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## Negotiating with Myself

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(<http://www.lse.ac.uk/philosophy/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/handshake.jpg>)

Can the concept of “temporal selves” help us understand temptation and restraint? Johanna Thoma (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/philosophy/people/faculty/#johanna-thoma>) on self-negotiation.

### Temptation.

You are considering whether to attend a conference in a beautiful city you have never been to. The conference would inevitably be very useful for your work. Moreover, if you were to go, you could enjoy the local cuisine, the sun, the beach and the art in your spare time. Some good friends will be there, and you could enjoy these things with them. However, you have looming deadlines and other tasks to perform. You also recently decided to be more frugal and live more healthily. Enjoying the city to the fullest would interfere with those plans. All things considered, you decide that if you were to go to the conference, you should forego the temptations of the city and work in the evenings instead. If that is not an option, you judge it better not to go at all.

Is resisting the city's temptations an option for you? You may be sceptical. Once the temptations are right in front of you, it may be hard not to give in. In fact, you may anticipate that once you are immediately confronted with the option of enjoying a cocktail by the beach, your preferences will shift. If that will not do, your friends may convince you that all things considered, you should come and enjoy the city with them

after all.

You are tempted to act against a plan of temperance you previously thought best. And there is indeed some evidence that people subject to temptation also often change their mind about what course of action is best, in favour of giving into the temptation.<sup>1</sup>

There is a danger, then, of the following tragic outcome occurring: anticipating in advance that you will fail to resist the temptations of the city, you may decide not to go to the conference at all. But even your later, tempted self thinks that it is better to go to the conference, be prudent and work than not to have gone at all. And so you end up with an outcome that is worse according to your preferences at any point in time than another outcome you could have had.

To prevent this tragedy, it has been suggested that you could engage in negotiations with yourself.<sup>2</sup> Your earlier self could decide to go to the conference, in exchange for the later self being prudent and working in the evenings. We could understand such a deal as creating mutual advantage for your temporal selves, or what are sometimes called "time slices". If each time slice of you does her part, such an agreement would make possible a course of action that is preferred by each: you would go to the conference and behave yourself.

## Self-Control Regained?

The notion that negotiating with ourselves could help us be more prudent and resolute is a familiar one from self-help books and management classes. I certainly often strike deals with myself: for instance, I will allow myself a coffee and TV break now, in exchange for grading five more papers before dinner. But can negotiating with ourselves help us resist temptation when temptation shifts our preferences?

The approach to temptation outlined here makes use of an analogy to familiar cases of cooperation between people. In a famous example going back to Hume ([https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page%3ATreatise\\_of\\_Human\\_Nature\\_\(1888\).djvu/544](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page%3ATreatise_of_Human_Nature_(1888).djvu/544)), two farmers need to harvest their crop at different times. They are each better off by helping one another, than by harvesting alone. They thus stand to gain from agreeing to cooperate.

There is a whole branch of game theory, namely bargaining theory (<https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/amuthoo/publications/simpbarg.pdf>), that studies what deals rational agents may strike when they have such opportunities for mutual advantage. Of course, there is also a question of whether the farmers will find it rational to follow through on any agreement they made. After the first farmer has been helped by the other, she may be tempted not to return the favour. In response to this, some have maintained that self-interest favours a disposition to stick to an agreed course of action in such circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Others

have claimed that norms of fairness that are recognised by both farmers are necessary for them to cooperate effectively.

Let us grant that either self-interest or fairness demand that agents do their part in agreed-on, mutually beneficial cooperation. Are your reasons for going through with a plan to be prudent of the same kind? If that was so, there would be a hope that we can apply economic theories of bargaining and cooperation to individual persons who find themselves in the pull of temptation.

## Self-Control Lost.

I want to raise some doubts here. The problem is that there seems to be no way of thinking of what your “time slices” are that would preserve the analogy to cooperation between people.

Suppose that you decide to go to the conference, but only because you plan and expect to resist the city’s temptations. You then find yourself there having changed your mind about prudence being a good thing. What reason do you have to resist the temptations of the city? Thinking about your past self like a different person, you might think you owe prudence to your past self – just like you owe it to your neighbour to return a favour. But then you will realise that your past self did not consult you when she made the plan to resist temptation. How could she have, when your present self was not around at the earlier time? Suppose that, while you are napping, your neighbour provides you with unsolicited help harvesting your field. It may be nice of you to return the favour, but it is not called for by fairness or self-interest. Similarly, you should not take yourself to owe your past self prudence.

At this point, you may think that your past self is not really a different person, and the resolution she made to be prudent is really *your* resolution. But note that you have since changed your mind about the value of prudence. Normally, when you change your mind, you are also allowed to revise your plans. I used to not like driving. Now that I do, I abandoned any plans I might have made to avoid it. If you are cooperating with yourself, you are cooperating with somebody who has changed her mind. And there seems to be no reason to make good on an agreement once the person you are cooperating with doesn’t want you to anymore. Suppose that by the time it comes to returning a favour to your neighbour, she has come to despise you and does not want to spend another minute with you. You seem to have no reason of self-interest or fairness to still impose your help on her. Similarly, if you find yourself at the conference, why shouldn’t you go and enjoy the city?

By Johanna Thoma

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## Notes

1. Richard Holton discusses this evidence at length in his *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/willing-wanting-waiting-9780199214570?cc=gb&lang=en&>) (2006).
2. See, for instance, George Ainslie (1992), *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States Within the Person* (<http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/psychology/cognition/picoeconomics-strategic-interaction-successive-motivational-states-within-person>), and Edward McClennen, "Rationality and rules" (1998), in Peter Danielson, editor, *Modeling Rationality, Morality, and Evolution* (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/modeling-rationality-morality-and-evolution-9780195125504?cc=gb&lang=en&>)
3. See, for instance, David Gauthier's "Assure and Threaten" ([https://www.jstor.org/stable/2382214?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2382214?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)) (1994), in *Ethics*, 104(4).

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