

Self-Control and Planning: A Reply to Williamson

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Abstract: In Timothy Luke Williamson’s commentary on my article “Micromanagement and Poor Self-Control,” Williamson casts my focus on managerial failures in certain cases of poor self-control “as an especially fruitful tool for addressing problems of poor self-control”; but he suggests that the cases of poor self-control that I view as cases of managerial failure *also* involve control by a foreign force, in accordance with the “foreign force paradigm,” which I claim is off base in the cases on which I focus. Although I cannot get into Williamson’s entire interesting and elaborate argument, I here question *The Weak Planning Perspective*, which plays a key role in Williamson’s critical response, with the aim of addressing the issues he raises and shedding some light on why and how our views diverge.

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I was offered a small window of opportunity to supply of a brief reply to Timothy Luke Williamson’s commentary on my article “Micromanagement and Poor Self-Control”;¹ and although it was clear I could not really do justice to Williamson’s piece given the constraints, I also could not quite get myself to pass up the chance to say at least a little, even if it has to be somewhat ‘off the cuff.’ So I have proceeded in a way that will, I hope, vindicate the optimistic assumption that even a hurried reply aimed at addressing the issues he raises can shed at least some light on why and how our views diverge.

First, a bit of context. My article suggests that the “foreign force paradigm” is off base with respect to many paradigmatic cases of poor self-control. According to the foreign force paradigm, in cases of poor self-

¹ All references to Williamson’s work are to his critical reply “Managing Temptation: Comment’s on Chrisoula Andreou’s ‘Micromanagement and Poor Self-Control’” (2024).

control, the agent is controlled by an ‘alien’ or foreign force, understood as a force that is part of the agent’s psychology but that the agent does not identify with. My view is that “while some cases of poor self-control may fit the foreign force paradigm, many paradigmatic cases of poor self-control are not plausibly cast as cases of domination by a force that is alien to the self; they are better understood as cases in which the self controls behavior, but does so poorly” (Andreou 2024, 170). In these cases, poor self-control can be due to a managerial failure involving micromanagement.

Williamson sees my focus on managerial failures in certain cases of poor self-control “as an especially fruitful tool for addressing problems of poor self-control”(264), but he suggests that the cases of poor self-control that I view as cases of managerial failure *also* involve control by a foreign force. Although I cannot get into Williamson’s entire interesting and elaborate argument, I want to question *The Weak Planning Perspective* (henceforth *WPP*), which plays a key role in Williamson’s critical response. According to *WPP* “if a rational agent makes a plan and later finds themselves deliberating in a situation envisaged by that plan, then absent a change in preferences or beliefs, they should carry out that plan” (259–260). While *WPP* is not without some plausibility, and despite Williamson’s characterizing and labeling it as “weak,” the view is, I think, too strong. For example, the view prohibits very limited exercises of discretion even when exercising some discretion here and there is harmless.²

Consider, for example, the following harmless instance of “brute shuffling”:³ I am going out to dinner. I have a bit of time to kill, so I look at the menu online, which includes, among other options, the two incommensurable alternatives dish X and dish Y.⁴ Having no basis for choosing

² This flaw is emphasized by Sergio Tenenbaum. See, for example, Tenenbaum (2014 and 2020). Although my view regarding permissible exercises of discretion is influenced by Tenenbaum’s, Tenenbaum’s view is even more permissive than my view, allowing, for example, for certain self-defeating patterns of “brute shuffling” (which go beyond the instances of “brute shuffling” that I count as permissible); it thus goes, I think, too far (see Andreou 2023a). I borrow the label “brute shuffling” from Micheal Bratman (2012) who describes it as “lurching from one plan-like commitment to another incompatible commitment seen as equal or incomparable, in a way that involves abandoning one’s prior intentions” (81).

³ For an extensive discussion of “brute shuffling,” see, for example, Bratman (2012). Notably, I think Bratman’s view regarding “brute shuffling” is too restrictive because it prohibits harmless patterns of brute shuffling. See Andreou (2005) and Andreou (2023b, chapter 2).

⁴ In saying that options X and Y are *incommensurable*, I mean that X and Y are neither one better than the other nor exactly equally good. This usage of *incommensurable* appears, influentially, in Raz (1986, chapter 13). Raz’s view that two options can be

one over the other, I, somewhat arbitrarily, plan on one of the options, say dish X. While, however, waiting for the waiter to come take my order after I arrive at the restaurant, I, having nothing better to do, review the menu again, change my mind, and opt for dish Y instead. I still see the options as incommensurable. My change of mind is not required by any change in the situation. Still, it seems too strong to dismiss it as impermissible, at least if it figures as an isolated or occasional and harmless exercise of discretion.

Essentially the same point applies in cases involving cyclic preferences (assuming, as Williamson allows, that the cyclic preferences at issue can be rational). Suppose, to take a familiar case of cyclic preferences, that for each chip in a large bag of chips, I prefer eating one more chip than not; but I also prefer eating no chips to eating all the chips in the bag. Suppose also that I plan to eat the handful of chips I have put on my plate and then stop. When, however, I finish the chips on my plate, I—in what figures as an occasional exercise of discretion—pop three more chips in my mouth before ‘calling it.’ Suppose that I have shown such discretion here and there before and have no reason to think that this exercise of discretion will prompt me to eat the whole bag. Indeed, suppose that, perhaps because I am susceptible to anchoring (which is part of the reason planning is so helpful to me in cases like the one under consideration), I almost always eat roughly the amount of chips I originally planned on eating.⁵ As in the earlier case involving incommensurability, it seems too strong to dismiss this exercise of discretion as impermissible. It is worth emphasizing that my occasional exercises of discretion do not make me unable to make and carry out plans, which, as Williamson emphasizes, can play an important role in self-control. Note also that dismissing such exercises of discretion as impermissible seems incredibly strong in cases involving long-term projects, such as the project of writing a book over a year. An agent who never exercises any elective discretion in such cases—“never, ever deviat[ing] from a still defensible [plan] to pursue an alternative defensible course,” such as, say, occasionally spending a planned writing day pursuing an incommensurable

incommensurable is now fairly common and debates about incommensurability in the relevant sense often focus on (1) whether familiar cases of incommensurability are best understood as cases of parity or as cases of incomparability, and on (2) the sense(s) in which such cases might qualify as hard. For some germinal discussion of these issues, see, for example, Chang (1997, 2002, and 2017), though Chang labels such cases ones of “equipose” (2013), reserving the term “incommensurable” for something else.

⁵ I elaborate on planning and anchoring in Andreou (2023b, chapter 7).

activity—seems unnecessarily rigid and even “somewhat compulsive” (Andreou 2023b, 152). But such cases are more likely to involve tangential complications than the simpler cases I have front-loaded with the aim of avoiding unnecessary distractions.

Of course, in the chip case just considered, the agent does not have a self-control problem. Even if the agent sometimes deviates from her plan, she is managing her choices over time well. Does her success involve defeating a ‘foreign force,’ where this foreign force is, perhaps, as Williamson suggests, her preferences “in their entirety” (260n9), which threaten to lead her astray? It is, I think, misleading to describe her success in this way (and, relatedly, misleading to claim that a key difference between her and an agent who shows poor self-control due to managerial failure is that she—our self-controlled chip-eater—defeats rather than succumbs to a foreign force). But doesn’t the fact that she eventually acts counter-preferentially make it clear that one (or more) of her preferences figures as (part of) a foreign force? I do not think so. Note first that, as Williamson at some point grants, an agent with cyclic preferences can identify with each of her preferences individually. And, as my discussion of *WPP* suggests, her making a plan need not change that. (Given that her plan’s proposed stopping point is somewhat arbitrary relative to her concerns, a bit of discretionary deviation is fine.) Relatedly, she may recognize that the need for her to act counter-preferentially at some point is not because one of her preferences or her preferences “in their entirety” fail to accurately capture what matters to her, but because her concern for achieving her goal of not overindulging, which is captured by her preference to eat no chips over eating all the chips in the bag, will never have a chance to be expressed if she simply acts on her pairwise preferences as the options present themselves. It is in an attempt *to do as much justice as possible* to her preferences “in their entirety,” rather than to defeat her preferences “in their entirety,” that she proceeds in the way she does.

Now it might be suggested that the foreign force that “conquers” the chip-eater with poor self-control—who, we can suppose, keeps eating chip after chip—is a disposition to follow his pairwise preferences;⁶ *that*, it might be maintained, is the force that distinguishes him from the self-controlled chip-eater and that he disowns. (Of course, if having a disposition to follow one’s preferences is part of having preferences, then the

⁶ I borrow the characterization of the foreign force as “conquering” from Frankfurt’s case of the “helplessly violated” “unwilling addict,” which figures as a classic case of an agent being hijacked by a foreign force that is “too powerful” for him to “withstand” or “overcome” and that ultimately “conquers” the agent (Frankfurt 1971, 12).

self-controlled chip-eater also has a disposition to follow her preferences; for the sake of argument, let us put this complication aside and assume that the idea that the chip-eater with poor self-control has a disposition to follow his preferences is getting at something that distinguishes the chip-eater with poor self-control from the self-controlled chip-eater.) The suggestion under consideration raises the following interesting question: Does *Claim 1*, below, go beyond *Claim 2*, below?

CLAIM 1 The chip-eater with poor self-control has a disposition to follow his pairwise preferences (with deviations requiring special explanation, such as an interference of some sort).

CLAIM 2 The chip-eater with poor self-control generally follows his pairwise preferences (with deviations requiring special explanation, such as an interference of some sort).

If it does not, then *Claim 1* just points to a poorly managed set of choices rather than to an alien force in the agent's psychology, and so does not speak against my view that cases of poor self-control need not involve a foreign force. If, on the other hand, *Claim 1* does go beyond *Claim 2*, then hanging on to the idea that cases of poor self-control need not involve a foreign force requires an additional, but quite plausible move: We can turn our attention to an agent who meets the condition of generally following his pairwise preferences, but not the more demanding condition of having a disposition to follow his pairwise preferences (where the disposition at issue is understood as a force in the agent's psychology beyond the dispositions associated with the agent's preferences), and see *this* agent as one with a purely managerial self-control problem—one that can be manifested in misplaced (even if natural and understandable) local 'fine-tunings' that together reveal a failure to adequately develop and exercise the managerial skills required to be sufficiently responsive to the big picture. Perhaps what characterizes this agent is the *lack* of a disposition or habit that would need to be postulated to explain the situation were he to *deviate* from acting on his pairwise preferences in the absence of any external interference. This, then, could serve as an illustration in which managerial failure, rather than a foreign force, is at the root of the agent's self-control problem.

There is a great deal more that needs to be said, but that will have to wait for another occasion, which is for the best given that a great deal more reflection on Williamson's thought-provoking comments, for which

I am extremely grateful, is in order. In any case, in the end, I hope that Williamson is right that, even if I am wrong in thinking that there can be cases of poor self-control that are not due to hijacking by a foreign force, it is, nonetheless, illuminating in many cases to think about poor self-control not just in terms of a foreign force but also in terms of managerial failure, and, more specifically, in terms of counter-productive micromanagement.

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