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Self-Constraint versus Self-Liberation

Tyler Cowen

INTRODUCTION

The rational choice literature on self-management and self-control postulates that persons have multiple or shifting sets of preferences which vie for the power of control.¹ One particularly influential version of the self-management problem bifurcates the individual into a long-run, rational self and a short-run, impulsive or “irrational” self.²

The rule-oriented self uses binding constraints to ensure that it will prevail in forthcoming periods, just as Ulysses tied himself to the mast to prevent himself from succumbing to the song of the sirens. The modern Ulysses destroys his cigarettes to give up smoking, takes antabuse to stop drinking, or leaves credit cards at home when shopping. Even when binding precommitment is not possible, persons may attempt to increase

1. Important works in the self-constraint literature include George Ainslie, “Specious Reward: A Behavioral Theory of Impulsiveness and Impulse Control,” *Psychological Bulletin* 82 (1975): 463–96; Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and “Weakness of Will and the Free-Rider Problem,” *Economics and Philosophy* 1 (1985): 231–65; Jon Elster, ed., *The Multiple Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); George Loewenstein, “Anticipation and the Valuation of Delayed Consumption,” *Economic Journal* 97 (1987): 666–84; Thomas Schelling, “The Intimate Contest for Self-Command,” *Public Interest* 60 (1980): 94–118, *Choice and Consequence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), “Self-Command in Practice, in Policy, and in a Theory of Rational Choice,” *American Economic Review* 74 (1984): 1–11, and “Enforcing Rules on Oneself,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 1 (1985): 357–74; Robert Strotz, “Myopia and Inconsistency in Dynamic Utility Maximization,” *Review of Economic Studies* 23 (1955–56): 165–80; Richard Thaler, “Towards a Positive Theory of Consumer Behavior,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1 (1980): 39–60; Richard Thaler and H. M. Shefrin, “An Economic Theory of Self-Control,” *Journal of Political Economy* 89 (1981): 392–406; and Gordon Winston, “Addiction and Backsliding: A Theory of Compulsive Consumption,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1 (1980): 295–324. The view of the self offered in rational choice theories of self-constraint resembles the theory of behavior modification in psychology; see Harry I. Kalish, *From Behavioral Science to Behavioral Modification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

2. Rather than speaking of a long-run, rational self and a short-run irrational self, I refer to rule-oriented and impulsive selves throughout the article in order not to introduce a bias in favor of the long-run self. The issue of how to distinguish different selves properly is considered in more detail below.

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the costs of disregarding the will of the rule-oriented self. Dieters may buy clothes of a smaller size, for instance.

Multiple selves constructs are used in the literature on economics and rational choice to analyze several different types of problems. First, multiple selves models help us consider the argument for paternalism. If we are unable to enforce our rational, long-run will upon our impulsive selves, perhaps government policy can assist us in this endeavor. Banning smoking in public places, for instance, need not be coercive from the smoker's point of view. Although one of our options is restricted, our more rational selves may prefer that this option be restricted. The presence of multiple selves thus makes it difficult to unambiguously define either consumer sovereignty or coercion.³

Multiple selves models are also used to explain some otherwise puzzling features of market institutions. Markets sometimes offer self-control or disciplinary services for hire, as evidenced by smoking and weight loss clinics. Christmas clubs and credit unions help persons enforce budgeting discipline. Why else would individuals allow themselves to be forced to lay away money periodically at below-market rates of interest? The multiple selves model also has implications for predicting the consequences of tax cuts or other changes in economic policy. If self-constraint is a problem, we might expect the proceeds of a windfall tax cut to be spent, even when saving would be a more rational use of the money.

In this article, I focus on the underpinnings of multiple selves models. Much of the self-management literature analyzes the strategies that the rule-oriented self uses to induce cooperation from the impulsive self. I refer to this as the command view of self-management. Witness the title of Schelling's well-known essay "The Intimate Quest for Self-Command."

In contrast to much of the current literature, I explore scenarios where the impulsive self behaves strategically, and constraining one's rule-oriented self is the most important self-management problem. Self-liberation, as opposed to self-constraint, is the relevant goal. This article does not attempt to support this claim by a detailed examination of the literature on empirical psychology; instead, I use a combination of argument and anecdote to support the plausibility of my point of view.⁴

3. I consider this issue in more detail in my "The Scope and Limits of Preference Sovereignty" (1990, typescript).

4. The possibility of strategic behavior from the impulsive self has been recognized by Schelling, "Self-Command in Practice"; Richard Burt, "Commentary on Schelling's 'Enforcing Rules on Oneself,'" *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 1 (1985): 381–83; and George Ainslie, "A Behavioral, Economic Approach to the Defense Mechanisms: Freud's Energy Theory Revisited," *Social Science Information* 21 (1982): 735–79. The importance of self-liberation has been recognized by Burt; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (e.g., p. 40); and George Ainslie, "Behavioural Economics. II. Motivated Involuntary Behavior," *Social Science Information* 23 (1984): 47–78. Nonetheless, self-constraint still receives the primary emphasis in the literature. Elster's "Weakness of Will," for instance, argues that the rule-oriented self has an asymmetric advantage when it comes to strategic behavior. The writings of Schelling also emphasize self-control rather than self-liberation.

This article suggests a new orientation for the study of self-management. Self-management is an attempt to coordinate and extend one's personality development rather than a struggle for self-command. As I argue below, this reconceptualization of self-management has implications for our understanding of specific economic and social problems, including risk-taking behavior, addiction, advertising, and the effects of the market economy on personality and morals.

HOW DO THE TWO SELVES DIFFER?

I define the rule-oriented and impulsive selves according to their preferences. The rule-oriented self refers to the forces in a personality which attempt to impose regularities and controls on a person's behavior. In contrast, the impulsive self designates the forces that favor spontaneity and unpredictability. I thus identify a self with a set of preferences linked to certain cognitive and volitional capacities. The presence of two selves in a person implies conflicting desires, either at a single point in time or over time. As a person's preferences change, one self is supplanted by another.

The selves considered in this article need not value rules or spontaneity as ends in themselves. Instead, the demands for rules or spontaneity may be derived demands. Personality features such as self-control or spontaneity are linked to particular internal values. By exercising self-control, for instance, a person may better achieve the internal values of prudence and moderation. Or spontaneity may favor the value of sexuality. For the remainder of this article, however, I take the derived demands for rules and spontaneity as given and do not emphasize the role of underlying internal values in generating these demands.

Either the rule-oriented or impulsive self will be in command of a person's faculties at a given moment. Most likely, both rule-oriented and impulsive selves will recur over time, with neither exercising continual control. The impulsive self in this article is capable of weighing future consequences. The actions of an impulsive self are not limited to myopic forms of immediate gratification and may involve sophisticated strategic maneuvers; I argue for the plausibility of this below.⁵ Even when these maneuvers are not themselves spontaneously undertaken, they may still maximize long-run spontaneity in the person, given the constraints imposed by the presence of the rule-oriented self.

Since most persons possess more than two conflicting impulses, the two-selves model is a considerable oversimplification. Rules versus spontaneity is just one of many intrapersonal conflicts that persons experience. I also do not consider endogeneity of control or factors that determine

5. Even an impulsive self who receives utility only in the short run may engage in strategic behavior if it cares about having its desires implemented after its disappearance, as illustrated by Merton's example discussed below. A parallel can be drawn with death; although persons receive no utility after death, they may still care about what happens after they are gone and act to ensure certain outcomes.

which self has the power to act during which points of time. Despite these limitations, the two-selves model may help us understand intrapersonal struggle. The multiple-selves model attempts to provide a useful framework for organizing our thoughts and finding analogies (and dis-analogies) between intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts.

CAN THE IMPULSIVE SELF ENGAGE IN STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR?

The literature on self-management generally argues that the rule-oriented self has a greater ability to engage in strategic behavior than the impulsive self. Jon Elster, for instance, notes, "Typically, the self who wants to stop drinking is capable of long-term anticipation of what the other self will do, but the latter does not deploy such strategies. . . . This is not to say that the self who wants to drink has no weapons to deploy. Typically, however, it proceeds by (short-term) deception rather than (long-term) manipulation."⁶ Elster thus imposes a fundamental asymmetry upon the self-management problem. If one of the selves is largely incapable of strategic behavior, self-management becomes primarily an issue of how the strategically inclined self imposes (or fails to impose) its will upon the weaker self.

The notion of an impulsive self presented here can behave strategically also. Precommitment, for instance, is not the exclusive province of the rule-oriented self; the impulsive self can also lock a person into long-range commitments. Such commitments may be made because the impulsive self is afraid that the rule-oriented self, left to its own devices, will thwart or reverse spontaneous desires.

An example of impulsive precommitment is given in Robert Merton's study of social pressures. Merton notes the ephemerality of many persons' desires to contribute to the American war effort during the Second World War. The desire to contribute was strong only immediately after hearing radio appeals for funds. Merton's study of contributors revealed that "in some instances, listeners telephoned at once precisely because they wished to commit themselves to a bond before inhibiting factors intervened." After making such telephone calls, persons were required to fulfill commitments that had been undertaken by their impulsive selves.⁷

Even when the impulsive self cannot precommit, the impulsive self can engage in strategic behavior by increasing the cost of precommitment to the rule-oriented self. The costs of binding precommitment generally increase as the future becomes more uncertain because the flexibility lost through precommitment becomes more valuable. The impulsive self may thus deliberately increase future uncertainty to obtain additional leverage in a self-management game.

6. Elster, "Weakness of Will and the Free-Rider Problem," pp. 234–35.

7. Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1946), pp. 68–69.

A camping weekend in the mountains may be an effective means of limiting drinking if the person does not bring alcohol, but this precommitment strategy of the rule-oriented self can be countered. A weekend trip involves costs if the boss may suddenly try to call his employee into work on Saturday. In the workplace, one's impulsive self might thus accept projects that involve being on call during weekends. Working on such projects will increase the cost of precommitment and perhaps prevent the camping trip.

Even if the rule-oriented self achieves partial precommitment, the impulsive self can sometimes retaliate effectively. The impulsive self could defy the rule-oriented self more intensely when the opportunity to rebel arises. Assume that the rule-oriented self always requests seats in the nonsmoking section of restaurants to limit smoking. Once out of the restaurant, the rule-oriented self no longer has access to this constraint. The impulsive self may then smoke stronger cigarettes with a higher tar content, smoke more frequently, or take deeper puffs on the cigarettes. Even if chosen self-constraints decrease the number of cigarettes smoked, the impulsive self can compensate by altering the quality variable of the pleasure enjoyed. Perhaps the impulsive self will develop another addiction altogether.⁸

Although the above examples illustrate how the impulsive self can counter precommitment, the rule-oriented self has other disciplinary devices at its disposal, such as punishments for deviant behavior or rewards for self-control. A person may treat himself to a nice meal in a restaurant as a reward for having saved money or may buy a new sweater to reward successful dieting. If a person develops an internal reputation for toughness, such rewards and punishments may be effective in enforcing discipline.

The impulsive self, however, can utilize retaliatory techniques that take advantage of time-consistency problems. Time consistency is the Achilles' heel of ex post punishment or reward; once the infraction has been committed, it may no longer be desirable to carry out the punishment. Likewise, rewards can be enjoyed, even if they have not been earned.

The impulsive self can remind the rule-oriented self of the logic of backward induction, which implies that cooperation (punishment in response to an infraction, in this context) is not sustainable in multiperiod games with a finite horizon. The rule-oriented self may attempt to overcome the logic of backward induction by deliberately ignoring information about the game's pay-off structure or finite horizon. In retaliation, the impulsive self can attempt to reintroduce such information into the person's deliberations. If the person is fully aware that he or she will binge on the last day of a diet, dietary discipline may never get off the ground.

8. Jeffrey A. Harris, "Taxing Tar and Nicotine," *American Economic Review* 70 (1980): 300–311, examines more generally the use of quality adjustments in response to taxes on quantity; in this context, the rule-oriented self is placing a quantity tax on the habits of the impulsive self.

Unlike the weapon of short-run deception analyzed by Elster, Donald Davidson, and David Pears, this tactic requires only that the impulsive self speak the truth.⁹

The ability of the rule-oriented self to use other persons is well known. Harry I. Kalish gives the example of Victor Hugo, who would write naked and instruct his valet to keep his clothing out of reach so he would not be tempted to go outside instead of write.¹⁰ Disciplinary programs for weight loss, drinking control, and budgeting are all strengthened by cooperation with others. Likewise, the impulsive self can also enlist the cooperation of other persons in the battle against the rule-oriented self. Men who are regarded by their friends as workaholics or “too uptight” are sometimes encouraged to drink or take vacations to loosen up. Knowing this, the impulsive self may deliberately parade the dual’s rigidities in front of other persons in the hope of enlisting their help.

CAN THE RULE-ORIENTED SELF BE TOO STRONG?

Much of the self-management literature stresses the desirability of victory for the rule-oriented self. The rule-oriented self wishes to give up smoking, drinking, or some other undesirable activity but is thwarted by resistance from the impulsive self. In this view, the person’s well-being depends upon the ability of the rule-oriented self to win the battle for self-command.

There is no *prima facie* reason for believing that victory for the rule-oriented self is desirable. Many cases, such as the abuse of alcohol or hard drugs, may require the victory of the rule-oriented self for personal welfare, but too many victories for the rule-oriented self can be injurious to mental health. A person who continually thwarts the desires of his impulsive self may become frustrated and overly rigid and lose his capacity for spontaneity. Although our impulsive selves sometimes act irresponsibly, they are also responsible for much of the fun we have.

Mental health requires a balancing of the claims of the rule-oriented and impulsive selves rather than continual victories for the rule-oriented self. In some cases it may be preferable that the impulsive self wins out; in other cases it is best when neither self wins and conflicting desires are

9. On self-deception, see Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980); and David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). The logic of backward induction is explained in Reinhard Selten, “A Reexamination of the Perfectness Concept for Equilibrium Points in Extensive Games,” *International Journal of Game Theory* 4 (1975): 25–55. The role of uncertainty in inducing cooperation in multiperiod games is analyzed by David Kreps and Robert Wilson, “Reputation and Imperfect Information,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 27 (1982): 253–79; and David Kreps, Paul Milgrom, John Roberts, and Robert Wilson, “Rational Cooperation in the Finitely Repeated Prisoner’s Dilemma,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 27 (1982): 245–52. The well-known “tit-for-tat” solutions analyzed in Robert Axelrod’s *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic, 1984) make sense only if there is uncertainty about the behavior of one’s opponent.

10. Kalish, p. 297.

integrated and reconciled. Neither self, of course, will necessarily favor the best overall outcome, as each self may have a less than full regard for the interests of its counterpart. In effect, the rule-oriented self can inflict externalities upon the impulsive self (or vice versa). Overdiscipline may arise from this externalities problem.¹¹

Overdiscipline may arise from a number of other sources as well. Either or both selves may have biases or failings of a cultural, biological, or cognitive nature which militate against full rationality. In the case of cognitive biases, persons may simply fail to perceive all of the costs of regulating their behavior with rules; perhaps the person focuses so intensively upon the goal that can be achieved by behavior regulation that sight is lost of the full consequences of a choice.

Another possible source of overdiscipline is our biological heritage. Rule-governed behavior is not unique to humans but is also utilized extensively by animals to solve problems.¹² Humans have since developed the capacity to analyze and think linguistically, an ability which may be an effective substitute for rule-governed behavior in many instances. However, humans may still have an inherited tendency to apply rules, even when rules are not always appropriate. Persons might thus be better off if their impulsive selves could more successfully fight this tendency to use rules.

The life of German philosopher Immanuel Kant provides a more extreme example of an excessively strong rule-oriented self. Kant's biographer discusses Kant's use of mental discipline to master the physical impulses of his body; Kant would suppress thirst, coughing, colds, and headaches by sheer force of will.¹³ All other aspects of Kant's life were rigidly regulated as well; Kant never married, and J. H. W. Struckenberg described his career as "sixty-six years of severe and uninterrupted mental application."¹⁴

Kant's lectures, hours of study, meals, evening walk, and bedtime were all regulated to the minute. Even bad weather did not deter Kant from taking his walk, during which he carefully regulated his behavior to ensure that he neither perspired nor breathed through his mouth,

11. A number of philosophical issues relevant to intrapersonal preference aggregation are discussed by Gregory Kavka, "Is Individual Choice Less Problematic Than Collective Choice?" (University of California, Irvine, 1988, typescript). If we treat intrapersonal aggregation as analogous to Arrow's problem, preference dictatorship is a necessary solution only if we do not allow for cardinality of preferences. This essay does not address the problem of aggregating the interests of different selves. It is unlikely, however, that a solution to this problem would involve no weight whatsoever for the interests of the impulsive self.

12. See Ronald Heiner, "Rule-governed Behavior in Evolution and Human Society" (George Mason University, 1987, typescript).

13. See J. H. W. Struckenberg, *The Life of Immanuel Kant* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 102–4.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

two activities which he regarded as injurious to his health. Kant also insisted that his servant wake him at five every morning with the stern military call "It is time!" and never let him sleep beyond five, however strongly he might plead for more time in bed. Kant would often proudly announce that in his thirty years with his servant, the servant was never obliged to wake him twice.¹⁵

Kant felt that "great physical and mental regularity was essential. He feared even slight changes, lest they should affect his health or interfere with his studies; hence he was rigorous with himself, and made his life singularly methodical. There was a painful anxiety in his strict conformity to rules, which at last got the mastery over him and excluded spontaneity."¹⁶

Many individuals suffer from Kant's neuroses in less extreme form. Overly rigid persons, workaholics, persons who will incur high costs to be punctual, compulsive exercisers or cleaners, persons with authoritarian personalities, and tightwads are but a few examples where the rule-oriented self becomes too strong. The costs of overdiscipline are not only psychological; workaholics, for instance, may develop costly health problems.

The harmful nature of excessive self-control is emphasized by a school of psychologists called the "insight therapists."¹⁷ Insight therapy emphasizes that self-control often substitutes for personality integration. Persons may use their rule-oriented self to control the external manifestation of an underlying personality disorder without coming to terms with the disorder itself. Rather than simply trying to control the external manifestations of deviant behavior, insight therapy recommends trying to reconcile deviant impulses with one's entire personality.¹⁸

Failure to achieve this reconciliation may have serious consequences. Richard Burt gives the example of a person who succeeds in controlling the urge to scratch his or her face by disabling or occupying his or her hands. In response, the person develops an uncontrollable facial tic.¹⁹ The mere suppression of bothersome behavior patterns does not always suffice to achieve a satisfactory result, as suppression may simply encourage the development of substitute neuroses that cannot be so easily regulated.

Other reasons can be given why self-management problems may involve a rule-oriented self that wishes to stimulate the impulsive self rather than control it. Stimulating the impulsive self may be rational for the rule-oriented self, even when the two selves have conflicting desires.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–62.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

17. See Burt.

18. Personality integration is a common theme in numerous classic works of psychology. See Carl G. Jung, *The Importance of Personality Integration* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939); and Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950) for two examples. The psychological literature on the costs of self-control has been heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930; reprint, New York: Norton, 1961).

19. Burt, p. 382.

The effectiveness of the rule-oriented self may depend upon the presence of counterbalancing activities from the impulsive self. A rule-oriented self that became too strong might be less successful in imposing its will in the long run because of the resulting deterioration in mental health. The impulsive self might also provide bursts of creativity and innovation whose value can be harnessed only by the rule-oriented self. In addition, some cheating on rules may be desirable to prevent a complete breakdown of discipline. A person may periodically cheat on his diet because he or she knows that the strain of enforcing complete abstinence from fattening foods is too great to bear and could lead to a complete collapse of discipline. A strong and healthy impulsive self may thus benefit the rule-oriented self; a weaker impulsive self which never gets its way may produce neuroses that undermine the long-term ability of the rule-oriented self to function.

Self-liberation techniques can result in greater strength for the rule-oriented self in other instances as well. Gambling, buying lottery tickets, or other forms of impulsive risk taking, for instance, may contribute to interself cooperation. Risk taking increases the uncertainty of future payoffs; persons who periodically take risks may thus avoid the feeling that their situation is a dead end. A belief that the future is hopeless might disrupt patterns of self-cooperation and break down self-discipline, as persons who see no hope for the future might have difficulty constraining themselves from drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in other destructive practices. An impulsive self strong enough to induce a person to take chances may thus indirectly contribute to the ability of the rule-oriented self to control other, more dangerous impulses.

It is often remarked that purchasers of lottery tickets are "buying a dream," rather than maximizing the expected value of their monetary income (a one dollar lottery ticket usually has an expected value of forty to sixty cents). If playing the lottery increases hope and encourages greater self-cooperation, however, buying lottery tickets with an apparent negative expected value may actually maximize long-run utility. Gambling may be part of a broader self-management program that involves cooperation between the rule-oriented and impulsive selves. In contrast, standard analyses of self-constraint regard gambling or buying lottery tickets as impulsive activities that the rule-oriented self wishes to constrain.

The above hypothesis about risk taking is consistent with many of our intuitions concerning lotteries and gambling. Casual empiricism suggests that individuals in "dead end" situations are most likely to gamble or play the lottery. Gambling may help overcome the feeling that the future is hopeless and thus induce successful self-constraint for these persons in other areas.

Behavioral quirks and peculiarities may serve a function similar to risk-taking behavior. For instance, there is a chance that my impulsive self will resign my current university position and enter the world of business. Even if my rule-oriented self would disapprove if I left academia,

the existence of the possibility of switching occupations may benefit the rule-oriented self. I may refrain from developing habits, such as sloppiness or laziness, that would be particularly disadvantageous outside of academia. Again, uncertainty may encourage interself cooperation by increasing the potential costs of a breakdown of discipline; one's impulsive self may be an important source of uncertainty.

IS ADDICTION ALWAYS THE RESULT OF WEAKNESS OF WILL?

In addition to enforcing overly strict codes of behavior, the rule-oriented self may also be responsible for addictions and other harmful consumption patterns. Addiction is not always the result of weakness of will or a predominance of the impulsive self; a person's rule-oriented self may make a deliberate decision to become an addict. Such a decision may be spurred by the absence of impulsive, spontaneous pleasures in a person's life. Without such pleasures, ordinary life may not be sufficiently attractive when compared to addiction.

In the country of North Yemen, for instance, nearly 80 percent of the population regularly chews a habit-forming substance known as qat, which induces mild euphoria for several hours and is regarded as a source of energy. Qat chewing is so widespread in Yemen that some sources estimate qat's share of the gross national product at 30 percent.²⁰ Fewer than 50 percent of heavy qat users, however, are unsatisfied with their addiction or wish to stop chewing qat; most Yemenis are proud of their custom of qat use.²¹ Qat may serve as a substitute for the consumer goods and cultural stimulations that Yemen does not possess; indeed, Yemen is ranked by the World Bank as one of the six least developed countries in the world. In many cases, qat addiction does not appear contrary to the desires of the rule-oriented self.²²

Contrary to the usual analysis of self-constraint, strengthening the rule-oriented self might not significantly reduce qat addiction. Instead, overcoming qat addiction might better be served by the introduction of pleasures and temptations that give the impulsive self an incentive to fight qat addiction and seek alternative sources of pleasure. Kennedy notes that the Yemenis who are reducing their qat consumption belong to the small middle class and are primarily motivated by the desire to spend their money on consumer goods.²³ Furthermore, Yemenis who

20. John G. Kennedy, *The Flower of Paradise: The Institutionalized Use of the Drug Qat in North Yemen* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), p. 133.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 237.

22. Qat use in Yemen is consistent with some aspects of Gary S. Becker and Kevin S. Murphy, "A Theory of Rational Addiction," *Journal of Political Economy* 96 (1988): 675–700. A rule-oriented self may consciously choose addiction to maximize expected future utility. Unlike Becker and Murphy, however, the analysis in this article allows for selves (e.g., impulsive selves) whose interests are underrepresented in the decisions made by the rule-oriented self.

23. Kennedy, p. 238.

work abroad in the United States or Saudi Arabia often become disillusioned with qat as they develop interests in other facets of life.²⁴

SELF-MANAGEMENT AND MARKETS

An understanding of the self-liberation aspect of self-management may influence our attitudes toward numerous social and economic issues. If self-management is viewed primarily as a problem of self-constraint or command, for instance, attempts by firms to break down consumer discipline will be considered harmful or counterproductive. Self-constraint could be aided by restrictions on advertising or other persuasive marketing practices, thus increasing consumer welfare.

Attempts to disrupt consumer discipline are common in a market economy. Supermarkets and department stores are arranged so shoppers must walk by tempting merchandise and “splurge” items to reach other destinations. Businesses selling expensive automobiles, furniture, or other luxury items offer easy credit terms or allow the consumer to have the item for a free trial period. For commodities that are used regularly and periodically repurchased, such as lipsticks, deodorants, and bathroom tissues, suppliers give away free samples to develop consumers’ taste for the product.²⁵ Along this line, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb argue that focused supplier attempts to appeal to consumers were the true innovation behind the Industrial Revolution.²⁶

Many business practices, such as free samples and trial offers, can be interpreted as an attempt to inform consumers, as it is often difficult to separate the informative and persuasive functions of information. Nonetheless, breaking down consumer willpower and discipline appears to be an important component of many marketing practices. An obvious example is subliminal advertising, where suppliers attempt to undermine consumers’ willpower by the use of hidden images in advertisements or the insertion of flashed pictures or messages in a reel of film.

Critics of advertising traditionally argue that the chief function of advertising is persuasion, whereas defenders of advertising emphasize its informational and signaling functions.²⁷ The persuasive aspect of advertising, however, need not imply negative welfare consequences.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 191. Also of interest on this point is Herbert Fingarette, *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), who argues that alcoholism is a conscious decision rather than a disease.

25. Suppliers of self-control devices such as nicotine gum or exercise facilities, however, may prefer a preponderance of influence for the long-run, rational self. Likewise, banks wish to encourage savings and will also wish to encourage self-constraint rather than self-liberation.

26. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (London: Europa, 1982).

27. For a critique of advertising, see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958). The signaling functions of advertising are considered by Philip Nelson, “Advertising as Information,” *Journal of Political Economy* 82 (1974): 729–54.

Persuasive advertising may favor the impulsive self in persons and improve their well-being, as persons may be more likely to yield to temptation in a consumer-oriented economy. If self-constraint is too successful and self-liberation is underdeveloped, subversive marketing practices of suppliers may do more good than harm. Persons may become more spontaneous and impulsive and less able to adhere to programs of rigorous discipline.

Markets entail not only deliberate attempts to disrupt discipline (such as advertising) but also unplanned antidisciplinary effects. The wide selection of consumer goods, the freedom of choice, the increase in wealth, the greater accessibility of "licentious" opportunities, and the loosening of traditional social bonds resulting from the market economy may all encourage individual self-liberation and discourage rigid programs of self-discipline.

Samuel Brittain, in his *Capitalism and the Permissive Society*, argues that the freedom of choice associated with capitalism tends to generate permissive moralities.²⁸ Many conservatives have objected to capitalism's tendency to destroy or weaken traditional values; Brittain turns this criticism on its head and argues that the looser moral codes generated by capitalism are conducive to personal freedom.²⁹

The antidiscipline influence of the market, however, may be a mixed blessing. Even if the ability to implement overdiscipline decreases, an increase in individual welfare need not follow. Healthy personality development may require that the desire to discipline oneself diminishes as well. The best solution may entail a weaker desire for self-discipline, but given that the desire is there, success may be preferable to failure. Perhaps markets succeed only in producing persons with desires that can never be fulfilled.

In addition, the market's ability to break down overdiscipline in certain areas might simply induce a substitution of discipline into areas where markets exert less influence. Consider a person with tendencies toward overdiscipline who attempts to give up chocolates but is thwarted by persuasive advertising and free candy samples in shopping malls. This person might transfer his compulsive behavior to another area where it cannot be so easily frustrated; he may adopt an overly stringent exercise program during his evening hours, for instance.

A decrease in the ability to implement overdiscipline successfully, however, may also diminish the desire for overdiscipline. Success at an activity tends to reinforce a person's preference for that activity and failure tends to weaken preferences.³⁰ Furthermore, if persons are able

28. Samuel Brittain, *Capitalism and the Permissive Society* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

29. Albert Hirschman, *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays* (New York: Viking, 1986), offers a survey of different views of the effects of the market economy upon morals.

30. See Maynard W. Shelly and Tina Z. Adelberg, "The Constraint-Reinforcement Approach to Satisfaction," in *Analyses of Satisfaction*, vol. 1, ed. Maynard W. Shelly (New York: MSS Information, 1972).

to influence their preferences, they may attempt to get rid of preferences they know they cannot satisfy. Inability to overdiscipline oneself may give rise to self-management programs that attempt to eliminate the desire for overdiscipline.

In addition, even if the disruptive activities of market suppliers induce a switch into alternative spheres for self-discipline, the marginal valuation of discipline (for the rule-oriented self) in these new areas will be lower (otherwise discipline in these areas would have been preferred to begin with). If the value of discipline at the margin decreases, persons will be more likely to give up overdiscipline or at least invest fewer resources in ensuring its success.

Some of the above arguments suggest that Marx's hypothesis of alienation under capitalism may have roots in rational choice theory.³¹ Alienation may occur because markets change the balance of power in our self-management games. Marx, however, is not the only thinker to emphasize the effects of economic growth upon morals. The belief that wealth undermines important personal values was an important component in many theories of the fall of the Roman Empire. Hirschman notes that "[in this view] the republican virtues of sobriety, civic pride, and bravery—in ancient Rome—led to victory and conquest which brought opulence and luxury, which in turn undermined those earlier virtues and destroyed the republic and eventually the empire."³² A view of the market contrary to Marx's can be found in the German classical liberal Wilhelm von Humboldt, who argues that voluntary relationships encourage personality integration.³³ John Stuart Mill, likewise, saw a relationship between personal happiness and spontaneity and political freedom.³⁴

CONSTRAINT AND LIBERATION AS COLLECTIVE GOODS

In this article, I have discussed only the effects of self-liberation on individuals. It is possible, however, that self-liberation increases individual well-being but is socially undesirable. Self-constraint may produce positive externalities for society by inducing hard work, savings, and capital formation, and by making behavior more predictable. We would thus be faced with a situation analogous to the Prisoner's Dilemma. Each person would be better off if he or she (and perhaps his or her family and close friends) were liberated but other individuals were not.

A possible example of the social benefits of self-constraint is given by the Protestant work ethic, which Weber claims was a crucial factor behind the economic development of the West and the rise of capitalism.³⁵

31. On this point, see Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

32. Hirschman, p. 114.

33. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

34. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Norton, 1975).

35. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

Although the strict Protestant work ethic may have created psychological neuroses in many individuals, these problems may have been offset by the increase in wealth resulting from the creation of a capitalist economic order. If the economy was characterized by increasing returns to scale, engaging in business activities could resemble a free-rider problem and require the imposition or evolution of a norm for an efficient solution.

Freud also argues that the social benefits of self-control exceeded the private benefits.³⁶ Humans can only live in civilized society because of severe psychological constraints; these same constraints are the source of their misery in society. The anecdote about Kant's life discussed earlier may provide a good illustration of this point—Kant enriched society through his disciplined production of ideas, but in doing so he may have damaged his mental health.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As discussed above, current self-management theory emphasizes command. The focus on command in self-management theory has parallels in other branches of economics, such as management science or the theory of central planning. In these models, managers attempt to command resources within the firm or central planners attempt to command the allocation of resources within an entire economy.

Both management science and planning theory, however, have been moving away from an emphasis upon command; firms and economies are increasingly seen as self-regulating orders. A manager or planner is not analogous to a chess player who moves pieces around on a board to achieve the maximum effect; instead the problem is creating the conditions which allow a large number of independent and often conflicting forces effectively to coordinate their activities at a high or complex level of operation.³⁷

The rational choice approach to self-management problems should move in a similar direction. Successful self-management programs are no more based upon command than successful economies or firms are. Instead, good self-management involves the unleashing of forces in such a way as to create a complex but coordinated process of personality growth. Moving away from the assumption of asymmetry between the two selves represents only a single step in the direction of a new view of self-management. Further work is required to produce a more detailed alternative to current models.

36. Freud.

37. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Richard Nelson and Sidney Winter, *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), survey the social sciences literature on self-regulating orders.