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# Brandt on Self-Control

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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 Occasions Self-Control?

Brandt tells us that self-control is required when an agent is relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise than as she judges best. He notes that, on certain interpretations of what it means to judge a course of action best, this may seem to be impossible. For example, if such a judgment were the expression of an overall preference for acting in the way in question, then it would be impossible, by definition, for an agent to be relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise. However, Brandt makes it clear that he rejects such an interpretation of best judgment. For, as he points out in an important article on "The Structure of Virtue", "the fact of experience, that we sometimes fail to do something at the very moment we are judging that it would be 'best' is some evidence that 'is best' at most expresses a strong motivation but not an overall preference" (Brandt 1988: 70).

This is all Brandt has to say about best judgment in "The Structure of Virtue". However, as is well known, he has more to say about the content of the judgment that an act is best in *A Theory of the Good and the Right.* In order to give Brandt's account of the circumstances that call for self-control determinate content, then, we must interpret it in light of his analysis of best judgment.

In *A Theory of the Good and the Right* Brandt tells us that, though the expression "the best thing to do" "has no definite meaning at all, in ordinary use", we can say everything that it is useful to say using that expression by substituting the expression "the rational thing to do". The latter expression, he tells us "captures all that is clear in the former" (Brandt 1979: 15). Brandt would therefore presumably be happier himself with the following reformulation of his account of the circumstances that call for self-control. An agent is in a situation that calls for self-control when she judges something to be the rational thing to do, but finds herself relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise. In order to flesh this out, we need to remind ourselves what Brandt means by the expression "the rational thing to do".

Brandt holds that to say that something is the rational thing for us to do is in fact ambiguous (Brandt 1979: 11). On the one hand, it might mean simply that it is the thing we would do, if we had vivid awareness of all of the facts, but *where our actual intrinsic desires are taken as given.* Following Brandt, let's say that this is rational action "to a first approximation". On the other, it might mean that it is the thing we would do if we had vivid awareness of all of the facts, and *if our intrinsic desires were themselves rational.* Our intrinsic desires are themselves rational, according to Brandt, if they are the intrinsic desires we would have if we had vivid awareness of all of the facts. Following Brandt, let's speak here of "fully" rational action, as distinct from action that is rational to a first approximation.



In order to see what this distinction amounts to, consider an example. Suppose an agent has just one actual intrinsic desire: a desire for pleasure. What is it rational for her to do? Brandt tells us this question is ambiguous.

To a first approximation, it is rational for her to do what she would do if she were vividly aware of all of the facts, her desire for pleasure taken as given. Let's suppose that her options are just two. She can either eat a chocolate bar or eat a piece of fruit. Vivid awareness of all of the facts therefore means, in this case, awareness of how eating a chocolate bar and eating a piece of fruit each contribute to pleasure. We will therefore suppose that the rational thing for her to do to a first approximation, in this case, is to eat a chocolate bar. For, we will suppose, eating a chocolate bar will give her more in the way of pleasure.

A fully rational action is, however, different. For now we must begin by asking whether her actual intrinsic desires are themselves rational: that is, whether they are the intrinsic desires she would have if she were vividly aware of all of the facts. And let's suppose that they are not. For though she does not in fact desire health, she would desire it, and indeed desire it even more strongly than she desires pleasure, if she were to think vividly about what health is and involves. It then follows that the fully rational thing for her to do is to eat a piece of fruit. For that is what she would do if her intrinsic desires were themselves rational, and if she were then to think vividly about her options: that is, about how eating a chocolate bar and a piece of fruit each fare with regard to the production of both pleasure and health.

Let's return to Brandt's account of the circumstances that call for self-control. An agent is apt to lose self-control, he tells us, when she believes that it would be best for her to act in a certain way, but she is relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise. We noted that, by Brandt's own lights, this is better stated in the following terms: an agent is apt to lose self-control when she believes that it would be rational for her to act in a certain way, but she is relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise. And we noted that, according to Brandt, the claim that it is rational to do something is ambiguous, and that it therefore follows that his account of the circumstances that call for self-control is itself ambiguous. There are, as we might now say, the circumstances that call for self-control "to a first approximation" on the one hand, and there are the circumstances that call for "full" self-control on the other.

In order to see what these amount to, consider one of Brandt's own examples, a variation on the example we have been discussing thus far: exercising self-control in order to restrain indulgence in eating food. Let's suppose an agent is deciding whether to have one sandwich or two at lunch time. Among her various actual intrinsic desires we will suppose that she has desires for pleasure and health, and that these give rise to motivations to eat a second sandwich and to

refrain respectively. She contemplates her various options and comes to believe that, taking her actual intrinsic desires as given, if she thought vividly about all of the options available to her and their various consequences, she would overall prefer to eat one sandwich rather than two. Unfortunately, however, she finds herself relatively more strongly motivated to eat a second sandwich none the less.

Here we have a situation that calls for self-control to a first approximation. For the agent suffers from a form of instrumental irrationality. With her actual intrinsic desires taken as given she knows that, if she thought vividly about all of the options available to her, she would overall prefer to eat only one sandwich. But, compared with the alternative, thoughts about how refraining from eating a second sandwich will contribute to health are "too abstract", or are thoughts about something that is too "remote in time", to remain vividly in her awareness (Brandt 1988: 70). Instead, less abstract thoughts about an immediate good, thoughts about how eating a second sandwich will lead to pleasure, occupy all of her attention, and so she ends up preferring overall to do that instead.

So much for the circumstances that call for self-control to a first approximation. What about the circumstances that call for full self-control? Let's suppose again that an agent is deciding whether to have one sandwich or two at lunch time. But this time let's suppose that she only has an intrinsic desire for pleasure. She contemplates her various options and comes to believe that, if she thought vividly about all of the options available to her and their various consequences, she would overall prefer to eat two sandwiches rather than one. She therefore concludes that it is rational to a first approximation to eat a second sandwich. However, she then wonders whether her actual intrinsic desires are themselves rational, and comes to believe that, if she were to think vividly about health, she would have an intrinsic desire for health, and that her desire for health would in fact be stronger than her desire for pleasure. She once again contemplates her various options and comes to believe that, if she had rational intrinsic desires, and if she then thought vividly about all of the options available to her and their various consequences, she would overall prefer to eat one sandwich rather than two. This is then the fully rational thing for her to do. However, since she is not thinking vividly about what health is and involves, she does not in fact have a desire for health. The property of being healthy is, we might suppose, itself "too abstract" or its realization too "remote in time", to remain vividly in her awareness. Unfortunately she therefore finds herself relatively more strongly motivated to eat a second sandwich none the less. This is a situation that calls for full self-control, as distinct from self-control to a first approximation.

In Brandt's view, then, when an agent is relatively more strongly motivated to act otherwise than as she judges it would be rational for her to act, she is in a situation that calls for self-control. The problem in such cases is *either* that, given her beliefs, her overall preferences do not reflect the relative strengths of her actual intrinsic desires (a situation that calls for self-control to a first approximation) *or* that her actual intrinsic desires are themselves irrational (a situation that calls for full self-control).



Brandt's account of the circumstances that call for self-control is rather cumbersome, because of all of the distinctions we have had to make. Therefore, from here on, when we say that a situation calls for self-control we will mean that it calls for full self-control. When we want to say something about situations that call for self-control to a first approximation, we will make this explicit in the text. This will allow us to simplify the discussion that follows. No points of any significance will be lost.

### *What Constitutes Self-Control?*

We have explained Brandt's account of the circumstances that call for self-control. We must now say what Brandt tells us about self-control itself. Suppose two agents find themselves in circumstances that call for self-control. One exercises self-control and the other doesn't. What does the difference between the two agents consist in?

Brandt tells us that the agent who possesses self-control possesses certain intrinsic motivations, motivations lacking in the agent who does not. Since we may suppose that both are alike with regard to the intrinsic desires that support their judgments about what it is rational to do, the intrinsic motivations that constitute the one agent's self-control must be *extra* intrinsic motivations. Self-control is therefore, according to Brandt, simply an extra intrinsic motivation adequate for acting in accordance with an agent's judgment concerning what it is rational to do in the circumstances that call for self-control.

Brandt emphasizes the fact that the agent who possesses self-control need not possess a *quite general* intrinsic desire to act in the way that she believes rational when she has relatively stronger inclinations to act otherwise. For, as he reminds us, an agent may possess self-control in one area (say, in the consumption of food) but not in another (say, in the consumption of liquor). Self-control is rather, as he puts it, "a *plural* motivation" (Brandt 1988: 71). The agent who exercises self-control has certain intrinsic motivations adequate enough to adopt "a plan for specific situations, with rewards". For example, in the case of exercising self-control to stop overeating, she may have intrinsic motivations for going to see a therapist; for joining a group who congratulate each other for their success in losing weight; for promising to give herself rewards in return for restraint; and so on. Furthermore the agent will have intrinsic motivations adequate enough for the "development of motivation so that the problem calling for self-control does not exist" (Brandt 1988: 71). The agent who lacks self-control, Brandt tells us, simply lacks these extra intrinsic motivations.

Brandt's view that it is the presence of a certain sort of motivation that constitutes self-control fits, it should be mentioned, with his more general view that all

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 contrasts with the view that at least some virtues are managerial rather than motivational in character; they involve cognitive skills rather than desiderative dispositions (Roberts 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.



## II. What Occasions Self-Control?

We have no quarrel with Brandt's general claim that self-control is required when an agent is more strongly motivated to act otherwise than she judges best: otherwise than how she judges it is rational for her to act. Indeed that claim fits very well with our own picture of practical unreason (Pettit and Smith 1993). But Brandt's claim has to be interpreted, as we saw, in the light of his analysis of what it means for something to be the rational thing to do or desire. And we believe that that analysis is crucially flawed. In this section we identify the central problem for that analysis and we present an amendment that enables us to get around it. The upshot is a revised picture of the sort of situation that occasions self-control.

For Brandt, the term "rational" is used in three different contexts.

(1) An agent's action is rational to a first approximation when, taking her actual intrinsic desires as given, it is the case that, if she thought vividly about all of the options available to her and their various consequences, she would act in that way.
(2) An agent's intrinsic desires are rational when they are the intrinsic desires she would have if she were to think vividly about all of the facts.

and

(3) An agent's action is fully rational when it is the case that, if she had rational intrinsic desires, and if she thought vividly about all of the options available to her and their various consequences, she would act in that way.

There are a number of questions that might be raised about this line of analysis but we are going to concentrate on one.

A remarkable feature of (1), (2), and (3) is that none of them makes the rationality of what an agent does or desires in any way depend upon the circumstances in which she is to do or desire that thing. And this is problematic, as emerges when we think about what it is rational for someone to do or desire in circumstances of extreme irrationality. In order to see this, consider a rather fanciful case.

Suppose an agent believes that he is Jesus Christ, and that, as a result, he has all sorts of irrational desires. And suppose further that the only way he could come to realize his predicament is by going to see a psychiatrist. What is it

rational for such an agent to do? What is it rational for him to desire? (Imagine that we are giving him advice.) We take it that the answers are plain enough. The rational thing for such an agent to do and desire is to go and see a psychiatrist. Remarkably, however, Brandt's analysis of what it is rational to do and desire prevents him from saying any such thing.

For Brandt, it is rational to a first approximation for an agent to visit a psychiatrist just in case, if she were to think vividly about all of the options available to her, her actual intrinsic desires taken as given, she would visit a psychiatrist. But the agent we have described has intrinsic desires that reflect his belief that he is Jesus Christ. These Jesus Christ-like intrinsic desires would lead him to do all sorts of things, if he were to think vividly about his options: healing the sick and helping the poor, for example. But we have no reason at all to suppose that they would lead him to go and see a psychiatrist. Going to see a psychiatrist simply doesn't fit into Christ's agenda. It follows that it is therefore not rational *to a first approximation* for the agent we have described to go and see a psychiatrist.

But neither, on Brandt's analysis, is it rational *in the full sense* for the agent we have described to visit a psychiatrist. For it is fully rational for him to visit a psychiatrist just in case, if he had the intrinsic desires he would have after thinking vividly about the facts, and if he were then to think vividly about all of the options available to him, he would visit a psychiatrist. Now if the agent we have described were to think vividly about the facts, especially about the facts that constitute his identity, then we may well expect him to lose many of his actual intrinsic desires—all of those that are nourished by his false belief that he is Jesus Christ. And we may well expect that he would acquire certain other intrinsic desires instead. But he would also, thereby, lose any reason he has to go and see a psychiatrist. For why would someone who knows that he is not Jesus Christ, who knows that he is he himself with the intrinsic desires it is rational for him to have, go and see a psychiatrist? His other desires would give him no reason to visit a psychiatrist. And neither would he form an intrinsic desire for such a visit. There is nothing *intrinsically attractive* for such a person about seeing a psychiatrist. We must therefore conclude that it is not fully rational for the agent we have described to go and see a psychiatrist.

Despite these, to our eye, compelling points of criticism, we are sympathetic to the general form of Brandt's analysis of rational action and desire. Indeed the critique shows us how we can revise the analysis, and preserve that form. The lesson of the critique is that an analysis of rational action and desire must make explicit room for the fact that the situations in which an action is done or a desire is had is itself an independent determinant of what it is rational to do or desire. We suggest an analysis in which circumstances are given this role and in which one further amendment is made: the reference to vivid awareness is replaced by a requirement of full rationality and full information. This further amendment can be ignored by those who think, as Brandt does, that all that need be involved



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-

1. The 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 biconditionals can be philosophically useful in the elucidation of the concepts they involve. See McGinn 1983: 6–8, 14; Peacocke 1983: ch. 2; Smith 1986; Peacocke 1986; Wright 1988; Johnston 1989; Pettit 1991; Smith 1992; Menzies and Pettit 1993; Pettit 1993: ch. 2.

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 going to see 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 regain 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



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-the-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 airdrome, 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 gritting 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 gritting her teeth is too great—if it will cause all sorts of pain and

suffering, something the agent's fully rational self will want her less than rational self to avoid—then her fully rational self may prefer her less than rational self to get excitement in alternative ways. Perhaps she will prefer her to cut her losses and go rock-climbing instead. She will judge it rational for her to do this, and forget about self-control, taking-on-board-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology.[2]

In such a case, we say the agent is not in circumstances that call for the exercise of self-control despite the fact that, in one sense, she judges it rational to act in a way that she is not motivated to act—despite the fact that, abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology, she judges it rational to take the parachute jump. We say that she is rather in circumstances that call for a change of mind. By our account, then, self-control is called for only when the agent finds herself in circumstances where such a change of mind is not itself mandated; only in circumstances where the exercise of self-control is itself rational taking-on-board-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-her-psychology.

## III. What Constitutes Self-Control?

Suppose two agents are relatively more strongly motivated to eat a second sandwich despite the fact that they each believe it is rational for them to eat only one, abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-their-psychologies. Suppose that they are also alike in their beliefs as to what can be done—for example, what therapies can be tried—to facilitate doing the rational thing. And suppose further that one of these agents has an extra intrinsic motivation of the kind Brandt describes, a motivation that the other lacks. The one has a desire to visit a therapist who will talk her out of eating a second sandwich whenever she finds herself in the situation just described. The other has no such desire. Then it seems to us that Brandt is right that what the agent who has the extra desire does, when she acts on her desire, should count as an exercise of self-control. And it also seems to us that Brandt is right that, in her case, the extra intrinsic desire she has therefore constitutes her possession of self-control in that case.

However, Brandt's position on what constitutes self-control is stronger than the claim that self-control *may* be constituted by an intrinsic desire. According to Brandt, a virtue like self-control simply *is* a desire to act in certain ways and *only* an agent with the extra intrinsic motivation that he describes possesses self-control. There is no other way in which an agent can possess, and so exercise, self-control. What does Brandt say, then, in support of this stronger claim?

2. Gary Watson is well aware of this possibility in his discussion of desires that "coerce" rather than "compel" (Watson 1977: 326).



He notes that, in a case much like that which we have been discussing, the agent who possesses self-control *does things* that the agent who lacks self-control *doesn't do*. And he argues that that shows that there is some independent source of motivation present: at least "enough to seek therapy and try to follow a constructive program" (Brandt 1988: 70). But, as is perhaps readily apparent, Brandt's premise simply does not support his conclusion. Even if the agent who possesses self-control does do things that the agent who lacks self-control doesn't do, it does not follow that what she does is explained by some extra *intrinsic* motivation. For, even by his own lights, there are alternative ways in which the agents could differ in their *derived* motivations.

Consider an example. Suppose two agents are apt to lose self-control because, though they judge it rational to become more healthy, abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-their-psychologies, right now they are not thinking vividly about health, and so do not desire to be healthy to the extent that they should. Their desire for health is weaker than it would be if they were to think vividly about health. They are therefore, we will suppose, disposed to eat a second sandwich at lunch instead of refraining, despite the fact that they judge refraining the rational thing to do. But now, just suppose that one of these agents has a disposition the other lacks. Whenever she is in such circumstances, she is disposed to dwell on health, and, as a result of doing so, she regularly finds herself once more desiring health to the right degree. More to the point, in this particular case, she finds herself desiring health enough so that she refrains from eating a second sandwich. Does this person exercise self-control?

It certainly seems as though she does. After all, how else should we describe her achievement? But it seems entirely wrong to suppose that we need credit such an agent with any special intrinsic motivations in order to account for her exercise of self-control. For, in this case, her exercise of self-control consists in her having certain vivid thoughts, and her having those thoughts is explained by a disposition she possesses to have those thoughts in the relevant circumstances. But a disposition to have certain vivid thoughts in certain circumstances need no more be a desire, it would seem, than having those thoughts need be an action. In this case, then, the agent's possession of self-control seems to be constituted by her disposition to have certain thoughts under certain conditions, not by an extra intrinsic motivation.

Consider another example. Suppose two agents are apt to lose self-control because, though they judge it rational to become more healthy, abstracting-away-from-less-than-ideal-aspects-of-their-psychologies, and though they desire to be healthy to the extent that they should, they find it difficult to think vividly about how, say, refraining from eating a second sandwich at lunch time will help them to become more healthy. Instead they think vividly about how to satisfy another less strong intrinsic desire that they have. They think about how eating a

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 desire to go 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.

And neither can Brandt say that it is fully rational for the agent to visit the therapist. For that is so 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 Brandt 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 she 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. Suppose, again, 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 piece of 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 to 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 her 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 the agent 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. Others mandate a change of mind instead.

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 commonsense 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 of a 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]

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.[1] 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.

## I. Conceptions of Autonomy

Autonomy is literally self-rule. The term may be applied to political entities ("an autonomous region of tiie 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

1. Consider, for example, the effect on the argument in Haworth 1984.