

Who's in Charge Here?

The 20th century taught us that repressed desires are the source of human unhappiness. Now, with more possibilities for pleasure and fewer rules and constraints than ever before, the happy few will be those able to exercise self-control.



BY DANIEL AKST

MOST OF US WHO LIVE WITH CHILDREN AND computers know about software for controlling how the former use the latter. But what about the grownups who can't control themselves? For adult Internet users ready to admit that they're in the grip of a higher power, there is Covenant Eyes, a website that will keep track of all the other websites you visit—and e-mail this potentially incriminating list to an “accountability partner” of your choosing. Covenant Eyes even rates websites on a kind of taboo scale (the higher the score, the raunchier), so that your spouse or pastor can tell at a glance whether you've been poring over market research online or taking in a peepshow.

The existence of Covenant Eyes is a measure of just

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how hard it can be to control ourselves nowadays in a landscape of boundless temptation. Thanks to rising affluence, loosening social constraints, and the inexorable march of technology, most of us have more opportunities to overindulge than ever before. Life in modern Western cultures is like living at a giant all-you-can-eat buffet offering more calories, credit, sex, intoxicants, and just about anything else one could take to excess than our forebears might ever have imagined.

America is the biggest buffet of all, of course, and we invented the Internet to supply home delivery. Pornography, for example, once accompanied by shame and inconvenience, is now instantly and anonymously accessible to anyone with an Internet-connected computer at no charge whatsoever. Or how about gambling? In 1970 casino gambling was legal only in Nevada, while New

Hampshire, New Jersey, and New York were the only states with lotteries. Today the picture is almost entirely reversed, with 47 states having legalized casinos or lotteries, or both. And if near-ubiquity still isn't convenient enough, the Internet entices with offshore "virtual" casinos accessible from the comfort of home.

While temptations have multiplied like fast-food outlets in the suburbs, the superstructure of external restraint that once helped check our impulses has been seriously eroded, in part by the same inexorably subversive force—capitalism—that has given us the wherewithal to indulge. Oh, we're tougher on drunk driving and there's social pressure not to smoke, but as the social historian Peter Stearns writes, "The adjustments that

self-gratification. Scarcity is falling away in China and India as it did long ago in North America and Europe, where bounty has led companies to exquisite refinements in the art and science of selling—in exploiting taste, color, sound, and even smell to overcome consumer resistance. Nor is the family, that other traditional brake on behavior, anything like the force it once was, here or elsewhere. In the world's most affluent nations, the family's role has evolved from one of economic production to emotional satisfaction, transforming its inherent bias from discipline to indulgence. And families are less likely nowadays to be intact or extended. The willingness of adult offspring to move far away from parents—and vice versa, when retirement comes—has weakened ties that once circumscribed behavior much more tightly.

At the same time, the eyes of neighbors are no longer upon us. Despite a good deal of hand-wringing over electronic-data security, the fact is that

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produced the 20th-century style of self-restraint have, on the whole, reduced protective arrangements and behavior laws, placing more responsibility on the individual for knowing and following the rules."

Stigma, the ugly form of social shame that once helped keep so many of us in line, has withered like a cold soufflé. Drug and alcohol abuse, while not exactly applauded, are seen as medical afflictions rather than moral shortcomings, and while adultery may be frowned upon it is also understood, very often, as a painful part of the search for self-realization. (The same can be said of adultery's frequent offspring, divorce.) Financial constraints, meanwhile, once a ready substitute for willpower, have been swept away by surging affluence and the remarkable openhandedness of lenders. Last year alone Americans received five billion credit card solicitations in the mail; given the barrage of products (and product advertising) on offer everywhere we look, it's no wonder that so many of us decide to sign on the dotted line, with predictable consequences for our indebtedness and personal savings.

Few of these phenomena are uniquely American, even if we do tend to be the pioneers in most areas of

most of us enjoy an unprecedented degree of personal physical privacy. Those who live alone—and their numbers are growing—are especially free to do, watch, or eat pretty much any darned thing they please, but the rest of us are a long way from the in-home surveillance of 1984 as well. Freestanding houses in sprawling suburbs—and the universality of motor vehicle travel—mean that, for the most part, nobody has any idea when you come and go, what your destination is, or what you do when you get there. A scarlet letter today would have to go on your license plate.

Then again, what civil or religious authority today could impose such a mark? In the non-Islamic world, at least, church and ideology no longer provide much in the way of traditional limits on individual behavior. Communism, with its tyrannies large and small, is dead, and as a character in a Donald Barthelme story once remarked, opium is now the opiate of the people. Amen, let us hasten to add. Who wants someone else to tell us what to do? Covenant Eyes, after all, is something we can only impose on ourselves. And though lots of people are ready to criticize affluence, nobody I know truly craves the opposite.



The hypnotic allure of slot machines is captured by Charles Bell's photorealist painting *Rol-a-Top* (1981).

Events have conspired, then, to force each of us to rely more on himself or herself for the kind of restraint that was once imposed, or at least sternly reinforced, externally back in the bad old days. And there are real doubts whether the modern self is up to the job. “Self-regulation failure is the major social pathology of the present time,” say psychologists Roy F. Baumeister, Todd F. Heatherton, and Dianne M. Tice, who explore the subject in their book *Losing Control: How and Why People Fail at Self-Regulation* (1994). They add that “all over the country, people are miserable because they cannot control their money, their weight, their emotions, their drinking, their hostility, their craving for drugs, their spending, their own behavior vis-à-vis their family members, their sexual impulses, and more.”

Humanity's worldwide struggle with its weight is perhaps the quintessential example of self-restraint under stress. Americans have been gaining weight roughly since the introduction of the microwave oven, as the price of calo-

ries, both in dollars and preparation time, has fallen to perhaps the lowest level since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden. But these changes have not been matched by increases in willpower, with the result that roughly two-thirds of us weigh more than we should. Obesity is now a growing problem, if you'll pardon the expression, in countries all over the world.

Technology has only stoked temptation. Forget the Internet for a while; just think about the world without the birth control pill. Television is yet another skilled crusher of restraint, not just through the power of advertising but also by exposing people everywhere to levels of affluence, sexual license, and other forms of personal freedom they couldn't readily visualize before. Tevye's fantasies of wealth in *Fiddler on the Roof* included time to study the sages, but he never watched *The O.C.*, whose vision of sunshine, sex, and intrigue does not figure heavily in the Talmud.

As the structures of constraint come tumbling down, the ability to control ourselves will play an ever more

important role in our happiness. Already, that role is large. A little self-restraint can greatly reduce your chance of developing heart disease and lung cancer. If you are a man, it can preserve your marriage (a strong predictor of marital stability is the husband's ability to control his wandering impulses). And if you are a student, it can lead to higher lifelong earnings, since you are likely to do better—and go further—in school. The psychologists Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman, in fact, found in studying middle-school students that self-discipline (as rated by parents and teachers and derived from the students' own questionnaire responses) was a much better predictor of academic performance than IQ. It's worth bearing in mind, at this juncture, that education is correlated not just with income but with longevity.

The marketplace has already delivered its verdict, lavishing huge incomes on society's scary new self-control elite, those "resumé gods" who seem to excel at both self-restraint (the ability to resist) and its more vigorous cousin self-discipline (the ability to persist). Not only did these lords of discipline withstand all those boring texts in graduate school, but they keep themselves thin by carefully regulating what they eat after flogging themselves off to the gym at the crack of dawn. We all know who these people are: They're the ones who schedule their children's perfectly calibrated mix of mental and physical exertions with minute-by-minute precision, all the while plotting little Taylor's path from preschool to Harvard.

The postrestraint era leaves us not only to control ourselves, but to ask, self-control for what? What larger purpose, if any, should our self-regulation serve? The answer may be that self-restraint not only benefits each of us, but all of us. It's easy to make fun of the resumé gods and the choices they have made, for instance, but these folks don't seem to be doing badly to me, at least compared to us self-control hoi polloi frantically rolling over our credit card balances and ordering the fried cheesecake whenever we see it on a menu. On the contrary, America's aristocracy of self-control seems ideally adapted to the world in which we find ourselves, blast their steely backbones. It's as if they got the news ahead of the rest of us—no doubt by waking up earlier—that self-control may well be the most important personal trait of the 21st century.

For a people conditioned by the popular belief that suppressing our innermost desires is the surest path to mis-

ery, this may come as a bitter pill. Happiness, after all, is often held to require letting go, giving in, indulging, rather than remaining in thrall to those terrible inhibitions by which we thwart our own fun. So we drink bourbon, smoke marijuana, undergo primal scream therapy, ask our lovers to tie us up, all to free ourselves from . . . ourselves. "We long for a holiday from our frontal lobes, a Dionysiac fiesta of sense and impulse," writes Oliver Sachs. "That this is a need of our constrained, civilized, hyperfrontal nature has been recognized in every time and culture."

Yet if self-control appears to be in decline across the board, there are areas where it has increased, suggesting something like a law of conservation of self-regulation. There may only be so much to go around, in other words, and right now we'd rather use it to quit smoking than to lose weight. Consider how much self-control the average person expends navigating the modern workplace. At the office we are expected to regulate our attire, our attitudes, and our outbursts, smile at customers, refrain from off-color remarks, remain awake despite every postprandial impulse to the contrary, and produce urine free of illegal narcotics whenever it might be demanded. If factory jobs threatened to make us into physical automata, at least "they impinged less on personality styles than did the keep-smiling injunctions of sales gurus like Dale Carnegie or the efforts to mollify anger ranging from foreman-retraining programs in the 1930s to Total Quality Management schemes in the 1990s," Peter Stearns observes. "In sum, significant portions of most workdays are now marked by levels of emotional restraint not widely attempted in the 19th century."

Our struggle to control ourselves dates back much further than that—at least as far back as Odysseus, who commanded his sailors to lash him to his ship's mast and plug their ears lest he (and they) succumb to the seductive song of the Sirens. To the Greeks, the familiar problem was *acrasia*, a lack of control or self-command. Plato went back and forth on this, ultimately holding that people may judge badly what is best but can't really act against their own will, a view that left later philosophers unpersuaded. E. J. Lemmon, for instance, argued in 1962 that "it is so notorious a fact about human agents that they are often subject to *acrasia* that any ethical position that makes this

seem queer or paradoxical is automatically suspect for just this reason. Of Socrates we can say that as a plain matter of fact he was just wrong—acrasia does occur, or in Aristotle's phrase, knowledge just is, however sad this may be, frequently dragged about by desire."

To the early Christians, self-control was a religious issue. "I do not do what I would like to do," Paul laments in his letter to the Romans, "but instead I do what I hate . . . so I am not really the one who does this thing; rather it is the sin that lives in me." Self-control later became a problem for Augustine, the influential church thinker who, lacking the outlet offered to later repenters by Oprah Winfrey, chronicled his struggle with his own impure impulses in his *Confessions*. To modern Americans, heirs to strong traditions of moralizing on the one hand and philosophical pragmatism on the other, a lack of self-control is a personal failing. We expect people to exercise willpower, perhaps recognizing that society would fall apart if we didn't. But the nature of willpower makes this conclusion troublesome for philosophers. Justin Gosling, in a slender volume called *Weakness of the Will* (1990), puts the point succinctly: "If I am physically too weak to lift a weight, it is not my fault if I fail; so why does the same not hold if I am too weak of will, suffering, as it were, from debility of spiritual muscle?" Where, in other words, is the moral shortcoming in bad muscle tone?

And what if poor willpower is hereditary? There is evidence for this. Research has shown that addictions to gambling and alcohol, for example, have a strong hereditary component, although environment matters too, of course. (*The Harvard Mental Health Letter* reports that the rate of problem gambling is higher among people living within 50 miles of casinos.) Certainly there is a physical dimension to all this, which we know from cases of brain injury: Deliberation and self-control are activities of the prefrontal area of the brain, for whose size, shape, and (probably) powers none of us bears much personal responsibility. Indeed, some psychologists have argued that nobody really has *any* self-control, because consciousness itself is just an automated physical process.

Anyone who has ever spent a sleepless night can attest to how little control we have over our own thoughts, never mind our own actions, and skeptics can easily prove this for themselves by following the example of Leo Tolstoy's brother, who challenged the future novelist to stand in a corner until he could no longer think of a white bear. Later researchers have found that asking people not to think about a white bear (or its equivalent) does in fact make it hard to get the creature out of their heads. Forbidding a topic can even make it more appealing; in one experiment, subjects told *not* to think about sex had higher levels of skin conductance—they sweated more—than those who were told to think about sex. Apparently, in the suppressors, renewed excitement occurred every time sex popped involuntarily to mind.

All this notwithstanding, lots of people still contend that self-mastery is within our capabilities—and that we ought to

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have the self-discipline to instill it in our children. Roy Baumeister has derided the recent focus on self-esteem in American families and classrooms, arguing that an emphasis on self-control instead will produce accomplishments that not only shore up self-esteem but also lead to success in life.

This viewpoint is hardly new, even if it has become uncommon outside a certain class of professional scolds who, sooner or later, turn out to be playing games with prescriptions or playing high-stakes roulette in Vegas. No less than William James (Henry's smarter brother) urged us to "keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day . . . so that, when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved or untrained to stand the test."

Even in James's day, psychologists suspected that self-control had an address. In the late 19th century, the Englishman John Hughlings Jackson suggested a three-part



Impossible to resist?

cerebral hierarchy corresponding to different evolutionary levels, and that the job of the highest part was essentially to keep down the lower. Sigmund Freud, with his Jacksonian notion of the superego riding herd over some drooling and libidinous id, was the psychologist with perhaps the greatest impact on our thinking about self-control. To Freud—a man of considerable will who was no stranger to cocaine and tobacco—self-control was the price of civilization, and the human tragedy was that we can only live in society by subjecting ourselves to some serious psychological constraints—which are themselves the cause of our individual unhappiness.

Although absent from the rogues' gallery at your local post office, repression was soon recognized as a significant public enemy. In the 19th century, literary characters such as Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, and George Hurstwood got into trouble by failing to control themselves, but in 20th-century novels such as Anne Tyler's *Accidental Tourist*, self-control was more often itself the cause of unhappiness, or at the very least a symptom of something deeply amiss. This brave new emphasis on cutting

loose is reflected across the arts in the very shape of new works, now constrained by fewer of the formal requirements that once prevailed in, say, poetry and painting. John Elster, who wrestles with self-constraint and its advantages in such works as *Ulysses Unbound*, cites Henri Peyre's observation from the 1940s: "After a long century of individualism, many of our contemporaries seem to be overweighted by their absolute artistic freedom which has rendered any revolt insipid."

Self-control met its Waterloo in the 1960s. The emphasis in those days was on escaping not just the tyranny of capitalist-inflected *social* control, but also aspects of *self*-control that seemed equally imposed and unjustifiable.

The youth culture's embrace of consciousness-altering drugs can be seen as an attempt to internalize this broader revolution, a turn to pharmacology for help in overthrowing a superego so insidiously effective we might not even be aware of its string pulling and suppressions, so familiar and even comfortable were its constraints. The interest in Eastern mysticism, meditation, free love, and other means of getting over and around ourselves—in letting it all hang out—was part of the same revolutionary upheaval undertaken by individuals working hard to get out of their own grip.

This whole free-spirited project has lost much of its charm, at least outside Hollywood, where repressed movie characters still haunt central casting waiting to be opened up to life by freewheeling buddies and appealingly daffy love interests. In real life, feminists demand that men control themselves in the workplace as well as on dates. Parents demand that boys do likewise, employing pharmacology to impose constraints rather than subvert them. "Zero tolerance" policies for all sorts of transgressions have given us the spectacle of a kindergartener punished for a

peck on a fellow pupil's cheek—and have sent the message that even the tiniest of us better exercise more self-control.

Of course, these new social restrictions are low fences compared to the heights of freedom all those social changes have given us. Feminism has placed a greater burden of self-control on women, with more failures of self-regulation one predictable result. By 1987, lung cancer—mostly from smoking—had surpassed breast cancer to become women's leading cause of cancer death. Women are gambling more, and having more problems with gambling. The end (or at least the erosion) of the traditional double standard about sex has lifted a major constraint, with costs as well as benefits for women and men alike.

In the absence of such external restraints, we get to choose our own, which brings us back to *Covenant Eyes*. That particular website, like Odysseus' orders to his men, is a classic example of what is known among the cognoscenti of self-restraint as “precommitment,” and examples of such self-imposed outside constraints abound once you start looking for them. Most of us engage in precommitment sooner or later. We may avoid having ice cream in the house, for example, to help keep our weight down (if we had some, we'd eat it). If that doesn't work, we might get our jaws wired shut or our stomachs surgically reduced. If drinking is the problem, we may take medication that causes vomiting and other unpleasantness in those who consume alcohol. Isn't marriage a kind of precommitment as well? Why else would one need to wrap romance in a legal contract if not to guard against the day when fidelity might waver? Louisiana even offers something called “covenant marriage,” which is harder to get out of than the regular kind.

To understand human behavior in this arena, it can be useful to think of our selves as different and at times dissenting individuals. The economist Tyler Cowen has suggested that we all harbor two contemporaneous selves, one impulsive and the other rules-oriented, but others have proposed an infinite number of selves stretching off into the future, all of them subject to costs and constraints we might impose today. Obviously our desires are not consistent across time, which is why we might do something tonight that we'll hate ourselves for in the morning. When precommitment occurs, one's present self is typically the prudent one. Thus, Odysseus' careful current self

demanded that his raving future self be restrained. Similarly, Cowen notes that Victor Hugo reportedly worked in the nude, having instructed his valet to withhold his clothing lest he go off somewhere instead of staying inside to work. And John Elster reminds us that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, hired men to forcibly prevent him from going into drug dens. “But,” De Quincey wrote, “as the authority for stopping him was derived simply from himself, naturally these poor men found themselves in a metaphysical fix.”

If self-restraint is hard for people such as Hugo, it's even harder for whole societies. Is it any wonder that greenhouse gas emissions and government deficits are a problem in most of the advanced industrial economies? This is why societies engage in precommitment as well. The Constitution is a good example: It can be seen as a form of precommitment in which the nation's earliest electorate bound itself, its leaders, and all those to come against the infringement of individual rights and undue concentration of power. The Social Security system is a collective form of precommitment against individual financial imprudence; think of it as a government mandated Christmas club, whereby you let Uncle Sam take your money now and use it without paying interest, all so you can be sure to have something when you really need it later.

In a sense, the crux of the self-control problem is the future and how much regard we have for it. Today the future looks scary, in part because we are so lax—about warming the planet with fossil fuels, increasing national debt, and countless other issues. But if we can do better, we should also remember that things could be much worse. That technology helped get us into this mess means that it may well have the power to get us out. Can the time be far off when pills permit us to eat almost anything without gaining weight? What about when we're finally able to manipulate the genes of our offspring? Will we engineer superhuman self-control? And will the law punish those who don't possess it?

Meanwhile, let's look on the bright side. That self-control may be the most significant challenge faced by many of the world's people in the 21st century is a blessing in not much of a disguise. Self-regulation is a challenge, but one not nearly so daunting as the poverty and tyranny that are its most effective substitutes. ■