



## **Beyond Situation: Self-Regulation as an Executive Virtue**

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## ***Beyond Situation: Self-Regulation as an Executive Virtue***

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Contemporary virtue ethics is one of the most widely recognized ethical theories. The turn of the 20th and the 21st century witnessed the height of its development as well as the moment of its most intense criticism. On the one hand, a large number of its applications (in social ethics, political philosophy, moral education, business ethics or bioethics) confirm the strong position of virtue ethics. On the other hand, however, virtue ethics is facing the most fundamental criticism from the ethicists inspired by the empirical research results in social and cognitive psychology. The critics, such as John Doris (2004), Gilbert Harman (1999, 2000), Maria Merrit (2000), Peter Vranas (2005, 2009) – so-called situationists – argue that virtue ethics is empirically inadequate, founded on moral psychology which has been falsified by the latest empirical data.

Situationists try to convince us that our mode of behavior is decisively under the influence of so-called situational factors, while virtues (personological factors) are at best of secondary importance. This view, according to its advocates, finds its confirmation in various historical and empirical data, which point at authority (Milgram, 1974), social role (Zimbardo, 2008), or (among others) mood (Isen, Levin, 1972) as the factors determining our moral behaviour (Doris, 1998, 2002; Harman 1999, 2000). Some even deny the existence of practical wisdom (or phronesis), so central to virtue ethics (Meritt, Doris, Harman, 2010). In this denial, situationists refer to the data in cognitive psychology, which allegedly suggest that most of the human actions are determined by automatic mechanisms leading to what is called priming, framing, or mere exposure effects (Bargh, 1989; Bargh J.A., Chen M., Burrows L., 1996). In many cases, the work of these mechanisms is incongruent with moral views and convictions of human agents (Meritt, Doris, Harman, 2010).

In their response, virtue ethicists adopted various strategies of refuting situationist objections. In this presentation I would like to focus on one of these strategies, referring to a very crucial human ability of self-control. I want to show that the empirical data about self-control and self-regulation allow us to significantly weaken the objections raised by situationists, including the objection of empirical inadequacy (Doris, 2002), and justifiedly claim that we can develop (acquire and strengthen) the strength of will understood as self-control and self-regulation (Baumeister, 2011).

Ethicists treat self-control as one of the virtues, belonging (together with perseverance, courage, and patience) to the group of willpower virtues which consist of the ability to resist adverse inclinations. Considered in themselves, they are not ethical virtues – they can be used either for morally good or evil purposes. To become moral virtues, they need substantial virtues that are the psychological embodiment of ethical rules, like honesty, compassion, justice, generosity, promise-keeping, and kindness. Otherwise, they would be deprived of moral content. Substantial virtues, however, need the

willpower virtues to keep us on the path of moral development. So the latter virtues can be called corrective in the significant sense. (Roberts, 1984).

In my presentation, I will firstly, following Roy Baumeister, present the concept of self-control or strong will. Then, I will give a few examples of methods that aim at strengthening the will. Also, thirdly, I will outline a strategy of defending the claim, which situationists would reject, that self-control could be understood as a global (skill) disposition.

### ***1. Baumeister's understanding of strong will.***

If, as situationists maintain it, human actions were exclusively or mainly determined by external factors, people would be rather passive mechanisms entirely controlled by their environment. If one's circumstances enhanced honest behavior (e.g., via social control), one would act honestly; but were the environment strongly pushing one to act dishonestly, one would act as a dishonest person. In this situationist view, circumstances would also decisively shape people's views and desires (Doris, 2002, 147–149; Vranas, 2005, 2009).

However, the above picture does not find confirmation in our everyday experience, either of our behavior or that of other people we encounter. Even if, influenced by some external factors, other people (or we) change our behavior, it is not determined merely by these factors, but also by our understanding them. We do not react to the situation as it is in itself. In such a case all people, being in the same situation, would behave in the same way, and they don't – as is shown even in the experiments carried out by situationists. We react to our interpretation of the situation, and such an interpretation depends on who we are, and what convictions, emotions, or attitudes we have.

Also, if anyone of you has ever tried to influence other people's beliefs, you must have experienced the existence of their personal, inner sources of control. Besides, monocausal explanation of human behavior suggested by situationists does not find its confirmation in empirical data found by social psychologists. Treating human behavior mainly as a product of external influences is giving an incomplete picture of humans. Today psychologists widely accept interactionist theories of human behavior, according to which situationist influences mix with personological ones. (Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1995; B. Krahe, 1990; Krueger, 2009,).

If situationists were right, and human action had been mainly automatic responses to previously established situations, people would have a very weak control over themselves. However, numerous studies on self-regulation and techniques of its enhancement, carried out by social psychologists, allows us to conclude that human beings can overcome their mechanic reactions. What is more, the studies show that people can develop this ability through all their lives. This overcoming one's first reactions is achieved through rational analysis of one's behavior in the light of one's previously adopted goals and ideals. Although a high number of human reactions are automatic, most of them is also an effect of previous conscious processes. While learning something or doing something for the first time (e.g., riding a bicycle, driving a car, or typing) people do it consciously with some level of consideration. Once reaching some level of mastery, the control over this given form of action is taken by automatic systems;

at least until something new, unforeseen occurs to which one needs to react reflectively (Baumeister, 2005).

Roy Baumeister – one of the most widely known researchers of self-control – was inspired by the results of studies over delayed gratification (so-called Marshmallow Experiment), carried out by Walter Mischel. The subjects of these studies were pre-school children. They were left alone in a room in front of a candy. The experimenters promised each child that if they managed to resist from eating the candy during around 15 minutes of being alone in the room, they would be given this and one more candy. After some years (when the children were middle-aged adults) Mischel noticed a significant correlation between his subjects' ability to delay gratification when they were small children, and their achievements in various areas of adult life. Those subjects who, as children, were able to refrain from instant eating a candy, were, on average, had better marks at school, higher scores in final exams allowing them to enter universities, better jobs, and higher wages. They also had fewer problems with drug addictions, obesity, or law-abidingness (Mischel, 1974; Mischel, Shoda, Peake, 1988).

Having previously questioned the existence of free will, Baumeister got engaged in extensive research over self-control in the result of which he became an advocate of free will understood as self-regulation. He even went on to maintain that the most significant problem of contemporary America (and probably not only America) is the lack (or low level) of self-control. It is the main source of many pathologies: aggression, crime, divorces (Baumeister, 1994). Other researchers – Founder, Block, Block – also confirm the significance of self-regulation. They underline a high correlation between self-control and other positively evaluated personal features or modes of behavior, such as kindness, reasonableness, the tendency to cooperation, high competence, or intelligence. Lacking the ability to delay gratification, in turn, is highly correlated with a high level of aggression, low stress-resistance skills, the lack of endurance (Founder, Block, Block, 1983).

By self-regulation, psychologists mean the ability to take effort aiming at changing one's reactions. Basing on his research, Baumeister maintains, contrary to what situationists seem to suggest, that people are generally able to control their emotions (e.g. by trying to overcome bad mood), thoughts (e.g. by focusing on a particular task), impulses (eg. by resisting various temptations – to drink alcohol, eat excessively, take drugs, or behave violently), or behavior. He questions contemporary tendencies to treat people with no self-control, as victims of overwhelming – impossible to control – impulses, victims forced to unwanted behavior. Such an argument is often put forward by lawyers in defense of their clients. Baumeister argues that, apart from a few exceptions, people take an active part in destroying (or undermining) their ability of self-regulation: firstly, by minor acts of negligence, then by indulging their impulses, and finally, by total acquiescence and passive giving up (Baumeister, 1994, 2011).

Similarly, one can discuss the situationist claims about external causes of human actions and cognitive-affective processes. By neglecting work over the control of these processes, people can lead themselves to such a condition that they will passively give up to various external influences. Virtue ethicists do not deny that. To situationists, however, it is a natural state, of which we should be aware, and which we should accept; but to virtue ethicists, it is a pathological state, which needs to be overcome by strengthening self-control and developing ethical virtues (moral dispositions understood as cognitive-affective behavioral processes). Situationists, at best, offer as an antidote such organization of social life that external conditions would dispose people to morally right behavior and would make them feel

repelled from morally wrong behavior, for example by making undesired behavior too costly while rewarding desired behavior (Harman, 2005; Doris, 2002). Such a strategy is not in contradiction with what virtue ethicists propose and can be treated as helpful support to character education, but not as its substitution. The goal should be promoting autonomous moral agency not passivity, even if accompanied by the best channeled situational or social influences.

As one person originates various activities and developments, self-regulation involves regulating many overlapping processes which can mutually interfere, fortify, suppress, or substitute one another. The first precondition of starting the process of self-regulation is, according to Baumeister, defining the goals and ideals which one wants to realize in life. They set the standards, which allow one to monitor his or her thought and action. It is important that these goals and values be mutually consistent and clearly defined; otherwise, self-regulation will be inefficient. Secondly, one needs to reflect on one's current modes of reacting. If one's reactions fit the defined goals, they should be maintained; if they do not, they should be changed. This means continuous monitoring one's thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Thirdly, one needs to know how to break solidified modes of reaction and establish new ones that would fit accepted standards. One also needs to have enough strength of will to introduce these new modes of behavior into one's life and to strengthen them. Baumeister describes the very process of breaking in terms of a battle between various forces within us. Thus, for example, in fighting obesity or addiction to stimulants we deal with two opposing tendencies, a wish to, say, smoke a cigarette or have something to eat on the one hand; and the wish to be healthy or have a slim, attractive body on the other. In the context of morality, we can speak of a temptation to choose the easier way (e.g., by telling a lie, breaking a promise, or just by being lazy) and a wish to respect moral principles, to do what is right (Baumeister, Heatherton, Tice, 1994).

Baumeister compares the ability of self-regulation to what has traditionally been called the strength of will. To him, a strong will is like a muscle which, through special techniques, can be worked out and become stronger. The best strategy is to set goals which gradually, proportionately to one's actual condition, become more, and more difficult to achieve. Systematic training may thus lead to unbelievable effects. Baumeister points at the example of David Blaine – American illusionist whose performances are impressive. He was able to stand on a thirty-meter high column for thirty-five hours without any delay; was closed in ice-block for sixty-three hours; spent a week in a coffin with merely fifteen cm of free space, or hanged without any food for forty-four days over the Thames. Such performances, undeniably, require a high level of self-control. On asking, how to do it, he responded that training is the most important. Each next step, just as in bodybuilding, must be more difficult from the previous one, and we should never give up. Thus, it all comes down to discipline, systematicity, and repetitiveness (Baumeister, 2011).

One, however, does not need to refer to world-class illusionist to show that the self-control and development in various areas are possible. Suffice to point at numerous examples of serious sportsmen, sportswomen, scientists, or musicians. Not everybody can become a world champion, win a Noble prize, or become a virtuoso, but everybody can take up the fight to become better in those fields. That also refers to morality.

## ***2. Strengthening self-control and strengthening character***

The results of Baumeister and his colleagues' research show that will, just as every muscle, gets tired while working, and in such cases, we deal with the phenomenon of will depletion. One cannot infinitely control oneself, because self-control is energy-consuming. Depleted ego has weakened self-control, hyped intensity of emotional experiences. It becomes more challenging to resist emotional influences: not to become exalted, euphoric, disappointed, or depressed because of a trivial reason. Our ability to make decisions rapidly becomes weakened, and we easily get influenced by external factors, e.g., situation (Baumeister, 2011). Michael Inzlicht and Jennifer Gutsell, while monitoring the activity of the brain with EEG, observed that brains of people with depleted ego showed slower work of cerebral ganglia. When one's brain works slower, one needs to put more effort into controlling his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Inzlicht, Gutsell, 2007). Depleted ego then often gives up to various (previously established) automatic mechanisms. Thus, it is essential which mechanisms have been established.

We can draw similar conclusions from Daniel Kahneman's theory of two-processual mind. In his view, our mind consists of two systems: automatic system 1, and reflective system 2. The latter, although reflective, is also lazy and gets tired quite quickly, so whenever it can, it devolves initiative to system 1 that works using simplistic (heuristic) algorithms (Kahneman, 2011). Neither Baumeister nor Kahneman thinks that we are entirely powerless to the taking control over our thinking by system 1 and the mistakes it often commits. Basing on his long-time research Baumeister gives clues about how to defend from the depletion of ego, and minimize the negative results of this process. The very consciousness of this process and the knowledge of our physiology are helpful. Firstly, the research shows a high correlation between losing self-control and lack of glucose (Gailliot, Baumeister, 2007) and the deficit of sleep (Baumeister, 2011). Thus, if we do not want to avoid losing self-control, one thing we can do is make sure we have enough glucose and enough sleep. Secondly, as far as it is possible, we should avoid making important decisions if we are exhausted, upset, do not have enough time, or are emotionally excited. Thirdly, and probably the most important, we need to previously elaborate appropriate behavioral mechanisms (i.e., habits) which can be trusted when they take control over our behavior.

Baumeister maintains that, paradoxically, habits increase our self-control because they enhance thinking processes and behavior which require less energy. Of course, the very elaborating and perpetuating good habits is energy-consuming but once the habit is established it will be much easier to live by our goals and standards. Studies are showing that the best students and workers owe their successes to adequately established habits (Baumeister, Heatherton, Tice, 1994; Boice 2000).

Of course, one should not equate virtues with simple, thoughtless habits, such as brushing one's teeth or making the bed. However, the fact that we acquire virtues through habituation – repetition of certain behaviors and cognitive-affective processes makes them strongly tied with the automatized layer of our thinking and behavioral processes. As virtue ethicists say – these automated processes become our second nature (Snow, 2010; 2016). In relatively simple circumstances we can always rely on them. Although, in more complex situations, we need additional reflection. Elaborating morally appropriate behavioral mechanisms expedites our behavior, and protects us against undesired behavior when our will is depleted, and self-control lowered.

Working on moral character one can use various techniques of enhancing self-control that were developed from empirical studies and now are recommended by psychologists. These techniques usually apply to fight different types of addictions (such as nicotine, alcohol, or drug addiction, hazard, compulsive eating). They are also successfully used to motivate people in their work over developing skills necessary for work, health, or sports. Theraputists and personal coaches accept, against the situationist claims, the assumption that people are generally able (although to a different degree) to control their thoughts, feelings, impulses, or behavior; they can make conscious and free decisions and then act in accordance with their decisions. Although due to the depletion of the will process the scope of this ability is limited, it can be supported and enhanced in various ways. If it is possible to enhance self-control in non-moral areas, should also be so in work on the moral character?

The studies suggest that we first need to define our goals that are mutually consistent, i.e., they do not conflict with one another. If they did, we would not be able to set unambiguous standards of behavior. Let these goals be ambitious and far-reaching, but they must be analyzable into many relatively easy to reach steps, the realization of which is not too demanding and is giving satisfaction, which in turn becomes a strong motive to go on in the realization of further steps (Bandura, 1977; Deci, 2004; Baumeister, 2011). Secondly, we can see from the studies that social support is also a strong motivational factor. It is a useful strategy to announce publicly what our life goals, ideals, or principles are. It is desirable that our audience are people who are close to us, who will support us and, on occasions, if need be, control us. It is also advisable to wisely choose friends who share our goals, standards, and behavior because such companions will make solid support. The studies also show that work on self-control is often inspirational to others. If one quits smoking, starts a healthy lifestyle, or takes up some sports activity, it inspires people around and motivates them to do the same (Christakis, Fowler, 2007, 2008). Similar effects may be expected in the case of work on one's moral dispositions, such as honesty, readiness to help others or care about the environment.

Thirdly, it is also worth defining clear lines (i.e., clear do's and don'ts) so that in particular situations (as direct temptation) not to lose self-control. To a person who is, say, addicted to alcohol such a 'clear line' would be 'don't drink at all - not even one bit.' This is the way in which a prudent person, aware of her weaknesses, would act. She would not risk unnecessary temptation. Blurred lines are easier to cross (Gollwitzer, Oettingen, 2011). Persons who have problems with controlling their emotions, and who do not want to harm other people because of this, can similarly work on their emotions — one of the strategies they can use consists in working out a detailed scenario of how they would like to behave in particular situations. For example, they can decide not to instantly respond to irritating emails, to wait a day or two with writing the answer; not to send a review right after having written it, but I will reread it to check if my language is not offensive, or humiliating to the author of the reviewed text). This is a conscious strategy, and, especially at the beginning, it costs much effort, until it becomes an automatic process (or a habit), which turns out to be almost effortless, and does not require (each time) conscious decisions and choices. Such strategies allow us to save the limited amount of energy that we can use to take up other challenges (Baumeister, 2011).

Besides, another, one of the most efficient, technique of directing our behavior is so-called self-reinforcement. Its role is to keep a high level of motivation to do what is right until first desired effects appear, and they give us the necessary motivation to continue our work on self-control. Self-reinforcement may have both positive and negative character. One can motivate oneself by conditional

rewards, particularly when long, persistent, and systematic work is required. Facing difficulties is always easier if small successes are accompanied by some rewards (even if symbolic ones) (Bandura,1977).

Thus, in the light of the studies over self-control, it seems, contrarily to what situationists maintain, the thesis of perfecting one's moral character is not only thinkable but also deeply justified.

### ***3. Self-control – local vs. global traits***

In their criticism of virtue ethics, situationists also questioned the possibility of so-called global virtues or global traits of character, i.e., such traits that are displayed in a vast range (or even all kinds) of situations. They allow at best the existence of local traits, i.e., such traits that are displayed in a specific kind of behavior in very narrowly defined kinds of situations (Doris, 2002). Baumeister's concept of self-control can also be used to defend virtue ethics in this aspect of the debate with situationists. The studies on self-control show that training one's own will in one field of activity, e.g. using the non-dominant hand; controlling language, posture, or food intake or even squeezing a handgrip twice a day has positive results in other fields (e.g. healthier eating behaviour, or controlling their violent behavior also showed a higher level of sports activity, control of their expenditures, smoking or drinking behaviour (Muraven, Baumeister, Tice,1999; Cranwell, Benford, Houghton, Gombolewski, Fisher, Hagger, 2014; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, Foshee, 2009; Moraven, 2010a, 2010b; Oaten, Cheng 2006a, 2006b). Besides, the will of the subjects became depleted much slower than subjects in the control group (Oaten, Cheng, 2006a, 2006b).

Baumeister himself maintains that the control resources grow regardless of what kind of exercise (which requires self-control) is taken up. His studies show that there is one general reservoir of self-control, which consists in the ability to control undesired reaction, regardless of to which field of activity they relate; acts of self-control (controlling one's thoughts, emotions, impulsive reactions, behaviour) draw from the same source (Muraven, Baumeister, 2000; Gailliot, Baumeister, 2007; Baumeister, Gailliot, De Wall, Oaten, 2006). From this, we can thus draw a conclusion about the globality of self-control. Depending on the level of the self-control reservoir we can use it independently of situational contexts.

### ***Glucose objection***

In recent time, there have appeared some criticism of Baumeister's theory of free will, denying the existence of particular, biological, and internal resources of self-control to be found in each individual. Baumeister does not understand this resources merely metaphorically but takes it to be something physical and concrete, something that can be measured. Together with Gailliot, Baumeister made a hypothesis that it is glucose that can be strictly correlated with effective self-control and the will depletion (Gailliot, Baumeister, 2007). They are now heavily criticized for that because their hypothesis contradicts well-grounded knowledge on metabolization of glucose in the brain (Beedie, Lane, 2011; Kurzban, 2010). The brain uses only a small portion of the glucose that is metabolized by the whole body, and it is only in extreme situations that the body is not able to provide enough glucose to ensure mental processes. Hence, it is highly impossible that performing a short-time task which requires one's self-control (e.g., squeezing a handgrip) would lead to such a serious fall of glucose level that later on



one would not be able to perform such tasks as solving acronyms, which was identified by Baumeister as free will depletion effect) (Kurzban, 2010).

Besides, the results of Baumeister and his colleague's studies achieved did not find their confirmation in a substantial part replicative studies. Although Baumeister's advocates point at these replicative studies which confirm his results (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, Chatzisarantis, 2010), his critics focus on other studies which did not confirm his results (Dang, 2016). Some results seem even to directly falsify Baumeister's hypothesis, as is the case in the studies showing that mere gargling one's throat with glucose solution could reduce the "will depletion" effect, although the drink was not able to get into the subjects' blood (Dang, 2016). However, some psychologists find 'gargle effect' also controversial and not supported by sufficient empirical data (Vadillo, Gold, Osman, 2016). Other studies not only deny the correlation between glucose level and will depletion, but they even question the very existence of the effect of will depletion (Carter, Kofler, Forster, McCullough, 2015).

### ***Final remarks***

We should notice that Baumeister and his colleagues did not think that the level of glucose in the blood is the only factor determining the efficacy of one's self-control. They also underlined the role of rest and tiredness, as well as of physical fitness, health or sickness (Gailliot, Baumeister, 2007; Muraven, Baumeister, 2000). Besides, the critics of the resources of self-control hypothesis do not question Baumeister's basic claim, namely that humans can control their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. And it is this claim that I have been referring to in my discussion with situationists, namely that humans act mainly under the influence of situational factors and it is the situation that determines their behavior. Therefore, despite the criticism of Baumeister's idea of will depletion, my main argument remains in force. The criticism mentioned above may, however, undermine the second part of my argument that was aiming to defend the thesis of globality of self-control as a virtue of willpower.

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