Brandt on Self-Control

Philip Pettit and Michael Smith

There are three questions about self-control that we discuss in this paper. The first is, what occasions self-control: what circumstances call for the exercise of the virtue? The second is, what constitutes self-control: what sort of psychological traits can realize it? And the third is, what recommends self-control: what is there to be said in favor of the virtue?

Richard Brandt has put forward views, explicitly and implicitly, on all of these questions and the aim of the paper is to examine his views critically. We are in sympathy with many aspects of his approach but, as will appear, we defend a picture that differs significantly from that which we find in his works.

The paper is in five sections. In the first section we present Brandt’s views, as we understand them. And then in the three following sections we examine and criticize the answers that he suggests to each of our three questions. In the course of doing this we will have the opportunity to present, and to develop further, a picture we have already outlined elsewhere (Pettit and Smith 1993). The fifth section offers a brief resume of the argument.

I. Brandt’s Account

In giving an account of self-control we must do three things. First, we must say what the circumstances are that call for self-control. Second, we must say what self-control is in itself: what the difference is between two agents when one, in circumstances that call for self-control, exercises self-control, and the other, in those same circumstances, does not. And third, we must say why self-control is an attractive trait: why it is assumed, as people generally assume, that self-control is a virtue. In the terms introduced earlier, we must say what occasions, what constitutes and what recommends self-control.
What Quantum Self-Control?  

Brenda is a self-control expert. When an agent is in relatively more urgent need of self-control, this is due to an internal or external pressure. In order to make a decision, she needs to consider the consequences of her actions. If she does not self-control, she will experience negative consequences. If she does self-control, she will experience positive consequences. Therefore, Brenda needs to balance the negative consequences of self-control with the positive consequences of non-self-control. This is a complex process that involves her internal and external factors. 

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We have explained Brandt’s account of the circumstances that call for self-control. We must now see what Brandt tells us about self-control itself. Suppose two agents find themselves in the same situation. Brandt tells us that the agent who possesses self-control possesses certain intrinsic desires, motivations, and inclinations in the agent who does not. Since we may suppose that what makes an agent self-controlled is that the agent is intrinsically motivated to do the right thing (or is intrinsically disposed to do the right thing) and intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing (or is intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing), we may suppose that what makes an agent self-controlled is that the agent is intrinsically motivated to do the right thing and intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing. Brandt tells us that the agent who possesses self-control must be intrinsically motivated. Self-control is therefore, according to Brandt, simply an extrinsic motivation adequate to do the right thing. The agent who possesses self-control is thus intrinsically motivated to do the right thing and extrinsically motivated to do the right thing. Brandt tells us that the agent who possesses self-control possesses certain intrinsic desires, motivations, and inclinations in the agent who does not. Since we may suppose that what makes an agent self-controlled is that the agent is intrinsically motivated to do the right thing (or is intrinsically disposed to do the right thing) and intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing (or is intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing), we may suppose that what makes an agent self-controlled is that the agent is intrinsically motivated to do the right thing and intrinsically disposed to avoid the right thing. Brandt tells us that the agent who possesses self-control must be intrinsically motivated. Self-control is therefore, according to Brandt, simply an extrinsic motivation adequate to do the right thing. The agent who possesses self-control is thus intrinsically motivated to do the right thing and extrinsically motivated to do the right thing.
virtues are motivational; they consist in dispositions to desire certain things intrinsically. "A virtue is a (certain kind of) relatively unchanging disposition to desire an action of a certain kind (e.g. helping one in distress, not stealing) for its own sake" (Brandt 1988b: 64). This motivational view of virtue contradicts the view that at least some virtues are managerial rather than motivational in character; they involve cognitive skills rather than dispositional dispositions (Robertson 1984). We return to this point later.

What Recommends Self-Control?

Finally, to the question of why self-control is supposed to be a good thing. There are two salient answers that might be offered. The first is that it is a good thing because the consequences of possessing it are better than the consequences of not possessing it. The second is that, though that may indeed be true, there is a deeper reason for thinking well of self-control viz., that it is rationally desirable.

Brandt does not explicitly address the question of what recommends self-control and it is difficult to be sure about what he would want to say. On the one hand, his conception of what it means for something to be rational to do or rational to desire suggests that he would take the exercise of self-control to be something rationally required or supported. No matter what it is rational for an agent to do or desire—no matter what the content of his judgments as to what is best—it would seem to be rational for him to exercise self-control, in the circumstances where self-control is called for: in these circumstances, as Brandt presents them, spontaneous motivations fail and self-control is the only way of doing what is judged rational.

On the other hand, however, Brandt defends a general position on what recommends virtue which would not seem to square well with the view that self-control is rationally required or supported. This is the view that what makes certain motivational dispositions into virtues is the fact that they have good consequences. The characteristic mark of the virtue is "roughly that the trait must be one normally and importantly favorable either for the well-being of society (or some group thereof) or for the flourishing of the agent (or those dear to him, e.g., his family)" (Brandt 1988b: 76). This view would naturally call for qualification or amendment, if it is held that some of the motivational dispositions in question—self-control and perhaps some others—are not only beneficial but also rationally required or supported.

We will not say anything more at this stage on Brandt's views about what recommends self-control. We return to the issue later, when we try to give a critical assessment of his views.
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is vivid awareness. It signals the presence of an issue which is not relevant to our purposes here and which we do not wish to get in the way of our present debate with Brandt.¹

Our analysis is this:

(4) It is rational for us to do, in circumstances C, whatever we, if we were fully rational and fully informed, would want ourselves to do in circumstances C;

and

(5) It is rational for us to desire, in circumstances C, whatever we, if we were fully rational and fully informed, would want ourselves to desire in circumstances C.

The idea behind (4) and (5) should be plain enough. In order to find out what it is rational for us to do or want in certain circumstances C, we must imagine ourselves in two quite different possible worlds. First, we must imagine ourselves in the evaluated world. This is the world in which circumstances C obtain. Perhaps these are circumstances in which we face certain options: to act this way or that. But perhaps also they are circumstances in which we have all sorts of false beliefs, like the belief that we are Jesus Christ, or circumstances in which, perhaps as a result of these beliefs, we have irrational intrinsic desires. And, second, we must imagine ourselves in the evaluating world. This is the world in which we are fully rational and fully informed: and informed, inter alia, about who we really are in the actual world where circumstances C obtain. The idea then is this. What it is rational for us to do or want in the evaluated world is whatever we, in the evaluating world, would want ourselves to do or want in the evaluated world. (4) and (5) direct us to imagine our fully rational and informed selves, in the evaluating world, forming a preference concerning what our less than fully rational selves should do or want in the circumstances of the evaluated world. The content of this preference then in turn tells us what it is rational for us to do or want in the evaluated world.

Our analysis of rational action and desire makes explicit room for the possibility that what it is rational to do or desire is sensitive to the circumstances in which an agent’s less than rational self finds herself. Characterize the circumstances as those in which an agent’s less than rational self has to choose between various options—to act in this way or that—but abstract away from the fact that her less than rational self has all sorts of psychological flaws, and her fully ra-

¹The issue is whether the account to be given of rationality can be fully reductive. This relates to general questions as to whether partly circular, non-reductive biconditional can be philosophically useful in the evaluation of the concepts they involve. See McCinn 1986b: 6–8; Pears 1985a: ch. 2; Smith 1986; Pears 1986; Wright 1986; Johnston 1986; Pettit 1990; Smith 1992; Meiners and Pettit 1995; Pettit 1995: ch. 1.
tional self may want her less than rational self to do and desire very, very different things from anything she can in fact do or desire. Perhaps she will want her to be doing and desiring exactly what her fully rational self would do and desire in her circumstances. (This is like Brandt’s account of fully rational action.) However, characterize the circumstances as those in which, additionally, the agent’s less than rational self has all sorts of irrational beliefs and desires, beliefs and desires which place severe limits on what she can in fact do, and her fully rational self will then plausibly have very different desires about what her less than rational self is to do or desire. For she will frame those desires with an eye to the limits provided by her less than rational self’s defective psychology, and so she will take on board the fact that being fully rational is not a real option for her.

In order to see this, consider the example that proved so difficult for Brandt. An agent falsely believes that he is Jesus Christ and has all sorts of irrational desires as a result. Is it seeing a psychiatrist a rational thing for him to do and desire? Our own analysis suggests that this all depends on what the agent’s fully rational self would want his less than rational self to do and desire in the circumstances of the evaluated world.

If we abstract away from the false beliefs and irrational desires of the agent’s less than rational self in characterizing his circumstances, then the agent’s fully rational self will want his less than rational self to be doing and desiring very different things from anything he is at all likely to do or desire. He would want his less than rational self’s actions and desires to reflect his belief that he is he himself and not Jesus Christ. He therefore would want him to have desires that are just like his own fully rational desires. And he would want him to do just what he would do on the basis of those desires. Let’s say that these are the things that it is rational for the agent’s less than rational self to do and desire, abstracting away from less-than-ideal-aspects of his psychology. (Again, this is like Brandt’s account of fully rational action.)

Importantly, however, given his less than rational self’s predicament, and especially given that being fully rational is not a real option for his irrational self right at the moment, the agent’s fully rational self will also presumably have some far more realistic desires about what his less than rational self is to do and desire. He will want his less than rational self to do and desire whatever is required in order to retain his grip on reality. Since that seems to require a visit to a psychiatrist, so, it seems, his fully rational self will desire his less than rational self to do and desire just that.

Our own analysis allows such circumstance-specific desires of a fully rational and informed agent to fix what it is rational for an agent’s less than rational self to do and desire in those circumstances. Alongside what it is rational for an agent to do and desire abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects of her psychology, then, we might say that our own account suggests that there will be the things that it is rational for the agent’s less than rational self to do and desire.

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taking-on-board-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology. This is what is fixed by the circumstance-specific desires of an agent’s fully rational self: by the desires her fully rational self has for what her less than rational self does when she takes into account the irrationality of that self in characterizing the relevant circumstances of action. Thus, our own analysis of rational action and desire tells us that desiring to go and see a psychiatrist and acting upon that desire are indeed rational: taking-on-board-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-the-agent’s-psychology.

And this is the right result. On our account, then, what it is rational for an agent to do, in any circumstances, is a matter of what, if she were fully rational and informed, she would want herself to do in those circumstances. But in characterizing an agent’s circumstances we may pay more or less regard to the agent’s own rational failings, and so, on our account, we can distinguish what it is rational for her to do abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology from what it is rational for her to do taking-on-board-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology. This amendment of Brandt’s analysis of rational action and desire means that we have an amended answer to the question of what occasions self-control. The difference from Brandt’s own answer is by no means trivial.

We say that the need for self-control comes from the fact that what an agent judges it rational to do, abstracting-away-from-the-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology, is not always the action which she is most strongly motivated to perform. But, unlike Brandt, we do not think that this is sufficient to require the exercise of self-control. We think that it is only necessary. For self-control is called for only if, in addition, the agent judges the exercise of self-control itself rational, taking-on-board-the-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology: only if, having learned about those aspects, she continues to judge it rational for her to act in the manner prescribed. This is an important extra condition because, in many situations, it may not be met.

Consider an example. Suppose an agent’s fully rational self desires excitement more than anything else, and so judges it rational for her less than rational self to go parachute-jumping, abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology. This is marginally more exciting than rock-climbing, and that is enough to recommend it as the thing to do. However, her less than rational self balks at the thought of parachute-jumping: perhaps in the airbase, perhaps on board the aircraft. She wants to sit tight and avoid the jump. Is this a situation that calls for self-control?

Suppose the agent could get herself to jump by getting her teeth. Should she just grit her teeth and get on with it? Not necessarily. It all depends on what her fully rational self desires her less than rational self to do, given that she is not motivated to go parachute-jumping. Perhaps her fully rational self will desire her less than rational self to grit her teeth and get on with it. But perhaps she won’t. If the cost of getting her teeth is too great—if it will cause all sorts of pain and
suggesting something she actually feels is rational, self-control. Perhaps she will prefer the idea of her self-control being exercised through more indirect means, such as through escape fantasies or through the pursuit of social approval. In this case, she may feel less need to self-control in the present, as she can rely on the indirect means to satisfy her desires and maintain her identity.

In the end, it is clear that self-control is a complex and multifaceted construct that is influenced by a variety of factors. It is not simply a matter of resisting temptation, but rather a dynamic process that involves the interplay of cognitive, affective, and motivational factors. By understanding the complexity of self-control, we can better appreciate the challenges that individuals face in striving to control their impulses and desires.
second sandwich will give them pleasure. Because of instrumental irrationality of this kind, we will suppose that they are both disposed to eat a second sandwich rather than refrain. But now suppose further that one of these agents has certain other vivid thoughts that the other doesn’t have. She thinks about an alternative way in which she can become more healthy. She thinks about the fact that, if she goes to see a therapist, the therapist will help her to eat less, and this, in turn, will cause her to become more healthy. And, let’s suppose, these thoughts happen to be thoughts which remain vividly in her awareness, and so give rise to an even stronger motivation in her to refrain from eating the second sandwich and head off to the therapist instead. Does this person exercise self-control?

Again it seems to us that she does. But, again, it seems that we need credit her with no special intrinsic desires, over and above her desire for health, in order to explain her exercise of self-control. Her desire for health, together with the fact that she thinks vividly about certain indirect ways in which she can achieve health, is enough to explain why she heads off to see the therapist. And, correlatively, the fact that the other agent fails to think vividly about these indirect ways of achieving health may be enough to explain why she doesn’t. In this case, then, the agent’s possession of self-control seems to be constituted by her knowledge of the indirect ways in which she can achieve her goals, together with the fact the content of this knowledge can be represented vividly in her awareness, not by any additional intrinsic motivation.

It is clear from these considerations that we should be more permissive in our account of self-control. “Self-control” directs us to that class of psychological mechanisms by which we can get ourselves to act in (roughly) the way we think it is rational to act, abstracting away from less-than-ideal-aspects-of-our-psychologies, when we have a relatively stronger motivation to act otherwise. Brandt may be right that one such mechanism is the possession of certain intrinsic motivations of the kind he describes. But there are plainly other such mechanisms as well: for example, the possession of a disposition to have certain vivid thoughts under certain conditions and the disposition to think vividly about indirect ways of achieving our goals. And there may be yet further mechanisms too. Brandt is much too narrowly focused in his account of what constitutes self-control.

We mentioned in our presentation of Brandt’s view on the question before us that it connects with a general thesis that he defends about virtues: that all virtues are motivational dispositions and that it is a mistake, as a long tradition of thought holds, to think that some virtues are managerial in character. The considerations rehearsed in this section are sufficient to give the lie to Brandt’s general view. They show that some of the traits whereby we exercise self-control, some of the traits that count as virtues, are cognitive or related skills, not dispositions of a desiderative kind.

IV. What Recommends Self-Control?

Now to our third question and, as we shall see, a third area of contrast between Brandt’s view and our own. We saw earlier that Brandt believes that certain traits are virtues—self-control, presumably, included—just so far as their possession is associated with good consequences. We agree that self-control generally has good consequences. But we believe that self-control is also attractive on other, arguably deeper, grounds: on the grounds that it is rationally desirable. In this section we ask whether Brandt is disposed to agree: whether he is of a mind, and whether he is in a position, to defend the same view.

It appears that Brandt must be of a mind to think that self-control is rationally desirable. Suppose you take Brandt’s view that to exercise self-control is to succeed, in spite of a strong opposing motivation, in doing what it is rational to desire and do. And suppose you believe, as he does, that this is the only route, in the circumstances, to such success. In that case you can hardly avoid holding that self-control is rationally desirable.

But should Brandt be of a mind to regard self-control as rationally desirable, is he is in a position to take this view? It turns out that he is not.

Consider an example discussed earlier. An agent is deciding whether to have a chocolate bar or a piece of fruit. She has only one intrinsic desire, a desire for pleasure, and this desire gives rise to a motivation to eat a chocolate bar. However, the reason she only has an intrinsic desire for pleasure is that she finds it hard to think vividly about what health is and involves. Her fully rational self, who does think about such things, has desires for health as well as pleasure, and, indeed, her desire for health is stronger. Let’s suppose that the agent knows all this to be true. She therefore believes that it is rational for her to eat a piece of fruit, but she unfortunately finds herself relatively more strongly motivated to eat the chocolate bar. On Brandt’s account, this agent is in a situation that calls for the exercise of self-control.

Let’s suppose, for simplicity, that there is only one way in which this agent could exercise self-control: by visiting a nearby therapist who will teach her how to think vividly about what health is and involves. The agent knows this too, and so begins to wonder whether she should exercise self-control. Would it be rational for her to have an intrinsic desire—or any trait—of the kind that Brandt thinks constitutes her self-control? In this case, would it be rational for her to desist from going and see the therapist? Would it be rational for her to act on that desire? Surprisingly, Brandt’s own analysis of rational action and desire tells us that it would not be rational. Brandt cannot say that it is rational to a first approximation for the agent to visit the therapist. For that is so just in case, if the agent were to think vividly
about all of the options available to her, her actual intrinsic desires taken as given, she would visit the therapist. But of course, ex hypothesi, this condition is not met. The agent’s actual intrinsic desires taken as given—her desire for pleasure—it is rational to a first approximation for her to eat the chocolate bar, the therapist. For that is just in case, if she had the intrinsic desires she would have after thinking vividly about the facts, and if she were then to think vividly about all of her available options, she would visit the therapist. But again, ex hypothesi, this condition is not met. The desire that it is rational for her to have, the desire for health, supports eating a piece of fruit, not visiting a therapist. Why would someone with that desire go and see a therapist? That desire would give her no instrumental reason to do so and neither would she form an intrinsic desire for such a visit: there is nothing intrinsically attractive, at least for the fully rational agent we are imagining, about visiting a therapist.

The problem that blocks Brando from saying that it is rational for an agent to desire and exercise a necessary measure of self-control, like visiting the therapist, is essentially the same problem that we raised in § II. That problem led us to present a revised analysis of rational desire and action, according to which it is rational for an agent in certain circumstances to desire or do whatever she, were she fully rational and informed, would want herself to desire or do in those circumstances. It turns out that this revised analysis, unlike Brandt’s, does make it possible to say that self-control is rationally desirable.

According to the analysis, an agent is in a situation that calls for self-control only if she is in certain circumstances in which the judges it rational to act in one way, abstracting away from less-than-ideal aspects of her psychology, and yet she finds herself relatively more strongly motivated to act in another. For example, Brandt’s judgment is that the agent’s options are to eat a piece of fruit or a bar of chocolate and that she has only a single desire, a desire for pleasure, which gives rise to a motivation to eat the bar of chocolate. The agent believes that her fully rational self would have an additional and stronger desire for health. And this leads her to believe that her fully rational self would want her less than rational self to eat the fruit instead. The agent therefore finds herself more strongly motivated to eat the bar of chocolate despite the fact that she believes it rational to eat the fruit instead, at least abstracting away from less-than-ideal aspects of her psychology.

Suppose the only way in which the agent can exercise self-control, in the circumstances, is by visiting a therapist who will help her think vividly about what health is and involves. Suppose, as Brandt generally supposes, that the only way in which the agent will go to the therapist is if she has an intrinsic desire to do so. And suppose further that the costs of visiting a therapist—in pain and suffering, say—are not so great as to mandate a change of mind. Of the acts and desires that are real options for her, then, it is plausible on our account to suppose that the agent’s fully rational self would form a circumstance-specific desire that she less than rational self forms an intrinsic desire to visit the therapist and then acts upon her desire. For only so will she overcome her irrationality. Only so will her less than rational self do the things that are required to get herself back on the rational track. On our account, then, it is rational, taking on board less-than-ideal aspects of her psychology, for the agent to desire to visit a therapist and to act upon that desire. It is rational for such an agent to possess and exercise self-control.

A variant on this argument will go through, no matter what it is that she judges it rational to do, abstracting away from less-than-ideal aspects of her psychology; no matter what sort of motivation outweighs her desire to do that; and no matter what measure offers itself as the means of self-control provided, of course, that those means do not themselves mandate a change of mind instead. We can see therefore that on our approach, self-control presents itself as a trait that is rationally attractive, even rationally compelling, in a distinctive fashion. To fail to be self-controlled, when self-control is called for, is to fail in an important way to be rational.

IV. Conclusion

The foregoing discussions should serve to outline the contrasts between the view of self-control that Brandt defends and the picture to which we are drawn. Take the question as to what occasions self-control. For him and for us, self-control is occasioned only when an agent who judges it best to act in one way is more strongly motivated to act in another. For him and for us what an agent judges best is what she judges that it is rational for her to do. But there the approaches come apart. For we offer a different and, we think, more satisfactory account of what it is rational for an agent to do, and this account leads us to distinguish, in a way Brandt doesn’t, between two sorts of situations in which an agent is more strongly motivated to act other than as she judges best. Only some such situations present occasions where the exercise of self-control is appropriate.

On the question of what constitutes self-control, the contrast has a similar partial character. For Brandt and for us, self-control may sometimes be realized by the possession of an intrinsic desire for a measure—say, a therapeutic measure—whereby an agent is led, contrary to an otherwise compelling motivation, to do what she judges best. But we hold, on the basis of more or less common-sense examples, that that is not the only way in which self-control may be constituted. In some cases it may involve the presence of a suitable desire, but in others it can be realized by the presence of any range of cognitive habits. Self-control may be a managerial or a motivational matter.
Finally, to the question of what recommends self-control in those circumstances where self-control is really called for. Anyone who adopts Brandt’s line on what occasions self-control must want to think that self-control is rationally desirable. But here, again, Brandt’s analysis of rational desire and action lets him down. It turns out, on that analysis, that it is not going to be rational for an agent to desire and pursue measures necessary for self-control. The problem is remedied, however, under our account, and so we can happily say that self-control is a rationally desirable trait.  

3. We are grateful to Jeanette Kennett for many helpful conversations.

4

Brandt on Autonomy

Michael Davis

My thesis is that Brandt’s A Theory of the Good and the Right offers a conception of autonomy different from, and at least as plausible as, any other now available. Many of Brandt’s readers may find this surprising. Indeed, perhaps even Brandt would. What Brandt claims to offer is a conception of practical rationality, not autonomy. Yet if, as I shall argue, Brandt’s conception of rationality can absorb the sort of case that makes autonomy seem a concept worth the attention it has recently received, autonomy theorists face a dilemma. On the one hand, they can deny that Brandt’s practical rationality offers a conception of autonomy. That denial would leave utilitarians free to claim that they do not need one. Brandt’s practical rationality will do. On the other hand, autonomy theorists can admit that Brandt’s conception of practical rationality is also a conception of autonomy. But that admission would invite hard questions about why autonomy has been so important to moral discussions over the last decade or so. Why talk about “autonomy” if the concept conveys nothing not conveyed less problematically by the more traditional concept of practical rationality? I shall conclude with a suggestion for answering that question.

1. Conceptions of Autonomy

Autonomy is literally self-rule. The term may be applied to political entities (“an autonomous region of the Russian Republic”) or to individual persons, their acts, choices, or desires. My concern here is the latter, what is commonly called “personal autonomy”. “Personal autonomy” has a wide range of applications, from the global (“Professionals need autonomy”) to the local (“The patient’s decision was not autonomous”). Whether applied globally or not, “personal

3. Consider, for example, the effect on the argument in Havworth 1984.