

Thinking and Knowing

Defining control for the application of positive self-control

Justine-Juliette Grindley
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I invite you to imagine electronics. I invite you to investigate the operations of a computer at its most fundamental level. Computers are incredibly complex entities to the eye, but even their most elaborate displays and abilities are but a byproduct of a simple binary: Zeros and Ones—yes's and no's. These machines are made by creators, who learned their methods from the generations of creators before them, and so on. Though each operating system is programmed using the same two digits, there are infinite possibilities of patterns to be made with them, giving each model its own unique identity, its own charms and its own flaws, determined by the whims and abilities of their cooperate creators. In that way, computers are a lot like us. We are created and programmed from the ground up, with all possibilities of our behaviors and appearances to be determined by our DNA, environment and upbringing—our own system of code. To expand on this analogy, we could say that our actions result from the coding of our souls which, when simplified, look very much like a carefully configured database of yes's and no's operating each of our decisions. If we consider our virtue of self-control using these terms to explain a binary system behind our actions, temperance becomes a tangible entity and, most importantly, an entity that can be reprogrammed with the right knowledge and skill. By analyzing a conversation found in The Dialogues of Plato, the epidemic of intimate partner violence by authoritative figures in our society and the methods of successful rehabilitation in drug addicts, we can begin to see tangible commonalities across seemingly separate toxic mentalities. One argument that continually surfaces within the content of these readings is a conclusion that most unhealthy habits are formed *not* from a lack of interior self-control, but instead by a strong desire for exterior control. This desire for control usually spans from the nature and nurture of one's upbringing. In other words, our desire for control over what we know not how to control induces actions that carry the façade of a lack of discipline. If we are to practice good self-control in any

maintainable way, the best method very well could be an investigation and reprogramming from the ground up—exploring the definition of control that has been made by our individual experiences, confronting those experiences, and readjusting that binary code that inspires our day-to-day thoughts, feelings and actions. If we search for control, with a poor definition of what control is, then our ability to be disciplined in the quest of obtaining it can only further harm. In other words, to change what we do, we must change what we think and to change what we think, we must change what we know.

In the Dialogues of Plato, we are confronted with a discussion between Socrates and Gorgias. In their conversation they discuss the differences between knowledge and belief, concluding that, ultimately, the main discrepancy between the two are that there can be false belief but not false knowledge (Plato, 334). This would seem to imply that temperance is an accessible virtue, that when presented with the knowledge of our actions, we cannot hide from the truth of what our actions represent. However, if things were this simple, the ending of cyclical poor choices in our lives could be found in a simple obtaining of exterior reasoning and deliverance of fact. The problem is that our systems of belief are based on what *we* know from our learned experiences, not on an exterior transmitting of global “good” virtues. One may recognize the damage that their actions impose, but *true* knowledge is represented by their nature in and of itself. If it is within one’s nature to resort off-hand to addiction, abuse or other toxic behaviors, then that is indeed what they *know*. By using this line of thought, in tandem with the words of Plato, it can be surmised that to change our harmful behaviors, we must observe the information we are given—that our individual decisions have a negative effect we wish to discontinue—and use it to guide us in evolving the knowledge we hold deeply within us. True self-control lies in our ability to trust information we are yet to understand, and use that

information in exploring and readjusting the binaries of our internal responses, beginning with their formative structures.

Perhaps the most jarring example of “poor self-control” is domestic violence. In an article by Zavala Egbert and Lisa A. Melander, *Intimate Partner Violence Perpetrated by Police Officers: Is it Self-Control or the Desire-To-Be-In-Control That Matters More?*, we see the objective of changing ones actions to not necessarily be rooted self-control abilities, but rather their desire for control. Most instances of intimate partner violence by police officers has been linked heavily to trauma exposure early on in their own lives (168). Of course, continued stress on the field and being subject to a career that involves frequent observations of violence certainly has its role in solidifying their violent tendencies, these occurrences act more as “triggers” than as instigators (168). In truth, most police officers would not acquire the jobs that they have if their self-control was limited, as this trait would make an appearance in the application and training process before ever receiving a badge (169). If a child experiences domestic abuse between their parents, or becomes a victim of abuse themselves, they may grow to crave the control that they lacked in their upbringing (168). If not confronted and managed, this violent socialization may present itself in all aspects of the person’s life once they reach adulthood. It may lead them to seek a profession in which they are handed a position of direct authority over others, as well as relationships in which they can employ “terroristic control” (172) over their spouses and children. For these reasons, we must understand the qualities that differentiate “poor self-control” from a “desire for control”, and use these distinctions when observing our own control complexes. If the issue is rooted from a desire for control, teaching an abuser how to apply “good self-control” is only worsening the situation, as self-control is the ability and discipline to act on methodically on what we truly desire and know to be true. For true change,

the abuser must re-write what they know to be true—they must reprogram themselves from the ground up, beginning with the learned behaviors they absorbed in youth. Self-control is a secondary application. To understand how one may begin this reprogramming, so as to develop a sense of self-control that aligns with who they want to become and not who they currently are, we can direct our observations to the methods used in substance abuse clinics.

The Effectiveness of Integrated Matrix Therapy on Self-Control and Emotional Regulation by Farnaz Abhar Zanjani, explores an experiment of psychological therapy for methamphetamine users in Mashhad substance abuse clinics in the winter of 2016 (36). With substance addiction being an emotional disorder more than anything else, their research involved changing “ineffective emotional regulation strategies” (36-43). Over the course of 24 sessions, therapy involved open discourse, observations and counselling in every realm of the addict’s life—They would explore everything from the physical symptoms of withdrawals, to an understanding of the roots of their temptations, to the readjusting of their emotional signifiers when observing their own actions, such as guilt and shame (36-43). The main component of these sessions was not to simply instill a sense of self-discipline in the patients, but to also introduce a method of positive refocusing of perspectives, so that their self-discipline could be built upon a strong psychological and emotional foundation (36-43). This “Matrix Therapy” led to significant long-term results in methamphetamine users by tackling knowledge and emotional responses held deeply within, resulting in a change of physical reactions.

While researching self-control from the perspectives of the above pieces, I find myself analyzing my own habits. There are many patterns I find myself falling into, such as maintaining relationships that are harmful to my emotional and physical wellbeing—with other people as well as with substances. There is never a point where I do not logically understand that my

affiliations or actions have a negative impact, and yet that logical understanding rarely (if ever) leads to a long-term improvement or cessation of those patterns. The problem lies—just like in the abusers and methamphetamine addicts—in what I *know* from the world around me. Only with the theory that my own knowledge is flawed, and faith in positive external influences that I am yet to truly know, can I explore my resulting actions and begin to reprogram the binary codes that impede my progress—resulting in a *healthy* definition and sense of control. After all, if your computer faces a virus or manufacturing error, you would not attempt to solve it by changing the screensaver.

Work Cited

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