**Resolving Two Tensions in (Neo-)Aristotelian Approaches to Self-control**

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**Abstract**

A neo-Aristotelian approach to self-control has dominated both philosophy and the sciences of the mind. This approach endorses three key theses: (1) that self-control is a form of self-regulation aimed at desires that conflict with one’s evaluative judgments, (2) that high trait self-control is continence, which is distinguished from temperance by (a significant amount of) motivational conflict (which the continent person is good at resisting), and (3) that self-control is broad, in that such resistance can be not only direct (inhibiting or overriding conflicting desires) but also indirect (e.g., preventing conflicting desires from arising). There is an obvious tension between (1) and (3). I argue that the equally obvious resolution of this tension—allowing that self-control does not require occurrent conflicting desires but can instead be aimed at foreseeable conflicting desires—reveals a surprisingly unnoticed tension between (2) and (3). To resolve this tension, we are forced to either deny that high trait self-control is continence or deny that self-control is broad. I rebut one argument for narrowing self-control to effortful resistance to occurrent conflicting desires and argue that, even if self-control were narrow, recent empirical evidence suggests that it would not be a good candidate for a human excellence concerning self-regulation. Thus, if we want to make room for such an excellence, we should deny that high trait self-control is continence. However we resolve these tensions, the Aristotelian status quo regarding self-control cannot stand.

A broadly Aristotelian account has long dominated work on self-control in both philosophy and the sciences of the mind. This account includes the following three theses:

*Self-control-requires-motivational-conflict*: Self-control can be exercised only in opposition to desires that conflict with one’s evaluative judgments (what I’ll call “conflicting desires,” for short. When individuals have conflicting desires, I’ll say that they have “motivational conflict”).[[1]](#footnote-1)

*High-trait-self-control-is-continence*:Being self-controlled is a distinctive trait concerned with self-regulation. In particular, being self-controlled is identical to the Aristotelian trait of continence (*enkrateia*)and is distinguished from temperance, at least in part, by the fact that self-controlled people have (a significant amount of) motivational conflict, which they are good at resisting, while temperate individuals have (little or) no motivational conflict.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Self-control-is-broad*:Self-control includes both *directly* resisting (i.e., inhibiting or overriding) conflicting desires as well asusing *indirect* resistance strategies to prevent conflicting desires from arising.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After showing, in Section 1, how pervasive these theses are in the literature on self-control, in Section 2, I point out an obvious tension between *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict* and *self-control-is-broad*. In Section 3, I argue that the equally obvious resolution of this tension (which is already implicit in the literature)—allowing that self-control does not require occurrent motivational conflict but can sometimes target foreseeable motivational conflict—reveals a surprisingly unnoticed tension between *self-control-is-broad* and *high-trait-self-control-is-continence*. For, if self-control is broad, then a highly self-controlled individual could completely lack occurrent motivational conflict and thus regularly, and as a matter of character, act in accordance with her evaluative judgments while never exercising (or even having) a “strong will” (i.e., an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent conflicting desires) and thus not be continent. Thus, we must either narrow self-control to resisting occurrent conflicting desires or deny that high trait self-control is continence. In Section 4, I rebut one argument for narrowing self-control: contra a recent suggestion by Chandra Sripada, self-control can be broad even if it is inherently effortful. Then, in Section 5, I argue that, even if self-control were narrow, it may not be a good candidate for a human excellence concerning self-regulation. Finally, in Section 6, I explore the implications of denying that high trait self-control is continence, and conclude, in Section 7, that any consistent resolution of these tensions calls for significant revision to the (neo-)Aristotelian status quo with respect to self-control.

***1. The Three Theses in Philosophical and Scientific Literature on Self-control***

The first thesis, *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict*, is widely accepted by both philosophers and scientists working on self-control. In philosophy, for example, Al Mele notes that “self-control as commonly conceived is … exhibited only where there is competing motivation” (1987, 52).[[4]](#footnote-4) In scientific work, Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross claim that the contemporary “consensual definition” of self-control is “the self-initiated regulation of conflicting impulses in the service of enduringly valued goals” (2016, 36).[[5]](#footnote-5) Similarly, Fujita, Carnevale, and Trope claim that self-control is a special case of self-regulation in general, one which requires “dual-motive conflicts” (2018, 283). So, for example, attempting to make a free-throw in a crowded arena is typically a case of self-regulation but not self-control because it does not involve “resolving a motivational conflict” (ibid., 284). That is, basketball players typically judge that they should make their free throws, and their desires conform to this evaluative judgment; they are not “tempted to miss” (ibid.). By contrast, resisting eating a piece of cake that one judges one should not eat is a paradigm case of self-control; it is a “dual-motive conflict,” since the self-controlled person wants to eat the cake but also wants to act in accordance with her evaluative judgments.

The second thesis, *high-trait-self-control-is-continence*, is part of the core of the traditional Aristotelian distinction between *sophrosyne* (temperance or moderation) and *enkrateia* (self-control or continence) (*Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) Book III.10, 1117b24-1118b8; Book VII.9, 1151a29-1152a7).A person exhibits self-control when she resists eating a second piece of chocolate cake that she judges that she should not eat. By contrast, someone exhibits temperance by not having a conflicting desire for the second piece of cake in the first place. Further, self-controlled individuals (those who have self-controlas a character trait) have many conflicting desires, but they are typically successful at resisting them. Temperate individuals, however, have desires that conform to their evaluative judgments. As Al Mele summarizes this view, “Self-controlled agents are typically successful in resisting temptation; temperate individuals are not even subject to temptation” (2016, 170).

One might think that Aristotle was “overly demanding” in claiming that temperance requires having “perfect conformity” “of one’s desires for appetitive pleasures to one’s assessment of their value” (Mele 2016, 171). *High-trait-self-control-is-continence* is compatible with more moderate, neo-Aristotelian views, which allow that temperance is compatible with some “cognitive and motivational imperfections,” but which claim that temperance is still “legitimately distinguished from self-control” and that “the notion of assessment-desire conformity is central to a proper distinction” (ibid., 170, 171). For, *high-trait-self-control-is-continence* is compatible with “temperate individuals [being] characterized by a remarkable but imperfect conformity of their appetitive desires to their relevant evaluative judgments, whereas self-controlled persons, though they are subject to temptation [i.e., subject to conflicting desires] significantly more often, are very good at resisting [those conflicting desires]” (ibid., 170). According to this more moderate, neo-Aristotelian view, “Self-controlled agents (conceived of roughly along the lines of Aristotle’s continent agents) often struggle with temptation and are good at resisting it” (ibid., 178). *High-trait-self-control-is-continence* is also accepted by influential scientific work on trait self-control. For example, in the paper that introduced the “Self-Control Scale” for measuring individual differences in trait self-control, Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone write that: “Central to our concept of self-control was the ability to override or change one’s inner responses, as well as to interrupt undesired behavioral tendencies (such as impulses) and refrain from acting on them” (2004, 274).

The third thesis, that self-control is broad, asserts that self-control is not exhausted by *direct* resistance to conflicting desires, i.e., effortfully inhibiting or overriding conflicting desires.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rather, self-control also includes *indirect* strategies of managing one’s desires, i.e., methods, other than direct resistance, for preventing conflicting desires from occurring or preventing conflicting desires (once they have arisen) from causing behavior contrary to one’s evaluative judgments. Indirect strategies include *selecting* one’s *situation* to make it make it more likely that one will act in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments (e.g., choosing to go to the library to study so that one avoids temptations at home), *modifying* one’s *situation* (e.g., Odysseus’s having himself lashed to the mast and gagged to avoid following the sirens’ song), *redirecting* one’s *attention* toward features that facilitate, rather than undermine, acting in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments (e.g., looking away from a chocolate bar that one judges one should not eat), and *changing* one’s *thinking* about the situation to promote behavior that accords with one’s evaluative judgments (e.g., thinking of tempting options in high-level, abstract terms rather than low-level, concrete terms). (For more discussion of these strategies, see Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross (2016); Mele (1987, 26) discusses some of these strategies under the label “skilled resistance”).

The thesis that self-control is broad may not seem as central to traditional (neo-)Aristotelian views as the first two theses are, but it is in fact integral to such views. We can see that self-control’s being broad is part of traditional, (neo-)Aristotelian accounts by noting that it follows from the idea (which such accounts endorse) that “exercising forethought” is a “form of *enkrateia”* (Rorty 1980, 274). This is exactly what (at least) the two “situational” indirect strategies amount to. For example, Odysseus exercises self-control when he modifies his situation by having his crew bind and gag him “to avoid putting himself in a position of naturally strong temptation, a position in which predictably he would at best be conflicted or at worst behave as an akrates” (ibid.). The thesis that self-control is broad is even more prominent in the contemporary scientific literature. As Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross state, “contemporary conceptions” of self-control are “inclusive” and include a “stunning multiplicity of means—other than brute-force suppression of impulses—that may be used to rein in errant impulses,” including all the indirect strategies listed above (2016, 38).

***2. Resolving a Tension between Self-control’s Being Broad and Its Requiring Motivational Conflict***

There is an obvious tension between self-control being broad and its requiring conflicting desires.[[7]](#footnote-7) For, if exercising self-control requires having conflicting desires,then a self-controlled person cannot exhibit her self-control by using indirect strategies to prevent conflicting desires from arising (as is allowed by self-control being broad). Or, in the other direction, if self-control is broad, then a self-controlled person *can* exhibit her self-control by using indirect strategies to prevent any conflicting desires from arising in the first place (contra *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict*).

This obvious tension has an equally obvious resolution: distinguish between occurrent, standing, and foreseeable desires and revise or clarify *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict* in light of this distinction. An occurrent desire is, very roughly, one that is “active” in that it does “not need to be activated or aroused in order to exert an influence” on the behavior of the individual who has it (Mele 2003, 31). By contrast, a standing desire (at time t) is one that is inactive or inert at t. Mele “tentatively suggests” that a sufficient condition for having a standing desire for *x* is the “agent’s frequently having had occurrent desires for *x* that manifested an ongoing disposition to have such desires and his still having that disposition” (ibid., 35, 33).[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, a foreseeable desire is a future occurrent desire that an individual can accurately predict she will have. One way in which a desire can be foreseen is if an individual knows or justifiably believes that she has standing desire(s) that will give rise to such an occurrent desire (in certain situations).

Using this distinction, we can revise *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict* as follows to resolve the tension:

*Self-control-requires-occurrent-or-foreseeable-motivational-conflict*: Self-control can be exercised only in opposition to occurrent or foreseeable desires that conflict with one’s evaluative judgments.

This no longer conflicts with self-control being broad. Since exercising self-control does not require *occurrent* conflicting desires, using indirect strategies to prevent standing conflicting desires from becoming occurrent (i.e., using indirect strategies to avoid foreseeable desires) can be consistently thought of as an exercise of self-control. Indeed, although he is not explicitly motivated by resolving the above tension, Mele recognizes that exercising self-control does not require occurrent conflicting desires:

Motivation which competes with one’s better judgment need not actually be present at the time at which self-control is exhibited; for one may exercise self-control as a precautionary measure against motivation that one expects to arise later… But where there is no (actual or foreseeable) motivation contrary to one’s better judgment, there is no occasion for a manifestation of self-control in support of one’s better judgment. (1987, 52)

Clarifying that exercising self-control does not require occurrent motivational conflict—but also can be directed against foreseeable motivational conflict—resolves the tension between *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict* and *self-control-is-broad*. However, as I argue in the next section, this move leads to another tension in the traditional view, one that has surprisingly gone unnoticed in the literature.

***3. If High Trait Self-control Does Not Require Occurrent Motivational Conflict, then it is Not Continence***

In the previous section I argued that, if self-control is broad, then motivational conflict must be interpreted inclusively: i.e., one must accept *self-control-requires-occurrent-or-foreseeable-motivational-conflict*. However, if self-control is broad, then motivational conflict must also be interpreted inclusively in *high-trait-self-control-is-continence*: That is, *high-trait-self-control-is-continence* must claim that high trait self-control is distinguished from temperance, at least in part, by the fact that self-controlled people have (a significant amount of) occurrent or foreseeable motivational conflict (which they are good at either directly or indirectly resisting), while temperate individuals have (little or) no occurrent or foreseeable motivational conflict. However, as I’ll show, this inclusive reading is inconsistent with the traditional, (neo-) Aristotelian conception of continence.

As noted above, if self-control is broad, then a highly self-controlled person could effectively use indirect strategies so that she never had *any* occurrent conflicting desires. In this respect, she would be like a temperate individual. So, if motivational conflict still distinguishes high trait self-control (understood as continence) from temperance—i.e., if *high-trait-self-control-is-continence* is still true—then, in this case, such motivational conflict must be *only* foreseeable. In other words, assuming that self-control is broad, being highly self-controlled is compatible with having *no* occurrent motivational conflict. So, being self-controlled (rather than temperate) cannot require having (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict. Rather, in some cases, having (a significant amount of) foreseeable motivational conflict *alone* (and being good *only* at indirectly resisting it) would mark out self-control (understood as continence) as distinct from temperance (and other traits concerned with self-regulation). As I’ll now show, this contradicts the traditional understanding of continence, according to which continence requires either (a significant amount of) *occurrent* motivational conflict or at least exercising an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent motivational conflict.

First, note that the idea that continence requires (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict seems to be implicit in discussions of the traditional distinction (even though almost no such discussions explicitly distinguish between occurrent and standing motivational conflict or go on to state that the former is required for continence).[[9]](#footnote-9) For example,when Mele claims (as quoted above), that self-controlled people are “subject to temptation [i.e., subject to conflicting desires] significantly more often” than temperate individuals (2016, 170) or that they “often struggle with temptation” (ibid., 178), this seems to imply that self-controlled (i.e., continent) people have occurrentconflicting desires. For, being tempted itself requires (or consists in) having an occurrent conflicting desire. An individual would not be “subject to” or “struggle with” temptation if she did not *feel* drawn toward, or motivated to pursue, an option that conflicts with one’s evaluative judgments. And, if one has a felt motivation toward an option that conflicts with one’s evaluative judgments, then one has an occurrent conflicting desire.[[10]](#footnote-10) (I take it that a psychological state’s being conscious is sufficient for its being occurrent, even if it is not necessary. See note 8.)

So, if trait self-control is continence, then being self-controlled requires (a significant amount) of occurrent motivational conflict. However, if self-control is broad, then being self-controlled is compatible with having only (a significant amount) of foreseeable motivational conflict and having *no* occurrent motivational conflict. Hence, the traditional view, which holds both that trait self-control is continence and self-control is broad, is inconsistent.

One might respond to this inconsistency by revising the traditional conception of continence—that is, by denying that continence requires (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict. Rather, the response continues, some continent people are distinguished from temperate individuals by having only significantly more foreseeablemotivational conflict than temperate people do (and thus needing to use indirect strategies more often that temperate individuals) and that this difference inforeseeablemotivational conflict is, by itself, enough to mark out those continent individuals as distinct from temperate ones (assuming that the individuals all typically act in accordance with their evaluative judgments). Proponents of this response might claim that it preserves the traditional idea that motivational conflict is “central to a proper distinction” between continence and temperance, even though it abandons the idea that *occurrent* motivational conflict distinguishes these traits.**[[11]](#footnote-11)** Below, I argue that this response fails. For, having (a significant amount of) only foreseeable motivational conflict (yet still acting in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments) is compatible with never exercisingan excellent ability to directly resist conflicting desires, and thus is compatible with lacking the trait of continence.

First, we need to get a better handle on what foreseeable motivational conflict is before we can say what it is for someone to have a significant amount of it or for one person to have significantly more such conflict than another individual. Again, one has foreseeable motivational conflict if one can accurately predict that one will have occurrent conflicting desires in the future. As noted above, one way for an individual to foresee motivational conflict is by knowing (or justifiably believing) that she has a standing desire that is likely to result in an occurrent conflicting desire in certain situations. There may be other ways for motivational conflict to be foreseen, but I will use the presence of known or justifiably believed standing motivational conflict as a proxy for the entire class of foreseeable motivational conflict.

The conformity of individuals’ standing desires to their evaluative judgments can vary along several dimensions, including the *probability* that a given (set of) standing desire(s) will give rise to an occurrent conflicting desire (of a certain strength) in a given possible situation, the *strength* of the occurrent conflicting desire (if any) that results from the standing desire(s) in a given possible situation, and the *number* and *variety* of occurrent conflicting desires that result from the standing desire(s) across all possible situations. When someone’s standing assessment-desire conformity is less-than-perfect along any of these dimensions, we can say that she has *standing motivational conflict* or *standing conflicting desires*. When a given individual falls above a given threshold along any (combination) of these dimensions, we can say that she has a significant amount of standing motivational conflict, and when one person scores significantly higher along any (combination) of these dimensions than another, we can say that the former person has significantly more standing motivational conflict than the latter. So, one person will have significantly more foreseeable motivational conflict than another if she has significantly more known or justifiably believed standing motivational conflict than the latter person.

Now, even a very demanding Aristotelian account (which requires that temperate individuals have *no* occurrent motivational conflict) can allow that some temperate people have *some* standing motivational conflict.[[12]](#footnote-12) The proposed attempt to reconcile self-control’s breadth with its requiring motivational conflict claims that continence is still distinguished from temperance in virtue of the fact that continent individuals have significantly *more* foreseeable motivational conflict than temperate individuals do. I’ll now argue that this response fails.

Suppose that an individual, call her ‘Indy,’ has a significant amount of standing motivational conflict, which she knows she has. Suppose that she has (and knows she has) so much standing motivational conflict that she regularly, and as a matter of character, needs to use indirect strategies to prevent occurrent conflicting desires from arising. She thus also has a significant amount of foreseeable motivational conflict. However, Indy is excellent at using indirect strategies to prevent occurrent conflicting desires, and, as a result, she never has occurrent conflicting desires. For Indy, “acting in accordance with reason” rarely, if ever, consists in her acting directly “from her pathe” (see the quotation from Rorty in note 12). Rather, Indy can act in accordance with her evaluative judgments only by regularly and effectively employing indirect strategies, which she does. Suppose Indy has significantly more foreseeable motivational conflict than Timmy, a paradigmatically temperate individual, who has very little standing motivational conflict and rarely, if ever, needs to us indirect strategies to prevent occurrent conflicting desires from arising. Suppose that Indy also does not have an excellent ability to *directly* resist occurrent conflicting desires if they did arise; Indy is not “strong willed.” However, because of her excellent indirect resistance abilities, she never has the occurrent conflicting desires that would reveal that she lacked this ability. I’ll say that Indy has exclusively *indirect harmony* between her occurrent conflicting desires and her evaluative judgments.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Indirect harmony is clearly not *paradigmatic* temperance. For, when paradigmatic temperate individuals act in accordance with reason, their doing so consists in their regularly acting directly from their “pathe” and does not involve their using indirect strategies (unlike Indy). Classifying Indy as temperate would significantly revise the way the concept is typically used. Indirect harmony is also clearly not continence. Indy is not continent even though she acts in accordance with her evaluative judgments in the face of a significant amount of foreseeable motivational conflict (which she successfully and exclusively *indirectly* resists). This is because, even if continence *can* be exercised by using indirect strategies, being continent *also* requires (at least sometimes) exercising an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent conflicting desires. However, as stipulated above, Indy does not have an excellent direct resistance ability; she is not “strong willed.” But, if one is not “strong willed”—i.e., does not have an excellent direct resistance ability—anddoes not exercise that ability on at least some occasions,then one does not have the trait of continence or *enkrateia*.

Indy’s case shows that having a significant amount of foreseeable motivational conflict, and significantly more foreseeable motivational conflict than a paradigmatically temperate individual, (yet still acting in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments) is not enough to distinguish continence from temperance. So, even if one allows that (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict is not required for continence (which is *already* a significant revision to the traditional view), a mere difference in foreseeable motivational conflict cannot distinguish trait self-control (as continence) from temperance. For, having significantly more foreseeable motivational conflict than a (paradigmatic) temperate person is compatible with never exercising an excellent direct resistance ability, and continent people must be good at directly resisting conflicting desires and must at least sometimes exercise that ability.

To summarize this section: if self-control is broad, then being highly self-controlled does not require having (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict nor exhibiting an excellent ability to directly resist it. Being continent, though, does require either having (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict or exhibiting an excellent ability of direct resistance. So, if self-control is broad, high trait self-control is not continence. Thus, the very move that allows us to reconcile self-control’s breadth with its requiring motivational conflict (i.e., clarifying that the required motivational conflict is either occurrent or foreseeable) itself implies rejecting the traditional view that high trait self-control is continence.

***4. Should We Simply Claim that Self-control is Narrow?***

If the discussion in Sections 2 and 3 is correct, then we must either deny that self-control is broad or deny that high trait self-control is continence. Some theorists may think that it was a mistake to claim that self-control is broad in the first place. If we reject this and instead claim that self-control is narrow—that it consists only in direct, effortful resistance to occurrent conflicting desires—then we can maintain the traditional conception of high trait self-control as continence. In this section, I rebut a suggestion that self-control is narrow.

In a recent paper, Chandra Sripada (forthcoming) offers a sophisticated, scientifically informed account of self-control. Sripada claims to provide “a unified, mechanistically precise account of self-control” by arguing that “exercises of self-control consist in performing numerous cognitive control actions in a skilled way over time” (forthcoming, 20). According to Sripada, the “exercise of cognitive control is inherently effortful” (ibid., 19), and, because of this, he suggests that self-control can only be synchronic—it can be directed only at occurrent conflicting desires.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, on his view, accounts of self-control that understand it as broad (and thus include cases in which someone prevents future occurrent conflicting desires from arising) are mistaken because they leave out a key “ingredient” in self-control: namely, “mental effort” (ibid., 18, 19). On his view, self-control can be directed only at a conflicting “desire that is currently active” (ibid., 2).[[15]](#footnote-15) So, “what some call [pure] ‘diachronic self-control’, which prevents an unwanted, non-occurrent, anticipated future desire from becoming active … is a misnomer—it isn’t a form of self-control at all” (ibid., 20 n.1). If this were correct, self-control would require occurrent motivational conflict, and the initial tension (resulting from allowing that self-control is broad and sometimes “diachronic”) would not arise, and thus we need not deny that high trait self-control is continence.

Sripada’s suggestion that supposed diachronic self-control is not a form of self-control at all is made in the context of an argument against what he calls “results views” of self-control, which define self-control in terms of achieving a particular outcome or result (e.g., on a (neo-)Aristotelian view, mastery over desires that conflict with one’s evaluative judgments) “leaving it essentially open what process is used to reach the outcome” (ibid., 18). His argument against results views seems to run as follows:

1. Self-control consists in exercising cognitive control.
2. The exercise of cognitive control is inherently effortful.
3. So, self-control is inherently effortful.
4. If results views are true, then some instances of self-control (in particular, some instances of pure diachronic self-control) are not effortful.[[16]](#footnote-16)
5. So, results views are false.

Even if this argument shows that results views of self-control are false, it does not show that self-control can be only synchronic, i.e., that self-control can be directly only at occurrent conflicting desires. For, Sripada has not shown that *all* instances of pure diachronic self-control are not effortful. As I’ll now argue, even by the lights of Sripada’s own account, some instances of pure diachronic self-control involve the effortful exercise of cognitive control and hence are legitimate instances of self-control.

Sripada does not explicitly draw the direct/indirect distinction, but he in effect grants that self-control can involve indirect strategies. For, in addition to the “inhibitional family” of cognitive control mechanisms (ibid., 6-7, 14), which plausibly underlie direct resistance, Sripada allows that at least the “intrapsychic” indirect strategies (if not the “situational” indirect strategies) discussed above count as instances of self-control. That is, he grants that “distraction” counts as an instance of self-control because it is “naturally understood” in terms of either “the attentional family of cognitive control actions” or “the memory/thought suppression family of cognitive control actions” (ibid., 14). Further, he grants that “reappraisal” (changing the way one thinks about, or construes, an option that conflicts with one’s evaluative judgments) involves “memory suppression-type control actions” as a “critical element” and, thus, “is a form of cognitive control” and counts as exercise of self-control on Sripada’s account (ibid.).

Once we grant that distraction and reappraisal (or construal) are instances of self-control, we can see that self-control’s being inherently effortful does not support the claim that “pure diachronic self-control” is a misnomer. For, some instances of pure diachronic self-control involve the (effortful) exercise of distraction or reappraisal. For example, suppose Indy judges that she should not eat another candy bar. She does not have an occurrent desire to eat one, but she knows that she will have such an occurrent desire if she pays too much attention to the candy bar that is sitting on her kitchen counter. Despite the fact that Indy does not have an occurrent conflicting desire (nor, we can suppose, any conflicting response pulse), she can effortfully (consciously and deliberately) distract herself from the candy bar on her counter. For example, she can effortfully direct her attention to working on a crossword puzzle or to preparing a healthy snack so that she does not think of the rich chocolaty goodness of the candy bar (which would result in an occurrent desire to eat it). Similarly, Indy can effortfully (consciously and deliberately) construe the candy bar as a “calorie bomb” to prevent herself from having an occurrent desire to eat it (which, again, would likely result from her thinking of the candy bar as being rich and chocolaty).

The indirect strategies of distraction and reappraisal can be used effortfully to prevent an occurrent conflicting desire from arising in the future and not only to prevent oneself from acting on an occurrent conflicting desire (or other occurrent emotion-type state) that is already present.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thus, the fact that self-control is inherently effortful does not imply that it is only synchronic; self-control need not consist only in effortful resistance to occurrent conflicting desires. That is, self-control may still be broad—some instances of it may be indirect and aimed solely at preventing foreseeable occurrent motivational conflict—even if it is inherently effortful.

***5. A Narrow Conception of Self-control May Not Be a Good Candidate for a Human Excellence Concerning Self-regulation***

Even if, as I argued in the previous section, the claim that self-control is inherently effortful is not a good reason to think that it is narrow, there may be other arguments that self-control is narrow, and one of them may be sound.Indeed, one could simply stipulate that self-control is narrow, and this stipulation provides *one* coherent notion of self-control—one that is likely to be theoretically productive and important for certain purposes. Further, this narrow conception allows one to preserve one of the features of the traditional idea that high trait self-control is continence—that high trait self-control involves an excellent ability to effortfully inhibit or override occurrent conflicting desires (of which the self-controlled person has a significant number).

However, there is some reason to doubt that a narrow conception of self-control is compatible with *another* feature that has often (but not universally) been associated with thinking of high trait self-control as continence: namely, that high trait self-control contributes to (or is at least positively correlated with) the well-being of highly self-controlled individuals.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, if we are interested in a self-control trait that is positively correlated with individual well-being (and thus is a plausible candidate for an excellence toward which actual humans can, and should, strive), then a narrow conception of self-control may not pick out such a trait. For, there is emerging empirical evidence that deploying an excellent ability to directly and effortfully resist occurrent conflicting desires (i.e., exercising narrow self-control) is *not* positively correlated with individual well-being.

One study that provides initial support for this conclusion is Grund and Carstens (2019). Grund and Carstens found that scoring higher on a measure that reflects “self-control as imperative (i.e., effortful and inhibitory), willful control” was negatively correlated with self-reports of life satisfaction and of positive affect (2019, 67-9).[[19]](#footnote-19) That is, they found that individuals who report acting to effortfully inhibit or control occurrent conflicting desires as “a typical characteristic of their life also report … lower psychological well-being” (ibid., 69). Further, in an experience sampling study they found that the “more typical effortful [synchronic] self-control was for the participants, and the more participants were momentarily engaged in effortful [synchronic] self-control, the worse their momentary positive affect” (ibid., 73). That is, they “found evidence both at the between- and within-person level that [deploying effortful, synchronic self-control] is detrimental for momentary affective well-being” (ibid., 75).

Further discussion would be needed to bring empirical results like these to bear directly on (neo-)Aristotelian views on virtue, self-control, and well-being. For example, (neo-)Aristotelians may question whether the measures used in this and similar studies really reflect (what they take to be) genuine well-being: e.g., they may question whether most individuals have a correct understanding of an “ideal” life (see note 19), whether (even granting such a correct understanding) self-report measures accurately reflect whether one’s life is truly ideal, and whether the kind of “positive affect” that this and similar studies measure is a component of genuine well-being. However, even before engaging with these issues, I think that (neo-)Aristotelians should grant that studies like this are suggestive and at least shift the burden of proof onto those who claim that a trait of narrow self-control is positively correlated with individual well-being.[[20]](#footnote-20)

***6. If High Trait Self-Control is Not Continence, then How Should We Think of It?***

If, as I have argued, we do not have a good reason to narrow self-control to effortfully resisting occurrent conflicting desires (and, even if we had such a reason, narrow self-control may not be a good candidate for a trait that is a human excellence concerning self-regulation), does this imply that we should stop thinking of self-control as a distinctive form of self-regulation altogether?

If we do so, one option is to think of high trait self-control (including indirect harmony) simply as temperance. However, as suggested in Section 3, this involves a significant revision to the traditional conception of temperance (at least as that concept is typically used). For, to claim that indirect harmony is an instance of temperance is to allow that temperate individuals may *always* need to rely on indirect self-control strategies to ensure that they act in accordance with their evaluative judgments. However, as discussed above, temperate people (as traditionally understood) at least sometimes act in accordance with their evaluative judgments *without* using indirect self-control strategies. Another option is to reject the traditional distinction between the categories of continence and temperance altogether and simply rely on the broader notion of self-regulation. That is, one could deny that the specific categories of *continence* and *temperance* are explanatorily or practically important and instead claim that it is only the broader category of *self-regulation* (whether or not it is involved in “dual motive conflicts”) that should appear in our scientific and philosophical theories. [[21]](#footnote-21) (One version of this view is suggested by Neil Levy’s (2011) deflationary approach to weakness of will, according to which self-control is simply the exercise of domain-general, “system 2” resources (ibid., 147ff.).)

Yet, I think that there is a way to maintain that self-control is a distinctive form of self-regulation without claiming that self-control requires (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict. Rather, the kind of motivational conflict that distinguishes high trait self-control from other forms of self-regulation (including temperance) might be more complicated and not map cleanly onto the continence/temperance distinction. Return to individuals with *indirect harmony*, like Indy from Section 3. If we stick with the typical usage of ‘temperance,’ then Indy is neither continent nor temperate. She is not continent because she does not have (nor exhibit) an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent conflicting desires: she lacks a “strong will.” She is not (paradigmatically) temperate because, even though she regularly, and as a matter of character, acts in accordance with her evaluative judgments, she does so only because she is good at effectively deploying indirect strategies of resistance. She needs to engage these “rational” (executive function or cognitive control) capacities to act in accordance with her evaluative judgments; she cannot regularly or characteristically act in accordance with her evaluative judgments simply by “acting on her pathe,” as the paradigmatic temperate person would.

Indy is a highly self-controlled person, though. The capacities that make her self-controlled (her excellent ability at indirect resistance) lie in the intersection of the features that characterize temperance and continence. However, when they are combined with features that are incompatible with (paradigmatic) temperance or continence—her lack of well-trained or acquiescent standing desires and her lack of a “strong will,” respectively—it results in her having a trait, what I’ve called *indirect harmony*, that is not captured by the traditional distinction between temperance and continence.

Indy’s motivational conflict is not characteristic of continence because it is not occurrent, and it is not characteristic of temperance because it is so strong and extensive that it requires the regular and characteristic use of indirect strategies to act in accordance with reason. We can say that Indy has *robust standing motivational conflict*, and that the presence of this kind of motivational conflict, in the absence of (a significant amount of) occurrent motivational conflict and in a person who regularly, and as matter of character, acts in accordance with reason, results in a self-regulatory trait (indirect harmony) that is neither temperance nor continence.

***7. Concluding Remarks***

I have argued that there is an obvious, but little remarked on, tension between two components of the traditional conception of self-control—between the idea that self-control requires motivational conflict and the idea that self-control is broad and sometimes consists in the use of indirect strategies to prevent motivational conflict from arising. This tension has an equally obvious resolution: clarify that self-control does not require occurrent motivational conflict but rather can be directed at foreseeable motivational conflict. Yet, as I have shown, this very clarification leads to another, unnoticed, tension in the traditional view: high trait self-control can no longer be thought of as continence, for being continent requires exercising a “strong will”—an excellent ability to directly resist occurrent conflicting desires—but if self-control is broad, then one can regularly, and as a matter of character, act in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments without being “strong willed” (but instead by exclusively using indirect strategies to counteract (a significant amount of) foreseeable (but unrealized) motivational conflict). So, we are forced to choose between self-control’s being broad and its being understood as continence.

The first response to this tension—narrowing self-control to resisting occurrent conflicting desires—is not supported by the idea that self-control is inherently effortful. Further, even if self-control is narrow, recent empirical evidence suggests that an ability to exercise narrow (effortful, synchronic) self-control is not positively correlated with individual well-being and thus is not a good candidate for a human excellence concerning self-regulation. The second response to this tension—allowing that high trait self-control is not continence—either calls for significantly revising the way that the concept of temperance is typically used, theorizing solely with the broader concept of self-regulation, or recognizing that a distinctively human excellence concerning self-regulation may be a trait that is neither temperance *nor* continence (what I have called *indirect harmony*). In any case, the (neo-)Aristotelian status quo regarding self-control, which has long been dominant in philosophy and the sciences of the mind, cannot be maintained.

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1. I follow Mele in using the term ‘desire’ to pick out a “very common, generic motivation-constituting attitude” (see (2016, 173) and the references therein). In a recent paper that I discuss below, Sripada argues that a kind of state he calls a “response pulse” is “the proximal [target] of all self-control actions” (forthcoming, 5). I intend my use of “desire” to include response pulses. As Sripada notes, the “psychological functional role of a response pulse is broadly akin to what philosophers call an ‘action-desire’, a desire to perform some action straightaway” (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The parenthetical phrases allow for a less demanding account of temperance than Aristotle’s, according to which temperate people can have *some* motivational conflict. On this more moderate account, continent people will be distinguished from the temperate by having significantly more motivational conflict. See Section 1 for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I adopt the direct/indirect contrast from Levy (2017, 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kennett and Smith (1996), Henden (2008), and Sripada (2014), among many others, also endorse or presuppose *self-control-requires-motivational-conflict*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roy Baumeister and colleagues’ influential “strength” or “resource” model of self-control adopts this definition, noting that: “Self-control involves overriding or inhibiting competing urges, behaviors, or desires. … Many

   behaviors (such as solving math problems) may be difficult and effortful but require minimal overriding or inhibiting of urges, behaviors, desires, or emotions. Hence, not all effortful behaviors are self-control behaviors” (Muraven and Baumeister 2000, 247). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mele calls direct resistance “brute resistance”: “what we have in mind when we speak, in ordinary parlance, of someone’s resisting temptation by sheer effort of will” (1987, 26, italics in original). It is what Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross call “response modulation” —“the most straightforward” way of exercising self-control, in which individuals “voluntarily suppress undesirable impulses or amplify desirable ones … [i]n the heat of the moment” (2016, 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Even though the tension between these theses is obvious, it is rarely acknowledged. The only discussion I am aware of that comes close to acknowledging it is Fujita, Carnevale, and Trope’s paper, which notes that: “although self-control is often described in conflictual terms” (as they do themselves earlier in their paper; see the quotation above), “successful self-control may at times paradoxically be marked by the absence of such conflict” (2018, 293), i.e., when indirect strategies are used to prevent motivational conflict, as allowed by a broad conception of self-control. I suspect that this tension goes unremarked on because the resolution (as I discuss below) is itself so obvious that it is often tacitly assumed in the literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Bartlett (2018) for a helpful discussion of occurrent and standing mental states. Bartlett argues against both the claim that occurrent states just are conscious states (since some occurrent states may be unconscious) and the claim that occurrent states just are manifestations of dispositional mental states. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Miller (2017, 147) provides the only discussion I know of that explicitly refers to occurrent conflicting desires in the context of the distinction between virtue and continence. Miller claims that on an Aristotelian account, virtue requires “that consistently and reliably across *all* situations relevant to virtue, there be no opposing occurrent desires” (ibid., italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Similarly, the language that authors sometimes use to describe temperance and continence implies that the conflicting desires that distinguish them are occurrent—e.g., Hursthouse writes that temperate individuals enjoy themselves “without more than the most transient *twinges* of temptation” (1999, 246, italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This response may also be motivated by the idea that continence is not a “trait to be avoided” but rather an “excellent” or “good and admirable” state of character (see Callard 2017), together with the idea that occurrent motivational conflict cannot be part of an excellent character trait (see, e.g., Annas 1993, 54). More on the claim that continence is an excellence in Section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rorty recognizes this when she allows that exercising forethought (i.e., using indirect self-control strategies) is also compatible with temperance. As she writes: “Sometimes, [the phronimos’ (i.e., the practically wise person’s) acting from his pathe [roughly, emotions or appetites] *is* acting in accordance with reason; but there might also be times when even the phronimos might have to act as if he were an enkrates, exercising forethought as a form of *enkrateia*…” (1980, 274, italics in original). Assuming that the virtues are unified, the phronimos will also be temperate. Assuming, as the traditional view does, that temperance and continence are mutually exclusive, the phronimos will not be continent. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See [redacted for blind review] for further discussion of indirect harmony as a trait distinct from continence and temperance. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Or, in his terms, self-control can be directed at only occurrent conflicting “response pulses produced by emotion-type states” (ibid., 13). See note 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As an anonymous referee pointed out, here Sripada is concerned only with synchronic self-control, but, as I discuss in more detail below, later in his paper he suggests that *all* genuine instances of self-control must be directed at occurrent conflicting desires—that “pure diachronic self-control” is a misnomer. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sripada supports this premise with the following kind of case: “**(C)** Mo judges it is best that he not smoke, so he visits a doctor who specializes in helping smokers quit quickly and effortlessly. The doctor hands Mo a special little pill and tells him it tastes like candy. Mo has no desire to smoke at the moment, but he knows he will have one shortly. He takes the pill, and he never has a desire to smoke again.” (forthcoming, 18). Sripada writes: “What Mo does in this case certainly fits the definition of “diachronic self-control”… But … what Mo does clearly does not involve exercising self-control [because it does not involve the (effortful) exercise of cognitive control]” (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Sripada (forthcoming, 22 n.26) for an example of “impure” diachronic self-control in which an individual “effortfully inhibits her [occurrent] anxiety or dread.” I grant that such cases occur, of course, but the point I am making here is that distraction and reappraisal can be used as part of effortful “pure diachronic self-control,” as well as in such “impure” cases of diachronic self-control. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Agnes Callard has recently argued that, contrary to an influential “purist” interpretation, Aristotle himself claims that self-control (*enkrateia*) is not a “trait to be avoided” but rather an “excellent” or “good and admirable” state of character and that “Aristotle’s *enkratēs* not only can, but must, have *phronesis*” (2017, 32ff.). Whether or not Aristotle thought that continence is an “excellence” with respect to self-regulation, decades of empirical work support the claim that high trait self-control is positively correlated with a number of beneficial life outcomes, such as better health, greater wealth, and greater levels of subjective happiness, even when controlling for potential confounding variables, like socioeconomic status (Mischel et al. 1989; Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004; Moffitt et al. 2011; de Ridder et al. 2012; Hofmann et al. 2014). This provides some evidence that trait self-control is positively correlated with individual well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. What Grund and Carstens call “cognitive well-being” was assessed using a German version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale, which includes items like “In most ways my life is close to ideal,” and affective well-being was assessed with the German version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, which consists of “ten items measuring positive affect (e.g., interested, excited) and ten items measuring negative affect (e.g., scared, nervous)” (Grund and Carstens 2019, 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Another recent study that casts doubt on this claim isVon Gunten et al. (2020). The authors found no significant correlation, in a sample of 463 undergraduates, between the inhibitory factor of cognitive control (commonly thought to underlie direct, synchronic self-control) and measures of “psychological adjustment” (including things like life satisfaction (measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale) and finding meaning in life (measured by the Meaning in Life Questionnaire)) and of “relationship adjustment” (for those who reported being in a serious relationship) (ibid., 420-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. An anonymous referee suggested that Lorraine Besser’s (2017) work on self-regulation as a virtue may be relevant here. However, I take Besser to be offering self-regulation as a supplement, rather than a replacement, for the traditional distinction between temperance and self-control. As she writes: “I do not mean to suggest that self-regulation is a specific character trait along the lines of generosity, temperance, and courage. Rather, the sense in which self-regulation is a virtue is simply in terms of its being *an excellent use of our cognitive capacity*” (ibid., 510, italics in original). Further, Besser’s notion of self-control is narrower than mine, as she claims that “self-control essentially involves the experience of unwanted desires [i.e., occurrent conflicting desires]” (ibid., 511). The trait of indirect harmony is plausibly one way to manifest self-regulation—one way to make excellent use of our cognitive capacities. However, I am not committed to Besser’s particular account of self-regulation and its relation to executive function (cognitive control). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)