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# Willpower as a metaphor

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*Abstract*: Willpower is a metaphor that is widespread in both common usage and expert literature across disciplines. This paper looks into willpower as a 'metaphor we live by', analyzing and exploring the consequences of the tacit information content of the willpower metaphor for agentive self-understanding and efficacy. In addition to contributing to stigma associated with self-control failures, the metaphor causally contributes to self-control failures by obscuring available self-control strategies and instructing agents to superfluous self-control efforts.

*Keywords*: self-control, willpower, metaphor, ego depletion, agency, stigma, disadvantage

## 1. Introduction

A pervasive linguistic practice within philosophy, psychology, and lay discourse is to use the metaphorical concept of willpower to refer to self-control[1]. Willpower connotes to a strength or resource ("power") used to manage motivational states, such as desires, and their actional

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outcomes. One needs willpower to quit smoking, to stick to a resolution to go vegan, or to not lash out during a family dinner. The willpower concept is also often alluded to: we wonder if we're *strong enough* to go vegan, whether we *have what it takes* to hold our tongue when a sibling is being a nuisance, or whether we can *power through* our craving for a smoke.

In holding our tongue, going vegan, and ignoring unwelcome cravings, what's at stake is our capacity for self-control. Here, it suffices to characterize self-control broadly as the regulation of responses when facing motivational conflicts, such as a conflict between a plan of action and a conflicting desire. Self-control is a general-purpose capacity that is deployed, successfully or not, in various personal and professional contexts. As we navigate our experiences with self-control successes and failures, we also seek to understand the sources of this success and failure, and to improve our future efficacy in self-control.

This paper looks into willpower as a 'metaphor we live by' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). I explore the consequences of the willpower metaphor for agentive self-understanding and efficacy. My central claim is that the willpower concept is a vehicle for two connected metaphorical conceptions of self-control. This metaphorical content transmits tacit information about self-control: it implies specific sources of self-control success and failure, guiding agents to seek to improve their efficacy in self-control in a corresponding manner. This guidance, however, harms rather than helps: the metaphor of willpower does disservice to the development of skillful self-control and undermines agentive self-efficacy. Moreover, these harms are unevenly distributed, disproportionately harming people who are already at a disadvantage.

In what follows, I will first expand on what metaphors are and how they serve as conduits for tacit information. I will then analyze the willpower metaphor and its effects, explaining how it can undermine the development of self-control. I finally argue that due to harms resulting from the willpower metaphor, we should actively work to dismantle it and to change our linguistic practices accordingly.

## 2. Metaphors are vehicles for tacit information

Metaphors shape our conception of the world and guide us in conducting ourselves. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in discussing the metaphor TIME IS MONEY, point out that we do not simply say things like "I'm sorry for *wasting your time*" or "reading that book is not *worth your while*": we also act accordingly, which has wide-ranging consequences on our lives.

The way we structure, make sense of, and reason about our rich subjective experiences involves abstract concepts, including concepts of agency, control, and efficacy. These abstract concepts in turn draw on metaphorical analogies with the physical world. For example, the primary metaphor CAUSATION IS FORCED MOVEMENT, as is seen in turns of phrase like "they *pushed* the bill through", "the war *threw* the country into recession", and "the lecture *put* me to sleep" draws on the sensorimotor experience that the application of physical force causes objects to move or change, applying that to the abstract target domain. Our understanding of ourselves as agents, including understanding our motivational structures and our competences in self-regulation, and efficacy in steering our own behavior, operates on abstract concepts. The way in which we form this abstract understanding of our own agency is contingent on metaphorical relations between the abstract target domain of agency and physical source domains such as movement and force. These source-target

mappings constitute *tacit information*: information to the effect that some features of the source domain also pertain to the target domain. (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 45, 53, 184–186).

To illustrate how the conceptual mapping between the source domain and the target domain constitutes tacit information that structures our use of abstract concepts, consider LOVE IS A JOURNEY. This metaphor is evident in how we talk about romantic relationships in terms of *moving forward* in a relationship, *hitting a bump in the road* or *rough waters*, and about either *getting past* an issue, or *parting ways* when you *can't go on*. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, however, these are not just figures of speech. Aspects of the sensorimotor experience of movement in space are applied to the concept of a romantic relationship in a manner that structures how we conceptualize and reason about our love life, rather than just how we talk about it. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999).

Metaphors, then, involve tacit informational content, although that content need not form a logically consistent whole. The relationships between source and target domains are many to many. For example, love is also conceived in terms of LOVE IS A LIQUID IN A CONTAINER: love may be *overflowing,* or it may *run dry*.

As metaphors involve tacit information such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY, the social and cultural transmission of metaphors is a conduit for the transmission of such information. Plainly, that content is not explicit: otherwise, we would not need sociolinguists to uncover the conceptual mappings underlying our idioms. Instead, the content transmitted is tacit. Sometimes, that content then is realized in a tacit dispositional belief. More often however, that content guides our behavior even as we would deny its plausibility.

A study by Thibodeau & Beroditsky (2011) illustrates the force of metaphorical thinking in complex contexts. They conducted a series of experiments in which respondents were presented with a vignette about rising crime rates in the fictive city of Addison containing either the metaphor CRIME IS A VIRUS or the metaphor CRIME IS A BEAST and then asked them to fill in a survey concerning how crime should be prevented. An example vignette read:

> Crime is a {beast/virus} ravaging the city of Addison. Five years ago Addison was in good shape, with no obvious vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, in the past five years the city's defense systems have weakened, and the city has succumbed to crime. Today, there are more than 55,000 criminal incidents a year - up by more than 10,000 per year. There is a worry that if the city does not regain its strength soon, even more serious problems may start to develop. (Thibodeau & Beroditsky 2011: 3).

In this series of studies, the chosen metaphor was found to be highly predictive of respondents' suggestions as to how to curtail crime. VIRUS was associated with suggestions of investigating the root causes of crime and enacting social reform, particularly poverty eradication and improved education; BEAST was associated with endorsements for catching and incarcerating criminals, and for harsher law reinforcement (ibid.: 2). The metaphor was found even more predictive of respondents' suggestions on crime prevention than their political beliefs and party affiliation. In the authors' analysis, "metaphors can have a powerful influence over how people attempt to solve complex problems and how they gather more information" (ibid.: 10).

To strengthen the premise that metaphors impact thought and action, we need not commit to a single theory of how metaphor elicits the force it has on our reasoning and behavior. Yet it's

helpful to give some plausible suggestions as to how this might be. An inviting account of the force of metaphors in guiding action describes metaphors in terms of framing effects, which invite us to perceive a given topic of situation through a specific lens (see, e.g., Kahneman & Tversky 1981, JL Bermúdez 2018, 2021).

Here, I use 'frame' and 'framing' in the sociopsychological sense, where it refers to the shaping effect of the way in which information is presented on subsequent choice (Kahneman & Tversky 1981, JL Bermúdez 2018, 2021). People respond differently to equivalent information depending on how it is presented: for example, in a classic experiment, physicians' opinions on whether a medication should be prescribed differed based on whether they were told that after giving the medication to 600 people 400 people will die, or that 200 will survive (Kahneman & Tversky 1981). The effect of metaphor on thought and action may be a framing effect, or at the very least, may employ the same mechanisms as the framing effect does.

A connected suggestion would be to consider metaphor acquisition to functionally serve as a prime. In priming, antecedent, unrelated cues reportedly have an impact on subsequent behavior – e.g., participants subjected to words like "wrinkle" and "bingo" walked more slowly than controls (Bargh, Chen & Burrows 1996), an effect that is attractively consistent with the impact of metaphor on behavior. However, priming studies in social psychology have been subject to increasing doubt (see, e.g., Chivers 2019).

A third possibility is to employ Gendler's (2008) concept of alief. For this suggestion, metaphors structure our behavior because they structure our aliefs. Aliefs are associative, automatic and arational cognitive states that also figure in the generation and guidance of

action. In Gendler's (2008: 656–659) analysis, alief is what explains the effect of priming on behavior; I submit it is equally well suited to illustrating the force of metaphor on action because it captures the tacit, associative character of information transmit in metaphor, as well as the lingering effect on it: there is a process to unlearning alief, as there is to unlearning the information transmitted by metaphors. However, the alief construct has not been subjected to similar empirical scrutiny as framing and priming have.

Shared among these suggested analyses of the cognitive processes implicated in the force of metaphor on thought and action are two insights. First, the force of metaphor is unreflective, associative, and tacit. And second, this force is malleable. The tacit information conveyed by metaphor is not deterministic, rigid, or independent of feedback. Primes and frames wear off unless perpetuated; aliefs can be unlearned and replaced. Likewise, the tacit information conveyed by metaphors can be replaced or forgotten, though not always by choice but rather by indirect, slow processes.

Metaphors are an issue of importance for social and moral philosophy because they are culturally shared and transmitted: they shape the thought and action of large groups of people. The tacit information they convey, and subsequently their impact on thought and behavior, is contingent: even as metaphor is a ubiquitous feature of language and thought, and trying to get rid of metaphors altogether would be a fool's errand, we could have a different conceptual landscape based on a different set of source-target mappings (although some argue that a subset of metaphors are universal to the human condition; see Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999).

The tacit information conveyed by metaphors can be helpful and even illuminating:

metaphors sometimes beautifully capture pre-linguistic connections between the source and target domains, such as in AFFECTION IS WARMTH, which captures the physical warmth experienced when being held affectionately (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 50). However, some metaphors serve as conduits for harmful informational content. The harms caused by such content, for many metaphors, are not evenly distributed: for example, racist and sexist metaphors continue to shape cultural responses to women and racialized minorities, harming those groups specifically (see Weber 2015, Kittay 1988), and the metaphor of incompetence as disability (e.g., describing political incompetence as "*blind leading the blind*" or saying "the administration is *crippled*") reinforces a stereotype that results in harms that chiefly fall on disabled minorities. The professional and other competences of members of disabled minorities are often belittled, for example, when a professor assumes that a visually impaired student is not academically promising. In such cases, if pressed, the professor may not consciously harbor the belief that visual impairment prevents academic success. Instead, he has subscribed to this tacit information as an automatic attitude that he has contracted by means of a range of cultural practices including metaphors.

## 3. Taking stock of the metaphor of willpower

If the all things considered impact of a metaphor is desirable, then that metaphor is benign. However, due to their informational content, some metaphors are harmful. In what follows, I analyze the metaphor of willpower, bolstering my analysis with telling examples of the metaphor in use, and discuss the ethical upshots of the tacit information it conveys on our understanding of ourselves as agents.

A basic notion the concept of willpower (and indeed the concept of agency) relies on is the

primary metaphor CAUSATION IS FORCED MOVEMENT (see Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 176–179). When agents cause their actions, that causation can involve anything from gently *nudging themselves on course*, to *pulling themselves together*, to forcibly *dragging themselves out of bed*.

The willpower metaphor, however, invites us to apprehend a rather specific form of causation. For that metaphor, in situations that prompt self-control – i.e., where a motivational conflict makes following a plan of action difficult – willpower causes us to act according to plan, and the lack or loss thereof causes us to fail to do so.

The contemporary willpower construct has two main source domains that inform us on how willpower operates. The first of these source domains is power as energy. In this metaphorical mapping, willpower compares to electricity – and in some usage, by extension, to sugar or gasoline. We get WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER, a metaphorical mapping that underlies the limited resource model of self-control found, e.g., in social psychology (see Baumeister, Vohs & Tice 2007). The source domain of energy in a container is exemplified by the electric battery and the gasoline tank. In what follows, I will chiefly make comparisons with the electric battery as an example of the source domain for willpower. Consider what we know about the source domain of electricity:

> Electricity makes machines work. When such a machine is powered, it works. However, electricity is expended by its use. When using electricity from a battery, the battery eventually runs out, after which the machine will no longer work. In that case, we need to recharge the battery. It is possible to avoid these issues by using a larger energy reserve or by decreasing energy usage. Sources of electricity can sometimes

malfunction, in which case the appliance will not work.

In the target domain, we get the following:

> Willpower makes self-control work. Self-control is successful when there is willpower. However, willpower is expended by its use. When using willpower, we eventually run out of it, after which our self-control will no longer work. In that case, we need to replenish our willpower reserves. It is possible to avoid these issues by having a larger reserve of willpower, or by decreasing willpower usage. Some things, such as neurological disorders, can cause willpower to malfunction, in which case self-control will not work.

The above is, roughly, the content of the tacit information conveyed by WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER.[2] The second source domain we can glean from the metaphor of willpower is that of muscular strength. This is tightly connected with the basic metaphor of applying motor force, but distinct from it: as any pool player will attest, the application of motor force does not require muscular strength[3]. Consider what we know about the source domain:

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[2] Why is the source domain of willpower energy *in a container*, such as battery power, which leads us to believe it is easily exhausted, rather than mains current, which would lead us to believe it is abundant? I suggest that this has to do with our association of willpower with the mind, and of another basic cognitive metaphor, MIND IS A CONTAINER. We think of ourselves, and our minds, as containing thoughts, plans, powers, desires, and so forth; this is evident, for example, in the notion that by *putting something in mind,* we can *store it in memory*. It is less common to think of our minds as plugged into an external source of thoughts, plans, powers, desires, and so forth, even though that way of thinking has experienced a surge with the 4E approach to cognitive science. The pervasiveness of the container metaphor makes it intuitive to think of willpower as energy in a container, and as akin to battery rather than mains power.

[3] This metaphorical association of energy to action may not be willpower-specific but may instead reflect a more general metaphorical association of action with energy expenditure.

> Muscular strength allows us to complete tasks that rely on physical exertion. The stronger your muscles, the more such tasks you can perform. However, muscles tire when used. Fatigued muscles are weak. They need rest before they are strong again. It is possible to improve your muscular strength by training. We are supposed to prefer strong muscles to weak ones. Sometimes, muscles are weakened because of illness or disability.

This is the resulting transfer, i.e., the tacit information conveyed by the metaphor WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH:

> Willpower allows us to complete tasks that require self-control. The stronger your willpower, the more such tasks you can perform. However, willpower tires and becomes weak when used. Rest restores willpower. It is possible to improve your willpower by training it. We are supposed to prefer strong willpower to a weak one. Sometimes, willpower is weakened because of illness or disability.

There are also other source domains for willpower: historically, the term had strong connotations to paranormal powers and to leadership. A full description of the history of the willpower construct is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found in Kugelmann (2013), who describes that in the mid-19th century, "philosophical treatises, self-help books, phrenology, mesmerism, and spiritualism were potential sources of the term "willpower" and it was in them that the term took shape" (Kugelmann 2013: 483). Kugelmann's account is corroborated in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which lists 1850 as the year of the first known occurrence of the term (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Correspondingly, historical

conceptions of willpower also included a connotation to supernatural powers, including powers of mentalism; while these have not altogether vanished from lay thinking, their role has grown smaller due to the present-day proliferation of theories of self-control that heavily rely on WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER and WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH is social psychology.[4] While the prevalence of the term 'willpower' is used here as one clue in probing the history of the concept and its scope of connotations, it is the willpower *concept* – with its contingent, historically embedded content – rather than the word, that is at stake here.

Because of its armchair character, the above analysis of the willpower metaphor is a preliminary sketch only. That is, my analysis of the metaphor of willpower is not based on any established method in sociolinguistics. To bolster my reading, I will next offer some anecdotal evidence. This evidence supports both the claim that the willpower metaphor conveys tacit information about the nature of willpower that scientists, philosophers, and laypeople alike use to reason about self-control; and the claim that this tacit information is captured by the WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH and WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER source-target mappings.

*Evidence from turns of phrase.* Turns of phrase where the word willpower, or connected words such as self-control, are used in such a way as to suggest either a limited, depletable

[4] Some may protest that willpower theorizing is far older, having its sources in accounts of weakness of will in ancient Greek philosophy. I find this an unlikely story, as the Greek conceptual landscape has no such concepts; in *akrasia*, which is often translated as weakness of will, and *enkrateia*, which is often translated as willpower, **kratos* refers to rulership; the older term *enkratos* refers to rulership or control over other people (Dorion 2007). These terms make no reference to will, weakness, or power (other than in the sense of power over others), and it might be more precise to translate these Greek constructs in terms of self-rule or continence. However, those disagreeing with this account of *enkrateia* need not disagree with the broader argument found in this paper; I've offered these historical remarks merely to illustrate the premise that the willpower metaphor is culture-bound and contingent, a premise that can be accepted while endorsing a different conception of the history of this metaphor.

resource or an exertable, trainable muscle are evidence of the presence of the willpower metaphor. Such turns of phrase are not at all difficult to come by once you start to keep your eyes peeled for them: they abound in philosophy, psychology, economics, and self-help literature. In psychology, "people who use their willpower seem to run out of it" (McGonigal 2011), and "Evidence is mounting that control capacity can be restored in the short-run and improved in the long-run" (Kotabe & Hoffmann 2015); in philosophy, "there must be many ways of achieving self-control […] perhaps the most important will be frequently practicing self-control in a variety of circumstances in order to strengthen one's 'muscle' of will-power" (Henden 2008: 86). (My apologies to the authors of these examples for here using them as evidence of the spread of the metaphor rather than engaging with the broader ideas found in their work.)

The above examples demonstrated that the word 'willpower', as well as its cognates, are often used in reference to self-control or its underlying processes. However, this is not just a poetic turn of phrase. Rather, it conveys tacit information that in turn shapes our understanding of self-control. At times, the presence of the willpower metaphor is skin deep, and could be removed without much damage to the key ideas in each text. Such is, for example, the hyperbolic discounting theory, as developed by Ainslie (2001, 2021): the willpower terminology that Ainslie copiously employs is not vital for that theory and could be replaced while keeping Ainslie's ideas about hyperbolic discounting intact. Likewise, at least on a first reading, the core ideas in the above cited examples could be reformulated in such a way that removes sidesteps into the willpower metaphor. The willpower metaphor 'tags along' on our thinking of self-control even when it isn't doing any heavy lifting – indeed, it is even present when discussing self-control strategies that, on some academic accounts (e.g., Levy 2017, Duckworth, Gendler & Gross 2016, Koi 2021b) are *alternatives* to

what some term willpower, rather than requiring it. For example, describing the 'pomodoro' time management technique, which involves the use of a kitchen timer rather than of mental effort, the Guardian columnist Oliver Burkeman writes: "such tricks can be hugely effective, slowly strengthening the self-discipline muscle." (Burkeman 2010).

However, as other examples demonstrate, many an account of self-control is little more than an exposition of this metaphor run wild; remove the source-target mappings analyzed above and there is no paper. The presence of such expository work, across disciplines as well as in popular literature, is anecdotal evidence to the effect that the willpower metaphor's two source-target mappings are relied on as information, that is, they are found to be so credible that both practical advice for navigating life's challenges, and scientific models and theories, can be staked on these source-target mappings. The following are examples of such expository work.

*Evidence from expository theorizing*

Above, I suggested that the mentalistic, magical, and leadership connotations of the term willpower are less prominent now than they used to be, having been usurped by WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH and WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER. The main culprit in this shifting landscape, I suggest, is the work of Roy Baumeister and colleagues. Their well-publicized research capitalized on these metaphorical mappings, helping them gain momentum. Baumeister and colleagues assert that "there is one resource (one "muscle") that the self uses for all its regulatory and other volitional operations" (Baumeister & Exline 1999: 1177). Moreover, "Just as a muscle gets tired from exertion, acts of self-control cause short-term impairments (ego depletion) in subsequent self-control" (Baumeister, Vohs & Tice 2007: 351).

Baumeister and colleagues proposed two overlapping accounts of self-control as willpower. The *strength model of self-control* is an explicit comparison of self-control strength to muscular strength. The *ego depletion theory* postulates a limited resource that self-control success is contingent on. Taken together, they suggest that self-control training can strengthen self-control capacity, and liken the limited resource consumed by self-control to glucose consumed by muscular exertion – an analogy that was reified (Gailliot & Baumeister 2007) in experiments with severely limited validity, as an avalanche of criticism suggests (see Dang & Hagger 2019; Finley, Tang & Schmeichel 2019). Strategies to combat supposed ego depletion include conserving willpower use, adequate rest, and the use of stimulant medication (see, e.g., Sripada, Kessler & Jonides 2014). The strength model and ego depletion theory arguably owe their intuitive appeal to being expository accounts that build on their underlying metaphorical mappings.

Even as other social psychologists have received the Baumeisterian approach with increasing caution, its intuitive appeal has been reflected on the 'stickiness' of the strength model and ego depletion theory in subsequent theories in other disciplines as well as in self-help literature. Biohacker Dave Asprey tells us that "When your willpower muscle is fatigued, you start making bad decisions" (Asprey 2018) and goes on to suggest the off-label use of stimulant medication, including methylphenidate and modafinil, to help combat that fatigue, a move that reflects the biohacking movement's inspiration from the tweaking of physical performance in competitive sports.

The appeal of these specific source-target mappings is evident in that researchers in other disciplines, such as philosophy and economics, often build their Baumeister-inspired

accounts on the source-target mappings rather than any other feature of these theories and studies (such as their statistical features, experimental designs, and so forth). Indeed, the ego depletion theory has sparked a small industry of willpower theorizing in economics. For example, Gul & Pesendorfer (2001) and Liang, Grant & Hsieh (2019) defend models of decision-making where utility is weighed against a depleting effect on a limited stock of willpower. These are examples of theorizing in economics that is altogether contingent on the source-target mapping WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER.

Expository theorizing can also be found in philosophy. For example, the account of willpower proposed by Holton (2006) is an expository account of the willpower metaphor. The idea of limited willpower is also essential to some work in ethics, such as the satisficing consequentialism proposed by Chappell, on whose description "adopting a vegetarian diet, or a robust exercising regime, may be positively beneficial to an agent on net, and yet still be experienced as "burdensome" insofar as large amounts of willpower are required to "go against the grain" and forge new habits of behaviour." (Chappell 2019: 254). The pervasiveness of the willpower metaphor is evident in that, even as Chappell's account hinges on the resource metaphor, it cites no willpower literature. Assuming appropriate citation practices, this indicates that this source-target mapping is experienced as intuitive and self-evident rather than a theory specific to Baumeister and colleagues.

These expository examples from social psychology, self-help / pop psychology, economics, and philosophy point to the widespread nature of WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER and WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH, as well as to the high credence placed on the metaphor. In brief, both experts and laypeople rely on these metaphorical mappings when thinking about self-control.

A final point I want to make in this section is that this metaphor is not just relied on in theorizing about other people, such as research participants. Instead, the willpower metaphor is also relevant for our understanding of ourselves as agents.

As outlined in section 2, we rely on metaphor when reasoning about matters that are abstract, complex, or both. We rely on metaphor tacitly: when someone reminds me of a meeting and I promise to "keep it in mind", I do not cognize about employing appropriate cognitive metaphors; rather, I intuitively and automatically rely on MIND IS A CONTAINER. A similarly intuitive, automatic understanding is present for our conceptions of ourselves as agents; the source-target mappings involved in it are not simply rhetorical flourish, but rather contribute to structuring our understandings and experiences of our own agency. We end up apprehending our basic agentive capacity for self-control as being a certain way rather than another, which also includes a tacit understanding of the etiology of self-control successes and failures.

The above romp through the literature, though cursory, suggests the following. The willpower metaphor guides us to try to apply more mental effort when self-control failure seems like a possibility we wish to avert, the same way we squeeze harder when a heavy object seems like it may slip out of grip. It also guides us to suspect that failures of self-control could be prevented by strengthening the willpower 'muscle'; it guides us to wonder if we can run out of it like laptops run out of power; and owing to the more vintage usages of the word willpower, it yields connotations to mentalism and supernatural powers.

If we notice that our lives are hampered by self-control failures, WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A

CONTAINER guides us to try to improve self-control strength by conserving its use, by seeking opportunities to replenish our reserves, and by seeking to increase the depth of our willpower reserves (if we believe their depth is malleable). WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH guides us to try and train our 'muscle', and to let it rest after exertion.

When facing a situation that requires self-control – say, I am having dinner with family, and need to hold my tongue when my uncle says something petty, rather than give in to my urge to lash out – WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH tells me that if I'm worried about self-control failure, I need to exert self-control harder; and that if I fail regardless, either I have exhausted my willpower or it simply is too weak for the task. WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER highlights temporary depletion as a possible source of failure, but also indicates that my reserves may be insufficiently deep. Both suggest an essentializing reading of robust differences in self-control, such as are caused by neurological differences, as a weakness or a flaw: one is "weak" or "just doesn't have it", i.e., a sufficient amount of the resource in question.

The above advice is very specific, when contrasted with the scope of self-control mechanisms and strategies acknowledged in social psychology (see, e.g., Duckworth, Gendler & Gross 2016). WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER and WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH guide us to conserve self-control, to seek out rest, to push harder in tough situations, and to acknowledge that some have more willpower than others. They do not indicate that we could seek out and learn self-control strategies that are a good fit for us, or that these strategies may be qualitatively different from person to person[5].

[5] One might wonder whether these differences nevertheless are compatible with the metaphor: after all, there are many ways to train to get stronger. However, there is no obvious way in which many self-control strategies would strengthen, replenish, or conserve anything.

Insofar as WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER and WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH are tacitly understood and relied on as intuitively plausible, they obscure the fact that qualitative, not just quantitative, differences in self-control exist. In other words, when apprehending myself as an agent, I am *not* invited to consider what sorts of strategies would best help me succeed in my demanding self-control task. When apprehending others as agents, I am *not* invited to consider their situation and capabilities beyond a simplistic assessment of whether they "had what it takes".

Finally, there is a normative dimension to WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER and WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH that should not be ignored, one that can be summarized as *more is good, less is bad.* Our culture greatly values muscular strength and athleticism, and there is a stigma to having muscular strength that is perceived as below a threshold of normalcy. Lack of muscular strength is seen as a sign of sloth, lack of character, and lack of masculinity. The term, "skinny fat", that now is ubiquitous in popular media, characterizes a body composition that is low in muscle mass while being "skinny" in appearance – an example of a metaphorical source-target transfer where the stigma associated with obesity is extended to slim figures. Similarly, WILLPOWER IS MUSCULAR STRENGTH extends our cultural appreciation of muscular strength, and stigmatization of the lack thereof, to the domain of self-control. As for WILLPOWER IS ENERGY IN A CONTAINER, we are supposed to prefer a large battery life (or gas tank) to a small one. Indeed, an appliance with a low battery life is a bad

Situational strategies, such as altering one's surroundings, relying on social support, and completing tasks together rely on changing the task context rather than personal capabilities. Cognitive devices, such as framing or 'counting to ten' likewise strengthen nothing.

appliance.[6] This preference is then transferred to the target domain of willpower.

Of course, not all tacit understandings are harmful, even if they were to obscure some aspects of the issues at hand. We operate on various heuristics, many of which are arguably adaptive and, all things considered, benign. In the next section, I will make my case for considering the willpower metaphor as not being such an adaptive, benign metaphor, but rather as resulting in harms.

## 4. Willpower hurts

As metaphor is a pervasive feature of thought and language, the observation I made at the beginning of this essay, that willpower is a metaphor, is quite trivial. We cannot eradicate the use of metaphors in thinking about abstract topics, such as agency and control. Less trivial, however, is the way in which the willpower metaphor, specifically, impacts how we reason about our agentive efficacy. The willpower metaphor has practical implications for how we conduct ourselves and respond to each other as agents. In this section, I argue that these practical implications are not benign but rather are harmful, so harmful in fact that we should endeavor to change our linguistic practices to slowly effect changes in thought, as well.

There are three reasons to consider this metaphor harmful. These are the argument from stigma, which posits that the stigma resulting from the metaphor is harmful; and the two causal arguments which suggest that the willpower metaphor may in fact contribute to self-

[6] There may be upper thresholds above which the extremely athletic person is no longer considered 'normal', and some rare cases where a shorter battery life is found desirable. More clearly phrased, then, more is almost always good, less is almost always bad.

control difficulties in disadvantaged groups, namely the argument from epistemic barriers, and the argument from superfluous efforts. I'll take each of them in turn.

*1. The argument from stigma.* Individual differences in self-control are correlated with multiple measures of disadvantage, including socioeconomic status, measures of health and happiness, and crime (Moffitt et al. 2011). Let's put the concern of why that might be so aside, and instead, consider the correlation as such. Above, we noted that the willpower metaphor carries normative content: *more is good, less is bad.* If people who struggle with self-control are viewed as lacking in willpower, and if willpower carries the sort of normative content I propose, then the stigma of insufficient willpower chiefly falls on those who are already disadvantaged (see also Kennett & Wolfendale 2019). The willpower metaphor, then, contributes to the perpetuation of conceptions of poverty as indicative of non-ideal agency, such as associating poverty with laziness. This impacts how we view ourselves and others as agents: it elicits us to respond to agents with self-control difficulties as faulty, bad, or lazy, including when we ourselves are those agents. It guides us to blame ourselves for failures of self-control, and to normatively appraise ourselves in response to our self-control successes and failures.

The claim here is, of course, not that normative responses to self-control successes and failures would in their entirety trace back to the willpower metaphor. Normative responses to self-control arise from a variety of sources, including conceptions of self-control as a normative capacity (Kalis 2017). The claim put forward is more modest: that some of the stigma associated with self-control difficulties can be traced back to the willpower metaphor, and were our metaphorical landscape different, self-control difficulties would be stigmatized to a smaller extent. Consider, again, Thibodeau & Beroditsky (2011). There is no doubt that

respondents had a variety of conceptions of crime prevention prior to the experiments, and that factors like education, political beliefs, and upbringing influence these conceptions. What the experiments showed is that our linguistic practices have a strong impact on these conceptions, reinforcing some conceptions over others. It is unsurprising, then, that social reform often involves revisions in linguistic practices. While it is the willpower concept that is at stake here, the use of certain words and phrases – such as 'weakness of will' and 'willpower' – reinforces the metaphor's place in our shared conceptual landscape.

It is plausible that we had stigmatizing attitudes towards insufficient self-control before the advent of the willpower metaphor. However, this would not entail a lack of causal relationship between the two: the metaphor need not precede the attitudes for it to have a causal role in sustaining and enforcing these attitudes. Whether our stigmatizing attitudes precede the willpower metaphor, or whether the metaphor induced changes in our attitudes, is an empirical question for sociolinguists[7].

One might worry that the burden of stigma resulting from the willpower metaphor is diminutive compared to the total burdens falling on people with self-control difficulties due to other sources of normative responses to self-control, as well as to any other forms of disadvantage they are dealing with. In addition to the material, social, and embodied effects of disadvantage, disadvantaged groups deal with stigmatizing attitudes connected to multiple aspects of disadvantage and oppression, such as stigma associated with race (Webster 2021). I am, of course, not claiming that actions to alleviate this source of stigma should be prioritized over taking practical action to alleviate poverty, provide equitable access to

[7] For the record, I think the most plausible story is that we had a robust set of stigmatizing attitudes pre-willpower, but that the content of this set has changed with the metaphor.

healthcare and education, and so forth. However, for agents dealing with stacked burdens, the apprehension of one's own agency is crucial for discovering, developing, and sticking with adaptive coping strategies in those situations. The willpower metaphor may hinder such apprehension.[8]

When probing why it is that disadvantaged populations do not make full use of services such as education (in countries where it is free), social scientists often explain this with reference to stigma and its effects on decision-making and to beliefs about self-efficacy (Bandura 1986); in a series of essays, Patrick Corrigan terms this the "why try" effect (Corrigan, Larson & Rusch 2009). To be successful, the provision of equitable services must be complemented by the eradication of stigmatizing cultural practices, including metaphors, to help lessen the impact of stigma on self-efficacy beliefs. I here posit that willpower is such a stigmatizing metaphor.

2. *The argument from epistemic barriers.* This argument suggests that the metaphor has a *causal* effect on the fact that measures of self-control track measures of psychosocial advantage. In brief, the metaphor obscures strategies of self-control that do not map well to the tacit information conveyed by the willpower metaphor. The obscured strategies, however, would facilitate self-control in disadvantaged populations. The epistemic barriers generated by the metaphor then make it harder for disadvantaged people to enact self-control. This is a harm, because even as more self-control may not always be better, self-control is needed in a variety of life situations and goals.

[8] In an allied paper, Kennett & Wolfendale (2019) describe the relationship of race, disadvantage, self-control, and self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1986) in terms of the effect of respectability politics on moral security.

There is a growing literature suggesting that self-control is a set of practices subject to multiple realizability (see, e.g., Mischel & Ebbesen 1970, Levy 2017, Duckworth, Gendler & Gross 2016, Koi 2021b), a skillful process (Sripada 2020, JP Bermúdez 2021), or both. Strategies that we use to accomplish self-control include, for example, the rehearsal of reasons; construing of a situation differently, such as by imagining that a marshmallow is a cloud (rendering its edibility less salient); exercising brute inhibitory control; self-distraction; avoiding situations where self-control failure is likely; modifying situations, such as by installing reminders or removing temptations; and relying on social support (Duckworth, Gendler & Gross 2016) [9].

This argument hinges on the claim that some such strategies are a good fit for some, while being a bad fit for others. A bad fit, here, means that the strategy is seldom available; it requires too much effort; or one simply cannot (reliably) do it. The reasons why a self-control strategy may be a bad fit for a given person include facts about their lived circumstances: avoiding situations where self-control failure is likely is the more difficult the less control you have over where you spend your time; situation modification is also contingent on a degree of control over one's living conditions. They also include facts about their cognitive function. The feasibility of strategies that rely heavily on attentional shifting or inhibitory control depends largely on executive function; for some other strategies, such as construal, a broad swath of cognitive function (including imagination) is implicated (Koi 2021b).

[9] I have elsewhere (Koi 2021a, Koi 2021b) argued that rather than being mere facilitatory strategies, these in fact are self-control itself. But that distinction plays no role for the argument presented here, and it suffices that we share an understanding of these strategies as useful for self-control.

Why might the extent to which a self-control strategy is a good fit track disadvantage? For simplicity, I will focus on strategies that heavily rely on executive function. These strategies are hard for people with executive functioning difficulties; these difficulties track various measures of disadvantage. By no means does this imply a unidirectional causal relationship where disadvantage would be caused by executive functioning difficulties. Disadvantage is a social phenomenon whose causation cannot be reduced to individual differences in cognitive function. Rather, there are other sorts of regularities to the co-occurrence of executive functioning difficulties and disadvantage. Here is a cursory and incomplete list of established causes and correlates for executive functioning differences: insomnia and sleep deprivation; stress; fatigue; malnutrition; somatic illness, including pain; environmental toxins; many psychiatric disorders, including, e.g., Major Depressive Disorder, Schizophrenia, and Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder; trauma; and genetic causes (for indicative sources, see Goldstein & Naglieri 2014, Friedman et al. 2009). Given that many of these are more prevalent in socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, who may have limited access to decent nutrition, timely healthcare, and sufficient sleep, and be more likely to be subjected to environmental toxins, trauma, and prolonged stress, it should be unsurprising that measures socioeconomic status track measures of executive function (Farah 2017).

Self-control strategies that heavily rely on executive function are a bad fit for people with executive functioning difficulties. Since people with executive functioning difficulties are overrepresented in disadvantaged groups, including psychiatric subjects and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, it would be of paramount importance for these people to be aware of other strategies for self-control, so that they could access and employ such strategies as best fit their situation. Here, the positive account of what strategies would be a good fit for a person becomes more heterogeneous and is contingent on their specific

circumstances. I merely suggest that awareness of a wide swath of strategies is needed (see also Koi 2021a, Koi 2021b).

If self-control takes forms that run counter to the tacit information conveyed by the willpower metaphor, then we have good reason to worry that the transmission of the willpower metaphor in effect obscures those forms of self-control, by generating epistemic barriers to becoming aware of those forms of self-control that, e.g., rely on the development of skill (rather than strength) or on situational strategies to achieve self-control success.

*3. The argument from superfluous efforts.* There is a second way in which the willpower metaphor may have a causal effect on the fact that self-control difficulties disproportionately fall on disadvantaged groups[10]. It does so by guiding people to attempt to accomplish self-control by means that are a bad fit for those people, resulting in superfluous efforts. At times, the effort expended yields the desired result; at other times, their efforts are futile.

Recall that the tacit information conveyed by the metaphor guides us to expend more effort, to conserve the use of self-control, and to try to strengthen our self-control. It guides us to think that failures in self-control can be prevented by trying harder, and highlights strategies of self-control that are heavily reliant on executive function. The worry here is that the metaphor guides us to effortfully attempt self-control by a narrow set of means, which are a bad fit for people with executive functioning difficulties. *The willpower metaphor guides us to go harder at it, rather than to try to seek out a different strategy that might work.* If what I have written above regarding the relationship of executive function and disadvantage is true,

[10] On Kennett & Wolfendale's (2019) description, this causes a willpower deficit: on their account, disadvantage causes prolonged stress, which "places the agent under a cognitive load which reduces both willpower and planning capacities" (p. 48).

then this disproportionately concerns disadvantaged people. Attempts to resolve one's situation with willpower are in vain when it is in fact other factors of one's situation that prevent self-control success, or when executive functioning difficulties make success in the sorts of self-control that the metaphor highlights unlikely.

Superfluous efforts result in three sorts of harms. First, they result in self-control failures that may have been preventable. Second, they result in a futile expenditure of effort that could have been put to better use. I am not here saying that a willpower battery is being drained – my concern is, simply, prolonged stress and fatigue. Self-control efforts are often stressful and tiring, and when futile, they add an unnecessary burden to an already burdened life. Finally, repeated failures at "just trying harder" may result in a conception of oneself as incapable of self-control, and in a diminished sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 1986) and agency (Kennett & Wolfendale 2021).

I have, above, suggested three ways in which the willpower metaphor results in harms that disproportionately fall on people who are disadvantaged: harms from stigma, harms from epistemic barriers, and harms from superfluous efforts. To establish that the metaphor is harmful only requires that one of these three sources of harms checks out. However, if both the argument from stigma and the two causal arguments are correct, then the metaphor plays a role in the generation of self-control failures as well as in reinforcing stigmatizing attitudes towards those failures.

Nowhere is the compounding effect of the epistemic barriers, superfluous efforts, and stigma expressed as succinctly as in a column in The Guardian, where Burkeman writes, "My supposedly bottomless well of self-discipline is revealed to be about a foot deep, and my

efforts to transform my situation through sheer force of will end in a firestorm of recriminations, with me on both sides of it" (Burkeman 2016). Operating on a false conception of self-control conveyed by the willpower metaphor, it is difficult to identify strategies other than to exert more "sheer force of will"; as those efforts prove futile, only the self-blame resulting from the stigmatizing attitudes connected to the metaphor remains.

Without the obscuring, instructing, and stigmatizing effect of the willpower metaphor, I conjecture that the skillful, strategic character of self-control success would more easily reveal itself, agents would have an easier time identifying a range of means for transforming their situation, and the self-blame of failure would not be quite as fervent.

## 5. Who benefits from willpower?

Willpower is ordinarily perceived in a positive light: we prefer a strong will to a weak one, either because we find that having willpower reflects well on an agent or because we find willpower desirable in itself. In short, the concept has positive connotations. Given these positive connotations, we should wonder if there are any positive effects to the willpower metaphor.

One such positive effect could be the impact of willpower as a framing device that, contrary to what I have argued above, in fact *helps* agents succeed in self-control. In José Luis Bermúdez' (2018) analysis, resisting a smaller sooner reward can appear more valuable to the agent than pursuing the larger later reward does because agents place value on self-control itself, such as because the agent believes that resisting a reward strengthens their willpower or because the agent believes doing so "can provide evidence about … my character traits

and strength of will" (ibid.:201). In brief, the metaphor of willpower is a frame that causes us to value self-control more, and thereby causes agents to be more motivated to control themselves.

I do not contest that willpower can be a cognitive device for success of the sort that Bermúdez describes. However, as this framing device operates by increasing motivation, it only helps those people muster self-control for whom their self-control failure stems from insufficient motivation. The metaphor thus helps those for whom their self-control problems have resulted from a lack of motivation at the expense of those for whom their self-control struggles stem from a different source.

On balance, the benefits of the metaphor for those whose self-control difficulties can be remedied by increasing motivation appear to be outweighed by its harms on others, particularly as those harms disproportionately fall on populations that are already disadvantaged.

## 6. Conclusion

Given the harms resulting from the willpower metaphor, and the fact that such metaphors – and their widespread status – could be otherwise, my conclusion is that it would be preferable to put the metaphor to rest.

Changing linguistic practices is slow, and dismantling the willpower metaphor will not happen by the flick of a switch. Just as with racist and sexist metaphors (see Weber 2015, Kittay 1988), changing cultural practices is a slow and imperfect process. That slowness of

pace, however, does not give us grounds for quietism. In practice, I urge that we cease to engage in willpower discourse, and instead proceed to discuss self-control in ways that highlight the discovery and development of self-control strategies that are a good fit for one's circumstances as the primary response to self-control difficulties.

I have not argued that the stigma connected to self-control differences, or indeed those differences themselves, would be due to the willpower metaphor in entirety. I do not predict that eradicating that metaphor, then, would eradicate stigma, nor that it would put an end to self-control differences tracking various forms of disadvantage. However, I do predict that lessening the hold of this metaphor on our conceptions of self-control would help both issues by a notch. How big a notch, remains difficult to predict given that metaphorical language interacts with our cultural practices and agentive self-understanding in multiple, overlapping ways.

I conclude that the willpower metaphor's slim benefits fall on those who have comparatively little need for help. On balance, the harms of the willpower metaphor give rise to an imperative to actively work to dismantle it.

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