This book is about self-control. I nevertheless begin with a few words on cognitive ability – or what in everyday life is often referred to as “intelligence.”

To say that people differ in cognitive ability is stating the obvious. It is a basic fact of life. A well-ordered society accommodates these differences, for instance by providing different educational tracks and employment opportunities, some cognitively more demanding than others. It would be absurd to require all children to attain the highest educational level and obtain a PhD. It would be equally absurd to expect all adults to be able to do the intellectually most difficult work.

This is reflected in our morality. Nobody blames people of only modest cognitive ability for not reaching the top of the educational or labor market ladder. This capacity is not a matter of volition, but largely determined by genes and early upbringing. Since both genetic inheritance and childhood family environment are beyond our control, it would be unfair to hold anyone fully responsible if, as a result, they do less well in life than others – just as it would be unfair to blame a five-foot-tall youth for not being a top basketball player.

All this seems self-evident.

Why then are things so different for self-control? Some people are clearly better at maintaining self-control than others – at focusing their attention, inhibiting their urges and impulses, and thus achieving their long-term goals. Others make lofty resolutions but fail to realize them time and again because they do not persist and easily succumb to temptation. Their lives are marked by an endless string of self-control failures.

But in stark contrast to differences in cognitive ability, differences in self-control are not mirrored in how society is organized. The educational system caters to children with different levels of cognitive talent, but not to children with varying levels of self-control. Schools
may offer remedial teaching or special education for children with extremely poor self-control, but that is it. The same goes for the labor market. Some jobs require only limited cognitive skills and are mostly taken by the lower educated, whereas other positions require elaborate cognitive qualities and are mostly filled by the higher educated. But differences in self-control never seem to play a role. Job advertisements never ask for “good self-control.” Employers apparently think it is not so important, or simply assume that everybody has it.

Again, this is reflected in our morality. No reasonable human being would blame a fellow citizen of only modest cognitive ability for not obtaining a university degree, for being unable to do cognitively demanding work, or for failing to understand abstruse regulations. Most of us carefully avoid being judgmental about differences in intelligence. In contrast, many people have no qualms about blaming their fellow citizens for poor self-control. If someone fails to muster the discipline to study hard, get a job, live healthy, and pay the bills on time, the consequences are for her alone to shoulder. After all, everyone knows these behaviors are important. People who lack self-control only have themselves to blame. Next time, try harder!

The message of this book, however, is that self-control is not just a matter of volition. Self-control strength is a personality trait that, like cognitive ability, is largely determined by genes and early upbringing, and it remains relatively stable over the course of adult life. And like cognitive ability, self-control is limited. Some of us do better than others, but even champions of willpower cannot control themselves indefinitely. Sooner or later, they give in. Sooner or later, there comes a point when saying “just try harder!” is as absurd as saying “just be more intelligent!”

These psychological realities have profound implications for what a just and well-ordered society looks like. Such a society should not only accommodate differences in cognitive ability but also take into account that self-control capacity is limited, with some having less of it than others. Unfortunately, most Western societies are far removed from that situation. In fact, more or less unwittingly, we have constructed an “iron cage” that poorly befits the realities of the human mind. As a result, all of us are increasingly at risk of falling into a trap we have set for ourselves.
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Keeping Up with Change

Numerous studies have revealed that good self-control contributes to a broad range of desirable life outcomes: better school achievement and work performance, better physical and mental health, more satisfying relationships, less financial struggle and fewer setbacks, and less deviant and delinquent behavior. Differences in self-control thus have a major impact on the distribution of life chances. Although this should be more than enough to warrant serious attention, interest in self-control – in both social theory and everyday politics – has always been tenuous. Those who call the tune in these areas do not seem to view differences in self-control as a phenomenon of great importance in matters of justice and government.

What explains this relative neglect? One reason may be that much of the psychological understanding of self-control is fairly recent. It is only in the last decades that scientists have come to better understand the sources of self-control and the detrimental effects of, for instance, chronic stress and sleep deprivation. And it is only in the last decades that it became possible to peek inside the brain and see how neurological processes affect self-control. Another reason may be that, until not long ago, there simply was less cause to study the role of self-control in our lives. Several centuries ago, the average person, to make a living, needed muscle power and the stamina to work long hours on the land or the assembly line, not the ability to keep smiling to irate customers complaining about the service. Paths in life were relatively fixed, social control was strong, and modern-day problems such as impulse buying and overeating had yet to be invented.

All this has changed. Work today requires very different aptitudes, such as the ability to concentrate and sustain attention, meet strict deadlines, and work in teams, while rude and uncontrolled behavior may get you fired. Willpower has become more important than muscle power. The traditional institutional and social structures, moreover, have lost much of their sway. Not straying off course has become one’s own responsibility, and social benefits have become conditional on proper conduct. Perhaps most visibly, in almost every domain of life, the number of options and temptations has virtually exploded. Without ever leaving the couch, you can buy almost
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... anything, day and night. And thanks to social media, a single flash of impulsiveness – a careless tweet, a juicy picture – can suffice to ruin your life.¹

In sum, good self-control has become a crucial factor in the distribution of life outcomes – at times even more important than cognitive ability. The good news is that psychology in the intervening decades has learned a lot about this trait, placing us in a much better position to recognize and negotiate this reality. The bad news is that the worlds of social theory and politics have not caught up. Many of the theories and policies that define contemporary society were developed decades ago, when much less was known about the psychology of self-control, and good self-control was not that important anyway. But as the world keeps evolving and our knowledge keeps growing, these theories and policies seem increasingly out of date, no longer suited to the demands of modern society.

Hence this book. Its goal is to set out the state-of-the-art in our knowledge of self-control and to explore the implications of this knowledge for some prominent ideas about society and policy in general, and for the current heavy emphasis on personal responsibility in particular. The book consists of two parts:

• Part I discusses the relevant psychology. To what degree is self-control correlated with various individual and social outcomes? What factors undermine self-control and why? Can self-control be improved? And why are some people more motivated to exercise self-control than others?

• Part II explores the broader implications of these psychological findings. Why has self-control become increasingly important for navigating life? What do the research findings mean for moral responsibility? And what are the consequences for distributive justice?

The final chapter addresses the crucial question “What is to be done?” What does all this mean for society and policy? It results in three conclusions that partly transcend the subject of self-control, applying to politics and government more generally.

So that is the overall structure of the book. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of the main concepts, findings, and arguments, including my conclusions and resulting recommendations.
1.1 Individual Differences in Self-Control

Self-control challenges are ubiquitous and woven into the very fabric of life. They begin when the alarm clock sounds in the morning, as it requires willpower to get out of bed on time. They keep coming until it is time to sleep again, when one must resist the urge to stay up late and keep watching TV. In between these two moments, the day is packed with self-control challenges – remaining friendly to colleagues, retaining focus during tedious meetings, tackling long-overdue paperwork, making that difficult phone call, refraining from eating and drinking too much. One study found that we spend almost a quarter of our day in some way inhibiting our impulses and urges.2

But what exactly is “self-control”? The psychologist Denise de Ridder and her colleagues provide a useful definition: Self-control is “the capacity to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behavior, thoughts, and emotions.”3 Self-control involves situations of conflict, often between responses that lead to immediate reward versus responses that promote some desirable future goal. One should read a boring report that will be discussed in tomorrow’s meeting, but surfing the net and checking social media beckons. One should save money for next month’s rent, but the new flat-screen TV is on sale now. Self-control is roughly equivalent to willpower: It is the power to delay gratification.

Self-control not only involves inhibiting behavior but also initiating behavior, such as going to the gym or starting to study for an exam. This is sometimes overlooked as most self-control research focuses on the inhibition of some impulse or urge. In everyday language, moreover, the term usually refers to instances of not doing something rather than starting something. But self-control as defined above encompasses both. It also means “altering or overriding” the “response tendency” to remain passive. Inhibition and initiation are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. They both concern the regulation of behavior toward some desired goal, just like a car’s brake and accelerator serve the same purpose: to get to one’s destination quickly and safely.

Bridging the Gap

In functional terms, self-control can be viewed as the capacity to act on one’s intentions – to bridge the gap between “choice-making” and
“choice-following.” This gap is one of the perennial problems of life. We all know that we should pay attention, eat healthy, stop procrastinating, and so forth. Then why do we so often fail to act accordingly? Aristotle was already puzzled by this question. “How does it happen that thinking is sometimes followed by action and sometimes not, sometimes by motion, sometimes not?”.

“Self-control failure” can thus be defined as a failure to act on one’s intentions. Here it is useful to distinguish between two types of self-control failure. The first encompasses instances of “bypassing of the will” – the classic example being the attention lapse. I am doing my best to follow the lecture when I suddenly realize that my mind has been wandering. This is not something one chooses to do; it just happens. Such moments of inattention are more likely when one has already grown tired after listening attentively for some time. The second type of self-control failure encompasses instances of “weakness of will” – the classic example being the breaking of New Year’s resolutions. I fail to live up to my earlier intentions because at some point the desire for the forbidden fruit has become so overwhelming that I am no longer able to resist. Although I know perfectly well that it would be better to stick to my resolutions, I cave in anyway.

The distinction between these two types of failure in self-control is mostly analytical. In practice, the boundary is far from clear-cut. Both mechanisms will often be in play simultaneously, making it hard to determine which one tipped the scale. But either way, the result is the same: a disconnect between intention and behavior.

Perfectly Self-Controlled People?

Classical economic theory assumes that people are perfectly rational. When making choices, they use all of the information at their disposal, process this information in a logical and statistically sound manner, and unfailingly select the option that yields the highest utility. By now, it is widely accepted that this assumption is incorrect. Psychological research – in particular the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman – has shown that real people make all kinds of “mistakes,” basing their choices on incomplete information, making logical and statistical errors, relying on gut feelings, and so forth. Perfectly rational people do not exist.

How about their close siblings, perfectly self-controlled people? Do such people exist? And what would they look like? In classical
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economic theory, there is no such thing as limited willpower. Economists therefore have no reason to contemplate such questions. In psychology, there is no such thing as unlimited willpower. Psychologists therefore have no reason to contemplate such questions either. For an answer we must resort to philosophy. According to Alfred Mele, a perfectly self-controlled person is someone who:

• exercises self-control in all domains of life. Someone who is very disciplined at work but shows weakness of will in drinking and eating is not perfectly self-controlled;
• never exercises self-control errantly but only in support of his or her better judgments, values, principles, and the like;
• exercises self-control whenever he or she reflectively deems it appropriate to do so;
• and whose self-control is perfectly effective. His or her exertions of self-control always succeed in supporting what they are aiming to support.7

Obviously, perfectly self-controlled people are just as imaginary as perfectly rational people. Even the most disciplined person will not meet these criteria. There are two reasons why people fall short of the ideal – and some more than others. The first has to do with trait self-control, the second with state self-control.

Trait Self-Control

An individual’s baseline level of self-control strength is part of her personality and is therefore called trait self-control. As is often the case with personality traits, the distribution of this capacity follows a normal distribution. At one end, we find what the philosopher Joseph Heath has dubbed “the self-control aristocracy” – a small group of lucky dogs who are exceptionally good at delaying gratification and therefore likely to do well in life.8 At the other end, we find their antipodes: people who act on every impulse and seem incapable of controlling themselves, stumbling from one hapless incident to another. Most of us are somewhere in between – not very good at self-control but not very bad either.

What factors determine where one is situated in this distribution? It partly depends on early upbringing. Some children grow up in warm, responsive, and supportive families that foster self-control. Their
parents value this trait, set a good example, teach them self-control techniques ("First count to ten") and reward them for not acting on every impulse. Other children grow up in less conducive circumstances. Their parents have poor self-control themselves, lack the skills for teaching their offspring how to do any better, and family life revolves around immediate gratification. But the capacity for self-control is also a matter of nature. Just as some people are genetically endowed with more talent for intellectual achievement, some are genetically endowed with more talent for self-control. About 60 percent of individual differences in self-control can be attributed to differences in genes. So when it comes to this other important quality, some people have a better starting position in life than others by nature.

**State Self-Control**

But readers with good trait self-control should not conclude that this book is not about them, because one rule applies to all: Self-control is limited. The longer we have to exert self-control, the harder it gets. Sooner or later, even the most strong-willed people will be overcome by mental fatigue; their minds will begin to wander, and their impulses and urges will gain the upper hand. This phenomenon is, of course, all too familiar. We all know how, after a long day at work requiring continuous focus, placating demanding costumers, foregoing drinks at the office party, and keeping one's cool with the children causing a ruckus – we all know how, after all these challenges to our self-control, we may find ourselves raiding the fridge late in the evening, gorging ourselves on unhealthy snacks.

It is not only the prior exertion of self-control that can undermine self-control; other conditions, such as stress, can have the same effect. It is much harder to control yourself when pressure is mounting. This is particularly evident in people who get into financial trouble. Chances are that some readers of this book, at some point in their lives, have experienced a period of indebtedness or poverty. If so, they may have discovered that, perhaps to their surprise, this precarious situation undermined their mental functioning. Chances are that their behavior became less controlled and more erratic. It became harder to stay focused, keep urges and impulses in check, and stay calm and clear-headed, while it also became harder not to lapse into passivity, but keep doing whatever was necessary to fend off further financial trouble.
Another condition that undermines self-control is insufficient sleep. The shortage of sleep alters the balance in neurobiological processes responsible for self-control, thus making failure more likely. Feeling tired is also a major cause of negative mood. As a strategy to alleviate this negative mood, people tend to succumb to temptation – chocolate, alcohol, new shoes! – in the hope that this will make them feel better. Moreover, reduced self-control can make it harder to get to bed in time, thus potentially setting off a downward spiral. The solution to all this misery is obvious – get enough sleep! – but unfortunately, people tend to do the very opposite. In much of the world, the average amount of sleep is declining. Precisely in this day and age when self-control has become so important, people are cutting down on one of its main wellsprings.

The message is that self-control capacity not only depends on genes and early upbringing but also on the particulars of the situation. Psychologists speak of state self-control: one’s operational capacity for self-control in a specific situation at a specific moment in time. Even those fortunate people who normally have tremendous discipline – Joseph Heath’s “self-control aristocrats” – may find themselves in tough situations that markedly impair their capabilities, resulting in behaviors they would otherwise never exhibit, and would probably denounce as “utterly irrational.”

Improving Self-Control?

Is it possible to improve self-control through training, education, or some other type of intervention? It depends. In their first years of life, children are quite susceptible to interventions as their capacity for self-control is still developing. But once this capacity begins to crystallize, things become harder. In popular psychology, it is sometimes claimed that “willpower is like a muscle” that can be strengthened through regular exercise. As more research findings come in, however, the conclusion seems to be that exercise hardly makes a difference. The muscle metaphor does not hold.

There may yet be alternatives. Several techniques can help people to utilize their limited capacities more cleverly and efficiently, and thus to better deal with the ongoing stream of self-control challenges that cross their path. In Chapter 4, I recount the most common tips and tricks found in the self-help literature. These range from devising little
“if-then” plans and nutritional advice to strategies such as avoiding temptation all together. For readers eager to work on their own self-control, this summary may serve as a one-stop shop for the techniques currently on the market. Unfortunately, there is a catch. If everyone were taught these techniques, the net result would be that individual differences in self-control would actually widen. Those who already did poorly would only fall further behind.

Self-Control Motivation

If self-control is limited, an important question is how best to spend one’s available “budget” for self-control. What is the optimal allocation of this scarce resource?

This brings us to the role of motivation. The mere fact that some people are blessed with excellent self-control does not necessarily mean that they will always utilize this capacity. It is like the difference between having a tool and using it. Whether you will use this tool or not depends on your preferences. People will be highly motivated to exert self-control for goals they consider important – say, being successful at school or work – but less motivated to use this capacity for goals they do not care about – say, becoming a chess grandmaster. Unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, therefore, do not necessarily indicate poor self-control. An inveterate smoker may simply value his daily dose of nicotine more than his future health and exhibit great powers of self-control in other domains of life, such as work.

So what determines a person’s goals? It could be almost anything, of course. The spectrum runs from needs and desires, norms and values, social or cultural pressures, to cues and incentives in the environment. In this book, however, I discuss one factor in particular, namely a personality trait called “time orientation.” Some people are, in general, more oriented toward the future and the long-term goals they have set themselves, whereas others are, in general, more oriented toward the here-and-now and opportunities for immediate gratification. This across-the-board tendency is part of their character and may affect their overall motivation to exert self-control: the more oriented toward the future, the stronger this motivation.

The distinction between self-control motivation and self-control capacity is extremely important. One of the principal arguments of this book is that confounding them can result in serious injustices.