Self-Control without a Self

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Abstract

Self-control is essential to the Buddhist soteriological project, but it is not immediately clear how we can make sense of it in light of the doctrine of no-self. Exercising control over our actions, thoughts, volitions, and emotions seems to presuppose a conception of self and agency that is not available to the Buddhist. Thus, there seems to be a fundamental mismatch in the practical instructions for exercising control in the Buddhist texts and the doctrine of no-self. In this paper, we develop and defend a general account of self-control that coheres with Abhidarma Buddhism. We defend the Buddhist against recent arguments that self-control depends on an executive self; instead, for the Buddhist, the psychology of self-control must be "horizontal", e.g., a matter of one desire winning out over another. However, the characterization of the psychological process isn't sufficient for a Buddhist theory of self-control. For the Buddhist account is *substantive.* According to Buddhism, a paradigmatic instance of self-control is an episode in which the desire that wins is a desire that conforms to Buddhist values; by contrast, an episode is not an instance of self-control if the desire that wins is opposed to Buddhist values. We also argue that there are significant resources that the Buddhist can draw on for enhancing self-control despite the denial of self.

Keywords: Buddhism, self-control, no-self view.

1. The problem of self-control in Buddhism

> If it is argued that to resist anger is inappropriate, for 'who is it that resists what?', our view is that it is appropriate: since there is dependent origination there can be cessation of suffering (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* VI.32; trans. Crosby & Skilton [1995: 53]).

In this cryptic passage Śāntideva raises a challenge for the Buddhist and suggests a solution to it, but the connection between the two is difficult to decipher. The problem arises because of the foundational doctrine of no-self in Buddhism. The Buddhist exhorts us to give up actions, thoughts, volitions, and emotions that augment suffering and to inculcate other actions, thoughts, volitions, and emotions that will reduce suffering. Anger is one of these inappropriate emotions that the Buddhist wants us to resist and eventually extirpate. But since there is no self, what are these exhortations addressed to? Exercising control over our actions, thoughts, volitions, and emotions seems to presuppose a conception of self and agency that is not available to the Buddhist. Śāntideva's proposed solution refers to the other foundational Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination: like everything else, suffering has causes, and we can remove suffering by removing its causes. It seems that the proposed solution does not address the problem directly. To be sure, Buddhists can argue that it is appropriate to resist anger since anger is one of the bad roots and thus augments suffering. This explains *why* anger is to be resisted, but does not address the problem: who is it that is supposed to resist anger?

How best can we offer a theoretically satisfying general account of self-control that is consistent with the no-self view? We think that the clue resides in Śāntideva's cryptic passage. One way to interpret the passage is to say that Śāntideva rejects 'who is it that resists what' as containing a false presupposition. Insofar as the question "who?" demands to be answered by identifying some self, the very

question presupposes the existence of a self and so the Buddhist must reject this form of the question. Instead, Śāntideva's reply is that suffering can be eliminated because it depends on its causes, anger, ignorance, etc. In saying that 'resisting anger is appropriate' Śāntideva insists on a redescription of the phenomenon of self-control that only talks about mental states and processes. Śāntideva is suggesting that in order to facilitate self-control and eliminate suffering, we need to dig into the psychological processes and psychological states that cause suffering. This invites a reformulation of question. Rather than asking "who is it that resists what? We should ask "how did that resistance happen?" or "how is control exercised?"

In this paper, we focus on the Abidharma Buddhist no-self view to provide an answer to how there can be self-control without a self. Although our framework for thinking through the problem is that of Abidharma Buddhism, we think that the issues are not of merely narrow historical interest. On the contrary, we take Abidharma Buddhism to be a living philosophy, a contender for having the correct metaphysical view of the self. In addition, the basic rejection of the existence of the self is a prominent theme in Western philosophy from Hume to Parfit, Dennett, and Metzinger. We think, though we won't have space to argue for it here, that the account we offer of self-control without a self also fits naturally with other no-self views.

Over the next 3 sections, we explore contemporary theories of self-control to prepare the groundwork for the Buddhist account of self-control. Though the contemporary accounts are not adequate to the Buddhist commitments, there are some important lessons to learn. Then in the subsequent sections, we apply these lessons to present a more acceptable Buddhist explanation for cases of self-control. But before that, in the rest of this Section, we explain why the problem of self-control is so central to Buddhist philosophy and why some of the standard strategies to address this problem in the contemporary literature on Buddhism will not work.

Śāntideva's challenge points to a deeper issue that must be faced by all Buddhists.[1] The practical instructions for exercising self-control seem to presuppose a notion of self and agency that is unavailable to the Buddhist.[2] In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (4:35) the Buddha describes qualities of the wise person to a brahmin Minister from the Kingdom of Magadha as one who has complete control over his thoughts and intentions. The brahmin audaciously asks whether the Buddha himself possesses these qualities. The Buddha's reply:

> Surely, brahmin, your words are prying and intrusive. Nevertheless, I will answer you. … I think what I want to think and do not think what I do not want to think; I intend what I want to intend and do not intend what I do not want to intend; thus I have attained to mental mastery over the ways of thought. (trans. Bikkhu Bodhi [2012: 424])

Our question is what is reference of the "I", according to the Buddha? If there is no self, who is it that exercises control over thoughts and volitions?

Self-control is essential to the Buddhist soteriological project, but it is not immediately clear how control is exercised and how we can make sense of it in light of the doctrine of no-self. This mismatch between the practical instructions for self-control and the theoretical commitment to the doctrine of

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[1] Although we have used a quote from Śāntideva (who is a Madhyamaka philosopher) to spell out the problem that motivates our paper, the problem arises for Abidharma/Abhidhamma Buddhists too, who specifically deny self as an agent. It is worth mentioning that in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Śāntideva often writes from an Abhidharma point of view. Our solution to the problem raised here follows Abhidharma metaphysics.

[2] Some might argue that Buddhist reference to the self can be explained away linguistically. The prefix/word "self" (*sva-* or *atta*/*ātma*) in Pali/Sanskrit has two meanings: a reflexive meaning or a substantive metaphysical meaning (as in Brahmanical texts). We can refer to "the self" in a metaphysical way that attributes ontological reality to personhood, a soul, an enduring entity. But we can also use it in a more metaphysically innocent way, as the reflexive pronoun (oneself, myself, yourself, themselves). This was a common usage in the early Vedic texts (see, e.g., [Kulikov 2007]). For instance:

(1) The gods have rubbed the power into themselves [Kulikov 2007: 1419].

This use of "themselves" is simply a way of expressing coreference with the subject; it doesn't explicitly invoke a substantial self any more than the following:

(2) The extension cord was plugged into itself.

(3) The sponge absorbed the water into itself.

Often when the Buddha and the Buddhists use words translated with "-self", they seem to mean them in the reflexive sense without assenting to the metaphysical meaning.

Although we agree that Buddhists often use "-self" in a reflexive way, the problem raised by Śāntideva remains even after acknowledging this. For his question isn't primarily about language. His question is about the nature of self-control.

no-self is rarely addressed in the Buddhist literature. The problem can be made vivid by attending to the Buddhist sentiment expressed in the following quote:

> There is suffering but none who suffer, there is action but no agent, there is *nibbāna* but no one who is released, there is a Path but no traveller on it (*Visuddhi Magga* 15f; trans. Warren [1896: 146])

If there is none who suffers, none who is an agent, then how can there be one who exercises self-control?

It's important to recognize that merely invoking the Path and the Doctrine of Two Truths does not solve the problem raised by Śāntideva. Let us suppose, as the Buddhists say, that the various instructions and recommendations are intended for those who are beginning on the path. In the early stages one has not abandoned the false view of the self, one really believes one is an agent in control of actions, emotions, and volitions. For those, however, who have made some progress on the path and thus attained some measure of awakening – say, a "stream enterer" who is supposed to have abandoned the false view of a self – the situation is different.[3] They can no longer follow the path as a naïf. One might think that the stream enterer can just revert to the Doctrine of Two Truths. According to this doctrine, while reference to a self cannot be *ultimately* true – since ultimately there is no self – a statement that talks about persons can be *conventionally* true provided acceptance of the statements reliably leads to successful worldly activities [Siderits 2008: 35]. On this view, persons can be thought of as agents and experiencers and the bearers of moral desert. Meyers appeals to this strategy to make sense of self-control:

> … in order to exert and cultivate self-control, he cannot simply take this objective, impersonal view. He must become a subject and regard himself as responsible for his actions. For example, in order to generate the desire to nourish wholesome qualities, he must identify with this desire. He must believe that it is something that belongs to him, something he chooses and can control.

[3] The stream enterer is technically defined as someone who has abandoned the five lower fetters: The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10.13 lists the following as the five lower fetters "Self-identity views, uncertainty, grasping at habits & practices, sensual desire, & ill will. The stream enterer has more to do, as there are still the five higher fetters that need to be abandoned. They are: Passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, & ignorance.

> When he has completed his training, when he has become thoroughly habituated to wholesome ways of being and has perfected self-control, he might be able to dispense with this subjective view, but until that point he must regard himself as an agent [2010: 262-3].

The idea is that when one sets off on the path prescribed by the Buddhists, one has no choice but to use the conventional notion of person to make sense of what it means to exercise control. Thus, one might maintain that Buddhist philosophers can consistently offer practical instructions for enhancing self-control which presuppose agency insofar as these instructions are premised on the conventional truth of persons [Siderits 2013; Goodman 2016].

Although we acknowledge that adverting to the Two Truths can be and is gainfully deployed by Buddhists, we do not wish to rely on these strategies here. The reason is that by definition conventionally real persons are causally inefficacious, the causal work is done by the ultimately real momentary *dharmas*. Persons thus are not suited to do the work of the self. And, in any case, postulating more or less persisting persons will lead to the unwholesome emotional habits and biases that lead us to prioritise our future selves [Williams 1998: 110-2; Chadha 2021]. In particular, appeal to the conventional truth of persons won't help us determine whether kind of self-control promoted by the Buddhists is theoretically consistent with the no-self doctrine. Given that the exercise of self-control is so central to the Buddhist practice, we think it will be more satisfying to a no-self theorist to have an account of self-control that does not require reverting to the conventional truth of persons. Thus, we will engage the philosophical puzzle posed by Śāntideva's question on its own terms.

2. Self-control and the executive self

Since our ambition is to treat the Abhidharma Buddhist account as philosophically viable, we want to bring that account into contact with contemporary research on self-control. According to a prominent view in the contemporary literature, we see a distinctive causal role for the self in the case of self-control. The idea has been developed most systematically in psychology by Roy Baumeister, but a variant of the

idea has been defended in philosophy by Richard Holton. Since Holton frames his discussion in philosophically familiar terms, we will start there.

Holton suggests that the interesting thing about the will is not *weakness* of will, but *strength* of will. Exhibiting strength of will is a paradigmatic case of self-control. Holton locates the issue in the context of familiar Humean accounts of the mind. The simple Humean account appeals only to beliefs and desires in explaining decisions, and agents "act on whichever of their desires are strongest" [Holton 2009: 112]. Many philosophers have come to think that this account needs to be supplemented with a notion of *intention.* I can come to a decision now about what to do tomorrow, and then not revisit that commitment. By closing off further deliberation, one gains significant cognitive efficiency (see e.g., [Bratman 1987; Pollack 1991]). We might then regard intentions as a separate kind of mental state that needs to be added to beliefs and desires in order to give an adequate account of the mind. This yields what Holton calls an "augmented" Humean account. Although there are important differences between the simple and augmented Humean account, Holton points out that they rely on a similar mechanism for explaining strength of will – it's all down to the strength of the occurrent desires. When it comes to the simple Humean account, "An explanation of how agents stick by their resolutions must show how they thereby act on their strongest desires" [Holton 2009: 112-113]. The augmented account includes intentions in addition to desires, but the mechanism that explains strength of will is much the same. In particular, the augmented Humean account "keeps the idea that it is the relative strength of the conative inputs that determines what the agent will do; it is just that these now consist not simply of desires, but of desires and intentions. If a resolution is stronger than any contrary desires, the agent will stick to it; if the contrary desires are stronger, then the agent will act on them instead" [Holton 2003: 40].

Willpower theory is an altogether different proposal. The willpower theory allows that there are beliefs, desires, and intentions. But it invokes a new mechanism to explain strength of will, a distinct faculty of will power. Holton writes:

> the agent's decision is determined not just by the relative strength of the conative inputs, the desires and the intentions. Rather, there is a separate faculty of will-power which plays an

> independent contributory role. Agents whose willpower is strong can stick by their resolutions even in the face of strong contrary desires; agents whose will-power is weak readily abandon their resolutions [2003: 40-41].

Thus, on this theory, "will-power is a distinct faculty, the exercise of which causally explains our ability to stick to a resolution" [Holton 2003: 40].

Evidence for this view that willpower is a distinct faculty comes from a series of "ego-depletion" studies by Baumeister and colleagues. The basic design of the studies is to first make a participant perform a task that (putatively) requires self-control, and then have the participant perform a subsequent task that also requires self-control. For instance, the first task might be to suppress emotional reactions to a film, and the second task to squeeze a handgrip exerciser. Or the first task might be to suppress thoughts about white bears and the second task to persist working on difficult (in fact, unsolvable) anagrams. Across a wide range of tasks, Baumeister and colleagues find that people perform worse on a second task that requires self-control after completing a first task that required self-control. Holton argues that this delivers an important critique of Humean accounts of decision-making that only employ beliefs and desires. Those accounts are mistaken, he suggests, because "willpower [is] something that agents have to actively employ, and something that they can be more or less good at" [2009: 134].

Baumeister articulates the willpower theory in a way that seems to directly put pressure on the Buddhist. He identifies the self as the source of willpower. As he puts it, "The self is the controller of controlled processes" [1998: 713]. To return to the ego-depletion studies, the idea is that there is nothing special about the relations between one task and another (e.g., it's not that there's something special about suppressing white-bear thoughts and working on anagrams), but rather there is some mediating variable that is affected by tasks that require self-control. And the most natural hypothesis is that that mediating variable is in fact a faculty of willpower, which we might identify as the self (see figure 1).



Figure 1: The self as executive in ego depletion

On this proposal, what really matters about the self is its capacity to be an executive. Baumeister and colleagues write: "One important part of the self is a limited resource that is used for all acts of volition, such as controlled… processing, active… choice, initiating behavior, and overriding responses" [Baumeister et al. 1998: 1253]. More colourfully, he writes:

> When you make a resolution or vow; when you drag yourself out of bed too early on a cold morning; when you decide what it is that you really want to buy or work on or become; when you stop yourself from acting on an impulse, such as to eat or drink or smoke, or to hit someone, or to sleep with the wrong person; when you vote, or when you take out a bank loan; when you resist fatigue and temptation and make yourself put forth the maximum effort, beyond the normal call of duty-these experiences involve the executive function of self as an active agent and decision-maker. Without this aspect, the self would be a mere helpless spectator of events, of minimal use or importance [1988: 680].

Baumeister's concluding sentence above makes the threat to Buddhism explicit: Baumeister maintains that the self as executive plays an essential role in an adequate causal explanation of episodes of self-control.

This notion of self as an executive would be anathema to Buddhists. An important part of the Abhidharma Buddhist rejection of the self is precisely the rejection of an executive. The self is not the instigator of actions, according to Buddhism. Vasubandhu gives the following explanation of action in the final Chapter of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, "… from recollection there is interest; from interest consideration; from consideration willful effort; from willful effort vital energy; and from that, action. So, what does the self do here? [trans. Kapstein 2001: 373]. Vasubandhu's argument against the self is to

show that it is superfluous. All the functions that the supposedly fulfills are performed by the "shifting coalition of psychophysical elements" [Siderits 2007: 27].

Abhidharma Buddhists seem to be committed to denying that the willpower theory and its attendant executive self. Yet the best explanation for the ego depletion effects seems to demand an executive self. However, there are significant empirical challenges to the interpretation of the ego depletion studies as evidence for the willpower theory.[4] Veronika Job and colleagues suggest that the ego-depletion effects are not the result of a special faculty of willpower, but instead *implicit theories* about willpower. That is, what matters is the participant's beliefs about willpower. One study aimed to show this by manipulating participants' beliefs about whether in fact willpower gets depleted upon use. Half of the participants got a biased questionnaire that was designed to generate agreement with the idea that willpower is a limited resource; they were asked to indicate agreement on items like: "Working on a strenuous mental task can make you feel tired such that you need a break before accomplishing a new task". The other half the participants got a questionnaire biased in the other direction, to facilitate agreement with the idea that willpower is not limited; they received items like "Sometimes, working on a strenuous mental task can make you feel energized for further challenging activities" [Job et al. 2010: 3]. Although participants were simply asked whether they agreed with the statements, the presence of the statements affected their views (at least temporarily) about whether willpower was a limited resource. The participants subsequently underwent an ego depletion task, followed by a task that requires willpower. The researchers found that participants who were led to agree more with the idea that willpower is a limited resource performed worse on the second task as compared to participants who were led to agree more with the idea that willpower is not limited.

In other studies, Job and her colleagues examined the effects of individual differences in implicit theories of willpower. When people show up in the laboratory, they already often have opinions about whether willpower is a limited resource. Participants' implicit theories of willpower were measured by

[4] There has been some difficulty in replicating the ego-depletion findings (e.g., [Hagger et al. 2016]). But we focus on empirical findings that call into question the interpretation of the results as support for a special faculty of willpower.

items like “After a strenuous mental activity your energy is depleted and you must rest to get it refuelled again” and “Resisting temptations activates your willpower and you become even better able to face new upcoming temptations” [Job et al. 2010: supplemental materials]. Job and colleagues found that participants who believed that willpower is a limited resource show the standard ego depletion effects, but participants who did not believe that willpower is limited resource showed no such effects [Job et al. 2010: 3]. Longitudinal studies showed that these differences in implicit theories predicted academic success: those who thought willpower is not a limited resource procrastinated less and earned higher grades [Job et al. 2015]. Most recently [Savani & Job 2017] found related effects across cultures. A pilot study showed that while Americans tend to think that willpower is a limited resource, Indians tend to think that the exertion of willpower has an energizing effect. Subsequent ego depletion studies showed that while Americans did show an ego depletion effect, Indians showed a reverse ego depletion effect! That is, when they carried out a task that required willpower, Indian participants showed *greater* resilience in a subsequent task rather than less [Savani & Job 2017].

Thus, there’s some reason to think that implicit theories play a key role in what happens following ego depletion. The implicit-theory interpretation of ego depletion effects provides an alternative to the willpower explanation. Moreover, the implicit-theory interpretation fits naturally with Humean approaches. The implicit theories of willpower would count as beliefs – beliefs about willpower – on the Humean accounts. The details of how those beliefs affect behaviour is not entirely clear, but obviously Humeans allow that beliefs matter for decision-making. One way of developing a Humean theory would be to say that the belief that willpower is a depletable resource affects beliefs about probabilities, and beliefs about probabilities are naturally accommodated in a Humean theory. Consider, for instance, beliefs about short-term depletion of strength. If someone has done many pull-ups and has become exhausted, they might come to think (because of an implicit theory of willpower) that the probability of achieving another pull up is low. As a result of this belief about the probability of success, they might not attempt another pull up even if they desire to do one. So, the implicit theory interpretation provides some grounds

for thinking that we don't need to appeal to anything other than beliefs and desires (and possibly intentions) to explain the ego-depletion effects.

The implicit theory account of ego depletion thus makes room for a Buddhist account of self-control. However, of course, it is not yet anything close to an account of self-control. To develop such an account, we need first to be clearer about the nature of the processes and states that are available to the Buddhist. But before that, we turn briefly to another prominent contemporary account of self-control, based on Frankfurt's theory of autonomy.

3. Identification and self-control

Frankfurt [1971] offers an account of autonomy in terms of whether one "identifies with" the desires that one acts on. This is a kind of hierarchical account since it relies on second-order beliefs and desires. Frankfurt's account of autonomy naturally extends to provide an explanation for paradigmatic cases of self-control: if I identify with the desire to be calm in the face of insult, but my anger wins out over this desire for calm, then I exhibit a failure of self-control. By contrast, if I identify with the desire to be calm, and this desire wins out over my anger, then I have exhibited self-control.

Such theories of self-control in terms of identification do not postulate an executive self over and above a favored subset of mental states that one identifies with. However, Buddhists would likely resist the appeal to identification, for the notion of identification seems to illicitly smuggle in the problematic notion of self. The Buddha warns us against any *identification* with the *skandhas* (mental and physical states).[5] In a famous passage in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (22.59), the Buddha says:

[5] To be more precise, in the early stages of the path it may be better to identify in certain ways rather than others: as a monk, say, rather than a thief or a conman. Practitioners starting on the path may be encouraged to relinquish unhealthy forms of ego-identification in favour of other identifications (as a monk, or later as an *arhat*) eventually leading up to the relinquishment of all kinds of identification.

> What is impermanent, suffering, of a nature to change, is it suitable to regard as, 'This is mine.' 'I am this,' 'This is myself'? 'No, Sir.' Therefore, monks, I say, whatsoever form... feeling... perception... mental fabrications... consciousness, past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, should be looked upon as, 'This is not mine,' 'I am not this,' 'This is not myself.' [Mendis 2007: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.mend.html]

Here, the Buddha warns us against the natural tendency to identify with the aggregates, because we inadvertently smuggle in an independent entity self, which is an anathema to all Buddhists. When we say "I identify with states X, Y, and Z" this suggests that I am something apart from states X, Y, and Z. As a result, we should be cautious about embracing this apparent solution to the problem. Part of what makes the solution superficially appealing is likely that it draws on the natural but false presupposition of an entity self. Again, Śāntideva's formulation seems an apt challenge: Who is it that's identifying with what desire?

4. Substantive constraints on a Buddhist account of self-control

Buddhists would be suspicious of the appeal to identification. But there's a much more significant problem that applies to explanations of self-control like the Frankfurtian one. The Frankfurtian account of self-control, like process-based accounts generally (see [Stoljar 2018]), is entirely content neutral. If someone identifies with their desire to respond angrily, and not with their competing desire to remain calm, then, on a Frankfurtian account, to respond calmly would now be a failure of self-control. Indeed, if a person identifies with a morally repugnant first-order desire, and not with some competing benevolent feeling, if the benevolent feeling wins out, this would count as a failure of self-control. This content neutral approach to explicating self-control is deeply at odds with the Buddhist view.

The Buddhist account of self-control is anything but content neutral. The texts emphasize not just a change in behaviour but also a gradual inculcation of the right mental dispositions that resonate with Buddhist values, non-violence, compassion, etc. Chapter 15 of the *Dhammapada*, Chapter on Anger

[*Kodhavagga* 231-234] makes clear that exercise of self-control requires that one should avoid anger in deed, word and thought. The text reads:

> 231. Let a man guard himself against irritability in bodily action; let him be controlled in deed; Abandoning bodily misconduct, let him practice good conduct in deed.
>
> 232. Let a man guard himself against irritability in speech; let him be controlled in speech; Abandoning verbal misconduct, let him practice good conduct in speech.
>
> 233. Let a man guard himself against irritability in thought; let him be controlled in mind; Abandoning mental misconduct, let him practice good conduct in thought.
>
> 234. The wise are controlled in bodily action, controlled in speech and controlled in thought.
>
> They are truly well-controlled. [Buddharakkhita 1996:
>
> www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitika/kn/dhp/dhp.17.bud.html]

We want to draw attention to two points here. First, it is worth noting that all the words about "control" in text quoted above are past passive participles. In other words, the text seems to be designed to say that faculties "are controlled", without specifying a controller.[6] Second, the text makes clear that the implicit conception of control is value-laden. The substantive component of the account of self-control requires the inculcation of certain kinds of mental states, actions and behaviours. The basic idea is that certain natural reactions (anger for example) have the capacity to take hold of us and drive our behaviour. In this sense, some action-guiding emotions are inconsistent with autonomy. Acting on such emotions would presumably be a failure of self-control. Making progress on the Buddhist path entails initially taking control of one's behaviour and eventually taking control of one's mind (cognitive and affective factors) to rid oneself of unwholesome factors of wrong views, anger, etc. and replace them with wholesome factors of knowledge, patience, compassion, etc. Once the replacement is complete, Arhathood is achieved, and problems of self-control no longer arise.

[6] We are grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to this.

The inclusion of substantive constraints isn't alien to contemporary theories of autonomy (e.g., [Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000; Benson 2005]. Some theories -- "strong substantive theories" of autonomy -- specify normative constraints on the kinds of desires or values that are consistent with autonomy.[7] Substantive theories of autonomy are generally proposed as specifying necessary conditions for autonomy. For example, one strong substantive constraint might be that a desire to be enslaved cannot be autonomous, no matter how strong the desire or how much one identifies with it. Charles [2010] argues that if one's action is guided by a desire to be enslaved, this would presumably be a failure of self-control in virtue of the fact that the action-guiding desire is inconsistent with autonomy. Similarly, a Buddhist might maintain that if one's action is guided by a desire to express anger, this is a failure of self-control in virtue of the fact that the action-guiding desire is inconsistent with patience, an important value according to the Buddhists. The substantive component of the Buddhist theory is that the values that need to prevail in episodes of self-control are the values promoted by Buddhist philosophy. Thus, while anger winning out over patience would not be self-control, patience winning out over anger would be.

To conclude, what counts as a case of exercising self-control for Buddhists depends on which emotions, desires or values prevails. When anti-Buddhist values prevail, as in the case of the monk who engages in illicit sex, this cannot count as a case of self-control, even if the monk "identifies" with the desire for illicit sex. Thus, there is a substantive constraint on the Buddhist view.

5. Towards a Buddhist account of self-control

Paradigmatic cases of self-control involve competition between different aspects of the mind. For instance, there is the competition between the desire for a beer and the desire to refrain from intoxicating drinks. But we find mental competition in other arenas of our mental lives as well – for example, different phenomena compete for our attention, and an adequate Buddhist philosophy of mind must be able to

[7] Benson characterizes strong substantive accounts as follows: "the contents of the preferences or values that agents can form or act on autonomously are subject to direct normative constraints" [Benson 2005: 133].

explain this too. In important respects, the competition for attention is less theoretically challenging than the cases of self-control, so it might be helpful to consider how Buddhists might accommodate attention without a self. In a recent, instructive essay, Alex Watson [2019] presents an Abhidharma Buddhist account of attention by contrast with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika account of attention.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika offer a straightforward account of attention. On their view, shifts of attention are explained by positing an intelligent agent, the self, that guides attention to shift to different objects in light of its desires. Competition of attention is also explained by the self. It is the self that arbitrates among the various candidates for attention and decides which one to attend to. This decision is then executed by focusing the *manas* (mind) to zoom towards the sense-impression whose object was chosen by the self as the successful candidate. The executive self in this Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika plays the role of a top-down arbitrator.

Buddhism does not have the resources for top-down arbitration -- there is no self or mind or faculty of willpower over and above the mental states. Watson labels this aspect of Buddhist models "horizontality" (See also [Siderits 2003, 27]. By contrast with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika model, the "Buddhist model… is characterized not by vertical hierarchy, but by horizontality: shifts in attention are not brought about by commands from above, but by the previous moment in the stream of consciousness" [Watson 2018: 1300]. The claim is that shifts of attention are generated by conscious events in mental series. This, however, does not mean that shifts of attention are always unintentional. There may well be intentional causes of such shifts but they are, like everything else, conscious events rather than intentions directed by a self.[8] For instance, the thought that the object on the shelf is desirable might cause the intention to

[8] The talk of conscious events rather than mental states in the Abhidharma model of mind signals an important departure from the dominant mode of describing intentional action in modern Western philosophical and psychological discourse. The dominant Humean model of intentional action has it that beliefs and desires are causally implicated in the explanation of action. Intuitively the idea is that merely believing that the beer is in the fridge in no way by itself provides the agent with a goal which could lead to action. But if we add in a desire – say, a desire to have a beer – then this belief/desire pair could motivate the agent to act to get the beer from the fridge. This Humean account, however, is silent on the causal history of these mental states. While this seems a plausible account of the matter at one level, it tells us little about the causes behind our beliefs and desires, and the Abhidharma consider these to be crucial in accounting for the moral quality of our intentional actions. The Abhidharma theory of intentional action is psychologically rich compared to relatively sparse modern theories of action. For the Abhidharma, a mental state is best thought of as a momentary conscious event that is constituted by many

attend to that object. More generally, one might maintain that competitions for attention do not require top-down arbitration but are best understood as a plurality of potential contents of consciousness competing for attention in which the "loudest child" (most intense impression) wins, without a self playing the role of arbitrator.

In the context of perception, this account maintains that the object that grabs attention is the one that forcefully makes its presence felt in the context: for example, a noisy patron or a loud bang. In the context of cognition, the object attended to is determined by the associations that are most common, intense, or recent. To illustrate this, Watson offers Vasubandhu's example of what happens when the idea of a particular woman arises in consciousness – what will be attended to next depends on the latent impressions in the mental series. A monk who has made progress on the path will perhaps abhor the body of the woman. A friend of the woman's husband will be led to think of the husband. The woman's lover will be moved to attend to passionate thoughts when thinking of her. It is also possible that even if there is an intense or recent latent impression available and likely to make itself manifest, it can be inhibited by the sudden advent of a powerful bodily sensation or an external sense object. So, competition between various potentially available mental impressions, is decided in favor of the most forceful candidate.

For the purposes of Buddhism, the important point about this theory of mental competition is that there is no self directing the mind. Watson offers the following analogy to show how it might be natural to understand the competition for attention as occurring in the absence of top-down control:

In a running-race the winner is simply the one who crosses the finish line first; it is not that

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simultaneous co-existing mental atoms (*dharmas*). There are different ways of interpreting the Abhidharma Buddhist here:

> (1) a Humean account of decision-making in terms of beliefs and desires is accurate, and the Abhidharma account attempts to go further in explaining where beliefs and desires come from.
> (2) the Humean account is false. At best, it is a useful fiction, and the deeper story is given by the Abhidharma theory, which will not quantify over beliefs and desires.

Interpretation 2 fits with a broader eliminativist reading of conscious states in Abhidharma Buddhism (see, e.g., Siderits 2011). Chadha & Nichols (*forthcoming*) argue against this strong eliminativist interpretation. For the purposes of the present paper we are simply assuming that (1) is true. Though this is an important issue, it does not really affect our point here, which is that the Buddhist is committed to horizontality, a single level of explanation in terms of mental states (conscious events) without postulating any faculty or self over and above those states.

> competitors have to stop before the finish line and be ushered across at the discretion of the referee. Similarly, it is just built into our psychic system that whichever latent impression advances toward the level of consciousness most forcefully will make it through and block the way for others. It is unnecessary to postulate some agent at the threshold—whether the person, or some homunculus-like entity at a sub-personal level—that is needed to give its approval before entry to consciousness can be achieved. (2018: 1300).

Just as the winner of a competition between runners is determined by whichever individual runs the fastest, the winner of a competition between impressions is determined by whichever impression is the most forceful. In neither case is top-down arbitration required.

Watson's goal is to explain how Abhidharma Buddhism can account for the competition for attention in the context of sensory perception. Our goal is to try to explain how the Abhidharma Buddhist might explain self-control in the context of selecting action. To extrapolate Watson's account into the context of action, we adapt Vasubandhu's example of the thought of a particular woman. A novice monk just beginning on the Buddhist path who also happens to be the woman's lover will need to exercise self-control if he is to conform to his monastic vows. The novice lover will be plagued by intense memories of the last encounter with the woman and therefore have a strong desire to be with her again and have (illicit) sex. He will be struggling to overcome these external mental afflictions. The novice has conflicting motivations: at the same time as wanting to resist the desire to have sex (because of the Buddhist vow to refrain from having illicit sex), he still wants to have sex. In the case of attention, Watson's Buddhist account explains shifts of attention by appeal to the most forceful impression, rather than any top-down arbitrator. Analogously, in the case of self-control, whether the novice resists the temptation depends on which desire is strongest, not on some top-down arbitrator.

Thus, another important constraint on the Buddhist explanation of cases of self-control will be the restriction to mental states and processes. Watson, as noted above, characterizes this as the "horizontal"

commitment of Buddhism. Though the commitment is spelt out in the context of Abhidharma Buddhism, the structural constraint it imposes will be welcomed by Buddhists generally. In the context of action selection, we might also think of horizontal commitment as core to a Humean account of the mind. Such an account appeals to beliefs and desires (and possibly intentions), but no top-down authority as in a separate faculty of will or the self. The Buddhist is constrained to invoke mental events in the explanation of behaviour, resulting in a model of decision-making that is, to a first approximation, a horizontal model on which the strongest desire wins.[9] However, this is only a first step. While the horizontal model might suffice to explain attention, the horizontal model alone is inadequate for a Buddhist account self-control because of the substantive constraint discussed in the previous section. [10] For example, a Buddhist monk who engages in engages in illicit sex, because that is the strongest desire the monk has at the time is not displaying self-control.

6. A Buddhist account of self-control

The Buddhist account of cases of self-control, then, involves two components, a procedural component, and a substantive one. The procedural component is that the decision-making process must be horizontal or Humean. There is no self standing above the push and pull of beliefs and desires. Loosely speaking, the strongest desire wins. The substantive component is that the desires that carry the day must be desires that reflect Buddhist values. Thus, to put the two parts together, for the Buddhist, self-control is paradigmatically exhibited when the Buddhist values prevail in the horizontal competition between desires. The discipline required to make progress on the Buddhist path involves a gradual transformation

[9] This is clearly an oversimplification. Decision-making also depends on judgments about how probable it is that a certain action will satisfy a desire. If I have to choose between a 99.9 % chance of winning headphones and a .1% chance of winning a stereo, I might opt for the former even though I strongly prefer the stereo to the headphones. An adequate Buddhist account of decision-making would need to incorporate this as well. But we are setting aside this complication for the purposes of the paper.

[10] It might be argued, as xx suggests in personal correspondence, that the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* indicates that any violation or breach of some morally significant commitment or vow that an agent has undertaken in the past will be counted as a lack of self-control by the Buddhist, irrespective of whether the vow is in accordance with Buddhist values. We have a different reading of the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 57). In this *Sutta*, the kind of action exalted by the Buddha is not just blindly acting in accordance with a vow that one may have taken in the past, but rather acting in accordance with the right view (no-self view) resulting in the exhaustion of karmic residues ultimately leading to nirvana.

of one's psychology so that the strongest desires that drive behavior are consonant with Buddhist values.

This account of self-control may seem chauvinistic. Since the account builds distinctively Buddhist values into the notion of self-control, it may seem that the "self-control" displayed by the Upanisadic sage, or the Greek Stoic is not self-control at all. However, the worry about chauvinism can be muted to at least some extent. Note first that some Buddhist values are found across traditions, for example 'getting rid of anger'. The Stoics as well as the Upanisadic sages agree with the Buddhists on this. Seneca is clear that we should never act on the basis of anger. Upanishadic sages will also agree that actions based on anger are an instance of loss of self-control. Insofar as the sage is acting in accordance with the Buddhist values, they are exhibiting self-control. What is the Buddhist likely to say about cases when the Sage or Stoic or one of us is acting on the basis of values that the Buddhist rejects? For instance, Stoics extol piety for the divine (see, e.g., [Kamtekar 2018]) and a Stoic might resist temptation on these religious grounds. Since the Buddhist rejects any divinity, the Buddhist would not classify this Stoic activity as an instance of self-control. In this sense, the Buddhist account of self-control is avowedly chauvinistic. There are substantive constraints on what counts as self-control, and insofar as the values that guide decision are at odds with Buddhist values, those decisions cannot count as instances of self-control.

7. A practical guide for Buddhists

Thus far, we've offered a descriptive account of self-control that fits with the theoretical commitments of Buddhism. In short, our account says that when the winning desire reflects Buddhist values, self-control obtains. We started the paper by noting that an important strand of the tradition is practical advice. Much of the *Nikāyas* is devoted to helping people along the path. It's not at all clear how the theoretical account that we provided is even consistent with the idea of giving practical advice. The Arhat has transformed his psychology, he has eliminated greed, anger, hatred, etc. Such a monk's mental makeup is dominated by

positive emotions, like compassion, kindness, and empathy.[11] He can do no wrong and is always in control. But the stream enterer needs tremendous self-control to transform his psychology to align with the Buddhist values. The account we have offered doesn't say anything about what would make Buddhist values more likely to prevail. Is there any practical strategy we can offer to the experienced monks or stream enterers?

Although we often think of self-control as involving the self battling against temptation, prevailing accounts of self-control in psychology paint a very different picture. For instance, one proposed account is that self-control depends on attending to long-term rather than short-term outcomes [Ainslie & Haslam, 1992]. Another account of self-control is based on the idea that there two different kinds of representations, those generated by a "hot system" and those generated by a "cold system" [Mischel et al. 1989]. A more recent and comprehensive account draws on *construal theory*. The key idea behind construal theory is that the same object or event can be represented in different ways, and those different ways of representing objects can have significantly different downstream effects. The most basic distinction in construal theory is between higher and lower level construals. Lower level construals are "concrete, relatively unstructured, and contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events" [Liberman & Trope 2008: 1201]. Higher level construals are "abstract, schematic, and decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information. They emphasize superordinate, core features of the event and omit incidental features that may vary without significantly changing the meaning of events" (*ibid*: 1201-1202). An example of a low-level construal would be *eating cheesecake*; the same event might be represented with a high-level construal as *eating more food*.

Construal level has been shown to affect perception, categorization, and prediction [Trope & Liberman 2010]. One critical feature of the theory is that higher level construals omit "features that are

[11] In the Abhidharma Buddhist taxonomy 'positive' emotions are those that lead to right action and also have a feel good factor. Anger is a negative emotion because it leads to wrong actions and also has an unsettling effect on the mind that experiences it, empathy on the other hand is positive in both senses.

perceived as secondary and variable and [retain] those aspects that are essential and invariant from the perspective of that high-level construct" [Liberman & Trope 2008: 1202]. This focus generated by higher-level construals on essential aspects often leads to more apt evaluations than lower levels of construal. One study showed that when considering a purchase in the distant future, people focus more on the central evaluative characteristics of the object than when they consider a purchase in the near future; for instance, when participants were asked to imagine that they were going to purchase a radio with a built-in clock for the purpose of listening to morning programs, participants in the high construal condition were more likely to care about the quality of the sound than the clock [Trope & Liberman 2000]. It's not all positive however. Higher levels of construal are more likely to facilitate unrealistic plans than lower levels of construal [Liberman & Trope 1998].

When we turn to self-control, construal theory again capitalizes on the fact that higher-level construals focus on essential features of the object or event in question. People tend to make more financially advantageous decisions when the options are presented in terms of higher-level construals (see e.g., [Read et al. 2003; Liberman & Trope 2008: 1204]. Construal theory also provides an explanation for familiar results on the marshmallow task: when children represent a tempting marshmallow more abstractly, they are better able to delay gratification. Furthermore, merely framing a situation with concrete details seems to lead participants to think they would feel less bad about succumbing to temptation [Fujita et al. 2006: study 5].

Let's now return to the question that faces the Buddhist. The Buddhist cannot advise the stream enterer to exert greater executive control, for the Buddhist denies that there is an executive. But the work on construals doesn't implicate representations of an executive self. What really matters is just the relative abstractness of the representations. The more abstract the representation – the more distanced from immediate urges – the more likely a person is to resist the temptation. This way of thinking about self-control is entirely consistent with the no-self doctrine. One needn't appeal to any kind of self that oversees the decision-making; rather, on this Buddhist account one must strive to transform one's psychology so that one's strongest desires habitually align with Buddhist values. Simply put, the best way

to resist temptation is not to be tempted. The construal account of self-control offers a practical strategy to the struggling novices: options represented in terms of construals that are shaped by Buddhist values will not appear as tempting as options represented otherwise. To return to our earlier example, thinking of a beautiful woman as 'an abhorrent body' is not as tempting as thinking of her as 'lover'.

In conclusion, we want to consider how the descriptive account and the practical advice we offer fits with Buddhist practice. The answer is it fits in nicely. Buddhist traditions focus on meditation practices because of their presumed special power to effect a lasting transformation of consciousness. On our descriptive account, it is easy to see the importance of the meditative practice of monitoring one's current mental states. Since future actions are determined by our strongest desires, the monitoring and cultivation of wholesome *dharmas* which in turn constitute mental states is of great importance for developing the right kinds of dispositions and desires which align with the Buddhist values (similarly for the monitoring and eradication of unwholesome *dharmas*). Furthermore, the discussion of construals in this Section complements particular meditation practices. In some cases, the practice encourages low level (concrete) construals, as in *aśubhabhāvana* or the "contemplation of the repulsive". In this practice the meditator focuses the mind on various unsavoury aspects of physical, material existence, for example a skull or a corpse at various stages of decomposition. This in turn will lead to an attitude of detachment from one's own physical body and from the bodies of other beings. In other cases, the meditative practice encourages high level (abstract) construals, as in cultivating loving kindness or *mettā*. This is recommended by Budhhaghosa specifically for overcoming anger and resentment against one's enemies involves what might be called "resolution into elements". The technique recommends that one break down the enemy into a bundle of psychophysical aggregates or, further, into the material components of the body (head hair, body hairs, nails, etc.).

> when you are angry with him, what is it you are angry with? Is it head hairs you are angry with? or body hairs? or nails? ... Or among the five aggregates or the twelve bases or the eighteen elements with respect to which this venerable one is called by such and such a name, which then,

> is it the materiality aggregate you are angry with? . . . For when he tries the resolution into elements, his anger finds no foothold, like a mustard seed on the point of an awl or a painting in the air. [Buddhaghosa, The Path of Purification IX. 38, 22. trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli]

If a person is seen as nothing more than a heap of constantly changing material and mental *dharmas* then the anger and resentment cannot get a foothold.

As we've seen, the Buddhist tradition is replete with advice for disciplining the mind as part of the path to enlightenment. We are encouraged to control our anger, among many other passions. But how are we to make sense of this advice to exhibit self-control, given the tradition's commitment to the nonexistence of self? Śāntideva makes this challenge acute when he asks "if… to resist anger is inappropriate 'who is it that resists what?'" The no-self view constrains the available options for explaining cases of self-control. In particular, it means that the Buddhist cannot appeal to some controlling or executive self that overrides temptations. Rather, on a Buddhist view, decisions are a function of the strongest desire. An essential part of the Buddhist account appeals to which kinds of desires prevail in a decision. When desires that run against Buddhist values prevail, this will not count as a case of self-control. But when desires that are consonant with Buddhist values prevail over competing desires, these are exactly the kinds of cases that the Buddhist extols as successful cases of self-control. Thus, when we consider past decisions, we can recognize that some of them count as instances of self-control, provided that Buddhist values dominate in the competition for action. But it's also important to the Buddhist to promote these kinds of actions. There is no appeal here to an executive self or to exerting one's willpower.

We have argued that there are considerable resources for a Buddhist and other no-self theorists to explain and promote self-control without a self. And we've argued that the Buddhist, and other no-self theorists can consistently offer forward-looking practical advice without relenting on the no-self view. In particular, the way options are represented or construed makes a considerable difference to whether we resist temptations.

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