

## **The implications of ego depletion for the ethics and politics of manipulation**

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“Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man.” (O’ Connor 1970: 115)

On the usual understanding, the aim of manipulation is to modify another person’s choices. Philosophers writing on the nature of manipulation often emphasize that manipulative acts are distinguished from other acts intended to modify others’ choices by the fact that manipulation directly, but clandestinely, modifies a person’s psychology. For example, Claudia Mills observes that whereas coercion seeks to change an individual’s choice situation by modifying the objective features of that situation, manipulation seeks to change an individual’s choice situation by modifying her psychology. (Mills 1995) So whereas the mugger coerces me when he tries to compel me to relinquish my wallet with the threat “your money or your life!,” the psychiatrist manipulates me when she uses hypnosis to persuade me to give up my wallet. Likewise, Marcia Baron (2003: 39) emphasizes the opacity of manipulation when she notes an important psychological asymmetry: Manipulators cannot manipulate without intending to do so, but manipulation is no longer manipulation if its target is aware of being manipulated. Manipulation is, by necessity, *subtle*. This is why, for example, to utter ‘I am attempting to manipulate you’ is to engage in a performative contradiction. Like silence, mentioning manipulation destroys it. The intended effect of manipulation, as Baron notes, is to make it harder, if not effectively impossible, to choose other than as the manipulator desires that we choose, (2003: 42) and one way to reduce our susceptibility to manipulation is to become aware of it.

Much of recent social psychology research concludes that we are, unfortunately from an ethical perspective, much more susceptible to subtle — and seemingly irrational— influences on choice than we commonly recognize. For instance, we are creatures who tend to be more readily persuaded by someone who claims to share our birthday or our initials. (Miller et al 1998) Worst still, we routinely overestimate our stoutness in being able to resist others' influence on us, thinking that while *other* people readily succumb to such manipulation, we ourselves are nearly immune. (Davidson 1983) Being manipulated is not only easier than we think. Resisting it is harder than we think.

My purpose here is to investigate the ethical and political implications of one psychological phenomenon, known as *ego depletion*, that renders us susceptible to manipulation. On one common sense picture, willpower and self-control, are character traits that vary from person to person. But the strong willed or self-controlled person has, as Aristotle remarked, achieved the “hardest victory” of all, the victory over the self and its desires. And once established, self-control is a resource that does not need replenishing. The strong willed or self-controlled person chooses wisely and well even as temptations or irrational influences concatenate.

The ego depletion hypothesis suggests that this common sense picture is, in crucial respects, incorrect. While individuals vary in their ability to exercise self-control, within a given context, self-control and willpower are resources that become depleted as they are exercised. (Muraven and Baumeister 2000, Hagger 2010) Having to exert self-control and willpower draws down the reservoir of these resources and make subsequent such exercises more difficult. An appropriate metaphor, then, is that self-control and willpower are a muscle: Yes, some of us have stronger muscles than others, but all of us undergo muscle fatigue as we exercise.

Ego depletion's connection to manipulation is this: Ego depletion exerts a non-rational influence on our choice and conduct. Acting rationally can sometimes depend on the temporal order in which choices are made. However, ego depletion results in later choices being less governable by our powers of self-control and willpower than earlier choices. As our power to regulate our desires diminishes each time we must make conscious effort to keep those desires in check, our later desires exert outside influence over our choices, sometimes to our detriment and in ways that we would not rationally endorse. The employee who must keep her anger in check as she is berated by a heavy handed boss later gorges on ice cream. The recovering drug addict strains to stay away from the local drug markets only to later end up arrested for soliciting prostitution. The shopper who must drive past luxury shops en route to purchase goods at a discount store later lets loose with a torrent of verbal abuse at her children. Presumably, these individuals would rationally regret the latter choices, choices for which ego depletion is probably fundamental to their explanation. Resistance may not be futile, but if the ego depletion hypothesis is correct, it is much tougher than we tend to acknowledge.

Because ego depletion makes us more susceptible to manipulation, a full account of the ethical and political significance of manipulation cannot overlook it. I suspect that the implications of ego depletion for manipulation are very broad, so I will my aims here to one aims conceptual concern, one theoretical concern, and one practical, or policy-based, concern. Conceptually, ego depletion suggests that although direct manipulation by others may be the paradigm of manipulation, manipulation can also occur through the instigation of absent others or merely through the fashioning of social environments that shape choice. On the theoretical side, ego depletion is an important example of exogenous practical irrationality and of diminished autonomy that is largely causally independent of character as it understood in the

Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. Finally, on a practical level, ego depletion needs to be a more central focus of theorists of justice, since it appears to be a significant contributor to poverty and other persistent injustices.

## 1. SEMINAL EXPERIMENTS ON EGO DEPLETION

The hypothesis that “prior exercise of volition” causes a “temporary reduction in the self’s capacity or willingness to engage in volitional action (including controlling the environment, controlling the self, making choices, and initiating action)” (Baumeister 1998: 1253) has been confirmed in a wide variety of studies.

In one classic study, led by Roy Baumeister (1998), hungry subjects were placed in a room with a bowl of radishes and a bowl of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. A portion of the subjects were instructed to eat radishes but no cookies and another portion were instructed to eat cookies but no radishes. A third group of test subjects did not participate in this part of the experiment. After twenty minutes, all of the test subjects were asked to complete a geometrical drawing puzzle that, unbeknownst to them, was unsolvable. The subjects were told that they could try as many solutions to the puzzle as they wished and could work on the puzzle for up to 30 minutes, but they could also stop before solving it if they wished. Baumeister found that those instructed to eat radishes but not cookies not only reported greater frustration and desire to quit the puzzle task, they quit sooner than the other subject groups (after about eight minutes on average, compared to nearly nineteen minutes for those instructed to eat cookies) and attempted fewer solutions than the other subject groups (about 19 attempts on average, compared to about 34 attempts for those who ate cookies). Baumeister et al. conclude that these results are not explained by the claim that

eating cookies improves mental performance when compared to eating radishes. Rather, the combined effect of eating radishes (an unpalatable food to many) and resisting eating the cookies produced a “psychic cost” to the subjects, a cost that made them more inclined not to persist in solving the puzzle. “Self-regulation,” i.e., the regulation of one’s desires and actions, thus appears to draw on “some limited resource akin to strength or energy.” (1998: 1256)

Baumeister’s team also conducted an experiment that involved the regulation of emotional response instead of choice. In this experiment, participants were asked to watch movies, either a humorous clip of Robin Williams or a scene from *Terms of Endearment* in which a woman discusses dying from cancer. Subjects were instructed either to suppress their emotions while watching the clip or to let their emotions flow freely. The subjects were then asked to solve anagram puzzles, asking them to unscramble a set of letters to make words. Regardless of whether subjects had watched the humorous clip or the tearjerker, those subjects instructed to suppress emotional expression solved nearly 50 percent more anagrams than those instructed to express their emotional responses.

Other research supports the claim that ego depletion makes individuals more susceptible to particular persuasive tactics. Fennis, Janssen, and Vohs (2009) found that sales personnel achieved higher sales when they sequenced their pitches so that earlier pitches required more careful, information-intensive deliberation than later pitches. For example, a salesperson trying to persuade a customer to upgrade a cell phone service plan might begin her pitch with a highly specific question, like “how much of your monthly bill pays for text messaging?” or “how many of your available calling minutes do you use every month?” These questions can then be followed up with queries of a more general kind, like “do you

really think your current plan gives you a good deal?” Fennis et al found that such sequencing leads customers to consider their less carefully, to generate fewer counterarguments to salespersons’ assertions, and to rely upon simple heuristics in making their buying decisions.

## 2. EGO DEPLETION AND PRACTICAL REASON

On its face, both the *explananda* and the *explanans* in these ego depletion experiments appear to form heterogeneous classes. Indeed, the phenomena in question are wide ranging. However, the common pattern is that individuals who must engage in effortful practical deliberation then find subsequent deliberation, particularly deliberation that involves inclinations that the individual is seeking to control, more effortful and challenging. In the radish/cookies experiment, those subjects who had to suppress their desires to eat cookies and substitute radishes instead then found it more difficult to continue with a frustrating task. They become less patient or industrious (i.e., more tempted to quit) when they attempted to solve the unsolvable geometry puzzle. In the experiment where participants had to suppress their emotional responses to the film clips, those participants were less dogged in solving the anagrams. The experiments concerning sales tactics required participants to deliberate with care until the point that their deliberative willpower wore down. The common thread in each experiments is that prior efforts to control desires or guide deliberation diminish subsequent ability to do the same. Baumeister (2002) thus proposes that ego depletion is the result of an inability to regulate executive function and self-control.

Ego depletion is likely to be a pervasive source of practical irrationality. For as ego depletion sets in, individuals’ capacity to act in their own considered interests diminishes. More specifically, a feature of our desires and choices that is usually irrelevant to their

rationality — the temporal order in which we confront those desires and choices — ends up playing an outsized role in how we navigate those desires and choices. Even if I am able to suppress my desire to direct an obscene gesture at the driver who cuts me off on the freeway on the way to work, I may be less able to suppress my desire to eat a fatty hamburger for lunch *because* I had to suppress my earlier desire not to gesture at the reckless driver. And even if I am able to suppress my desire for a hamburger, I may be less able to suppress my late night desires to drink alcohol, watch pornography, or read Kant. (Well, maybe not that last one.) The concatenation of ego depleting events seems to put me less and less under the control of my own rational powers, such that I end up doing what (in a larger sense) I would prefer that I not do.

The ego depletion research emphasizes that individuals subject to this phenomenon devolve to choice strategies that simplify choice, usually to their detriment. The apparently compromised executive function of those undergoing ego depletion tends to lead individuals to make choices that favor immediate gains over long-term benefit; to avoid or duck decision, as a consequence of “decision fatigue”; to adopt a status quo bias in favor of familiar alternatives; to fixate upon a single factor (price or color of a product, for instance) above all else; or to devolve choice to an authority (a doctor or a salesperson, say). (Baumeister et al. 1998) These strategies seem designed to enable ego depleted persons to streamline the process of choice by avoiding choice characterized by complexity, and while such strategies may sometimes produce rational choices, it is doubtful that their cumulative effect on rational choice is positive.

### 3. TWO FORMS OF MANIPULATION

As noted at the outset, our standard model of manipulation understands it as a species of interaction wherein one person attempts to modify the attitudes or choices of another by clandestinely modifying the other's attitudes. Ego depletion eases others' ability to induce such modifications in us. Simple knowledge of the likelihood of another person being ego depleted places the actors on unequal rational footing. If A has reason to believe B is ego depleted — perhaps A is even responsible for B's ego depletion — then A holds a deliberative or persuasive advantage over B. Ego depletion gives manipulation one more entry way into our psychic economy. Because they are less able to withstand the unseen “pressure to acquiesce” exerted by manipulators (Baron 2003), individuals subject to ego depletion can more readily have their desires modified so that their actions end up benefitting others. Knowledge of the effects of ego depletion thus empowers would-be manipulators, enabling them to exploit the time order of choices in order to create a choice architecture that favors them and disempowers the rational agents they thereby manipulate. As Thomas Hill has put it:

Manipulation, broadly conceived, can perhaps be understood as intentionally causing or encouraging people to make the decisions one wants them to make by actively promoting their making the decisions in ways that rational persons would not want to make their decisions. (1984: 251)

Now of course, it will often be the case that in situations of negotiation, etc., one party will have a deliberative advantage over the other. In most sales contexts, for example, salespersons have a significant advantage over the customer simply because they are far more knowledgeable about the product. Such informational asymmetries can be remedied to some degree, but probably not completely eradicated, and to that extent, such asymmetries help to make manipulation possible. But from the standpoint of the ethics of manipulation, what makes ego depletion a particularly worrisome phenomenon is its pervasiveness and the



ease with which it can be induced on the spot. Those with the ability to induce ego depletion in others, even lacking the explicit understanding that this is what they are doing, hold a decided advantage in non-cooperative deliberations. Even though they engage one another on rational terms, they do not engage one another with their full inherent capacities as rational agents, so that one party stands in a privileged position with respect to achieving her rational aims.

Ego depletion is thus a worrisome phenomenon in terms of how manipulation is usually philosophically characterized. Yet ego depletion also challenges this picture of manipulation as well. Our paradigm of manipulation is *interactive*, i.e., we tend to think of manipulation as a state that A induces in B through A being present to, and engaged with, B in some communicative act. The manipulations made more probable by ego depletion, however, are not entirely interactive. For ego depletion can make individuals more susceptible to manipulation that occurs at many causal removes from the manipulators. Indeed, it is likely that most of the manipulation facilitated by ego depletion is what we might call *ambient* manipulation. Such manipulation occurs when an individual operates within a constructed environment designed to encourage her to make certain choices, even without those doing the encouraging being present. The modern supermarket, for example, is a deeply manipulative environment, despite there being no individual actually present to do the manipulating. The number of products at a typical U.S. supermarket has tripled in one generation and now numbers in the tens of thousands, including (typically) about 200 varieties of salad dressing, 300 varieties of cookies, and 40 varieties of toothpaste. (Schwartz 2003) Furthermore, the supermarket is an environment that pedals the narcissism of small differences. Product choices are minutely differentiated: organic versus conventional

produce; whole fruit versus prepped; low sodium and low fat; soda in 12, 22, or 64 ounce containers; and shampoo, conditioner, and shampoo *plus* conditioner. The opportunities for ego depletion are staggering — and while I will not speculate on what motivates the marketing tactics deployed by supermarkets, it hardly seems coincidental that sugary products and cigarettes are usually the last items available before checkout.

On its face, it might appear a stretch to call the supermarket a manipulative environment. After all, no person is present engaging in the overt verbal trickery, withholding of information, etc. that we associate with manipulation. On the contrary, the supermarket is an information-saturated environment, cluttered with pricing information, nutritional data, and recipe ideas. However, the supermarket, as a built environment, is designed to take advantage of ego depletion — to so bombard us with choice opportunities that our volitional control wears down. And who has not left the supermarket wondering struck by the divergence between the healthfulness of the items on our lists and the preponderance of junk foods in our carts?

The sociologist Barry Schwartz (2003) has proposed that the “official dogma” of Western industrial societies is that the more choice people have, the more freedom they have, and the more freedom people have, the higher their welfare or happiness. Schwartz contends that while providing people *some* measure of choice promotes freedom and happiness, modern industrial societies have passed the tipping point where additional choice actually diminishes freedom and happiness. Societies with boundless consumer choices raise our expectations for our choices, only to disappoint us; make acts of choice more taxing and energy-intensive, sometimes even to the point of inducing volitional paralysis; and induce states of regret and second-guessing, as we imagine that since there are so many choices

available to us, for us choice we make, there is some imagined alternative that must have been better. Schwartz goes so far as to suggest that this official dogma has contributed to the explosion of clinical depression.

Schwartz is principally concerned with the impact that seemingly limitless choice options has on well-being. However, we ought be equally concerned with the impact that seemingly limitless choice has on our susceptibility to manipulation and on our autonomy more generally. Our choice-saturated societies are incubators for ego depletion. In a world with over 300 cable television channels, several thousand cell phone calling plans, and multiple options as to where to school one's children, opportunities for choice are pervasive. But so too are opportunities for ego depletion and manipulation, either through direct interaction with others or via the ambient sorts of ego depletion I have been focusing on.

#### 4. AUTONOMY AND CHARACTER

A second worry about ego depletion concerns its consequences for attributions of autonomy.

It is not obvious that manipulation is possible only among agents who are autonomous. Non-autonomous but still rational individuals could perhaps manipulate others, as well as being manipulable themselves. However, I follow Kantians in holding that the connection between autonomous agency and rational agency is very tight, perhaps even analytic. That is, I am not quite sure how to make sense of the possibility of an agent who is self-governing but non-rational. To govern oneself is presumably to make choices that reflects the reasons one takes for making those choices, and so autonomy appears to presuppose some measure of rationality. Furthermore, what renders manipulation ethically

suspect is that it bypasses or enfeebles our rationality. Since ego depletion seems to make such bypassing or enfeebling much easier, it functions, at one remove, as a threat to our autonomy.

However, we must be careful in describing this threat. After all, ego depleted individuals do seem morally responsible for their actions. (Levy 2011:104-05) First, the ego depleted act *from reasons* when they make choices influenced by ego depletion. The ego depleted do not act against their better judgment in the moment, so to speak. Indeed, ego depleted individuals may be doing precisely what they seek to do in such choice settings. Second, those reasons in fact move them in act, so they do not suffer from weakness of will, compulsion, etc. Hence, ego depletion does not inhibit our ability to rationally guide our conduct at the time we act. (Fischer 1994) In this regard, ego depleted choices are (I will say) *weakly autonomous*, inasmuch as ego depletion still makes it possible for agents to act on reasons they recognize.

As I argued above, ego depletion facilitates manipulation because practical reasons that might otherwise be psychologically efficacious in individuals are not. Ego depletion brings about what Richard Holton has called “judgment shifts,” wherein agents who are faced with strong desires end up decoupling their judgments about what it is best for them to do from their desires. Holton proposes that this occurs when we are tempted to act against our better judgment (Holton 2009), but ego depletion appears to involve judgment shifts that are not catalyzed by the presence of some tempting alternative that moves us to act contrary to our best interests or reasons. Manipulation facilitated by ego depletion instead has the following form: A manipulates B into X-ing because B, being ego depleted, does X based on reason R1 but would not have done X had she not been ego depleted because other reasons

R2, R3, etc., would have been sufficient to motivate her to do other than X. But B's doing X has B's full rational endorsement in the context of choice. As Neil Levy puts it:

Since ego depletion induces judgment shift, the agent cannot reasonably be expected to take action of a kind that would prevent her from acting in accordance with her new judgment: After experiencing judgment shift, agents do not remind themselves of their values, or take other steps to test whether their (new) all-things-considered judgment coheres with their values, precisely because they *have* experienced judgment shift and are satisfied with their decision. (Levy 2011:106)

Ego depletion thus makes a difference not to acting rationality as such but to whether we do what we most have reason to do. In this respect, ego depletion enables manipulation because it threatens what I will call *strong autonomy*, our capacity to recognize reasons for action and do what we take ourselves to most have reason to do. The irrationality of ego depleted choices, as I suggested earlier, stems largely from the ways in which it makes relevant the otherwise irrelevant temporal ordering of choices. Ego depletion is likely to result in patterns in which earlier choices are more likely to result in strongly autonomous choices than later ego-depleted choices. More worrisome is that the later choices can undermine the effectiveness of the earlier choices, as a person who exercises volitional control in order to eat a healthy diet becomes ego depleted and succumbs to temptations later on. If, in the spirit of thinkers such as John Rawls, what we are concerned with is the shape of a person's life and her ongoing capacity to exercise her rationality in the pursuit of her conception of the good, then this pattern of strongly autonomous choices alternating with weakly autonomous choices should trouble us. This pattern underscores that the extent to which a person is autonomous cannot be evaluated merely episodically, in terms of her choices and actions taken in isolation. Rather, a person's autonomy must be appraised in terms of the interrelationships among her choices and actions.

Moreover, ego depletion accords well with — and in fact extends — the situationist trend in social psychology. Situationism claims that the human behavior is more heavily influenced by external or situational factors than by durable psychological traits or personality features. Setting matters more than character, say situationists. The well-known experiments in the situationist tradition (Millgram’s obedience experiment, Zimbardo’s imprisonment experiment, the various bystander experiments, Asch’s group conformity experiments, etc.) suggest that situational factors exert significant influence on a wide ranging of behaviors, including altruism, willingness to defy authority, etc. Ego depletion adds to this picture that strong autonomy itself is in important ways situationally influenced — that those whose environments place greater demands on their volitional capacities will be more likely to have their rationality manipulated and compromised. Characterological differences in self-control, etc., are therefore less stark than they are presented in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition in moral psychology. For even those with high levels of self-control are apparently susceptible to ego depletion that makes their choices less than fully rational. Furthermore, ego depletion suggests that interpersonal differences in self-control are likely to be narrower than *intrapersonal* differences in self-control, i.e., differences in the effectiveness of self-control when subject to decision fatigue and when not subject to it. Thus, differences in manipulability probably are less personal and more situational.

This conclusion runs counter to much of the traditional philosophical literature on self-control and volitional capacities. For virtue theorists like Aristotle, differences in volitional capacities stem from differences in acquired character. Some individuals are fortunate enough to have been habituated to be temperate, courageous, etc., and it is a mark of their having such virtues that their psychologies are harmonious in the sense that their

values, desires, choices, and actions do not conflict. The temperate person, for example, not only seeks to be temperate and chooses temperate actions, but experiences pleasure at doing so. The phenomenon of ego depletion suggests that such harmony is quite rare. But more fundamentally, it implies that our vulnerability to manipulation may not reflect good character so much as good fortune.

## 5. POVERTY, ALTRUISM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Lastly, ego depletion helps to explain why the achievement of social justice and the alleviation of poverty have proven to be such intractable policy goals.

In popular politics, post-war conservatism has tended to see poverty as a moral failing, stemming from family breakdown, lack of initiative, and so on. Liberalism has tended to attribute the resistance of poverty to lack of opportunity, poor education, and public policy failures. Broadly speaking, conservatives see poverty as effected by bad choices, whereas liberals see it as effected by bad environments.

Ego depletion suggest conservatives are correct in one respect, but liberals are correct in another: The *choice environments* in which the poor typically live are at least partially responsible for persistent poverty.

As noted above, modern consumer societies make available to us choices unprecedented in their number and complexity. Ego depletion, however, is not simply a function of the choices available to us. It is also a function of the resources that make various options available to us. Those with fewer resources must exert greater willpower or self-control precisely because their lesser resources necessitate their deliberation about tradeoffs among a wider range of options. Consider a relatively ordinary decision: whether to replace a pair of shoes whose soles have

cracked. For the well-to-do, such a decision may bring about ego depletion in the ways I outlined before: the buyer must choose among hundreds of styles, etc. But the poor must not only confront this plethora of options. They must also confront tradeoffs that the wealthy do not: If I buy these shoes, will I have bus fare for the week; will I be able to pay for my parents' medications; etc.? The wealthy can make these decisions based on preference alone. Yet for the poor, day-to-day life is more volitionally stressful due to their lesser resources.

Hence, in addition to all the other forms of scarcity faced by the poor, they face an environment in which willpower and self-control turn out to be scarce as well. This scarcity is why many behavioral economists now hypothesize that ego depletion encourages behaviors that reinforce poverty. Conditions of scarcity have distinct psychological effects. Individuals with lesser economic resources have to make more choices, and more difficult choices, about how to deploy those resources. Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan compares the situations of the rich and poor to that of two travelers packing for a future trip. The poor traveler has a small suitcase, the rich traveler a large suitcase. The rich traveler can pack all her essentials with space for discretionary items or for items acquired while traveling. The poor traveler cannot fit all her essential items in her smaller suitcase. The rich traveler will find packing an easier, less cognitively and emotionally demanding task. The open space in her suitcase is 'bought' at a relatively cheap cost, since it would otherwise be filled with non-essential, discretionary items. Moreover, the rich traveler has much greater margin for error than the poor traveler. If the poor traveler chooses badly, he will be missing some essential item. Hence, he must be a more vigilant and careful packer. Furthermore, Mullainathan suggests, the richer traveler will appear to others to be a more careful packer!



This metaphor seems to capture the volitional plight of the poor. Relative lack of resources magnifies the significance of each choice, since each such choice is more likely to require substantive tradeoffs. The ego depletion hypothesis thus explains the empirical finding that those in poverty are more likely to engage in self-defeating and seemingly irrational conduct, conduct that keeps them impoverished, because of the greater demands that poverty makes on their choice reservoir.

The economist Dean Spears has recently provided experimental corroboration for these conclusions. (2010) Spears' team traveled to villages in India with varying levels of wealth. A set of the participants were first asked to squeeze a handgrip, with the amount of time spent squeezing the handgrip measured. They were then given the opportunity to buy a package of soap at significant discount from its retail price. Most deliberated for only a few seconds, and 42 percent opted to buy the soap. The experimenters then asked participants to squeeze the handgrip a second time, again measuring the grip time. Richer participants showed no significant differences between the first and second grip durations. However, the poorer participants were typically unable to grip as long the second go around. Spears concludes that poverty appears to make "economic decision-making more consuming of cognitive control for poorer people than for richer people." (2010: 2)

Conservatives are thus correct about a proximate cause of poverty — that the poor make impulsive, self-defeating, or irrational choices — but liberals are correct about its background cause — poverty itself, with its power to deplete our volitional resources. Put in terms of manipulation, the poor suffer ambient manipulation to a greater degree than the well-to-do. Poverty is thus a source of poor self-control rather the result of poor self-control. In this respect, Aristotle's belief that virtue requires various external goods should be seen in a new, and ironic,

light. Temperance, at least, is easier for the rich, but not because they are any more virtuous than the poor.

Compounding this is the finding that exercising volitional control also appears to suppress altruistic tendencies. DeWall et al. (2007) subjected participants to a series of tasks. In the first, subjects given a page of text were instructed to mark every occurrence of the letter *e*. In the second, subjects were again given a page of text. Some were again asked to mark every occurrence of *e*, but others were instructed to mark every *e* except it was followed by a vowel or found in a word in which a vowel occurred two letters earlier. As expected, subjects assigned the more complex *e*-marking task worked more slowly. The researchers then asked both subject groups to read hypothetical scenarios in which they were asked to provide money or other help (donating money to a terminally ill child, giving directions to a lost person, lending someone a cell phone, etc) . Those in the second group — those who had to mark the specific subset of *e*'s in the text — showed less willingness to help, a result the researchers attribute to the fact that the more complex text marking task required them to work against the inclination established by the first task, i.e., to mark every *e*. In other words, the second set of subjects were more ego depleted than the first and so demonstrated a lesser willingness to help others. In a similar vein, Achtziger, Alós-Ferrer, and Wagner (2010) found that ego depleted individuals become less cooperative. They subjected participants to the same text marking task sequence and then asked participants to take part in the well-known 'ultimatum game', in which two individuals determine how to divide a sum of money. The first player proposes a division and the second player can then accept or reject that offer. Ego-depleted individuals, it turns out, made lower offers than others, and were also more likely to reject low offers as unfair, even though, according to the game's rules, rejecting an offer means that neither player receives any money. Ego-depleted participants

thus seemed more inclined to see others' offers as unfair even when they themselves would equivalent offers.

Taken together, these findings imply that ego depletion plays an especially powerful role in the maintenance of poverty. The poor, because their environments places greater volitional demands on them, are more susceptible to manipulation. But the poor, again due to ego depletion, are less inclined to cooperate despite having more to gain from such cooperation. These tendencies likely reinforce one another, as individuals more susceptible to manipulation are exploited by others who looking to manipulate rather than cooperate. Ego depletion, then, is likely a significant contributor to perceived moral pathologies within poor communities. For policymakers, the ego depletion hypothesis implies any conception of social justice, no matter how normatively attractive, is likely to flounder if it does not take ego depletion into account.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that ego depletion is not inevitable, for research has also found that a variety of factors appear to counteract it. (Hagger 2010) The consumption of glucose (except for those suffering from Type 2 diabetes), as well as laughter or other positive emotional experiences, seem to buttress or replenish volitional control. (Tice et al. 2007) Moreover, greater levels of self-awareness or self-monitoring help to overcome ego depletion. Activities that are self-affirming, such as recalling an incident in which one exhibited a trait one values, seem to enhance volitional control. (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009) Furthermore, the *belief* that self-control is limited tends to be self-fulfilling, whereas those who affirm that their capacity to persevere or overcome exertion tend in fact to persevere in the face of ego depletion. (Job et al. 2010) Individuals given the resources to monitor or track their efforts also appear less subject to ego

depletion. For example, individuals who have a clock available to measure their performance on a task tend to become more aware of deterioration in their progress in performing the task and compensate with additional effort. (Wan and Sternthal, 2008)

Furthermore, our knowledge of ego depletion can put to positive ethical use as well. For instance, consider addictive behavior (Levy 2006). The great majority of drug addicts are able to refrain from using their drug of choice for short windows of time. Indeed, one of the perplexities of addictive behavior is that addicts in the early withdrawal stage, when their physical dependence and desires are the greatest, nevertheless often manage to ‘get clean’. It would be natural to expect that having weakened the bonds of physical dependence, addicts would then find it easier to forego drugs. However, the contrary appears to be the case, a fact readily explained by ego depletion. The extraordinary resources needed to combat full-on addiction deplete addicts’ willpower and self-control, making them *more* susceptible to their desires for drugs over the long-term. Addiction wanes when addicts can break out of this pattern of persistent desire, typically by learning to avoid the situations, settings, or individuals they associate with drug use. Thus, ego depletion could be exploited for the benefit of addicts, by (for instance) imposing night curfews on those undergoing residential drug abuse rehabilitation to keep them away from drug markets. (Levy 2011)

But again, ego depletion is likely to be a permanent feature of late industrial society. No doubt early hominids suffered ego depletion. Desire, as philosophers as diverse as Plato, Kant, and Buddha pointed out, is a ubiquitous feature of the human condition, and the management of desire is a perennial theme in philosophy and in the self-help genre. As Amartya Sen, our “freedom of agency” can be “constrained by social, political, and economic circumstances.” (2000) The phenomenon of ego depletion is another instance of

how our modern social environment saturated with choice is, paradoxically, an environment that makes us more readily manipulated, and as a consequence, less autonomous and less free.

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