Willpower and the Cultivation of Virtue

Ryan West

Motivational and Structural Virtues

Robert Adams distinguishes two categories of virtues: motivational and structural.[1] The motivational virtues "are defined by motives which in turn are defined by goods that one is for in having them."[2] Generosity is an example. The generous person is sensitive to and positively disposed toward the pleasure and wellbeing of others, and is motivated by a concern for those goods. By contrast, the structural virtues—which include courage, self-control, patience, and perseverance, among others—are not defined "by particular motives or by one's main aims, but are rather structural features of the way one organizes and manages whatever motives one has."[3] In other words, the structural virtues, unlike the motivational virtues, are not about "having one's heart in the right place;" rather, "the excellence of structural virtues is a matter of personal psychic strength—of ability and willingness to govern one's behavior in accordance with values, commitments, and ends one is for."[4] An example will help.

Consider courage. In paradigm instances, an agent exemplifies courage when she acts for some end in a situation perceived as threatening. In this way, courageous actions are paradigmatically characterized by two kinds of motivations.[5] On the one hand, the agent is motivated by some end—say, she wants to save a child trapped in a burning building. On the other hand, she faces a motivational obstacle—the emotion of fear, which is a response to a perceived threat and will tend to discourage the motivationally virtuous action. The first kind of motivation is not what makes a courageous action courageous. Rather, courageous actions are courageous inasmuch as the agent overcomes, circumvents, or transcends the motivational obstacle presented by her fear.[6] Thus, we could say, very roughly, that courage is an ability to manage one's fears in such a way that one is able to act for one's ends (whatever those ends happen to be).[7]

Adams notes that he borrows the motivational/structural distinction from Robert C. Roberts, though he borrows only half of Roberts's terminology.[8] Roberts prefers to contrast the motivational virtues with what he calls the "virtues of willpower."[9] The shift in language is significant, for the different labels point to different features of the relevant virtues. The term 'structural,' rich in architectural overtones, highlights a characteristic *function* of these virtues: they provide the agent with a kind of structural integrity, keeping her from being toppled by countervailing forces as she pursues the goods she is "for." (In this way, the structural virtues are the character analogue of a cathedral's flying buttresses.) The term 'willpower,' though, doesn't tell us much about what a virtue of willpower *does*; rather, it highlights the *aspect of the agent's psychology* (viz., her willpower) that can enable her structural integrity.[10] (We learn something

---

[1] These two categories do not exhaust the categories of virtues.

[2] Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 33.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 34.

[5] For a helpful discussion of the motivational dimension of courage, see Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 217-221

[6] Ibid.

[7] It is a vexed question whether the courageous person's ends must be morally good. I need not take a stand on that issue here, though. My point is simply that courage does not have a particular end (whether good, bad, or neutral) built into its grammar in the way that the motivational virtues do. If courage does require a good end, it will have to borrow that end, so to speak, from another, motivational virtue.

[8] Adams, 33n22.

[9] Robert C. Roberts, "Will Power and the Virtues," *Philosophical Review* 93, no. 2 (1984), 227–47.

[10] Of course, willpower isn't *always* utilized in the interest of integrity; for instance, it's possible to use one's willpower to act out of character. Moreover, even when willpower yields integrity, the integrity in question can be a feature of a morally neutral or immoral person. (Flying buttresses could support a den of thieves rather than a cathedral, or a cathedral that's turned into a den of thieves.) My focus is the ways willpower can be used to dismantle immoral

about flying buttresses when we're told that they are made of stone.) It is not obvious that every structural virtue is, in fact, a virtue of willpower.[11] Still, it does seem that every virtue of willpower has a structural function. Roberts's alternative terminology for the virtues of willpower—the "strengths"—carries this double meaning.

One burden of this essay is to begin to suggest how, precisely, the virtues of willpower can imbue one's character with structural strength. Before looking at the particular functions of particular virtues of willpower within the particular kinds of situations that call for them (the task of a later section), it will help to pursue a set of questions that pertains generally to all the virtues of willpower: What exactly is willpower? Do we have any empirical reasons to think that willpower exists? Can willpower be cultivated? I address these conceptual and empirical questions in the next section.

Varieties of Willpower[12]

Confusion threatens any discussion of the nature and potential efficacy of "willpower," in part because the term is ambiguous, naming a variety of distinct, but interrelated, features of human psychology. In this section, I try to introduce a bit of conceptual order to the discussion by sorting through several empirical studies of willpower. In the end, I differentiate three dimensions of willpower: (1) muscular willpower, (2) self-management skill, and (3) the disposition to exert the first two kinds of willpower. In the next section, I'll explain how these three elements come together in the virtues of willpower.

Folk conceptions of self-control have long treated willpower as a kind of personal strength or energy, a psychic muscle that can be toned up by strenuous exercise. Near the turn of the twentieth century, as empirical psychology was beginning to take on a more robustly scientific form, some psychologists also held this view. Thus, William James, the "father of psychology," recommends to "do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test."[13] Gradually, psychologists began to look askance at this way of thinking, preferring to explain behavior in terms of factors outside the agent, and doubting whether people could consciously control themselves.[14] More recently, though, empirical researchers have had renewed interest in "self-regulation"—"the capacity to override natural and automatic tendencies, desires, and behaviors; to pursue long-term goals, even at the expense of short-term attractions; and to follow socially prescribed norms and rules"[15]—and the "strength model of willpower" has risen to favor yet again as an important—though not uncontroversial—

---

orientations and build, reinforce, and protect moral orientations. Thanks to Bob Kruschwitz for helping me clarify this point.

[11] For instance, a virtue Bob Roberts and I call self-vigilance is not a virtue of willpower, but it might qualify as a structural virtue, depending on how one parses Adams's language. See Robert C. Roberts and Ryan West, "Natural Epistemic Defects and Corrective Virtues," *Synthese* 192, no. 8 (2015): 2557–76.

[12] Some ideas in this section are adapted from an early draft of Roberts and West, "Natural Epistemic Defects and Corrective Virtues." The relevant section of that paper was cut before publication.

[13] William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 126.

[14] For a whirlwind tour of the reception of the idea of willpower, see the introduction to Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

[15] Isabelle M. Bauer and Roy F. Baumeister, "Self-regulatory Strength," in *Handbook of Self-Regulation: Research, Theory, and Applications*, 2d ed., ed. Kathleen D. Vohs and Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 65.

element in the psychology of self-control, thanks to scores of empirical studies that seem to support it.[16]

The strength model proposes at least two key characteristics of willpower: first, "you have a finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted as you use it;" and second, "you use the same stock of willpower for all manner of tasks."[17] Roy Baumeister and his colleagues summarize the foundational empirical method for testing the model:

> The basic approach to testing the depleted-resource hypothesis was to have some research participants perform a first self-control task, while others performed a comparable but neutral task, and then all would move on to perform a second, unrelated self-control task. If self-control consumes a limited resource, then performing the first task should deplete the person's resource, leaving less available for the second task—and therefore causing poorer performance on the second task.[18]

For instance, in one study, participants who either stifled or amplified their emotional responses to an emotionally charged film were less able to resist the urge to quit during a subsequent test of physical stamina than a control group. In other studies, suppressing forbidden thoughts led to a decreased ability to stifle laughter (as compared to those who hadn't suppressed any thoughts), and participants were quicker than a control group to give up on frustrating tasks after they had made themselves say "no" to dessert and "yes" to radishes.[19] Researchers coined the phrase "ego depletion" to refer to "the state of diminished resources following exertion of self-control (or other tasks that might deplete the same resource)."[20]

---

[16] Relevant studies include Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Dianne M. Tice, "The Strength Model of Self-Control," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2007): 351–55; M. Muraven, D. M. Tice, and R. F. Baumeister, "Self-control as Limited Resource: Regulatory Depletion Patterns," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (1998): 774–789; R. F. Baumeister, E. Bratslavsky, M. Muraven, and D. M. Tice, "Ego Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (1998): 1252–1265; M. T. Gailliot, R. F. Baumeister, C. N. DeWall, J. K. Maner, E. A. Plant, and D. M. Tice, "Self-control Relies on Glucose as a Limited Energy Source: Willpower Is More than a Metaphor," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92 (2007): 325–336; R. F. Baumeister, M. Gailliot, C. N. DeWall, and M. Oaten, "Self-regulation and Personality: How Interventions Increase Regulatory Success, and How Depletion Moderates the Effects of Traits on Behavior," *Journal of Personality* 74 (2006): 1773–1801. For a meta-analysis of 83 studies, see M. S. Hagger, C. Wood, C. Stiff, and N. L. D. Chatzisarantis, "Ego Depletion and the Strength Model of Self-control: A Meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 136 (2010): 495–525.

This is not to say that all self-regulation researchers are on board with all aspects of the strength model of willpower. Detractors have called various aspects of the model into question (see, e.g., Xiaomeng Xu, Kathryn E. Demos, Tricia M. Leahey, Chantelle N. Hart, Jennifer Trautvetter, Pamela Coward, Kathryn R. Middleton, Rena R. Wing, "Failure to Replicate Depletion of Self-Control," *Plos One* 9, no. 10 [October 2014]: 1–5; and Evan C. Carter, Lilly M. Kofler, Daniel E. Forster, and Michael E. McCullough, "A Series of Meta-Analytic Tests of the Depletion Effect: Self-Control Does Not Seem to Rely on a Limited Resource," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no. 4 [2015]: 796–815), and ongoing research continues (see., e.g., Alfred Mele's "Philosophy and Science of Self-Control" research initiative, funded by the Templeton Foundation: URL = <http://philosophyandscienceofself-control.com>). But the central features of the strength model are widely accepted in the field, and the model as a whole offers a plausible explanation of an expansive range of the recent empirical data. So while we must remain open to the possibility that the strength model will be criticized, qualified, or even overturned in light of future research, it is currently a leading model in the literature.

[17] Baumeister and Tierney, 35.
[18] Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 351–2.
[19] Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister, "Self-control as Limited Resource;" Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, "Ego Depletion;" cited in Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 352.
[20] Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 352.

Additional studies have suggested further ways in which willpower is like a muscle. Depleted willpower can be re-strengthened by an in-flow of glucose.[21] Furthermore, just as you are not stuck with your given muscular strength, you are not stuck with your innate level of willpower. Rather, as William James had suggested, by practice you can increase it.[22] That is, regular exercises of selfcontrol can help build resistance to ego depletion "in the sense that performance at self-control tasks deteriorates at a slower rate," so that dispositional willpower varies from person to person not only in strength, but also in endurance.[23] Additionally, this increase in willpower is transferable from one context of use to another, as is shown by studies in which practicing simple self-control tasks (like regularly brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand) lead to improvements in selfcontrol in other domains.[24] Finally, ego depletion can be compensated for, to some extent, by the agent's vigorous exertion or effort, especially in high stakes scenarios.[25] Still, this further exertion ultimately leads to even greater depletion, as has been found when those who have exerted extra effort to overcome depletion exhibit "severe impairments" when surprised by yet another selfcontrol task.[26]

Let us think further about the exertion of effort. The dispositional strength of a muscle is a prerequisite for the episodic exertion of that strength. An agent can't exert strength that she doesn't have, but in exertion the *agent* must *activate* that strength in some application. Analogously, there seems to be a kind of episodic exertion of willpower that is not the same as the strength or capacity for its exertion. Strength is capacity, while exertion is act, and the degree of exertion—*how hard* one tries, *how much* effort one expends—is within the scope of the agent's agency. A person with a lot of (muscular) willpower might elect not to exert it much, while a person with less willpower exerts it almost to the limit, thus *exerting* more willpower than the person who *has* more willpower.

How might this happen? In the scenario that comes most readily to mind, the person who exerts more with less is more strongly motivated than the one who exerts less with more. For instance, we might compare an average successful dieter with David Blaine, endurance artist extraordinaire.[27] Consider this partial list of Blaine's feats:

> He stood for thirty-five hours more than eighty feet above New York's Bryant Park, without a safety harness, atop a round pillar just twenty-two inches wide. He spent sixty-three sleepless hours in Times Square encased in a giant block of ice. He was entombed in a coffin with six inches of headroom for a week, during which he consumed nothing except water.[28]

It would require incredible exertion of strong (muscular) willpower, not to mention selfmanagement skill (see below), to train for and successfully complete such tasks. Blaine has shown again and again that he *has* such willpower. But he often opts not to *exert* it. Blaine reports that when he is not training for an endurance stunt, he will let his self-control go, sometimes

---

[21] Gailliot et al., "Self-control Relies on Glucose." Some researchers have been unable to replicate these findings; see Florian Lange and Frank Eggert, "Sweet Delusion: Glucose Drinks Fail to Counteract Ego Depletion," *Appetite* 75 (2014): 54–63.

[22] Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, and Oaten, "Self-regulation and Personality."

[23] Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 352.

[24] Ibid.

[25] M. Muraven and E. Slessareva, "Mechanisms of Self-control Failure: Motivation and Limited Resources," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29 (2003): 894–906.

[26] M. Muraven, D. Shmueli, and E. Burkley, "Conserving Self-control Strength," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91 (2006): 524–537. Quotation from Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 353.

[27] The following account of Blaine's career is drawn from Baumeister and Tierney, chapter 6.

[28] Ibid., 124–5.

gaining 50 pounds in a three-month span.[29] During that time, Blaine hasn't lost his tremendous (dispositional, muscular) willpower; he simply neglects to exercise it. By contrast, an average dieter with sub-Blaine willpower muscles might exert every bit of his willpower in his effort to retrain his eating habits, thereby resisting treats to which non-training Blaine might succumb. Perhaps the dieter does so because of a deep desire for temperance and the health and longevity that tend to accompany such temperance, or maybe because he has his eye on some extrinsic reward (e.g., catching the eye of a certain someone, or winning "The Biggest Loser").[30] We might think only the former motivation is *morally* virtuous. But any of these motivations will do as an impetus to the exertion of willpower. As exertion of willpower, the exertion is no less impressive because extrinsically motivated.

So exertion of willpower is not the same as muscular willpower, and it requires some motivation, either intrinsic or extrinsic. Might the degree of exertion be exhaustively explained by the degree (intensity, strength) of motivation? I'm inclined to say no, because to say yes would seem to identify the agent too much with his motives. You have to have a reason for exerting your willpower, but the strength of the reason (your attraction to the goal) is not the whole story about your exertion. This actualizing of exertion seems to be the mysterious center of human agency, the performing of tasks by a subject.

Exertion of willpower is episodic, but it expresses *two* dispositions: the "muscular" character strength that it exerts (most of what Baumeister and company call willpower), *and* an exertiondisposition (we might call this disposition "spirit"). People seem to differ not only in the strength of (muscular) willpower that they have to call on, but also in the strength of their disposition to call on it (their strength of "spirit"). The latter can be distinguished from, and does not reduce to, the strength of the agent's motivation for a particular goal. An individual could be relatively indisposed to exert her (muscular) willpower in the service of her goal because, say, she does not appreciate the bearing of such exertion on the attainment of the goal, or because a history of failure leads her to think that such exertion is pointless. But if she comes to realize that the exertion of willpower could help, or, better yet, actually makes some progress toward her goal as a result of such exertion, we might expect her "spirit" to increase, even if her intrinsic desire for her goal and her muscular willpower remain the same. After all, success breeds encouragement, the optimism that effort will be repaid, that one "can do it," that that for which one exerts oneself is accessible to one. In this way, spirit seems closely connected with self-concept, especially as it bears on one's agency. Spirit can be externally produced, by such expedients as AA meetings, Weight-Watchers clubs, the kind of managers that you see on "The Biggest Loser," and so on, but unless the agent internalizes such encouragement—that is, unless she develops *her* spirit—the prospects of sustained self-regulation will remain fairly dim.[31] Both the muscle and the exertion-disposition can rightly be called "willpower."

So far I have highlighted the ways in which willpower is rather strength-like. But we should not think that strength of will and the disposition to exert that strength are the only important psychological ingredients in self-regulation. Baumeister also recognizes (though he does not distinguish sufficiently) another aspect of willpower, namely, self-management skill. People who have good willpower usually use "techniques" for managing their impulses. For example, David Blaine explains one way he tried to get through the stunt in which he was encased in ice for sixtythree hours:

[29] Ibid., 140.

[30] "The Biggest Loser" is a television show aired on NBC featuring a weight loss competition.

[31] Thanks to Bob Roberts for helping me clarify this point.

"I looked through the ice at a guy standing in front of me and asked him what time it was. He says, 'Two o'clock.' I say to myself, *Oh, man, I'm not done with this until ten P.M. That's eight more hours!* I tell myself it won't be so bad once there's only six hours left, so I just have to get through the next two hours. That's the kind of time-shift technique I use to change perspective so I get through these stunts."[32]

Similar skills, particularly techniques for changing perspective or shifting attention, apply in all sorts of domains (not just when one is encased in ice!). Children can withstand the pull of marshmallows by diverting their attention away from the chewy morsels, or by reconceptualizing them as fluffy white clouds;[33] alcoholics can "stay on the wagon" by taking it "one day at a time," consciously choosing not to dwell on the fact that they have to say "no" to every drop of alcohol they come across for the rest of their lives;[34] establishing "bright lines"—"clear, simple, unambiguous rules" that set behavioral limits that one will not cross under any circumstances— significantly enhances one's ability to resist temptation;[35] and so on. Because I will discuss further self-regulatory techniques below, I won't multiply examples here.[36] My point at this juncture is threefold: (1) skill with such techniques constitutes an important aspect of willpower, (2) self-management skill isn't the same as either muscular or spirit willpower, and (3) there is strong empirical support for the efficacy of such techniques.

Now, self-management techniques are not, in themselves, constituents of a person's psychology. This may be one reason that Baumeister and his associates tend to treat these techniques not as *aspects* of willpower, but rather as tools that a person with (muscular) willpower can use to enhance her self-regulation, or methods one can learn to avoid depleting one's (muscular) willpower. However, another empirical approach to willpower, rooted in the cognitive affective personality system—or "CAPS model"—developed by Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda, helps explain how self-management techniques can become embedded in one's character.[37] Advocates of the CAPS model suggest that we think of character traits not as simple behavioral dispositions, but as clusters of cognitive-affective units, such as "beliefs, desires, feelings, goals, expectations, values, and self-regulatory plans."[38] Empirical research from the past few decades helps explain the relationship between CAPS units, self-management techniques, and willpower.[39]

Mischel and his colleagues have conducted many studies on the delay of gratification. One focus of their research has been the self-regulative strategies of preschool-aged children,[40] though they

---

[32] Ibid., 138; italics original.

[33] Walter Mischel and Ozlem Ayduk, "Willpower in a Cognitive Affective Processing System: The Dynamics of Delay of Gratification," in *Handbook of Self-Regulation: Research, Theory, and Applications*, 2d ed., ed. Kathleen D. Vohs and Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 83–105.

[34] For an empirically informed philosophical treatment of alcoholism and other addictions, see Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice*, Stategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

[35] The quote is from Baumeister and Tierney, 185; they draw the terminology of "bright lines" from George Ainslie, *Breakdown of Will* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[36] Baumeister and Tierney discuss several more techniques, and the empirical studies that support them, that have been shown to aid self-control with one's finances, time-management, diet, and more.

[37] See Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda, "A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality: Reconceptualizing Situations, Dispositions, Dynamics, and Invariance in Personality Structure," *Psychological Review* 102 (1995): 246-268.

[38] Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19.

[39] The following discussion draws heavily from Mischel and Ayduk, "Willpower in a Cognitive Affective Processing System."

[40] Relevant studies include W. Mischel and N. Baker, "Cognitive Appraisals and Transformations in Delay Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31 (1975): 254–61; W. Mischel and E. B. Ebbesen, "Attention in Delay of

have conducted longitudinal studies as well, which provide good evidence for "the long-term stability and predictive value of individual differences in the self-regulatory competencies assessed in the delay of gratification paradigm early in life."[41] A typical study would run like this:

> Young children wait for two cookies (or other little treats) that they want and have chosen to get, and which they prefer to a smaller treat, such as one cookie. They then are faced with a dilemma: They are told that the experimenter needs to leave for a while and that they can continue to wait for the larger reward until the experimenter comes back on his or her own, or they are free to ring a little bell to summon the adult at any time and immediately get the smaller treat at the expense of getting the larger preferred reward.[42]

The scenario provides an excellent test of willpower by tapping into an aspect of human psychology that is well-known to make self-control difficult: "temporal discounting." Temporal discounting is "the systematic discounting of the subjective value of a reward, outcome, or goal as the anticipated time delay before its expected occurrence increases."[43] In other words, settling for one cookie starts looking increasingly tempting the longer I have to wait for two.

Children differ quite a bit in their ability to wait. What explains the individual differences? Mischel's model is predicated on the difference between "hot" and "cool" systems.[44] The hot system "is a 'go' system. It enables quick, emotional processing."[45] The cool system, by contrast, "is an emotionally neutral, 'know' system: It is cognitive, complex, slow, and contemplative."[46] Subjective temptation occurs when the subject's hot, "go" system is viscerally attracted to the quick reward, despite the cool, "know" system's recognition that the delayed reward is better. Resistance to temptation through "effortful control and willpower [becomes] possible to the extent that the cooling strategies generated by the cognitive cool system circumvent hot system activation."[47] The chief "cooling strategies" identified in the studies are what we might call "practices of reconstrual." That is, the key to delay of gratification, in many of these studies at least, is the internalized ability to move one's attention away from the "hot, arousing, consummatory" features of the situation, and to reframe the situation in cooler terms.[48] For instance, subjects who pretended that the tempting items were pictures waited longer than a control group.[49] (As one subject quipped, "you can't eat a picture."[50]) In another study, those cued to construe marshmallows as "white, puffy clouds" and pretzels as "little, brown logs" delayed gratification for 13 minutes, whereas those cued to view the treats as "yummy, and chewy" or

Gratification," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 16 (1970): 239–337; W. Mischel, E. B. Ebbesen, and A. R. Zeiss, "Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 204–18; W. Mischel and B. Moore, "Effects of Attention to Symbolically-Presented Rewards on Self-control," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 28 (1973): 172–79.

[41] Mischel and Ayduk, 92. Elsewhere (100) the authors note that "self-regulatory ability assessed in the delay of gratification paradigm reflects stable individual differences in regulatory strength that are visible early in life and cut across different domains of behavior (e.g., eating, attachment, aggression)."

[42] Ibid., 84.

[43] Ibid., 85.

[44] The distinction roughly maps onto what Daniel Kahneman calls Systems 1 and 2. See Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[45] Mischel and Ayduk, 85.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 86.

[48] Ibid., 89.

[49] B. Moore, W. Mischel, and A. Zeiss, "Comparative Effects of the Reward Stimulus and its Cognitive Representations in Voluntary Delay," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34 (1976): 419–24.

[50] Mischel and Ayduk, 90.

"salty and crunchy" (respectively) waited only five minutes.[51] Mischel summarizes: "Taking these findings collectively, it became clear that delay of gratification depends not on whether or not attention is focused on the objects of desire, but rather on just how they are mentally represented."[52]

Mischel's work focuses on overcoming "hot" temptations through cooling strategies. I would add, though, that some forms of temptation—for instance, temptations precipitated not by being overly motivated to go astray, but by being insufficiently drawn to the good—may require a different kind of self-regulation, perhaps involving what we could call "heating" strategies. Given the psychological dynamics at play in the CAPS model, it seems plausible that actively placing one's concerned attention on features of the situation that one (coolly) knows *should* be hot, but currently are not, and reframing them in attractive ways, could result in increased motivation. Such strategies would provide another way to reduce the need simply to "muscle" oneself into action.

The examples given above illustrate the many diverse strategies by which subjects can selfregulate (I'll give further examples below). Mischel is careful to point out that these strategies must "be accessed before automatic impulsive action is triggered by the hot system that preempts the person from thinking rationally and creatively."[53] This point, which echoes ancient self-regulatory advice offered by Seneca and others,[54] highlights the need for what we might call self-vigilance.[55] If one is not "on the watch," poised to counteract one's hot system with pre-planned cooling strategies (or encourage one's hot system with heating strategies), self-control will be quite difficult. Ideally, the vigilant, active application of self-management strategies merely serves as a steppingstone, a necessary waypoint en route to a more automated form of self-regulation. As Mischel puts it:

> In order for these adaptive control efforts in the hot system/cool system interactions to be maintained over time and accessed rapidly when they are urgently needed, they have to be converted from conscious, slow, and effortful to automatic activation, in this sense taking the effort out of "effortful self-control."[56]

In other words, self-regulation becomes more successful when, through habituation into planned, rehearsed self-management strategies—what psychologists call "implementation plans" (e.g., "I will start writing the paper the day after Thanksgiving," "When the dessert menu is served, I will

---

[51] Mischel and Baker, "Cognitive Appraisals."

[52] Mischel and Ayduk, 90. In personal conversation, Bob Roberts suggested to me that the first exercise cited above sounds more like a game than the second, and one might wonder whether it's less the reconstrual than the challenge of the game that's effecting the delay in that case. That may be so, at least for some subjects. I would point out, though, that even if that were true, the mechanism of reconceptualization is still operative: the subjects are better able to resist temptation because they construe the task *as a game*. Perhaps there is wisdom here: at least some of the time, we might do well to treat temptations with a bit of playfulness, rather than always approaching them with utter solemnity.

[53] Ibid., 91.

[54] See, e.g., Seneca, *On Anger*, in *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays*, ed. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.7.4–1.8.1 (25–6).

[55] Bob Roberts and I develop an empirically informed analysis of the virtue of self-vigilance in Roberts and West, "Natural Epistemic Defects and Corrective Virtues."

[56] Mischel and Ayduk, 92. Baumeister also stresses the need for automated self-control (see, e.g., Baumeister and Tierney, 154–59).

not order the chocolate cake")—the agent takes the pressure off her muscular willpower and leans on her skill willpower, which has become an integrated part of her personality.[57]

We saw above that you can build muscular willpower through exercise. How might one grow in skill willpower? Mischel notes that "attention control strategies are experimentally modifiable,"[58] and that modeling such strategies can have at least short-term positive outcomes.[59] But he thinks further research is needed for us to understand "whether—and how—socialization, education, and therapy can effectively be utilized to help individuals gain the necessary attention control competencies to make willpower more accessible when they need and want it."[60] He is surely right that more studies of this nature could help. But research in parallel fields in empirical psychology suggests some ways that these skills can be internalized. The connection between Mischel's hot and cool systems and Daniel Kahneman's "Systems 1 and 2" is importantly suggestive here.[61] (Roughly speaking, Mischel's "hot system" correlates to Kahneman's "System 1," and Mischel's "cool system" correlates to Kahneman's "System 2.") In Kahneman's work on expertise, he found that System 1 "can be programmed by System 2 to mobilize attention when a particular pattern is detected" and "executes skilled responses and generates skilled intuitions, after adequate training."[62] These skilled intuitions are a matter of *recognition*. So long as one's environment provides "adequately valid cues to the nature of the situation," and one has "opportunity to learn the relevant cues," one can grow in skilled intuitions.[63] So, provided one is motivated to grow in self-management skill (admittedly, not everyone is), has been informed about techniques that work (here the ancient and contemporary psychologists will be of much help), and has adequate opportunity to practice the techniques (the never ending onslaught of temptation has this condition covered), we should expect to see growth in skill willpower.[64]

I have attempted to glean insights from both the strength model of willpower and the CAPS approach. This might seem strange to some readers, for these two approaches are sometimes taken to be rival accounts of willpower. For instance, Baumeister and company suggest that the multipletask ego depletion studies summarized above count against views, like Mischel's, according to which "self-control mainly [involves] activating a cognitive schema or mental program," because the latter would not predict diminished results over multiple self-control tasks.[65] It is not clear to me that Baumeister is correct. It is true that the ego depletion studies seem to provide evidence against the claim that self-control involves *only* activating a cognitive

[57] Mischel and Ayduk, 92. See also P. M. Gollwitzer, "Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans," *American Psychologist* 54 (1999): 493–503; C. J. Patterson and W. Mischel, "Plans to Resist Distraction," *Developmental Psychology* 11 (1975): 369–78; and T. L. Webb and P. Sheeran, "Can Implementation Intentions Help to Overcome Ego Depletion?" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39 (2003): 279–86.

[58] See O. Ayduk, W. Mischel, and G. Downey, "Attentional Mechanisms Lining Rejection to Hostile Reactivity: The Role of the 'Hot' vs. 'Cool' Focus," *Psychological Science* 13 (2002): 443–48; W. Mischel, Y. Shoda, and M. L. Rodriguez, "Delay of Gratification in Children," *Science* 244 (1989): 933–38.

[59] A. Bandura and W. Mischel, "Modifications of Self-imposed Delay of Reward Through Exposure to Live and Symbolic Models," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2 (1965): 698–705; quote from Mischel and Ayduk, 100.

[60] Mischel and Ayduk, 100.

[61] See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*

[62] Kahneman, 105.

[63] Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, "Conditions for Intuitive Expertise: A Failure to Disagree," *American Psychologist* 64, no. 6 (2009), 520.

[64] See also the literature on growth in moral expertise; e.g., Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley, "The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise," in *Character Psychology and Character Education*, ed. Daniel K. Lapsley and F. Clark Power, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 140–65; Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley, "Moral Identity, Moral Functioning, and the Development of Moral Character," in *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, vol. 50, ed. Daniel M. Bartels, Christopher W. Bauman, Linda J. Skitka, and Douglas L. Medin (Burlington: Academic Press, 2009), 237–274.

[65] Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 352.

schema. But the reality of ego depletion is fully compatible with a comprehensive view of willpower that gives cognitive schemas an important (or even a "main") role to play. Why pit the two views against each other? Indeed, Baumeister is keen to admit the importance of self-management skill, even if he doesn't usually refer to such skill as an aspect of willpower;[66] and Mischel acknowledges the reality of ego depletion and the need for effortful acts of will at various points in the self-regulatory process, even if he doesn't stress the muscular side of willpower.[67] So long as neither model is taken as a comprehensive theory, they seem obviously compatible. Indeed, as my analysis suggests, it may well be that the two research programs are getting at distinct but complementary aspects of the complex phenomenon that we colloquially refer to with the single term "willpower." I close this section with a summary of my proposed way of interpreting the data, highlighting the interrelations between the three key aspects of willpower I've identified.

"Muscular" willpower is the capacity to compensate "directly" for shortfalls of immediate motivation or to resist impulses of various kinds. It is a finite resource that gets depleted with use, applies across domains of activity, and can increase in strength through exercise. "Skill" willpower is a kind of know-how with self-management techniques; it constitutes the artful side of willpower, a kind of self-finesse that is trainable with adequate education, experience, and practice. It may take "muscular" willpower to implement such self-management techniques (at least at first), but doing so can reduce the demand on the "muscle." Indeed, over time, as the techniques become second nature, the agent will need less effort to use them. Still, both muscular and skill willpower need to be exerted, since they are only dispositions. "Spirit" willpower is the disposition to exert them. Since utilizing self-management techniques is typically more effective than simply "willing oneself" to attain one's goals more "directly," the self-regulatory success that is likely to come with an increase in skill willpower may also increase one's inclination to exert one's willpower (of both the muscular and skill varieties). In other words, learning how to exert one's muscular and skill willpower can enhance one's spirit willpower. All three dimensions of willpower will be actualized only on condition that the agent is interested, either intrinsically or extrinsically, in some ends. Intense motivation for one's ends might be regarded as a fourth kind of willpower, and it is certainly right to think of it as a kind of will. But I reserve the term "willpower" for the other three, since they are ways to compensate for a shortfall of immediate motivation, or to resist impulses that pull contrary to it.

Willpower and the Cultivation of Virtue

If, as I've suggested, willpower is a matter of "muscle," "skill," and "spirit," it would be natural to think of the *virtues* of willpower—self-control, courage, perseverance, and patience, among others—as *excellences* of willpower in all three of its aspects. That is, the agent with the virtues of willpower has both toughness of will and finesse with self-management techniques, and is intelligently disposed to exert these to govern herself in the interest of whatever goods she is "for" (though there is no particular motivation that defines any of these virtues). Thus, each of the virtues of willpower shares the same psychological building blocks (viz., the three kinds of willpower), and each serves some self-regulatory function(s). Yet they can be distinguished from one another, for diverse structural virtues overcome special obstacles (e.g., courage overcomes obstacles associated with fear; self-control, those associated with anger, or sexual or gustatory temptations; etc.). In my view, these virtues are (in part) specifications of willpower to a particular domain, the domain being constituted by the kind of urge or emotion or habit that the virtue fits

---

[66] See the detailed discussion of many self-management techniques in Baumeister and Tierney.
[67] See, e.g., Mischell and Ayduk, 100.

its possessor to resist, along with the range of situations in which that psychological obstacle arises. So understood, structural virtues, in their typical applications, allow an agent to correct for suboptimal motivations. But their work can go deeper. If cultivated in a particular way, they can enable the tempted person not only to *weather* temptation, but also to *leverage* temptation in the interest of character growth.

In what follows, I briefly consider each of the four structural virtues mentioned above—selfcontrol, courage, perseverance, and patience—in that order. My purpose is threefold: (1) to sketch each virtue in light of the analysis of willpower given above; (2) to explore how those virtues might be cultivated; and (3) to consider how they can enable the cultivation of other, motivational virtues.

I begin with self-control. The term 'self-control' has both broad and narrow usages. In its broadest application, the term covers all the virtues of willpower by which one regulates oneself. 'Self-control' is often defined more narrowly, though, as the virtue responsible for actively regulating a particular sphere of life: one's anger, or sexual urges, or gustatory desires. In these cases, an adjectival modifier is sometimes added for clarification (e.g., "sexual self-control").

There is nothing uniquely anger- or sex- or food-and-drink-oriented about the muscular element in self-control. That is, the very same resource is put to use when the tempted person simply *chooses* to behave calmly (when her blood is boiling), or to keep things professional (when flirting with one's colleague would be so fun), or to order the salad (when the Baconator is calling). Undoubtedly, such muscular action will be needed in some circumstances, and the tempted person will be more able to engage in it if she follows some of Baumeister's advice for building up her muscular willpower and avoiding unnecessary ego depletion (for instance, by regularly undertaking needless difficulties as a form of exercise, or getting more organized so as to reduce willpowerconsuming stress).[68] But muscular willpower alone, applied directly in the moment of temptation, is known to fail with some regularity.[69] (This helps explain why some people who advocate the development and use of what I've called skill willpower sometimes also, misleadingly, say that willpower [simpliciter] isn't particularly helpful in the face of temptation: they implicitly reduce willpower to its muscular element.)[70] Thus, the tempted will need to appreciate the foolishness of planning always to resist temptation directly, an appreciation that they will evince in their spirited exertion of muscular willpower aimed at growing in skill willpower.

What skills could they use and, eventually, internalize? One would be to formulate implementation plans.[71] Some of these will be plans for avoiding "near occasions for sin": "if that one special colleague suggests that we go for drinks after work, I will decline, offering an excuse such as … ." John Doris and Gilbert Harman also recommend such commonsense wisdom.[72] For instance, Harman writes:

---

[68] See, e.g., Baumeister and Tierney, chapters 3–6; Baumeister et al., "Self-regulation and Personality."

[69] See, for instance, the testimonies of alcoholics (Dunnington, chapter 2) and failed dieters (Baumeister and Tierney, chapter 10). Here's just one example: "Were a keg of rum in one corner of the room, and were a cannon constantly discharging balls between me and it, I could not refrain from passing before that cannon, in order to get at the rum" (quoted in Dunnington, 33).

[70] E.g., Baumeister and Tierney (chapter 10) repeatedly say that self-control and willpower often don't correlate with dieting success (e.g., 217), but also give several self-management techniques that are supposed to help "produce lasting effects" (219). A bit of clarity in terminology helps eliminate the apparent tension.

[71] See, e.g., Mischel and Ayduk, 92; Gollwitzer, "Implementation Intentions;" and Patterson and Mischel, "Plans to Resist Distraction."

[72] See, e.g., John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 147; and Gilbert Harman, "No Character or Personality," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2001), 91.

> If you are trying not to give into [sic] temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food … it is best to head [sic] the situationist slogan, 'People! Places! Things!' Don't go to places where people drink! Do not carry cigarettes or a lighter and avoid people who smoke! Stay out of the kitchen!"[73]

But they seem not to appreciate adequately that it takes a certain kind of person—a self-controlled one—actually to formulate and follow such plans as a matter of course.[74] For instance, in the passage just cited, I replaced an important phrase with an ellipsis. The full first sentence reads: "If you are trying not to give into temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food, *the best advice is not to try to develop 'will-power' or 'self-control.'*"[75] There is a small grain of truth in this advice, provided Harman has a purely muscular view of willpower in mind. (Even if muscular willpower is necessary, it isn't sufficient.) But his advice hardly makes sense once we realize that internalized implementation plans constitute an *aspect* of self-control, properly understood.

In addition to implementation plans for avoiding certain kinds of situations, one's plans might include behavioral scripts for when temptation strikes: "when my three-year-old begins her tantrum, I will lower myself to her height by squatting down (rather than towering over her, both literally and 'morally'), intentionally use a calm voice (rather than my instinctive yell), call her 'my precious girl' (rather than using her first, Middle, and LAST name), and tenderly put my arm around her (avoiding all aggression)." Still others will include attentional cooling strategies: "when offered a third beer, I will imagine that the bottle is filled with hangover juice." Each of these plans will take some "muscle" to implement at first. But as they become second nature, the tempted won't need to "try" as hard to execute them. They'll simply be tools in the agent's automated self-control repertoire, reflex-like responses that won't deplete her resources in the same way that "direct" resistance would.

The foregoing strategies not only help one to resist temptation; they also form one's character. By *exercising* self-control, one *grows* in it. But we can imagine slightly altered selfmanagement skills that could also help one to grow in the motivational virtue of temperance. On a broadly Aristotelian understanding, the temperate agent's desires for food, drink, and sex are finely tuned, such that the objects of his desires are always appropriate (i.e., he never wants to eat or drink anything, or copulate with anyone, that he shouldn't), and his desires are appropriately strong (or weak), are experienced at the right time, and have the right conceptual shape (i.e., he only wants food, drink, and sex under the proper descriptions).[76] This formal description of temperance leaves room for disagreement about the precise shape of the virtue, which will vary across moral outlooks inasmuch as outlooks diverge in their understandings of food, drink, and sex, and the place of each in a good human life. The outlook-specific nature of the virtue is especially important to keep in mind when thinking about character cultivation, for a key aspect of growth in temperance will be learning to care about and see food in a distinctively Epicurean, or Aristotelian, or Christian way (to cite just a few of the options), such that one's understanding of the good thoroughly penetrates and pervades one's perception of the world.[77]

---

[73] Harman, 91.

[74] Hagop Sarkissian makes a similar point in "After Confucius: Psychology and Moral Power" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2008), 59n9.

[75] Harman, 91; italics added.

[76] See Robert C. Roberts, "Temperance," in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93–112.

[77] This is not to say that every tradition's "virtue" of temperance really is a virtue; that will depend on the actual nature of the good. Of course, out of charity to all comers, we can refer to each tradition's "virtue" as a virtue. But in

How, then, might self-control strategies become temperance-training techniques? When the tempted person turns down the offer of after-hours drinks, she could plan to mention that she needs to get home to her "wonderful spouse," such language serving as both a cue to that special colleague that she is happily taken, and a cue to herself to fix her desire on her beloved. Or, when a continent but not yet fully assimilated moral vegetarian orders the salad instead of the Baconator, he could bring to mind what he takes to be the egregious harms of factory farming, or contemplate with pleasure what a gift it is to have year-round access to delicious vegetables—a blessing that the royalty of old could not have conceived[78]—in an effort to incorporate his moral understanding into his perception. By such repeated exercises of self-control in the face of temptation, agents can encourage not only behavior modification, but also a change of heart.

This kind of on-the-spot recalibration of moral perception is just one example of what historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot calls "spiritual exercises"—practices of mind and body whereby one digests the doctrines of one's philosophical school, so that those doctrines are not matters of mere notional understanding, but actually take up residence in one's vision of the world. Such on-the-spot practices, along with their off-the-spot cousins (see below), were common in the ancient world. As Hadot puts it:

> Each [ancient school of thought], then, represents a form of life defined by an ideal of wisdom. The result is that each one has its corresponding fundamental inner attitude … and its own manner of speaking … But above all every school practices exercises designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom … that will be, for the soul, analagous [sic] to the athlete's training or to the application of a medical cure.[79]

Understood in this way, philosophy "appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions … Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being."[80] Such transformed vision is no easy accomplishment; and this is where the spiritual exercises come in. Examples of the latter include the regular and careful study of Epicurean, or Stoic, or Christian teaching (say, on anger, food, sex, the family, etc.); the memorization of pithy, tradition-specific maxims (say, from Epicurus, or Seneca, or Jesus), so that one's ethic would become a deep part of one's psychology, "ready at hand" for on the-spot exercises of reconstrual; regular meditation on the central tenets of one's philosophy; prayer (at least for the theists); fasting; and so on.

The regular use of spiritual exercises is one historically prominent model for how we can retrain our concerns and perceptual dispositions so that we gradually learn to notice what is morally significant and are increasingly motivated to act properly in response to what we notice. In light of the cognitive psychology mentioned above, I propose that we think of these exercises (in part) as practices for retraining System 1. That is, by regularly setting one's mind upon the good—through study, meditation, memorization, and so on—and then actively trying to view the world through the lenses thus acquired (i.e., learning to see by looking), one can gradually grow in what Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley have called "moral expertise."[81] I am not aware of empirical studies that focus directly on the efficacy of spiritual exercises. But the way such character training is

---

so doing, we must be aware that there are distinctively Epicurean, Aristotelian, and Christian varieties of temperance (to name just a few), none of which is fully compatible with the others.

[78] I owe this insight to John Giannini.

[79] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 59.

[80] Ibid., 83.

[81] See, e.g., Narvaez and Lapsley, "Moral Identity, Moral Functioning, and the Development of Moral Character."

supposed to work is relevantly similar to well-attested methods for growth in expertise in other fields, wherein a pupil apprentices herself to a master. Narvaez and Lapsley write:

> Experts in training receive instruction that builds skills and theoretical understanding simultaneously. They are immersed in situated practice while being coached by someone with more expertise. They are immersed in well-functioning environments that provide corrective feedback so that appropriate intuitions are formed. In other words, experteducation in a particular domain cultivates deliberative understanding and intuitions simultaneously … During expert training, interpretive and action frameworks are learned to automaticity, perception is honed to chronically accessed constructs.[82]

The classical and Christian model of moral formation through spiritual practices is similar. The Epicurean, or Stoic, or Christian apprentices himself to the relevant "moral experts" (e.g., the great moral teachers from their tradition, or even just a person who is further along the path than the trainee) and engages in spiritual exercises (study, meditation, memorization, prayer, silence, solitude, etc.) within a community of like-minded persons (e.g., a local church) that provides corrective feedback.[83]

The virtues of willpower help enable the effective practice of spiritual exercises. Though engaging in exercises like meditation and prayer can be quite pleasant and even exhilarating at times, this seems not to be the norm for most people most of the time. Spiritual exercises require time and effort, are sometimes inconvenient, and are often quite slow in yielding their fruit. Thus, if the trainee wants to practice them with the regularity and intensity that befits them, she will need muscular and spirit willpower (to get over the relevant motivational barriers) and skill willpower (to establish routines, and to manage her attention when tempted, say, to sleep through her scheduled meditation time).

So far, I've emphasized self-control's role in resisting temptation, cultivating virtue, and enabling the practice of spiritual exercises. Another element in an agent's self-control wisdom is sensitivity to time periods and situations in which her willpower isn't up to the task, in a sense. (Perhaps she will recognize that on some days she has the unhappy combination of an uncharacteristically strong craving to misbehave and a relatively low level of "spirit.") Here the tempted might borrow a common and highly effective tactic utilized by participants in Alcoholics Anonymous: she'll have an implementation plan to "call my 'sponsor' when I'm feeling weak." Now, I'm not imagining that every tempted person (i.e., all of us) literally needs to attend a meeting for addicts (though, of course, some people do). But the tempted do need other people in their lives who can function in a similar way, and they would be wise to expend some willpower to open up to at least one friend (or therapist, or religious community, etc.) about their struggles. The selfcontrolled are not moral Lone Rangers, for resisting temptation is not an autonomous affair (even if it requires a certain amount of agential autonomy). Establishing morally serious relationships, and actually reaching out to one's friends when tempted, can thus both express and require willpower.

The foregoing suggestion highlights the need for additional virtues of willpower beyond selfcontrol in the battle for one's character. For one, the tempted will need some level of courage—the

---

[82] Ibid., 259.

[83] In addition to Hadot's work, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). On the theme of Christian discipleship as moral apprenticeship, see Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Note that in the Christian case, the exercises are seen primarily as ways of opening oneself up to the transformative grace of God, not chiefly as practices for self-improvement.

strength and ability to manage one's fears—if they are going to be willing to reveal their moral shortcomings to a friend (not just once, but perhaps embarrassingly often). In many instances, showing one's dark side to others is a daunting proposition (especially if one's faults aren't the kinds of things polite people discuss). When we do so, we risk hurting others, losing friends (or at least the respect of our friends), and more. Thus, even if the virtues of willpower are distinct—e.g., (anger) self-control deals directly with temptations to inappropriate anger, while courage deals with fearsome threats—they often build on and reinforce each other (e.g., when an angry person conquers her fear of opening up to her friend in the interest of conquering her anger).

Self-control will also require reinforcement from perseverance. Resistance to temptation is not merely the task of a moment; it is a lifelong project. There will be times when an agent feels the urge to throw in the towel, attracted by the "ease" associated with conforming to a less stringent moral standard. Thus, to maintain his "long obedience in the same direction,"[84] the tempted will need the strength and finesse that perseverance provides. For perseverance, as I'll use the term, is the virtue of willpower by which an agent sticks with his long-term commitments.[85] As a virtue of willpower, perseverance taps into the same muscular resource as courage and self-control. But perseverance's techniques aim at continuing in a task over the long haul, and thus tend to have a temporal dimension.

Bob Roberts highlights two time-related perseverance techniques, each of which involves a shift in attention.[86] As he notes, to every situation "we bring an implicit sense of our location in time, and how we focus that sense and exploit its elements is [an] aspect of perseverance."[87] In some instances, perseverance will take the form of "attending to the long-term *significance*" of the required acts of willpower.[88] In others, attending to the short-term will be perseverance's way. Consider a case of each kind.

Upon arriving in the conference room, that special colleague immediately begins pouring on the charm. The scenario calls for self-control, for our less-than-temperate subject—let's call her Denise—is more than a little tempted to flirt back. And, because she is on the watch for such temptation, Denise recognizes this temptation *as* temptation. But the scenario also calls for perseverance, for she also feels the urge *not to resist this time*. This desire is not explicitly sexual, even if it is occasioned by a sexual desire; rather, it is the impulse to give up (at least temporarily) on her long-term commitment to marital fidelity. Denise is, of course, aware (in some sense) that her resistance is not a standalone event; rather, this act gets its significance, in part, from its place in her long-term project of fidelity. But it can be very natural, in the moment, not to *attend* to the larger context, so that the act doesn't *seem* (in her moral perception) to have the significance that she *knows* (coolly) that it has. One application of Denise's perseverance, then, will be the skillful

---

[84] The phrase is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Dover Thrift Editions, trans. Helen Zimmern, ed. William Kaufman (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), section 188, page 57.

[85] Thus, my take on perseverance differs from Nate King's (see his "Erratum to: Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue," *Synthese* 191, no. 15 (2014): 3779–3801, DOI: 10.1007/s11229-014-0511-5). I agree with King that a disposition to put forth "serious effort" in the interest of overcoming obstacles is an aspect of the virtue of perseverance (3789–92). But he makes perseverance's domain too broad when he claims that it "just is the virtue needed to overcome … obstacles" (3799), for diverse virtues overcome special obstacles (e.g., courage deals with fear; self-control, deals with anger, or sexual or gustatory temptations; etc.).

[86] Robert C. Roberts, *The Strengths of a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 104–9. For empirical evidence concerning the importance of skilled attention shifting for self-control, see Mischel and Ayduk, "Willpower in a Cognitive Affective Processing System;" Mischel and Ebbesen, "Attention in Delay of Gratification;" Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss, "Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification;" and Mischel and Moore, "Effects of Attention to Symbolically-Presented Rewards on Self-control."

[87] Roberts, *Strengths of a Christian*, 105.

[88] Ibid., 106; italics original.

turning of her attention to the big-picture importance of resisting. At first, this will involve the effortful turning of his heart's gaze; eventually and ideally, attending to the "big picture" will be second nature.

Sometimes, though, the temptation to throw in the towel comes precisely from attending to the long term. What if, as Denise endeavors to keep things professional, it begins to bear in on her that she is going to have to fight her attraction not just to this special colleague, but to every person who is not her spouse, until death do them part. It occurs to her that the odds of withstanding for *that* long seem rather low at the moment. She begins to reason (if we can stretch that word to include the unconscious mental rehearsal of moral non sequiturs), "If I'm going to fail eventually, why not fail today?" (A thought which, if followed, will likely engender subsequent thoughts like, "I've already failed today; why not fail *big*?")[89] Here, like a "one day at a time" alcoholic, persevering Denise shifts her focus away from the long-term and onto the next hour: "All I have to do is get through this meeting." (Recall David Blaine's time-shift technique inside the block of ice.) It isn't as though Denise stops believing that marital fidelity is a long-term project; she just decides not to focus on the length of the term, for now. In doing so, she exercises self-control-bolstering perseverance.

Perseverance, as I've described it, is closely related to the virtue that Angela Duckworth and associates call "grit."[90] They write:

> We define grit as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course.[91]

This formulation of grit—as "perseverance *and* passion for long-term goals"—tacitly recognizes that passion is not itself a proper part of perseverance, while also affirming that perseverance will not "stay the course" without passion. This is in keeping with Roberts's insight that virtues of willpower are, in a sense, motive-borrowing virtues. Although those who research grit empirically do not specify which aspects of the trait relate to perseverance and which to passion, the analysis developed in this essay suggests a way to do so. Grit is a combination of perseverance (i.e., excellent muscular, spirit, and skill willpower in the service of long-term commitments) and passion (i.e., motivational interest intrinsic to the long-term commitments themselves). Thus, if Denise is "gritty" in her commitment to her spouse, the "perseverance" element in her grit will take something like the shape outlined above, while the "passion" element will be (ideally) her love for her beloved, her desire to love and respect all persons (including the sometime objects of her inappropriate sexual desires), and so on.[92]

I have not yet mentioned the role of patience in all of this. The patient person is able to "dwell gladly in the present moment when [she has] some desire, or what would normally be a reason to

---

[89] See Baumeister and Tierney, 220–22. They call the tendency to binge after mentally classifying a day as a "failure" the "What-the-hell effect," as in, "what the hell, I might as well enjoy myself today" (221).

[90] See, e.g., Angela Lee Duckworth, et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101; and Angela Lee Duckworth and Patrick D. Quinn, "Development and Validation of the Short Grit Scale (Grit–S)," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 91, no. 2 (2009): 166–174.

[91] Duckworth et al., "Grit," 1087–88.

[92] Of course, other motives might enter in as well: her fear of losing her job and her reputation if she were to have an affair that became public, etc.

desire, to depart from it."[93] In its most developed form, patience equips an agent to remain unruffled by the delays and setbacks that tend to disturb the rest of us. Since the deeply patient often seem not to have to "will themselves" to "dwell gladly in the present moment," it might seem that patience does not qualify as a virtue of willpower. But "deep patience" depends, developmentally, upon the regular application of "willpower patience." And even the deeply patient will need to utilize their willpower at times, for they are not immune to frustration, any more than the deeply courageous are immune to fear. Thus, we shouldn't expect to be able to "wait, and wait, and wait with a smile"[94] if we lack the particularization of willpower that is patience.

Patience could enter in at many points in one's struggle with temptation. I'll briefly mention just two. First, one's practice of spiritual exercises will require patience. Anyone who has spent much time seriously attempting to meditate or pray knows that there is often an urge to stop what you're doing and move on to some other task. Thus, the moral trainee will need patience's variety of muscular, spirit, and skill willpower to stay on task. Second, the tempted person will need patience with herself. Coming to terms with one's flaws is difficult; figuring out how to fight against them takes time; and successfully retraining one's habits of construal and desire requires more time still. The chronically tempted should not be surprised when they fail; no one is going to turn into a paragon of temperance (or any of the other virtues) overnight. Thus, the tempted need to learn to practice patience with regard to their own progress in moral development. Toward this end, they might imaginatively consider the attitude that a perfectly patient parent would have when teaching her child to walk—gratified by each stumbling attempt, but not content with her toddler's present gait—and then strive to emulate that parent's attitude in their assessments of themselves. Internalizing and drawing on such considerations in the moment of failure is one application of the virtue of patience.

Conclusion

Let me summarize. The virtues of willpower are each specifications of muscular, spirit, and skill willpower to particular domains. The various versions of self-control allow one to manage untoward impulses to anger, sex, and eating and drinking (respectively); courage enables one to manage fearsome threats; perseverance keeps one going over the long haul; and patience fits one to "dwell gladly in the present moment." I've illustrated the functions of each of these virtues with reference to a narrow range of cases. No doubt, the precise functions of these virtues would look different in other scenarios, and would take distinctive shapes within particular moral outlooks. But the illustrations are adequate to suggest at least two ways in which the virtues of willpower can give solidity or strength to one's character. First, they serve as a bulwark for one's considered values, loves, passions, desires, and so forth, allowing one to act in accordance with them, even when one's inherent motivation to do so is insufficient on its own (perhaps thanks to conflicting desires). And second, they enable the difficult moral work needed to cultivate one's passions, so that what one "is for" (or *wants* to "be for," but currently isn't) becomes a more thoroughgoing part of one's motivational structure and perceptual dispositions. I have not argued that the virtues of willpower are sufficient to achieve these goals; nor have I argued that they are the most important factor in character formation. But I have argued that they can make a significant contribution to growth in the moral life.

---

[93] Robert C. Roberts, *Strengths of a Christian*, 53.
[94] See <http://wechoosevirtues.com>.