

How Temptation Works

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1. Introduction

I have to get this paper finished by the deadline. This means completing the next section before I have to teach at noon today. So that is what I decide to do. Then the morning unfolds, and noon rolls around—but my paper is only a few paragraphs longer. I have not followed through on my decision.

Let us ask: What can have happened between my deciding to work on my paper today, and my ending the morning with so little done, that would explain why I did not act as I said I would?

Several possibilities can be set aside as irrelevant to the topic of this paper. One is that I did not do my writing because I chose to do something else, like deal with a family emergency, that I *reasonably* found to be more important than the task I had decided on. Others are that there were occurrences outside my control, like the loss of electrical power in my office, that somehow *prevented* me from doing my work; or that at some point I simply *forgot*, either innocently or not, that I had meant to do this. A further possibility is that I did spend the whole morning working hard on my paper, but came up short despite my best efforts. (Admittedly, the boundaries of this last phenomenon are vague, and it is something that we *claim* to have happened more often than it actually does.) Things like these do transpire, and each has its own philosophical interest. But none of them will be my topic here.

The topic of this paper is rather the phenomenon of succumbing to the *temptation* to do something other than what one has decided to do. And the argument I will make is that there is an especially devilish form of temptation,¹ prevalent in human life, that philosophers who have written on this topic have tended to ignore or overlook. For these philosophers, to give into temptation is always to *revise* a decision in a way that is somehow unreasonable—as when, say, recalling that there is a World Cup game that I can stream from my office, I abandon my plan to spend the morning writing. This construal of temptation fits the way it is depicted in the movies: the devil perches on my shoulder and tries to convince me to do what I know is wrong. In the present case, the devil might do this by praising the pleasures of watching soccer, while also reminding me of how far away my deadline is, how easily I can make up for missed time, and how many of the other authors are likely to be late with their submissions. In saying these things, the

¹ I owe this phrase to Jamie Ryerson.

devil is trying to get me to *undo* my decision to work on my paper this morning, to *change my mind* about whether this is what I should do.

As many philosophers have recognized, what makes this kind of temptation both so pernicious and so philosophically interesting is the way it exploits what is often a perfectly rational process of reconsidering and revising our decisions. In the case where my work is disrupted by a family emergency, for example, it would be madness to insist that, given my plans, the emergency must take care of itself. This gives us the task of accounting for why just such a thought is so *unreasonable* in connection with the prospect of spending my morning in the office watching soccer. The challenge, in other words, is to explain the difference between reasonable *resoluteness* and unreasonable stubbornness or *inflexibility* in respect of the decisions we have made.²

Clearly this is a common form of temptation, and we need to explain how we can resist it without irrationality. But I am going to argue in this paper that it is also possible to violate one's decisions *without* ever taking those decisions back, by succumbing to a form of temptation that does not involve any inclination to change one's mind. And the case that I began with can easily be of this other sort. For even if I never take back the decision that I made to do my writing, nevertheless I might spend most of my morning doing things like formatting my bibliography, going out for coffee, staring at my bookshelf, and so on—but operating all the while under the notion that I am getting my writing done, or at least that I am going to finish it before I have to teach. When I succumb to temptation in this second way, it is not because I confront a choice between *doing what I have decided* and *doing something else instead*, and then resolve in favor of the latter. This second form of temptation is, therefore, different from the form that involves an unreasonable

² For related discussion of the so-called “authority” of one's decisions, see Arruda, “Sticking to it and Settling”; Bagnoli, “Hard Times”; Betzler, “Inverted Akrasia”; Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*; Bratman, “Temptation Revisited”; Bratman, “A Planning Agent's Self-Governance Over Time”; Bratman, “Acting Together With Oneself Over Time”; den Hartogh, “The Authority of Intention”; Ferrero, “Three Ways of Spilling Ink Tomorrow”; Ferrero, “What Good Is a Diachronic Will?”; Ferrero, “Decisions, Diachronic Autonomy, and the Division of Deliberative Labor”; Ferrero, “Diachronic Constraints of Practical Rationality”; Ferrero, “Diachronic Structural Rationality”; Ferrero, “The Structures of Temporally Extended Agents”; Gauthier, “Assure and Threaten”; Gauthier, “Commitment and Choice”; Gold, “Putting Willpower Into Decision Theory”; Gold, “Guard Against Temptation”; Heeneey, “Diachronic Agency and Practical Entitlement”; Hinchman, “Trust and Diachronic Agency”; Hinchman, “Conspiracy, Commitment, and the Self”; Hinchman, “Narrative and the Stability of Intention”; Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*; Jaffro, “Weakness and the Memory of Resolutions”; McClennen, *Rationality and Dynamic Choice*; Morton, “Deliberating for Our Far Future Self”; Nefsky and Tenenbaum, “Extended Agency and the Problem of Diachronic Autonomy”; Paul, “Diachronic Incontinence is a Problem in Moral Philosophy”; Raz, “Reasons for Action, Deliberation, and Norms”; Roth, “Agency and Time”; Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency*, ch. 4; Smith, “Sovereign Agency”; Velleman “Deciding to Decide”; Verbeek, “Rational Self-Commitment”; and Verbeek, “On the Normativity of Intentions.”

change of mind. And resisting it requires a different set of strategies. Or so I am going to argue in what follows.

To preview my argument, my central claim is that there is a distinctive form of temptation, which I call *temptation to violation*, in which a person is tempted to act contrary a decision without undoing that decision or even calling it into question. This is possible, I argue, because the content of our decisions does not always settle exactly what is required to abide by them. This slack between the explicit content of our decisions, and the specific acts by which we carry or fail to carry them out, makes it possible for us to violate those decisions even as they remain in place. As such, temptation of this kind cannot be resisted simply by refraining from reconsidering our decisions or changing our minds about what to do.

Here is how my argument will proceed. Section Two gives a general definition of temptation and then characterizes in more detail the two forms that I think it can take: the form that culminates in an unreasonable revision of a past decision, and the form that culminates in a decision being violated without being taken back. Section Three addresses a series of questions about this distinction. Section Four explores recent work on temptation by Michael Bratman and Richard Holton, arguing that they both fail to recognize the possibility of temptation to violation, and further that this failure undermines their accounts of how temptation can be resisted. Section Five diagnoses what I think is the source of this failure: that Bratman and Holton both focus only on decisions that determine *exactly* what must be done to act in accord with them, in contrast with ones that lack this kind of specificity. Finally, Section Six considers two puzzles that are generated by my argument, and Section Seven discusses how temptation to violation can be resisted, arguing that this involves a crucial role for what the ancients called practical wisdom.

2. *Two forms of temptation*

Following Richard Holton, I understand succumbing to temptation as a way of manifesting weakness of will, where to be weak-willed is to be irresolute: it is to fail to persist in one's decisions; to be deflected too easily from the path one has chosen.³ Temptation itself, then, is the mental process that culminates, if it does, in this kind of weakness or deflection, whereby a person does what is contrary to what she has decided.

There is something normative in this definition: Holton says that we succumb to temptation when we are deflected from our chosen path *too easily*; and earlier I said that in succumbing to temptation a person acts contrary to her past decision *without a good reason* for doing so. The point of this language is to set off, say, the case where I abandon my writing because I have to deal with a family emergency,

³ See Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 70. I quote this remark in full in Section Four.

from the case where I abandon it in favor of watching the World Cup. Like Holton, I want to treat the latter cases as ones of succumbing to temptation, and the former as a reason-responsive change in mind about what to do. One thing this means is that “temptation” as I am using it here is necessarily pejorative: it’s an incitement to violate a past decision *unwarrantedly* and *unreasonably*.⁴ In practice, of course, there is not always a bright line to be drawn between reasonably changing one’s mind and unreasonably succumbing to temptation—not least because the person who does the latter kind of thing will often believe that she is being quite reasonable. But philosophers cannot draw brighter lines than the subject-matter itself admits.

Here is what we have so far: a person succumbs to temptation when, without good reason, she does what is contrary to what she has decided. This characterization needs something more: for a person only succumbs to temptation, as opposed to acting merely foolishly or irresponsibly, if she violates her own decision *out of the desire to do what she knows to be contrary to it*. We need this condition to screen off the phenomenon of *involuntary* failure to act as one has decided to—as when, for example, I miss an appointment because I slept through my alarm, or fail to stay sober because I did not know that the punch at a party was spiked.⁵ (If the punch was secretly spiked and I drank it because I thought it looked tasty, then I acted out of the desire to do what was *in fact* contrary to my decision, but not what I *knew* to be contrary to it.) By contrast, when I spend the morning in my office watching a soccer game, scrolling social media, or going out for coffee, it is out of my desire to do these other things—or, perhaps, out of a desire simply not to do my work—that I choose to act as I do, and so do not complete the work that I had planned. This idea will be important to my argument as it unfolds, and I will consider it in more detail just below.

With this in the background, let us look more closely at the low-grade drama in my office. I said there are two ways I could be tempted not to do what I decided to do, namely complete the next section of my paper before I go to teach. One of these is the Hollywood way: the devil perches on my shoulder and preaches in praise of

⁴ Admittedly, this appeal to instrumental normativity might not be enough to do this concept justice, as shown by the following example. A person who has never thought one way or the other about stealing decides on a whim to steal a bottle from the liquor store. Just as she is about to hide the bottle in her bag, she sees a police officer walk into the store—and though there is no reason to think the officer will notice or apprehend her, the would-be thief gets cold feet and puts the bottle back. According to the definition I have given, putting the bottle back is a way of succumbing to temptation—while taking it from the store would not have been. And neither verdict is intuitive. Since, however, it would take another paper to work out what this reveals about the kind of normativity internal to the concept of temptation, for now I will employ the framework that has become standard in the literature. (I thank Timo-Peter Ertz and Anselm Müller for presenting me with this case, and Robert Audi for also raising an objection along these lines. For steps toward an account of temptation that might be able to resist the worry, see Blackburn, *Mirror, Mirror*, ch. 7.)

⁵ I thank Marshall Bierson for prompting this clarification and suggesting the last two examples.

the other things I could do, and of the relative unimportance of my work—and in light of this temptation I *revise* the choice that I made this morning, thereby abandoning the decision to do my work.

But the other form of temptation, the one that I claim has been neglected by philosophers, works differently than this. Instead of attempting to change my mind outright, the devil works in a subtler manner, by whispering persuasive-sounding justifications that often involve words like “only” and “just.” *It’s only a short break. It’s just a way to clear your head. It’s something that’s got to be done eventually anyway.* In saying these things, the devil is trying to get me not to do my writing—but *not* by trying to undermine the decision that I made to do it. And so my morning unfolds: a bit after 9:00 I get to my office, stare out the window for a while, answer a few emails and quickly check social media, then go out to get a cup of coffee. (Now it is about 9:20.) Back in my office, I read the first chapter of that book I had been waiting for and then use this as inspiration to bang out a couple of rough paragraphs that will need to be revised before I can go on. I go to the bathroom, then stare for a few minutes at my screen. (10:00.) The first new paragraph I revise to my satisfaction, but the second one is hopeless and has to be deleted. (10:20.) I stare at my bookshelf and think. I dig a bit further into the relevant literature, then go to get advice from a colleague who is more of an expert than I am. (11:05.) This leads to my writing a lengthy footnote full of citations that need to be added to my bibliography, which I then spend a few minutes reformatting. I stare out the window, have a snack, answer two emails, and check Twitter. Now the jig is up: my paper is only a paragraph and a footnote longer, and the start of my class is about twenty minutes away. It is in this way that I end up failing to do what I decided I would—where the failure is of my own choosing, but not because I have abandoned the decision to do my work.⁶

Crucially, in order for this case to be one of succumbing to temptation according to my working definition, it needs to be that it is the *desire* not to do my writing, or to do something else instead, that explains why I spend the morning as I do. And there are possible versions of my morning that do not have this character: say, if I spent several hours grading papers, which I abhor doing, out of a misplaced belief that this needed to be done right away. If this were what had happened, then the charge that I succumbed to temptation would seem not to stick: I could be worthy of criticism for failing to write, but not for having given into the *temptation* not to do so. However, in the version of my case that I think we will find more familiar, it is indeed because I give into temptation that I fail to get my writing done, though not necessarily because I change my mind and decide to do something else instead.

⁶ This last phrase echoes G. E. M. Anscombe’s description of Saint Peter’s denial of Christ, in the closing pages of *Intention*, 93-94. For discussion of this passage, see my *Anscombe’s Intention: A Guide*, 207-10.

In such a case, the desire to do things other than write—and also, perhaps, the simple desire *not to write* at all—will be the very thing that leads me to spend the morning in the way that I have described, and so not to get done the writing I had planned. My claim, however, is that this need not involve any *decision* on my part that I will not do my writing after all.

For the sake of brevity, in what follows I will refer to the first of these forms of temptation, in which I am tempted to revise my decision and do something else instead, as **temptation to indecision**, while the second, in which I am tempted to act contrary to my decision but without revising it, I will refer to as **temptation to violation**. Neither label is perfect, but I hope they will work to elicit the corresponding notions. The next section will address several questions about this distinction.

3. *Some questions about this distinction*

Is the difference between these forms of temptation just that temptation to violation is always a temptation to procrastinate, or to delay the start of an activity one has decided to carry out?

If this were the case, then it would mean that I have not really identified a neglected phenomenon, as the topic of procrastination has received a great deal of fruitful philosophical attention.⁷ Fortunately, though, the temptation to procrastinate is not always a temptation to violation, nor does this kind of temptation always involve putting off the start of a task. For example, suppose I have decided to get started on my paper as soon as I get to my office this morning, and when I arrive I notice a book that has just been delivered by the library. In this case I could start to think, unreasonably and out of the desire not to write, *either* that reading the book will be a good way of getting to work on my paper, *or* that it is not that important to start on my writing right away, and therefore it can wait until after I have done some reading. If these thoughts are unreasonable, then both are temptations to procrastinate: but while the first takes the form of a temptation to violation, the second is a temptation to revise my decision and choose to do something else instead.

Likewise, succumbing to temptation to violation does not always involve putting off the start of a planned course of action. For example, even if I open up my document immediately when I get to my office, my subsequent “writing” might be mostly a matter of sipping coffee, fiddling over word choice, and staring at my bookshelf, none of which leads to my getting much done. If these choices are unreasonable, and if I made them out of the desire not to write, then in making them I will have succumbed to temptation to violation—but not because I ever put off *starting* to do the thing I had decided I would.

⁷ For a start, see the essays collected in Andreou and White, eds., *The Thief of Time*.

Is temptation to violation anything more than temptation to akrasia, or to action that is contrary to one's own best judgment of how to act?

Once again, if this were the correct account of temptation to violation then it would undermine my claim to have identified a neglected phenomenon, as philosophers have written a great deal about akratic action.⁸ But while there is something right in saying that a person who violates her own decision has thereby acted against her own best judgment, the phenomenon I am trying to highlight is quite different from akrasia as the latter phenomenon is usually understood. On the common understanding, a person who acts akratically does so while believing that *this* thing—that is, the very thing that she is doing, such as checking social media or watching a soccer match from her office computer—is something that she should not do.⁹ By contrast, in succumbing to temptation to violation we usually do *not* understand that we are thereby doing anything wrong, or even that we are being irresolute. We saw this in my office drama: in getting coffee, going to the bathroom, staring at the bookshelf, and so on, I act under the belief that I am doing what is totally appropriate, at least as regards the decision to get my writing done. (If instead I got absorbed in reading professional gossip that I know I should ignore, then *that* might fit the standard definition of akrasia.) Even if “at some level” I know that I am spending my time unwisely, my considered *judgment* may be that everything I do is entirely justifiable. I act in a way that is contrary to my own standing decision, but not by doing something that I judge I should not do.¹⁰

Does the distinction come down to whether the decision that is violated has a prescriptive character or a proscriptive one—so that temptation to indecision is always the temptation to revise a “shalt not”, while temptation to violation always concerns a “shalt”?

I do not believe it does. For one thing, prescriptive decisions are clearly subject to temptation to indecision, as when I consider quitting my plan to write this morning because I prefer to watch soccer instead. Further, and as I will discuss in more detail below, there are lots of proscriptive or “shalt not” decisions that it seems possible to violate without revising. For example: someone who has decided to stop yelling at the children might justify his yelling on a given occasion by saying that really he is only raising his voice. Someone who has decided to stop checking social media during the workday might entertain the thought that it “doesn't count” if he

⁸ Again, see for a start the essays collected in Stroud and Tappolet, eds., *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*.

⁹ For example, according to Donald Davidson a person acts incontinently (that is, akratically) in doing *x* “if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*” (“How is Weakness of the Will Possible?,” 22).

¹⁰ See, however, the discussion of “extended akrasia” in Tenenbaum, *Rational Powers in Action*, 191ff, for an account according to which this course of action comes out as akratic. I draw significantly on Tenenbaum's analysis in Sections Five and Seven.

does it while having a cup of coffee. Someone who has decided to refrain from drinking on weekday evenings might tell himself that not only does he “have” to calm his nerves this evening given how awful the children have been, but in fact he isn’t “really” drinking after all if he only has a small glass of wine (or two). And so on. (Enough with the autobiography, really.) All these are instances of temptations to violation, and each is in relation to the decision *not* to do a certain kind of thing. *Is the “violator” always self-deceived about her own intentions, professing to have a standing decision to do something when in fact she has already taken that decision back, if indeed she ever made it at all?*

This is definitely a possible reading of my office drama: maybe I would like to *think* that I have made the decision to work on my paper this morning, and have not changed my mind about whether to do this; but in fact this is only a story that I tell myself, and the reality is that I have decided to fritter away my day.¹¹ If this kind of diagnosis were correct in every case, it would undermine the description that I have given of what temptation to violation involves. But I do not believe this can be so.

One reason for this is that the pattern of behavior on display in my office drama could easily be the result, not of my having abandoned or never truly made the decision to write, but rather of my simply not *wanting* to act as I really have decided to, or of my more strongly wanting to do something else—just as, in a corresponding case of temptation to indecision, what explains why I fail to work on my paper is simply that I have more of a desire to watch soccer than to do my work, and not that I never decided to do the latter thing at all. That is to say, if a person who has made a certain decision can *revise* that decision in light of contrary desires, then it seems possible also to *violate* that decision in the same way.

Second, while I grant that *sometimes* I might, e.g., fritter away the morning in my office because I have not really decided, or have quietly taken back my decision, to work on my paper before I teach, in a given case there may be many things we can point to which would suggest the contrary: for example, that over breakfast I outlined the writing I was going to do; that when I got to my office I took some specific steps, such as canceling appointments and closing my office door, in order to limit distractions; that on several occasions I caught myself wasting time and made a concerted effort to get back to work; that most of the day was spent thinking about the topic of my paper with my document open on my laptop; and that when noon rolled around I despaired at how little I had gotten done. In general, a person who does these things is a person who intends to get their morning writing done. In such a case, what explains why I do not end up doing this is not that I failed to persist in my decision, but rather that I succumbed to temptation nevertheless.

¹¹ I thank Mario Attie, Paul Blaschko, and Mike Rea for raising different versions of this objection.

Won't any concrete case of succumbing to temptation usually involve a mix of these two forms, rather than consisting wholly in one or the other?

Yes. In my office drama, for example, it is likely that I will have supplemented my general decision to work on my paper this morning with the further decision to employ some more specific measures, such as keeping my office door closed and not checking my email too frequently, in order to keep me out of tempting situations. And very often, if I fail to complete my writing it will be because I failed to do some of these other things, too. Further, this latter failure will often involve succumbing to temptation to indecision—such as when I tell myself that, contrary to what I decided this morning, it is okay to spend *some* time on social media as long as I have been making good progress.

One interesting question that this raises, which I will discuss in detail in Section Seven, is that of how to understand the relation between specific decisions like “do not check my email this morning” and general ones like “finish this section of my paper before noon,” in cases where I adopt the former as a means of carrying out the latter. I will argue in that section that the achievement of our wider ends cannot always be reduced to the execution of narrowly defined policies. But the thing to see for now is that even if a specific case of succumbing to temptation does involve some unreasonable revision of a person’s past decisions, it does not follow that the work of temptation will consist entirely in that. When I go back on my decision not to check my email, for example, this does not mean I have changed my mind about whether to do the writing I had planned. And that is because it is not strictly *necessary* that I eliminate all distractions if I am to get my writing finished: for just as I can get coffee, or stare out the window a bit, compatibly with or even as a means to writing productively, so it may be with spending a few minutes reading emails. As such, even if I do revise these specific decisions, the decision to get my writing done may nevertheless remain in place—though not, of course, in a way that provides any guarantee that I will end up doing as I said.

4. Two inadequate accounts

Earlier I claimed that the kind of temptation that is the focus of this paper—what I called *temptation to violation*, or the temptation to violate one’s decisions without revising them—has been overlooked in recent philosophical discussions of temptation. Now I will substantiate this charge, by exploring how temptation is construed in influential work by Michael Bratman and Richard Holton. In addition, I will show how the accounts that Bratman and Holton give of how a person can *resist* temptation, and of how this resistance can be instrumentally rational, fail to get traction in reference to temptations of this other kind.

Bratman

Let us begin with Bratman, whose analysis of temptation centers on cases like the following:

Suppose I am a pianist who plays nightly at a club. Each night before my performance, I eat dinner with a friend, one who fancies good wines. Each night my friend offers me a fine wine with dinner, and—as I also love good wine—each night I am tempted to drink it. But I know that when I drink alcohol, my piano playing afterward suffers. And when I reflect in a calm moment, it is clear to me that superior piano playing in my evening performance is more important to me than the pleasures of wine with dinner. Indeed, each morning I reflect on the coming challenges of the day and have a clear preference for my turning down the wine. Yet early each evening when I am at dinner with my friend, I find myself inclined in the direction of the wine. If I were to go ahead and drink the wine, mine would be a case of giving into temptation.¹²

Bratman's example is a clear case of temptation to indecision. He begins the evening with a certain plan, then is tempted by the possibility of doing what that plan rules out. As Bratman presents the case, succumbing to this temptation would mean reconsidering, and then revising, his plan of refraining from drinking wine before his gig. By contrast, Bratman will *resist* temptation effectively if he refrains from revising this plan, and so keeps his decision in place. And neither of these characterizations applies to the phenomenon of temptation to violation: first, because succumbing to such a temptation does not involve a revision of a prior decision; and second, because the action one is tempted to perform is not seen as incompatible with one's standing plans.

Is there a way, though, for Bratman to be tempted to violation in the situation he presents? Speaking for myself, the operative thoughts are all too familiar: *I'll order it just to be polite—I'll only have a sip or two—it's very low in alcohol anyway—I'll follow it up with a cup of coffee—and we're eating earlier than usual tonight, so I don't have to play for several hours.* Later on, I will allow that if Bratman's plan is *so* specific that it rules out any of these ways of getting around it, then it is a special case of a decision that cannot be violated without being taken back. What will matter, though, is to see that it *is* a special case: so if Bratman's

¹² Bratman, "Planning and Temptation," 37-38. The basic structure of the case is a template for Bratman's later work on this topic. In "Toxin, Temptation, and the Stability of Intention," 74ff, Bratman the pianist is replaced with that of Ann, who is tempted to have a second beer that will interfere with her evening book-reading. In "Temptation Revisited," 274ff, and "Temptation and the Agent's Standpoint," 154ff, the temptation is to have a second glass of wine with dinner even though this will interfere with your after-dinner work. And in "Rational Planning Agency," 217, Bratman considers the case of someone who resolves to have just one beer at a party while knowing that later on she will think it better to have many beers.

decision were, by contrast, not to drink *so much* that it will interfere with his piano playing, then it would be easy to succumb to the temptation to do this without giving up the decision not to. (Section Six will present a case of just this kind.) Further, as I will discuss in detail below, many of the decisions that relate us to relatively indeterminate ends, or govern the structure of long stretches of our lives, are such that they cannot be construed so narrowly.

This limitation in Bratman's understanding of temptation leads to a corresponding limitation in his account of how it can be resisted—an account that is, as he puts it, one of “mechanisms and strategies of reconsideration that sometimes block reconsideration of a prior intention in the face of merely temporary preference change.”¹³ For Bratman, the central thing that allows us to resist temptation rationally and effectively is the anticipation of the *regret* that we will feel later on, if we revise our plans in the face of a tempting alternative to them.¹⁴ This is explicit in the case above: the pianist's preference for a glass of wine is supposed to be *temporary*, since when it comes time for his gig he will either wish that he had not had the glass (if he did) or be glad that he refrained (if instead he resisted the temptation). Bratman supposes, then, that a person who is being tempted can look forward to how she will feel later on about the choice she is tempted to make right now, and treat the prospect of her future regret as a reason not to reconsider. And even if we were to grant to Bratman that this strategy can do the trick in the kind of case that is his focus, it does not even get off the ground in the different kind of case that is mine.¹⁵ Returning once more to the temptation that I face in my office, it is only insofar as I *recognize* how the tempting possibilities might keep me from doing my writing that I can anticipate how disappointed I will later on feel if I choose them, and use that as a reason to buckle down. As it is, when I choose to do the tempting things it is never with the understanding that this will mean failing to do what I said I would. The anticipation of my future disappointment cannot motivate me to resist temptation, since I do not anticipate being disappointed at all.

¹³ Bratman, “Planning and Temptation,” 53.

¹⁴ Here is a characteristic formulation, concerning the temptation to have a second glass of wine: “... I know that this judgment shift will be temporary: at the end of the day I will stably revert to my judgment that what would have been best at dinnertime would have been to stop with a single glass of wine” (Bratman, “Temptation and the Agent's Standpoint,” 154).

¹⁵ It seems clear to me that we should not grant Bratman this much. Speaking from experience, often a person in the throes of temptation will be quite confident that the tempting choice will end up making her very happy—and sometimes she will be right! Related problems with Bratman's account are discussed in Andreou, “The Good, the Bad, and the Trivial” and Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 156–60; and for further discussion see Andreou, “General Assessments and Attractive Exceptions”; Bratman, “Planning and Self-Governance”; Gold, “Guard Against Temptation”; Greene and Sullivan, “Against Time Bias”; Hinchman, “Narrative and the Stability of Intention”; and Tenenbaum, “On Self-Governance Over Time.”

Holton

A similar picture of temptation is laid out in Richard Holton's detailed treatment of this topic in *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*. Central to Holton's account is the idea that temptation often works by *corrupting* a person's judgment rather than *overcoming* her better judgment to the contrary. This makes Holton's notion of weakness of will, which is the focus of his discussion of temptation, different from the philosophical notion of akrasia. As I explained earlier, on standard accounts a person acts akratically when she chooses to do what conflicts with her own best judgment. By contrast, on Holton's account the person who succumbs to weakness of will is led by temptation to *revise* that judgment in an unreasonable way—paradigmatically, in the kind of case Holton considers in detail, by a psychic mechanism that leads our subjective valuations tend to conform to what we expect ourselves to do.¹⁶ Anticipating, for example, that I am likely to have a second glass of wine, I am led to judge having the glass to be worthwhile, since otherwise I would have to regard my own choice as stupid.¹⁷

As I will discuss in detail below, there are elements of this account that apply in turn to the phenomenon of temptation to violation, as the “corruption of judgment” can impair our thinking about which courses of action are compatible with doing what we have decided. But Holton himself does not consider this quite different form that temptation can take. Beginning from the idea I endorsed earlier, that “weak-willed people are irresolute; they don't persist in their intentions; they are too easily deflected from the path they have chosen,” which describes temptation to violation no less than temptation to indecision, Holton goes on to say that “Weakness of will arises ... when agents are too ready to reconsider their intentions.”¹⁸ This latter phrase is a perfect description of temptation to indecision. And if, as I have argued, it is possible to succumb to temptation, and thus to be irresolute, *without* reconsidering or revising the intentions that we thereby fail to persist in, then Holton's definition draws the boundaries of temptation too narrowly.

As with Bratman, Holton's exclusive focus on the phenomenon of temptation to indecision leads to a corresponding limitation in his account of how temptation can be resisted. For Holton, the key to resisting temptation lies in forming *resolutions*, which he understands as “a specific type of intention that is designed to stand firm in the face of future contrary inclinations or beliefs.”¹⁹ The way that

¹⁶ For this discussion see Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 97-103.

¹⁷ And, likewise, I am led to judge that I will continue to think the same thing in the future. (This is relevant to the criticism of Bratman in note 15.)

¹⁸ *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 70-71.

¹⁹ *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 10. And again: “At the most intellectual level, resolutions can be seen as involving both an intention to engage in a certain action, and a further intention not to let that intention be deflected. ... So, when I resolve to give up smoking, I form an intention to give up,

resolutions help us resist temptation is through the capacity to refrain from *reconsidering* the choices that they concern. Recognizing, for example, that from the warmth of my bed I will fail to see the importance of going for an early morning run, the night before I go to bed I may form the intention, not only to run when I get up, but also not to reopen the question of whether to do this.²⁰ That last step is important because, as we have seen, if I were to reconsider this question then my ensuing judgment would likely be corrupted, leading me to judge it better to skip the run and remain in my warm bed. For Holton, then, “the effort involved in employing willpower is the effort involved in refusing to reconsider one’s resolutions.”²¹

There are, again, questions that can be raised about the adequacy of Holton’s account as a description of how to resist temptation to indecision.²² But even if the account were adequate on that score, it would be no account at all of how to resist the temptation to act contrary to our decisions *without* revising or even reconsidering them. When I give in to the temptation to fritter away the day, it is not because I reconsider the decision to do my work and decide it will be better to spend the day doing other things, thereby revising the decision to get my work done. Instead, that decision remains in place even as I succumb to the temptation to violate it. If there is a way to resist this kind of temptation, it is not by refusing to reconsider our decisions.

5. *Why the accounts fail*

If not sheer oversight, then what accounts for the fact that philosophers like Bratman and Holton have failed to recognize the possibility of succumbing to temptation without reconsidering or revising the decision that one violates? The answer I will give is that it is because they have failed to recognize how the content of our decisions often does not specify exactly what we have to do, and refrain from doing, in order to follow through on them. It is, I will argue, the slack that exists between the content of our decisions, and the specific acts by which we need to carry them out, that makes for the possibility of violating our decisions without changing our minds about what to do.

To bring this out, let us first look more closely at Holton’s case of the would-be morning runner:

Homer has not been getting much exercise, and it is starting to show. He judges, and desires, that he should do something more active. He resolves to

and along with it I form a second-order intention not to let that intention be deflected” (*Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 11).

²⁰ For this last case see Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 138ff.

²¹ Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 121.

²² For some of them, see Bratman, “Temptation and the Agent’s Standing”; Ferrero, “Diachronic Constraints of Practical Rationality”; and Paul, “*Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, by Richard Holton.”

go for a daily run, starting next Saturday morning. But as his alarm goes off early on Saturday, his thoughts start to change. He is feeling particularly comfortable in bed, and the previous week had been very draining. He could start his running next weekend. And does he really want to be an early-morning runner at all? That was a decision made in the abstract, without the realization, which now presents itself so vividly, of what such a commitment would really involve.²³

Holton uses this case to bring out the importance of a phenomenon he calls *rational non-reconsideration*, in which a person's resolution not to reconsider a decision makes it rational for them to persist in that decision even though, were they to reconsider it on a given occasion, they would rationally choose to revise it. (Rationally, since doing so would be in accordance with what would then be the person's best judgment.) In Homer's case, what makes it rational for him to run on a given morning is precisely the way that he does not reconsider his standing decision to do so: instead, Homer "springs out of bed . . . , brushing aside his desire to stay in bed, and any nagging thoughts about the worth of exercise, with the simple thought that he has resolved to run, and so that is what he is going to do."²⁴

There are two things to say about Holton's presentation of this case. The first is that Homer's decision to go for a daily run cannot be a decision to do so *no matter what*—even if his ankle is injured, or he is very sick, or it is blowing wind and rain or snow outside, or he has been up all night tending to sick children, or he would need to start his run at 4:00am because he has an early flight to catch. And because it is impossible to enumerate in advance all of the circumstances in which Homer would reasonably decide against running on a given day—that is to say: would decide this reasonably not from the warmth of his bed, but rather from an appropriately impartial perspective—, it would be madness for Homer to refrain *without exception* from reconsidering this decision when he wakes up. Instead, Homer's policy of not reconsidering his decision to go for a run has got to be somewhat flexible. This means, however, that there will always be some room for Homer to be tempted to indecision. *I've got a cold—I'm exhausted—the weather is awful—I'm sore from the hard workout I did yesterday—it's fine to skip today's run if I then double up tomorrow*. Sometimes, thoughts like these will be mere temptations. On other occasions, though, they will not be. Unfortunately, from the warmth of Homer's bed it is not always easy to say which is which. For this reason, the resolution not to reconsider cannot make Homer invulnerable to the temptation to revise his decision.

Second, and more importantly for our purposes, the decision *to go for a run* every day includes a similar kind of flexibility that exposes it to the possibility of

²³ Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 138.

²⁴ Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 139.

temptation to violation. When Homer decides to go for a daily run, clearly he does not mean that each day he will do a lap around the living room, or shuffle from the front door to the sidewalk and back. (A *run* must involve more than that.) But what if, on a given day, Homer finds that he only has the time, or the physical capacity, for an easy twenty-minute jog instead of the usual five-miler? If that is okay—if sometimes that counts as “going for a run,” depending on the circumstances—then how about running two or three times around the block? Or, again, if *sometimes* a twenty-minute jog is enough, then what if he did this for ten days straight? It seems impossible to rule such things out in advance. Yet as long as Homer’s decision leaves room to consider such a possibility, it also leaves him vulnerable to temptation to violation: to choosing courses of action that he *represents* as belonging to the appropriately flexible articulation of his standing decision, but in fact are quite incompatible with it.

The same lesson comes out in my office drama, though in that case the room for slippage is even more obvious. This is because even the relatively specific decision that I made—that is, the decision to finish the next section of my paper by noon—could be executed in an enormous range of ways. I could, of course, arrive at my office first thing in the morning and not move from my desk, check my phone, or navigate away from my document until the morning’s writing is complete: but as I will discuss below, this is not necessarily the best strategy for getting my work done. In any event, another *possible* way to finish the section involves doing quite a lot of the things that I in fact did: things like reading a chapter from a relevant book (or even one that is not so relevant), getting a cup of coffee, staring at my bookshelf, clicking occasionally over to my email, and so on. And while clearly I should not have done all of this *so* much, at least not without getting much more done during other stretches of time, nevertheless many of these things I did, considered in themselves, were quite compatible with—or even conducive to!—the goal of completing my work. Yet all of this is exactly what made it possible for me to justify doing all the things that I did, and to regard them as compatible with the decision to get my writing done. It is precisely in this way that I managed to *choose* to do what was contrary to that decision, without ever having to change my mind about it.

If this diagnosis is correct, then temptation to violation is similar to temptation to indecision in that both of them trade on a distinctive feature of our nature as finite and time-bound agents, but the features at work in each case are importantly distinct. As the case of Homer brings out, our vulnerability to temptation to indecision exploits the fact that we sometimes do have good reason to revise our decisions, in light of changing circumstances or facts about our situation that we could not account for in our initial decision-making. Similarly, my suggestion now is that part of what makes us vulnerable to the temptation to act contrary to our

decisions *without* revising them is the fact that these decisions often have the character I have just identified: they fail to determine in advance all of the things that one must do, or refrain from doing, in order to act in accordance with them—which means that we may fail to see how a given course of action is a violation of our own decisions.²⁵

The final section of this paper will consider whether it is possible to close ourselves off to this vulnerability by adopting decisions whose content is more specific. Before that, I want to address a pair of further puzzles that are raised by this argument.

6. *Two puzzles*

Suppose Homer decides, unreasonably and out of the desire not to run, that this morning he will just jog a couple of times around the block. While a wide range of activities could be enough to count as “going for a run” on a given day, on this particular day jogging twice around the block clearly does not. It seems right to say that, in deciding that this is what he will do, Homer decides *thereby* to act contrary to his decision to run that day.

The first puzzle I want to raise concerns how the case of my office drama seems to lack this simple structure, as in that case there is no *discrete* decision or action, or moment or series of moments of inaction or indecision, in which we can say my violation lies.²⁶ If this seems hard to swallow, consider first the stretches of the morning when a person who looked in my window might have said I was not writing, say because I was in the bathroom or out to get coffee. Could these be singled out as the times where I violated my decision to get my writing done? Of course not: for some of the things that I was doing at those times may have been compatible with or even conducive to doing my work; and further, many of the things that I did while I *was* “writing,” such as tinkering with my phrasing and adding entries to my bibliography, may have done as much as anything else to contribute to my eventual failure. Alternatively, consider the situation when 10:45 rolled around and I was sitting with my colleague discussing the twists and turns of the secondary literature, despite having written only a paragraph to that point. While at this point my failure to buckle down and “really” get to writing might be less forgivable than when at 9:15 I was sipping my coffee and reading a chapter from that book, this should not lead us to say that it is only at the later time that I acted contrary to my decision: for after all, it is only *because* of the way I had spent my time earlier—spent it, I would say, giving into temptations not to write—that I

²⁵ Here I have learned a lot from the discussion of indeterminate ends in Tenenbaum, *Rational Powers in Action*, ch. 4. See also Andreou, “The Good the Bad, and the Trivial”; Andreou, “Temptation, Resolutions, and Regret”; and Tenenbaum and Raffman, “Vague Projects and the Puzzle of the Self-Torturer.”

²⁶ I am very grateful to Nathan Helms for some spirited pushback against my argument here.

had so little leeway later to call on my colleague's expertise. Each stretch of my day takes on its character only in light of how I spend the others. And it is for this reason that we cannot locate where the moment of my violation lies.

This may seem surprising. Should it be? For one thing, this phenomenon is not limited to the violation of our decisions by commission rather than omission. Imagine, for example, that you are out on the town with your friends, and in light of what happened last weekend you have decided not to drink too much this evening. Okay, then—having one drink is definitely not having too much. Nor is having a second. A third? Well, you're only going to sip it. At some point you will be drinking to excess, despite never having taken back the decision not to. But is it *only then* that you do what is contrary to this decision? The problem with thinking so is not just that the "point" is really more of a region. It is rather that it keeps us from seeing how you approached the *entire* evening in the wrong way. Yes, you definitely should not have had that last drink—but nor should you have had the ones leading up to it, at least not without a better mechanism for cutting yourself off. It is, however, precisely the way that those earlier drinks were not *in themselves* violations of your decision not to drink to excess that made it possible for you to justify having them, and so to get yourself in a place where you drank as much as you did.

Further, this impossibility of pinpointing just where things go wrong (or right) pertains quite generally to a range of important virtue- and vice-descriptions. For while we can sometimes identify specific acts as ones of, say, justice or courage or intemperance, describing a stretch of a person's *life* with one of these words is not a matter of pointing to the various just, courageous, or intemperate acts they performed, nor of summing these up and considering the ratio between them. Rather, characterizing someone's life in terms like these is always a matter of seeing their particular deeds as instances of wider patterns.²⁷ And this is what explains how I could fritter my morning away: it is just insofar as I suppose that, as I go out for coffee, stare at the window, tinker with my wording, and so on, all of this belongs a wider pattern that culminates in the completion of my work, that I manage to violate this decision without ever taking it back.

But this raises a further puzzle. Earlier I said that in order to succumb temptation, as opposed to acting merely foolishly or irresponsibly, a person must violate her own decision *out of the desire to do what she knows to be contrary to it*. How, though, can this be true of my office drama as I have just described it, or of the case when you are out on the town with your friends? When I read from that new book and then went to get a cup of coffee, I thought that I was thereby making progress in my work. Likewise for the time I spent revising my rough paragraphs, diving into the secondary literature, and talking about my work with my colleague.

²⁷ Here I have learned a lot from Müller, "Acting Well."

Likewise, even, for the bit of time that I spent scrolling Twitter (“just to give myself a break”). It is central to my description of the case that, as I was doing these things, it was always under the notion that I was getting my writing done.²⁸ There is no doubt that I desired to do each of the things that I did—but how can I then have been doing what I *knew* to be contrary to my standing decision, especially given that I *thought* I was acting in accord with it?

The answer to this question seems to turn on two things. The first is that the knowledge that is highlighted by this condition is partly a matter of self-knowledge: not just knowledge of how certain things are in the world, but knowledge of what *I myself* am up to. These two kinds of knowledge are related, of course: for example, without knowing that the punch in this bowl is spiked, I cannot know that I am drinking alcohol when I consume it. However, the cases under consideration do not turn on such purely factual ignorance. When you are out with your friends, perhaps you have lost track of just how many drinks you have had—but you *do* know that you have been sipping drinks all night without keeping count, and without a clear plan to cut yourself off. Likewise, in my day at the office I may have lost track of the time, or of how long I have spent fiddling with word choice and staring out the window—but I *do* know that I have been taking a fairly relaxed approach to my work today, and I am under no illusion that the section I resolved to work on is just about complete. This makes these cases totally different from the one where I accidentally drink spiked punch. Each of us knows what we are up to, and it is no surprise to us that this is not a way of acting as we said we would. In the throes of temptation, however, such a thing can be difficult to appreciate.

The other thing we need to reflect on is the nature of the “thought” by means of which a person tempted to violation will tend to conceive of herself as following through on her decision. Holton’s notion of corruption of judgment is helpful here: in the throes of a powerful desire, not only do my choices tend to conform to what I want, but so does the way that I think about what I am up to. This seems to happen in two ways.²⁹ First, it happens through the *avoidance* of thoughts that would be ways of recognizing what has really been going on: so if my desire is to spend my morning doing things other than writing, then likely I will not keep close track of the time. And second, it happens through the *cultivation* of thoughts that provide justifications for going on as one prefers to. *It’s just a short break*, I said to myself. *This paragraph needs revision. I need the coffee to clear my head*. One reason why temptation often seems genuinely demonic is that “thinking” like this is so patently insincere: its function is to *persuade* ourselves that we are doing one kind of thing, when in fact we are doing quite another. When this happens, it is *no accident* that

²⁸ In the same way, during your night on the town *each* drink is consumed in the belief that it is not too much.

²⁹ I thank Anselm Müller for helping me to see this.

we choose what is contrary to our own decisions, nor that we see these choices as compatible with them. It is from the desire to act as we do that we end up, not only doing what violates our own decisions, but thinking all the while that we are acting as we said we would.

7. *Closing the gap?*

What follows from my argument about how temptation can be resisted? In particular, what ways might there be of resisting temptation *other* than by refraining from reconsidering or revising our decisions—strategies that are, as I have argued, generally ineffective in the face of temptation to violation?

We can identify an inadequate answer to this question by beginning from a natural reply to the argument of Section Five. On my account, it is possible for us to choose what is contrary to our standing decisions, to the extent that the decisions we thereby violate fail to identify the *specific* acts and courses of action that they mandate or rule out. Why, then, can't we immunize ourselves to this form of temptation simply by making decisions with a more specific content? This is, after all, just the kind of transition that I made originally, from "Get my paper finished by the deadline" to "Complete the next section before noon today." Shouldn't it be possible to continue this process further down the line, thereby ensuring that sheer willpower is enough to stay on task, since I will be unable to act contrary to my decisions without revising them?

Well, let us try to imagine how this might go. Suppose that, instead of resting content with the decision to make good progress on my paper this morning, I adopt a number of subsidiary policies like the following:

- (a) Get home from the gym no later than 6:45.
- (b) Make my own lunch at the same time as I make the kids'.
- (c) Open up my document as soon as I arrive in my office.
- (d) No checking email or social media.
- (e) Turn off notifications on my phone.
- (f) Take just a ten-minute break for coffee.
- (g) No fiddling with the bibliography.

Without question, this is often a smart kind of planning to go in for.³⁰ It is smart because it increases the likelihood that I will finish my work: the policies from (a) to (c) do this by helping me to get started earlier, while those from (d) to (g) do it by limiting the number of occasions on which I will be tempted to unproductivity. Yet we know all too well that nothing in this kind of planning is enough to ensure that I will follow through on the decision to do my writing, nor that the only way

³⁰ This planning falls under what Sergio Tenenbaum (*Rational Powers in Action*, ch. 8) calls the "vertical" dimension of practical wisdom.

not to follow through is by taking that decision back. And the reason for this is, of course, that there are countless ways I could violate this decision that do not appear anywhere on my list—nor could I, even if I tried, produce in advance a list of what they all might be.

Nor is this problem solved if, instead of a set of focused measures like these ones, I simply adopt a very general policy like

(X) Don't check my phone, leave my office, talk to my colleagues, or navigate away from my document until I have a full draft of this section.

The first thing to recognize about (X) is that it is not *in general* the best way of trying to go about one's writing: first, because it describes a course of action so unenjoyable that you are likely to have a strong desire to go back on it; and second, because often we write more effectively when we allow ourselves some flexibility in the process, including the opportunity to take occasional breaks. Further, even if (X) is a wise policy to adopt on a given occasion, adopting it is still no *guarantee* that I will get my writing done—since I could, after all, still spend most of the morning staring out the window while I “formulate my thoughts,” or decide that I have finished a draft when all I really have is a bunch of stream-of-consciousness remarks. Alternatively, to the extent that in sticking to a policy like (X) I thereby *force* myself to complete my writing, this will not be because this is a magical sort of policy that makes it impossible to fail to get my writing done unless I take the policy back, but rather because the course of action it prescribes is so unenjoyable that I will have plowed through my writing as quickly as I could with an eye to getting back on my phone. Which, again, is not a great way of getting one's writing done.³¹

Well, here is one more thing we might try, perhaps in conjunction with the policies from (a) to (g):

(Y) Each hour on the hour, check that my progress is on schedule, and allow myself a snack and a five-minute social media break if it is.

Once again, policies like (Y) are often good to have in place. What makes (Y) good is not just that it provides positive reinforcement, but also that it invites me to notice where I have gone off course, to form further plans to prevent this from reoccurring, and to pick up the pace if I have fallen off schedule. Nevertheless, adopting (Y) as a policy, and keeping it firmly in place with no room to reconsider, is still no guarantee that I will get my writing done, and not just because I might forfeit the

³¹ Put differently, if I follow (X) too slavishly then I will manifest what Tenenbaum calls the *vice of rigidity*, i.e., the vice “of performing the characteristic actions of [a] policy too often or at the wrong times” (*Rational Powers in Action*, 199). In this case, what makes my rigidity a vice is not just that it interferes with my extra-professional ends, but that it leads me to act irrationally with respect to the very end that my policy is supposed to serve.

snack breaks or let myself backslide during the final hour. It is rather because I need *judgment* to apply (*Y*) in any given case—to say whether, for example, it counts as being “off schedule” if during the past hour I wrote only a bit because instead I was reading that chapter from a book that was pertinent to my topic. Perhaps it should count, if I am not one to be trusted with that much latitude. But then again perhaps it should not, since applying (*Y*) that strictly means actively disincentivizing courses of action could be good ways of achieving my ends. More generally, the hourly opportunities for checking-in that are mandated by this policy are a forced and ultimately second-rate substitute for the kind of judgment that ideally I would be able to carry out “on the fly,” recognizing from moment to moment what I am doing, what the motivations are for it, and how I should proceed from here.

All these lessons illustrate a much more general point that has been noticed by philosophers at least since Aristotle, namely that success in practical reasoning cannot be reduced to the application of well-defined rules. It does not follow from this that general rules are useless in practical deliberation, nor that all substantive practical principles admit of exceptions.³² However, it does have the consequence that, first, even the maximally prudent person will not be able to identify *in advance* all the things she must do in order to achieve a certain goal, and, second, that even when correct practical principles have been adopted the task still remains of identifying what falls under them. And the discussion above shows how these lessons apply even to stretches of activity that are governed by a single overriding end: for even if I rank getting my writing done definitively above things like being collegial, knowing what is happening in the world, reading my colleagues’ gripes about their students, or simply having a generally pleasant and relaxing morning, nevertheless my commitment to this singular end is not enough to decide what I should do at each moment, nor to guarantee that I will choose in accordance with this end as long as I do not revise or abandon it. And, further, it shows how there can be a trade-off between the success that a policy will have in screening off tempting courses of action and the success it will have in helping me to do *well* the thing that the policy is in the service of.³³

What makes temptation an ever-present reality for us is that following through on our decisions depends on the exercise of practical wisdom. In practice, and especially for people who are far from perfectly virtuous, what does this exercise involve? One thing it may involve is the kind of thing I have just discussed: a strategy of attempting to anticipate the various ways we might fail to follow through

³² Compare Aristotle’s list in *NE* II.vi of actions “whose names directly imply evil”: adultery, theft, and murder. To the extent that we can give non-circular definitions of which actions are of these kinds, there may be action-guiding principles that prohibit them without exception. In the case of my office drama, such a principle might rule out plagiarizing my section from someone else’s work, or having it drafted by ChatGPT.

³³ For further discussion of all these points see Tenenbaum, *Rational Powers in Action*, ch. 8.

on our decisions, in order to head them off as well as we can. Another is the kind of thing emphasized by Bratman and Holton: the capacity, in situations where we might be inclined to revise our decisions and choose to do something else, to shut down this process except where it is reasonable. Yet something more is needed too: the ability to see ourselves aright, to recognize which courses of action would be ways of undermining our goals rather than fulfilling them, and to make and reevaluate our specific decisions in relation to our wider ends.³⁴

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