* and *actively redirecting* her attention onto other thoughts, or other aspects of these thoughts. For example, she may divert attention from an attractive aspect of a thought by dwelling on another aspect of this thought (such as the unattractive features of smoking), picturing it vividly for herself (e.g., early death, a pair of cancerous lungs) and refusing to focus on other aspects (e.g., how nice it would be right now with a cigarette). Now, suppose, as some psychologists do, that the intensive aspect of attention corresponds to mental effort (Kahneman, 1973, p. 4). In fact, 'mental effort' has even been defined as the causing of increased attention (Dornic, 1977).<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the intensity of attention, or mental effort, with which the self-controlled agent focuses on certain thoughts, or aspects of thoughts, cannot be a purely cognitive matter, a matter of her *thinking*. Making an effort is not only an active phenomenon; it can plausibly be seen as an action. Thus, making an effort is something an agent intentionally does in order to achieve something she desires when she encounters resistance, and as we have seen, the concept of synchronic self-control implies that the agent encounters resistance in the form of competing motivation. If this is correct, proponents of the cognitive-dispositional account are wrong to hold that exercises of self-control do not require any independent source of motivation. Even if they are correct that thinking certain thoughts is necessary for exercises of self-control, the occurrence of these thoughts requires that the agent makes a mental effort to direct her attention in certain ways, and not others. Without making an effort the agent would not be able to exercise self-control, even if she knew how she should think in order to do what she takes herself to have most reason to do, i.e., even if she should have the right kind of cognitive dispositions. In other words, mental effort appears to be an independent source of motivation for exercises of self-control. But what is 'mental effort', and how is it related to self-control? This brings us to 'the volitional account of self-control'.

### 3. Self-Control, Will-power and Strength of Will

A third possible view of self-control is that it is a volitional capacity, realized by *the will*. According to volitionists, ‘the will’ is a mediating executive capacity that bridges the gaps between an agent’s thought and action (see e.g., Searle, 2001; Zhu, 2004). For example, a gap may occur because the agent experiences her deliberated conclusion as causally insufficient for forming or retaining an intention to act; then the will is needed to form or retain that intention.<sup>18</sup> But a gap may also occur because the agent experiences her intention as causally insufficient for initiating the intended action; then the will is needed to initiate the intended action. Finally, a gap may occur because the agent experiences that the initiation of her intention to act is causally insufficient for sustaining the execution of that intention; then the will is needed to sustain the execution of that intention. In general, the will, on this view, is a mental activity that is under the agent’s direct voluntary control and is independent of her merely given desires or dispositions (Ginet, 1990; McCann, 1998; Wallace, 1999). Clearly, if there are such gaps between thought and action, and we need a will to bridge them, then the will is necessary for reason-responsiveness and self-control.

A recent defense of a volitional account of self-control can be found in a paper by R. Jay Wallace (1999). In this paper Wallace argues against what he calls “the hydraulic conception of desire”, which he describes as the view that desires are “vectors of force to which persons are subject, where the force of such desires in turn determines causally the actions the person performs” (p. 630). According to Wallace, this conception of desire is what motivates both the desire account and the cognitive-dispositional account of self-control. Given this conception, one is led into the “cold shower paradigm”, the view that we “achieve control by devising strategies to influence causally the motivational strength of the desires to which we are subject, such as exposing ourselves to a cold shower, or thinking of the queen, when an access of inappropriate sexual appetite overcomes us” (pp. 635–36). The problem with this view, Wallace claims, is that it leaves no room for deliberative agency, that in fact, it turns the agent into a passive bystander at the scene of her own action. Both the desire and cognitive-dispositional account of self-control are vulnerable to this problem, he argues. This is because they trace the exercise of self-control to the occurrence of a psychological event, either the agent having a certain desire, or her thinking a certain thought, thereby reducing it to merely a causal product of forces operative within her psychological economy with respect to which she *as agent* is ultimately passive. According to these accounts, the only way an agent who fails to exercise self-control could have succeeded, is if she had been subject to a different configuration of desires or thoughts. But even an akratic, addicted or compelled agent, holding fixed all her desires, thoughts and dispositions other than those that are partially constitutive of her action itself could have exercised self-control, Wallace claims. That is because exercises of self-control are realized by the will, which involves a capacity to respond to reasons and form intentions independently of the psychological states one happens to find oneself in at the time. Without assuming

that we have this capacity, he argues, there is no way we can explain self-control as an exercise of agency at all. But, then, what explains that people who have the capacity for self-control occasionally *fail* to exercise it?

At this point, Wallace appeals to a certain view of ‘the strength of desires’, according to which what makes some desires particularly strong or urgent is not causal force, but rather the way things seem experientially to the person who is in their grip: “To say that a desire of this kind is strong or urgent, is . . . to say that it is a state in which one’s thoughts and attention are directed onto the desired activity or experience with a particular force or intensity” (p. 643), and, “these desires involve the intense focusing of one’s attention onto the anticipated pleasures” (p. 645). Although the desire’s “quasi-perceptual mode” of presenting a certain course of action in terms that appear highly attractive is not itself under the agent’s voluntary control, it does not render her altogether unable to think clearly about the normative considerations. Still, it may succeed in directing her thoughts and attention away from these considerations, with the result that she fails to comply with the deliberated verdict she has arrived at. If this happens, it need not be an impairment of the agent’s practical rationality, according to Wallace, but an impairment of her capacity to choose or decide in accordance with her practical judgment, that is, a defect of her will (p. 648).<sup>19</sup>

Let me begin by saying that I find myself in broad agreement with Wallace’s view on the importance of the will for understanding deliberative agency, as well as his criticism of the desire and cognitive–dispositional accounts of self-control. No doubt the idea that there are ‘volitions’, irreducible to deliberative judgments or merely given desires, needs further defense in the light of possible difficulties and objections. However, it will not be my concern to offer this defense here.<sup>20</sup> Instead, I want to focus on the details of the view of self-control implied by this idea. As much as I agree with Wallace’s general approach to these matters, I believe his account of self-control leaves something out. Wallace’s claim seems to be that an agent who fails to exercise her capacity for self-control in the presence of an extremely urgent desire still could have exercised it in exactly the same psychological conditions, by choosing or deciding to comply with her deliberated verdict. If his view is that there need be no motivational difference between the agent in the actual case where she fails to exercise self-control and in the counterfactual case where she succeeds, I find Wallace’s claim difficult to accept. In fact, according to Wallace’s own account, this does not seem plausible since he holds that the reason an agent fails to exercise self-control is that she has a strong desire that directs her attention onto the desired activity or experience away from the normative considerations. This suggests that in the counterfactual case, where she is faced with the same desire except that she succeeds in exercising self-control, the reason she succeeds must be that she is somehow able to block the effect of that desire by redirecting her attention onto the normative considerations or attractive features associated with those considerations (it is difficult to see, therefore, how it can be correct that self-control doesn’t involve the agent’s influencing the motivational strength of the desires to which she is subject). But what explains that her attention in the one case is directed away from the



normative considerations, while in the other it is directed onto them? The former might be explained by Wallace's "phenomenological model" of desire, i.e., by the fact that her rebellious desire, in virtue of its strength, dominates her attention by presenting her with a highly vivid candidate for action, conceived of as pleasant in some way. However, if we assume, as Wallace does, that the agent's configuration of desires, thoughts and dispositions can be the same in both the actual and the counterfactual case, we cannot use this model to explain why her attention is directed onto the normative considerations in the counterfactual case. That is, the attractive features of these considerations cannot be assumed to be salient for the agent in this case, at least not initially; otherwise it is difficult to see why she should have a self-control problem to begin with. I think this leaves the volitionist with only one option, which is to characterize the difference between the actual and counterfactual case in terms of some feature of the agent's will. One natural (and commonsense) thought might be that an agent's will might be either 'weak' or 'strong' and that this is the motivational difference between someone who fails to exercise her capacity for self-control and someone who, everything else being equal, succeeds in exercising it.<sup>21</sup> Hence, what is needed to counter a desire that with great force and intensity directs one's attention away from the normative considerations certainly involves a particular style of thinking, but the occurrence of that thinking depends on a *strong will* to gain control over the direction of one's attention in order to bring it about that one does what one takes oneself to have most reason to do. But what is a 'strong will', and how is the notion of 'strength of will' related to the concept of self-control?

In the philosophical literature on self-control there have been few separate discussions of the notions of 'strength of will' and 'will-power'. A widespread opinion seems to be that once it is explained what it is for an agent to have and to exercise a capacity for self-control, e.g., in terms of an extra desire, style of thinking or volition, nothing interesting is added by talk about 'strength of will' or 'will-power'. However, in a recent paper, Richard Holton has argued for a different approach to these notions (Holton, 2003). According to Holton, strength of will is the contrary of *weakness of will*, which he defines as an over-readiness to abandon one's resolutions, i.e., it is a capacity to persist in one's resolutions by refusing to reconsider them. Self-control, he claims, is a different phenomenon, contrary to *acrasia*, which is acting against what one takes oneself to have most reason to do (Holton, 2003, p. 55). By 'resolution' Holton has in mind a special kind of intention or decision. Suppose, for example, that I judge that I have most reason to stay in and work tonight, but feel a strong temptation to meet up with a friend. According to Holton, "one thing I can do . . . is simply to *decide* now that I will work this evening . . . but this is a special sort of intention. Its distinctive feature is that it is supposed to remain firm in the face of the contrary desires that I expect to have" (p. 42). Holton then makes the plausible assumption that sticking to such a resolution is hard work; it takes mental effort. The faculty that enables one to make a mental effort to maintain one's resolutions is *will-power*. According to Holton, will-power is a faculty the agent actively employs that is independent of her merely given desires and is used in circumstances where it feels as though there is a struggle, i.e., where one encounters



some form of resistance from one's own inclinations. Agents exercise will-power, he claims, to avoid focusing on and developing thoughts that might lead to a reconsideration of their resolutions (p. 52).

Although self-control is not distinguished from strength of will in the psychological literature, the idea that 'will-power' is an energy or strength is familiar. According to one theory, will-power works in many ways like a muscle; it is unsustainable and if it is used for too long, the agent will simply burn out (Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice, 1994; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice, 1998). Holton finds support for his view of will-power in empirical research done by these theorists. For example, a set of experiments has suggested that will-power comes in limited quantities that can be used up. In one experiment, it appeared that controlling oneself to eat radishes rather than the available chocolate cookies made one less likely to control oneself to persist in solving unsolvable puzzles in the next (Baumeister et al. 1998). In another, suppressing one's emotional responses to a film made one less likely to persist later on in squeezing a handgrip exerciser (Muraven, Tice & Baumeister, 1998). Holton argues that the best explanation of "ego-depletion", which this phenomenon is called, is that one's actions are determined not simply by the strength of one's desires and one's resolutions, but also by a separate faculty of will-power. Just like a muscle this faculty gets tired when it is repeatedly exercised (p. 57).

Holton mentions other evidence as well, but I will not discuss his arguments for the claim that will-power is a separate faculty here. In fact, I find these arguments, based as they are, partly on a criticism of a Humean belief-desire psychology, partly on an interpretation of the empirical evidence in this area, altogether quite convincing. What I find less convincing is his characterization of will-power, and his way of distinguishing 'strength of will' from 'self-control'. As Holton seems to acknowledge, these conceptual claims are not directly borne out by the empirical evidence (p. 57). Let me start with the conceptual claim that will-power is an ability to make a mental effort to maintain one's prior resolutions by blocking reconsideration. If Holton means this as a definition of the faculty of will-power, I cannot see how this can be correct. First, it seems clear that the notion of 'will-power' cannot be independent of the notion of 'the will'. But what exactly is the connection between will-power and the will? A difficulty is that Holton does not say how he understands the notion of the will, but let us assume that it is an agent's executive capacity to bridge the gaps between her deliberation, decision and voluntary bodily action, as previously characterized. Then, if will-power is used in circumstances where it feels as though there is a struggle, where the agent encounters resistance from her own inclinations, a reasonable assumption is that will-power is a general ability to make a mental effort to bridge the gaps between one's deliberation, decision and voluntary bodily action *when one encounters resistance from one's own inclinations*. Now, this is not quite the same as saying that it is an ability to exert mental effort to persist in one's prior resolutions. For example, assuming the former characterization, it seems perfectly possible to exercise will-power even if one has *not* made a prior resolution. Thus, an agent who is faced with a sudden,

unexpected desire that forcefully directs her attention away from the normative considerations might need will-power to decide or form the intention to perform the particular act she takes herself to have most reason to perform. In such a case, she intentionally forms the intention to perform that act *by making a mental effort* to redirect her attention onto the normative considerations, with the intention of bringing it about that she performs the act she takes herself to have most reason to perform.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there may even be cases where will-power is needed, not to stick by one's prior resolutions, but quite the opposite, to *abandon* one's prior resolutions in the light of new information. For example, it seems possible that, once I have made a resolution to stay home rather than go out for drinks with a friend, if I later remember that tomorrow is in fact a bank holiday—i.e., that my reason for making that resolution is defeated by this new piece of information—it might require mental effort to abandon my resolution to stay home and get out of my comfortable chair to meet my friend. At least, this must be possible if resolutions have a disposition to remain inert unless acted upon by the agent (see section 2). It seems plausible that will-power might have a role to play also in cases of this type, not to *block* reconsideration, but rather to *facilitate* it. Of course, none of this rules out that will-power might be needed to stick with one's prior resolutions. An agent might intentionally retain a prior resolution by making a mental effort to block reconsideration of it, with the intention of bringing it about that she performs the act she has resolved to perform. My point is only that this is just *one* of many functions the faculty of will-power might have in our mental lives. So, if this is correct, what does it tell us about the relation between 'self-control', 'will-power' and 'strength of will'?

First of all, it tells us that will-power is required, not just for what Holton calls 'strength of will', but for the exercise of synchronic self-control quite generally. It is required for directing one's attention away from sudden, rebellious desires in order to bring it about that one performs the act one takes oneself to have most reason to perform. Second, if exercises of will-power to form momentary intentions or initiate intended actions in the face of rebellious desires imply strength of will (which seems plausible), self-control *also* implies strength of will. If this is correct, it is wrong to distinguish strength of will and self-control the way Holton proposes: sticking to a prior resolution might require will-power and imply strength of will, but so might doing what one takes oneself to have most reason to do in the absence of a prior resolution. To sum up, unlike Holton who appears to believe that will-power and self-control are separate, I believe will-power is an essential component of synchronic self-control. The self-controlled agent *uses* will-power to direct her attention away from a rebellious desire in order to form, retain or execute an intention to perform the act she takes herself to have most reason to perform. Since the exercise of will-power to achieve self-control implies strength of will, it follows that strength of will is an essential component of self-control. Does this mean that will-power and strength of will amount to *the same* as self-control? That conclusion, I think, should be resisted. Sometimes we use the term 'strength of will' to characterize the actions of individuals who do not necessarily demonstrate self-control, e.g., young children who

might not yet have developed any capacity for self-control. What do we mean by saying that a young child has a 'strong will'? A plausible answer, I think, is that we mean that the child is able to make an effort to stick with her intentions, or to sustain the execution of those intentions, come what may. It seems possible that a child can exercise this kind of intentional control even if she has not yet developed a capacity to regulate her behavior by the light of what she takes herself to have most reason to do. One hypothesis might be that what enables her to do that is that she has a separate faculty of will-power. In fact, the idea that people only should be able to make a mental effort to do what they take themselves to have most reason to do seems highly implausible. Clearly, sometimes people make an effort to do *the opposite* of what they take themselves to have most reason to do. This is not surprising since the loss of self-control need not eliminate the conflict in people's minds. Even an agent who gives in to temptation might continue to experience a motivational influence from her superior reasons. In such a situation, initiating the acratia action or sustaining the execution of the acratia intention may well require an exercise of will-power. Mele's example of the youth who has to "steel himself" for breaking into a neighbor's house against what he takes himself to have most reason to do, provides a good illustration of such a case.

A consequence, if this view is correct, is that the faculty of will-power, unlike the capacity for self-control, is not essentially reason-responsive. In contrast with the latter capacity, it may be exercised in the service of *any* desire the agent might have, even desires which do not manifest her 'self'.<sup>23</sup> It seems possible, therefore, that an agent who has a lot of will-power still may be lacking in self-control. In fact, it even seems possible that too much will-power may undermine an agent's self-control. Perhaps if Mele's youth had had less will-power, he would have resisted the desire to break into the neighbor's house and, as a consequence, would have succeeded in acting in accordance with what he took himself to have most reason to do. If this is correct, not all failures of self-control are brought about by the agent's failure to use her volitional powers, or by any defect of those powers themselves (as in ego-depletion). Some failures may be brought about by the agent's *misusing* of her volitional powers. This means that not all failures of self-control can be explained in terms of simple breakdowns in motivational machinery. It suggests that acratia behavior may originate in the agent's voluntary decisions and intentions in a way that supports the view that it ultimately is autonomous behavior for which the agent is rationally criticizable.

#### 4. Conclusion

Self-control is a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's self as it is embodied in what one takes oneself to have most reason to do. In this paper I have argued that what realizes particular acts of self-control is the exercise of will-power, which I have characterized as a general ability to make a mental effort to bridge the gaps between one's deliberation, decision and voluntary bodily action when one

encounters resistance from one's own inclinations. One may exercise will-power in order to do anything one desires to do, but in cases of self-control one exercises it to direct one's attention away from a rebellious desire in order to form, retain or execute an intention to perform the act one takes oneself to have most reason to perform. If this picture is on the right track, there must be many ways of achieving self-control. Learning how to think right in situations of temptation might be one. Encouraging character traits closely related to one's capacity for reason-responsiveness, such as conscientiousness, discernment and practical wisdom, might be another. But perhaps the most important will be frequently practicing self-control in a variety of circumstances in order to strengthen one's 'muscle' of will-power.

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### Notes

- [1] In more behaviorally oriented studies, self-control has been defined as choice of a more valuable but more delayed reinforcer over a less valuable but less delayed reinforcer, and is claimed to be achieved through a commitment to the larger-later reinforcer prior to that point. Conversely, a failure of self-control is seen as a time inconsistency problem that can be modeled by crossing discount functions (derivable from utility functions). See Rachlin and Green (1972), Ainslie (1974, 1992). For a discussion of some empirical and theoretical problems with the hyperbolic discounting model as a way of measuring self-control, see Rachlin (1995).
- [2] Not all philosophers would agree. On one view, acting against one's own better judgment implies that one's action is unfree (Watson, 1975). I cannot discuss this view here; suffice it to say that I find it implausible that all cases of weakness of will should involve compulsion. People sometimes succumb to temptation of their own free wills, which is why we find them criticizable for what they do.
- [3] This characterization of 'resolution' is due to Holton, whose views I discuss more fully in section 3. Bratman does not use the notion of 'resolution', but appears to think that self-control is a matter of sticking to a prior commitment (see Bratman, 1995).
- [4] This 'rationalistic' view of self-control seems to be the most common view in the literature (see e.g., Mele 1987, Pettit & Smith 1993, Kennett & Smith 1996, 1997). It is important to distinguish this view from the view that self-control is a capacity to bring one's actions into line with one's *values*, where these values are thought to accord with facts about what is valuable. Rather, on the rationalistic view as understood here, the self-controlled individual exhibits what Kennett has called "strict orthonomy," i.e., "[...] her actions are desirable at least by her own lights: when she desires and acts in accordance with her beliefs about what she has most reason to do." Kennett (2001, p. 132).

- [5] Kennett also argues that Mele misdescribes this case, but for a different reason. Her view is that it is not a case of self-control since it involves an action misfiring, i.e., it is a case where the agent ends up doing something other than what he intended to do. This seems to me to be wrong for the following reason: in contrast with Davidson's famous example of an action misfiring, that is, the case of the climber who is caused by nervousness to loosen hold of the rope, joining in the housebreaking is something the youth intentionally does, and as far as I can see, there is no reason to assume that he did not *intend* to do it. See Kennett (2001, pp. 121–122), Davidson (1980, p. 79).
- [6] For a discussion of techniques of self-control, see Elster (1984).
- [7] For example, to keep myself from drinking I can take a pill that will make me sick if I have a drink, or announce to everyone I know that I will never drink again so that backsliding is deterred by fear of embarrassment. For a discussion of self-binding, see e.g., Elster 1984.
- [8] One 'motivational assumption' that is shared by the participants of this debate is that whenever people do something intentionally at some time, they desire to do that thing more than they desire to do anything else they can do at that time. This, then, is claimed to create a paradox for the possibility of self-control since what occasions self-control is that the agent desires more to do *the opposite* of what she takes herself to have most reason to do, hence she cannot desire more to exercise self-control, hence exercising self-control seems impossible. Much of the ensuing debate has focussed on what must be true of exercises of self-control to avoid this seeming paradox. Of course, as I hope will become clear, volitionists (like myself) will reject the motivational assumption on which this 'paradox' depends.
- [9] I am assuming here along with other participants in this debate that this is a correct characterization of depression. This assumption can obviously be questioned. Depression can take on many forms depending on the particular circumstances, and there may well be internal variations in cognitive-motivational set between different cases. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this characterization here. All I can say is that it seems to me a plausible characterization of at least *one kind* of depressive disorder.
- [10] The view that intentions are a form of commitments, ontologically distinct from desires, is defended in Bratman (1987). For the view that intentions might motivate independently of desires, see also Holton (2003).
- [11] Whether she succeeds in exercising self-control in this situation will depend on other factors besides her intention to bring it about that she does not smoke, e.g., that she has a strong will. I discuss the notion of 'strength of will' in section 3.
- [12] Of course, the desire account does not imply that pre-depression treatment is *useless*. It is consistent with the possibility that such treatment may have preventive effects, i.e., prevent relapse or recurrence of depressive episodes.
- [13] The reported success of cognitive-behavioral therapy of depression may seem to suggest that the effects of training can survive a relapse and help the person get through the depression. For a discussion of cognitive-behavioral therapy, see e.g., Sacco and Beck (1995).
- [14] The term 'perverse cases' has been coined by Watson, who use it to describe cases where an agent identify with a course of action she does not think best, or to be what she cares about most (Watson, 1987, p. 150). The example I am using is a variant of a case suggested by Bratman (Bratman, 1999, p. 190).
- [15] This does not rule out that such desires or evaluative judgments *sometimes* may issue directly in corresponding decisions without any intermediate act of decision-making. Practical decidings in the absence of uncertainty, e.g., in the context of routine actions such as locking the door to my office, may be example of cases where decision may occur without any associated act of decision-making (see Mele, 2000). It should be noted that although this view of practical decidings have many followers in contemporary philosophy, it is not without its critics (see for example, Pink, 1996). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend it here.

- [16] Is ‘plumping’ *always* characterized by an absence of a practical decision, understood as a kind of mental action performed by the agent? Perhaps not, but the description of Joe’s case still appears to be a coherent and possible one, and that seems to be all that is needed for it to provide a counterexample to the desire account.
- [17] According to Dornic (1977), effort denotes “a consciously and deliberately initiated activation of a person’s information processing power, which results in a certain degree of attention being focused on a specific task.” Quoted from Eysenck (1982, p. 60).
- [18] I assume here that ‘forming intentions’ and ‘making decisions’ amount to the same.
- [19] However, according to Wallace, such defects do not amount to a total incapacitation of the will (Wallace, 1999, p. 647).
- [20] For a recent defense of this idea, see Zhu (2004).
- [21] Indeed, Wallace himself makes some suggestive remarks along these lines, e.g., at one point he notes that “[...] compliance with one’s settled better judgment would require effort, concentration, strength of will” (Wallace, 1999, p. 649).
- [22] How can a person who has the capacity for self-control fail to exercise it on a particular occasion? The case of Joe, described in section 2, was an example of such a case. How should we understand this kind of case, assuming the present account of self-control as will-power? I suggest the following: Joe has an extra intrinsic desire to do what he takes himself to have most reason to do, but on this particular occasion he refrains from intentionally forming the intention to perform the particular act he takes himself to have most reason to perform by refraining from making a mental effort to intentionally form that intention. Why does he refrain from making a mental effort? Because *he chooses* to leave it to his strongest desire (which is to go out drinking) to move him instead, since he thinks that will be fun, thrilling or whatever. So, although Joe has a desire to do what he takes himself to have most reason to do, on this occasion he does not have an intention to bring it about that he performs the act he takes himself to have most reason to perform. He is, therefore, insufficiently motivated to make an effort, i.e., to exercise self-control (since he lacks the intention), but not because he does not have a general desire to exercise self-control, but because he chooses to act on another desire on this particular occasion. Of course, this explanation depends on the assumption that an agent is not simply caused by her desires to act, but can choose what desire to act on. This assumption seems to me independently plausible, but also necessary if we are to be able to explain how a failure to exercise self-control, e.g., a case of weakness of the will, can be voluntary behavior.
- [23] A tempting speculation might be that the faculty of will-power constitutes a more primitive form of intentional control system than the capacity for self-control, i.e., in evolutionary terms it is more fundamental than the latter capacity. Unlike the capacity for self-control it does not only take as input information about the agent’s deliberated conclusions and then produces as output deliberated actions; it also takes as input information about her *desires and inclinations* and produces as output intentional behavior that might not be reason-responsive.

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