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Abstract

Self-control is one of the seven virtues, I believe it ^{is} ~~is~~ a part of the human condition to struggle with maintaining it, especially within the social and cultural contexts we live through today. In this essay I discuss self-control and how in and of itself is both a virtue and a vice in modern society. I use both personal anecdotes and external examples to support my ideas.

The Cost of Self-Control

Society tells us we need self control in order to be good, and that without it we are moral failures. But being so in control my entire life has only left me questioning all of the grey area behavior nobody seems to act on—all of the uncomfortable conversations nobody seems to want to have. This is what makes it hard to figure out if our virtues unite us or confine us. For this reason I have made sure to always behave because that's what I've always been told to do in order to be considered good. Morality has taken over every square inch of my mind. It is what drives my every decision, and is the force that has pushed me to move forward ever since I was a young child. All I ever wanted was to be good, and if I can't be that, I don't want to be anything.

I've held onto my self-control so tightly that I'd have to think back ten years to remember the last time I lost it. I was eleven years old. I looked up and saw my mom's old CRT television start to waver over me, and as I watched it fall forward I kicked harder and harder. I lay there knowingly and welcomed the impending crash. I'm almost certain I closed my eyes. I hated myself so much in that moment I didn't even care, I wanted to hurt. It couldn't come down fast enough, because my mom's hands came in swinging—practically punching the television out of the way. For weeks I sat up at night and wish she hadn't been there to stop the crash. I wish it had happened so for once she could see how much pain I was actually in.

Since that day my life has been seemingly perfect. Without fail I made sure to tell everyone that I'm always happy, doing well, and that I'm always strong enough to put others first. Everyone seemed to buy it. I used to pat myself on the back for keeping it all together, but I can't seem to pull it off anymore. I have been maintaining self-control for so long I don't even know who I am. It terrifies me.

We are told over and over that if we exert self control we will be successful—we will be good. And if we are good, then we must be happy. And so my insatiable desire to be inherently virtuous at all times has created my tumultuous relationship with self control. I learned to color within the lines so perfectly I barely thought about it anymore. It's scary how skilled I am at saying one thing when I'm actually thinking something else, acting like I'm listening when I simply can't, pretending to be happy when I'm nearly dying inside. It's just a skill you acquire as you age. It wasn't until recently that I realized it was that very virtue that had turned into something far more dangerous for me. My devotion to self-control has allowed me to cope. It's what got me through some of my lowest points thus far. However it is my mask, and I believe that sooner or later we all end up becoming what we pretend to be.

Perhaps the way we practice self-control as a society has done more bad than good, because it seems like life is a lot different than what people hope for. It's understandable—we can all protect ourselves for a bit with our individual efforts to be in control. But this doesn't hide the fact that our attempts have only created a gap between who we are and who we are allowed to be. And the worst part is, is that we characterize this social issue as an individual crisis. We are so deeply entrenched in this isolation we can't even look up long enough to see how widespread it really is. It's hard to ignore just how strange we all are—so close to one another at all times yet so incredibly lonely. For my part, it's gotten so bad I can't even discern what is me and what I have been told is me. Perhaps everyone has trouble with this too. Perhaps we aren't even free at all.

What is the cost of adhering to a virtue too much? Relinquishing self control can be paradoxically restoring not only for individuals but for society as a whole. What will be the point of our lives if it's not to break the mold of which we have been blocked into? We are so

composed all the time, it's easy to feel alone in our own darkness. Oftentimes people are a lot more sad than they pretend. Sadness works its way into your being over time, until you no longer feel quite like yourself. For my part, I have been so accustomed to going through the motions I was willing to sacrifice my own emotional sanity in order to meet everyone's expectations. I have never been told that it was okay to not be okay. I think if I'd heard that just once it would've saved me. But I realize now that there is a much larger social and cultural context that lies behind my own individual experience with this virtue. Self-control is more like social control, in that we have mistaken a deeply entrenched social struggle for personal control and constant responsibility. And while self-control in and of itself is an inherently good virtue, it has morphed into something that manipulates us by rather than inspires us. We live within a society that has created a strong, ever present social order through the means of strong individualization. In the name of upholding the virtue of self-control, we as a society have learned to sweep a lifetime of pain under the carpet where no one can see. We've mastered the craft—we've nearly perfected it.

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