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**Virtues of Willpower**

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*Abstract*: Drawing on recent work in psychology, I argue that there are not one but several distinct virtues pertaining to willpower or strength of will: (1) the disposition to exercise willpower; (2) a distinctively volitional kind of modesty, or moderation in exposing oneself to volitional strain; and (3) a distinctively volitional kind of confidence, or proper inattention to the possibility of volitional failure. A multiple-virtue conception of willpower, I argue, provides a useful framework for cultivating a good relationship to one’s own volitional limitations; resists an unhealthy emphasis on ‘powering through’ volitional obstacles; and avoids controversial empirical assumptions without giving up on making progress in ethical thought about willpower. I answer objections that the latter two virtues are incompatible, and that they add little of value to hope or belief in success. I then argue that combining these virtues requires a kind of flexible attention which, while difficult, is both psychologically possible and desirable.

*Keywords*: willpower; virtue; volition; attention; modesty; confidence

A recent study by the American Psychological Association (2012, p. 4) found that “People consistently report that a lack of willpower is the top reason they fall short of their goals to lose weight, save more money, exercise or make other lifestyle changes.” The self-help literature on willpower is, unsurprisingly, large and thriving (McGonigal, 2012; Perry, 2014; Peterson and Foulds, 2019; Hanning, 2020; Serotkin, 2021; Hollins, 2022). A vast body of psychological research into willpower continues to grow as well, although a recent “replication crisis” has shaken psychologists’ confidence in some of its core findings.[[1]](#footnote-1) The philosophical literature on willpower is comparatively sparse, and focuses mainly on metaphysical and conceptual issues.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps too many ethicists and moral psychologists find questionable any talk of a will as a distinct entity or capacity, or the idea that the will has a special sort of power (Navon, 1984; Hagger et al., 2010). Conceptual and metaphysical concerns, and doubts about replication, are important. But I think they should not deter us from exploring ethical issues about what many non-philosophers consider “the top reason they fall short of their goals.” We might help clear up important confusions, spark new psychological research, and perhaps even advance our understanding of what it is to have a good character or will.

In what follows, I argue that there are multiple virtues concerned primarily with willpower. This is a view within an underexplored area of virtue ethics, concerning willpower and other “executive virtues” (O’Neill, 1996; Williams, 1981). It contrasts with the eliminativist view that we should give up talk of willpower; with the skeptical view that there is no virtue particular to willpower; with the comparatively modest view that willpower is one aspect of various familiar virtues such as courage and patience (Roberts, 1984; West, 2021)[[3]](#footnote-3); and with a single-virtue view on which there is only one virtue in this area—the disposition to exercise willpower, or perhaps a more complex virtue. Focusing on the latter contrast, I will argue that we should adopt a conception on which there is a cluster of interrelated virtues of willpower: among them, the disposition to exercise willpower; a kind of volitional modesty that moderates exposure to volitional strain; and what I call “volitional confidence,” or proper inattention to the possibility of volitional failure.

I will proceed as follows. In §I, I describe a single-virtue view of willpower on which the only virtue concerning willpower is the disposition to exercise willpower. I offer some reasons to resist this view. I introduce the additional virtues of volitional modesty and volitional confidence in §II, and then develop the multiple-virtue view by responding to several concerns: Does volitional confidence add anything of value to hope or belief in success (§III)? Is combining volitional modesty and confidence feasible, and is it desirable (§IV)? Why not think of these as aspects of a single complex virtue (§V)?

A multiple-virtue conception of willpower, I will argue, does more than give a fuller theoretical picture of good character. It provides a framework for cultivating a good relationship to one’s own volitional limitations that can be useful in practical contexts ranging from parenting and education to dealing with one’s own burnout. In particular, a multiple-virtue conception resists an unhealthy emphasis on ‘powering through’ volitional obstacles by developing and exercising more willpower. Widespread self-reports are important to consider, but they can be mistaken. I think a lack of willpower may in fact notbe “the top reason” people fall short of their goals. At any rate, it is worth paying attention to the full range of desirable traits with respect to strength of will. Virtue ethics, I will argue, can help us respond well to many pressing volitional challenges by identifying multiple virtues of willpower and their many corresponding vices.

**I. Against ‘Powering Through’**

What is willpower? We do not entirely know. I will take it to be the ability to resist desires that run contrary to one’s decisions or ongoing actions. We exercise willpower in refusing to act on cravings for cannoli, whiskey, or fentanyl, but also in continuing to work on a difficult project, or in practicing nonviolence. Avoiding temptations altogether by staying away from bars or bakeries is another kind of self-control, but I will not broaden the term ‘willpower’ to include it. In my usage, avoiding temptation avoids the need for willpower, rather than itself being an exercise of willpower.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Willpower has often been described as a kind of muscle, resource, or reservoir of energy which can be depleted, restored, and cultivated (Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister, 1998). These images raise some of the most difficult questions about the nature of willpower. Do all exercises of willpower use a single resource or ‘muscle’, leaving less available for all other volitional challenges? If my resource is my own will, or internal to my will, how do we distinguish a lack of resource from a lack of motivation to use the resource (Navon, 1984; Hagger et al., 2010)?[[5]](#footnote-5) I am skeptical that the images can bear much weight, and I will avoid them, speaking more simply of an ability or capacity and its exercise. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that humans sometimes can resist temptations and other contrary desires. In this sense, we do have willpower, and we exercise it.

Are there any virtues of willpower? Aristotle (1999, VII.1)[[6]](#footnote-6) famously contrasted *enkrateia* or self-control with virtue. For him, the virtuous do not *need* self-control, because their feelings and desires are already those of a virtuous person. Still, the most virtuous people I know still have to expend *some* volitional effort to resist conflicting desires. Even a moral saint would presumably need to resist some natural urges toward food or sleep, at the very least. So although we may not fully understand what willpower is or how it functions, a disposition to exercise it seems to be a desirable trait of character, and, in that broad sense, a virtue.

It does not follow that willpower is itself a virtue. Willpower is naturally understood as a capacity, ability, faculty, or power, rather than a disposition or tendency to make good use of our capacities or powers (Holton, 2009). When we do an outstanding job ignoring a tempting pastry, or resist the urge to escalate a heated conversation, or persevere in solving a frustrating puzzle, we show excellence in *exercising* willpower, or resisting contrary desires. This virtue or excellence is difficult to name. The term “strength of will” again suggests a capacity rather than the disposition to exercise it. “Effortfulness” is an awkward and unfamiliar term. “Self-control” is a broad umbrella term that includes exercises of willpower but also other ways of acting on or influencing oneself; as Bermúdez (2021, p. 17) puts it, “Self-control literature has recently shifted from explanations appealing to a unique resource…or process…toward a recognition that self-control relies on a multiplicity of strategies and processes.” Philosophers and psychologists have identified and distinguished importantly different ways we control ourselves, from deliberation to treating oneself as an object to moral education, many of which do much more than exercise willpower (Hieronymi, 2006; Sklar, Adriaanse, and Fujita, 2017). “Grit” may be closer. But grit is a topic of fast-growing interest among psychologists and philosophers, who often use the term in a somewhat different way. Grit, as Angela Duckworth (2016, p. 53) describes it, centrally includes “passion” or sustained interest in a project, and, as a matter of long-term perseverance, is “more about stamina than intensity.” The term “determination” may be more helpful in this context, as it does not require passion or long-term commitment. But I will mostly speak more directly of the disposition to exercise willpower.

If this disposition is a virtue, it appears to be an *executive* virtue. Executive virtues, philosophers have said, “are manifested in deciding on, controlling and guiding action, policies and practices of all sorts”(O’Neill, 1996, p. 187), and “do not themselves yield a characteristic motive”(Williams, 1981, p. 49; see Yao, 2017). Like courage and patience, determination helps us execute our plans, whatever they may be. Like at least some executive virtues, it may not have a characteristic feeling associated with it. Still, its exercise may often be accompanied by various feelings, such as pleasure in overcoming obstacles.

The willpower of ordinary humans is severely limited. Indeed, exercises of willpower themselves seem to reduce our willpower temporarily. Psychologists have called this effect “ego depletion,…a temporary reduction in…capacity or willingness to engage in volitional action…caused by prior exercise of volition”(Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, 1998, p. 1253). Resisting chocolates, suppressing thoughts, or extended shopping can leave us drained in the face of new volitional challenges. Ego depletion is at the heart of psychology’s replication crisis. But even its critics agree that “Despite the controversy surrounding the empirical robustness of the concept of ego depletion…, fatigue…is real…. It has long been known that…people become less able or less willing to sustain their resolve after bouts of effortful work”(Inzlicht and Friese, 2021, p. 33). Whatever the controversies may be, we know from experience that burnout is real. As we continue to strain our willpower, we increasingly struggle to go on, and, increasingly, we fail.

One possible response to these limitations is to cultivate and exercise more willpower: to train one’s self-discipline, and “power through” temptation or exhaustion. To “power through” is, the dictionary tells us, “to continue in a strong and determined way until the end of something, even when this is difficult.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The common phrase “power through” echoes both the word ‘power’ in ‘willpower’ and the theme of continuing despite difficulty. Powering through can clearly be good or appropriate. When it is difficult to finish an exam or perform a surgery, often the thing to do is power through, resisting the desire to stop. But it is also a familiar fact that being gentle with oneself can be crucial for one’s physical and mental health, and sometimes for others as well. A sleepy surgeon with capable colleagues often should *not* power through. Many people who work long hours would do better to stop for food and sleep. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Ferapont is proud of the way his asceticism demonstrates his willpower; but the real wise figure is Father Zosima, who enjoys his cherry jam (Dostoevsky, 2002).

Those of us raised with a Protestant work ethic or ascetic ideals are used to seeing a high value placed on strength of will (Lynn, 2023). Taken to an extreme, the emphasis on ‘powering through’ obstacles expresses a single-virtue view of willpower, on which the virtue that responds to temptation and other volitional obstacles is simply the disposition to exercise willpower.[[8]](#footnote-8) This view is not defended among philosophers, who, as we saw, largely avoid ethical questions about willpower. But it is suggested by the American Psychological Association (2012) finding with which this paper opened: that “people consistently report that a lack of willpower is the top reason they fall short of their goals.”

These participants’ self-reports may be mistaken, or at least exaggerated, rather than authoritative. Psychological research increasingly suggests that strategies other than willpower can be more effective in responding to volitional obstacles. In Walter Mischel’s classic marshmallow studies, in which resisting a tempting marshmallow for twenty minutes yields two marshmallows, strategies such as distracting oneself by looking away or singing were far more successful than willpower in delaying gratification.[[9]](#footnote-9) Inzlicht and Friese (2021, p. 3) conclude: “Research makes clear that the best way to reach one’s goal is not to resist temptations but to avoid temptations before they arrive.” Compared to avoiding the need for willpower, cultivating and using willpower may itself be largely wasted effort.

The emphasis on powering through volitional obstacles encourages two mistakes. First, a proper or moderate disposition to exercise willpower leads its bearer to ‘power through’ in some cases, but without overdoing it. Emphasizing strength of will can confuse the corresponding vice or excess of *over-*exercising willpower with the virtue of exercising it properly. If the alleged virtue requires resisting contrary desires whenever they arise, acting on the single-virtue view can lead to burnout rather than excellence.[[10]](#footnote-10) Second, an emphasis on ‘powering through’ tends to ignore or underexplore *other* virtues that allow us to respond well to volitional challenges, especially when our ability to resist temptation is weakened or compromised. Philosophers’ squeamishness in discussing practical responses to volitional challenges can easily lead us to make the same mistake, ignoring the possibility of other virtues of willpower. These other virtues may be as important as the disposition to exercise willpower. In a world full of pressing volitional challenges, this possibility is worth exploring.

But what would the other virtues of willpower be?

**II. Modesty and Confidence**

If willpower is limited, or becomes fatigued, Aamodt and Wang (2008) tell us, then

You should spend your limited willpower budget wisely… [I]f you need to study for a big exam, it might be smart to let the housecleaning slide to conserve your willpower for the more important job. Similarly, it can be counterproductive to work toward multiple goals at the same time if your willpower cannot cover all the efforts that are required.

Baumeister and Tierney (2011, p. 38), for example, recommend making only one New Year’s resolution, citing evidence that people who make several are less likely to keep even one.[[11]](#footnote-11) Doing so exhibits what might be called *volitional modesty*. Volitional modesty is not modesty, full stop. It is simply *moderation in how much volitional strain one takes on*. It is possible to take on too little. But we can also overcommit, not only by overscheduling, but by overexposing ourselves to temptation. Volitional modesty limits exposure to volitional strain, whereas willpower responds to that strain when it is already present.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Volitional modesty alone, however, is not enough. As psychologists have noted, responding to one’s limitations can itself create new challenges. Job, Dweck, and Walton (2010) found that people who *believe* their willpower to be limited tend to do less well, with lower success rates and lower duration of effort on a wide range of tasks. Significantly, a similar effect can be achieved with simple priming. In a study by Miller et al. (2012, p. 1; see Francis and Job, 2017),

Participants assigned to the limited resource theory group rated their agreement with items such as, ‘Working on a strenuous mental task can make you feel tired such that you need a break before accomplishing a new task.’ Participants assigned to the non-limited resource theory group rated their agreement with items such as, ‘Sometimes, it is energizing to be fully absorbed with a demanding task.’

Sure enough, the priming study found poorer performance in people primed to focus on their limitations. Limiting volitional strain can backfire, by leading to a counterproductive focus on limitations in volitional capacity.

Once again, we are on shaky empirical ground; we must be careful not to depend on empirical studies at the heart of the replication crisis in psychology. In particular, I will avoid making assumptions about effect sizes and even the once-popular psychological terminology of ‘ego depletion’.[[13]](#footnote-13) But we can still use some of these studies as reminders of more uncontroversial facts we take ourselves to know already. We already know that attention to our own volitional limitations can be discouraging, affecting our assessment of them, our mood, and our willingness to persevere. In my own case, the weakest my will has ever been is on days when I work on this paper. I spiral downward and I work in fits and starts, stymied by encroaching thoughts of fatigue and failure. It is especially hard to ‘power through’ when I am constantly thinking about the dangers and limitations of exercising willpower. I will assume that others have similar experiences, and that we do not need to resolve the replication crisis to have evidence that focusing on our volitional limitations can make it more difficult to persevere in the face of volitional obstacles.

How, then, can we find the right way to take our limited willpower into account, without overemphasizing it? The danger of discouragement suggests a practice of keeping oneself primed: that is, keeping oneself reminded of or focused on one’s abilities and successes, or at least preventing an excessive focus on one’s failures. I want to suggest that *volitional confidence*, or a proper degree of *inattention to the possibility of volitional failure*, is itself a significant executive virtue with respect to volitional obstacles. In other words, if we are not very good at resisting pastries or marshmallows, it is good not to focus too much attention on the possibility that we will fail—both because it reintroduces the temptation, and because it can discourage us and in that way make failure more likely.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Together, volitional modesty and volitional confidence offer a way to systematize popular wisdom about willpower. A volitionally modest person may rest, ask for help, form specific implementation intentions, avoid temptations, and set up an irreversible reward or threat when needed, using these strategic choices to moderate exposure to volitional strain. But it is part of volitional confidence to keep one’s mind on what one most wants, emphasize one’s successes, and refuse to harp on or blame oneself for one’s failures. These qualities work in tandem, while each making distinct contributions to overall well-being and good functioning.

These are virtues in three ways that go beyond simply being desirable traits. First, there is no rule or deductive procedure that can tell us exactly how to treat our volitional limitations. Both limiting one’s commitments and confidently carrying them out require judgment in complex situations, cultivated through practice, life experience, and, in some cases, attention to empirical research. Second, it is natural to think of each virtue as, in Aristotle’s phrase, a mean “intermediate between excess and deficiency”(Aristotle, 1999, II.6.1106a30). Both modesty and confidence can be seen as means between extremes, and, following Aristotle, we can further characterize them by naming the extremes. Volitional modesty contrasts with overcommitment, or overexposure to temptation, but also with taking on too little volitional strain—a kind of volitional idleness, laziness, or wantonness. Volitional confidence contrasts with discouragement, and also, crucially, with the arrogance of ignoring the possibility of failure altogether. Cultivation of the appropriate state can proceed by distancing oneself from both extremes; and each of us can ask, in our own case, which extremes we are most prone to fall into.[[15]](#footnote-15) Third, virtues are naturally seen as distinct aspects of the single state of living well. Seeing how a person can be simultaneously courageous, generous, and just gives a fuller picture of a person who is virtuous overall. Seeing how someone can be volitionally modest and confident gives a fuller picture of the proper relation to one’s own will.

**III. Hope and Belief**

The multiple-virtue view I described faces important objections. First, recent writers have described motivation as buttressed by hope, and by belief that one can succeed. Does volitional confidence add anything of value to hope and belief in success?

Hope can often seem like, or perhaps be, a kind of confidence. For Cheshire Calhoun (2018, p. 69), “the hope that matters most is what I call *practical hope*—hope for success in the pursuit of ends we value.” Philip Pettit (2004, p. 158) describes a kind of “substantial hope,” which involves “acting as if a desired prospect is going to obtain or has a good chance of obtaining.” One aspect of substantial hope is “setting aside doubts about the possible nonoccurrence of the prospect and acting accordingly”(Pettit, 2004, p. 152).[[16]](#footnote-16) This “setting aside doubts” sounds much like what I called volitional confidence.

Is volitional confidence different from hope? I think so, in three ways. First, hope surely *can* inspire or involve volitional confidence. But whereas hope is usually seen as an emotion, volitional confidence need not always be emotionally valenced. It thus varies more broadly than hope does, and can draw on emotions other than hope. Second, as I understand it, volitional confidence differs from hope in being a proper *in*attention to the possibility of failure, rather than attention to the possibility of success in resisting temptation or desire. Attending to the possibility of successfully resisting a tempting pastry or marshmallow can backfire, by reintroducing the thought of that tempting dessert. Inattention, on the other hand, can be achieved simply by thinking about something else. It does not reintroduce anything; we can be confident in success by simply not worrying about the impending challenge. Third, and relatedly, getting one’s hopes up can often lead to *greater* disappointment and discouragement after setbacks, by building up attention to the goodness of the hoped-for outcome. As Luc Bovens (1999, p. 680) puts it: “Hoping increases my frustration about missed opportunities.” Volitional confidence may come with some *kinds* of hope, but it does not require hope, and may not be increased by it. In particular, unlike many forms of hope, confidence does not require attention to the value of one’s ends. Thus when she does fail in the face of volitional strain, a volitionally confident person may not be as focused on how much she has lost.

*Belief* in likely success can also play a motivating role. Morton and Paul (2019, p. 178) argue that “in many cases the failure to persevere has an epistemic explanation: it is attributable to a significant decrease in confidence that one is likely to succeed if one continues to try.”[[17]](#footnote-17) They mean “confidence” epistemically, or doxastically: that is, credence. Why not think of volitional confidence in this way instead? The willpower priming studies I discussed suggest an answer. Belief in success surely has an important motivational role to play. But whatever we believe, *attention* to the possibility of failure significantly undermines resistance to temptation. As Peake, Hebl, and Mischel (2002, p. 313-4) put it: “Nearly three decades of construct-oriented work on the factors that influence children’s delay of gratification…clearly points to the ability to deploy attention flexibly as a key competence for effective waiting.” Attending to something other than the temptation and its ability to influence us is key in meeting many volitional challenges.

This focus on attention also avoids a problem Morton and Paul (2019, p. 198) raise about “the coherence of an agent’s point of view.” Imagine that you face a pastry so tempting that you are unlikely to resist it. You may then have low doxastic confidence that you will succeed, but high volitional confidence, setting your doubts aside. This can seem like “two attitudes toward the same question” of whether you will succeed (Morton and Paul, 2019, p. 198). And that can seem incoherent. But in fact they are not two attitudes. Volitional confidence is proper *inattention* to the possibility of failure. This inattention is not an attitude; it is a way of keeping other attitudes comparatively peripheral in one’s awareness, or moderating their importance (see Watzl, 2017). Calhoun (2018, p. 80) worries, relatedly, that an “Eyes-on-the-Prize” approach “would come at the cost of being disposed not to notice the very things one needs to notice in order to engage in rational planning.”[[18]](#footnote-18) But we should distinguish noticing, believing, and knowing, on the one hand, from attending, foregrounding, and harping. A volitionally confident person can make modest plans while also moderating her focus on the need for modesty. Her volitional confidence is inattention to a proper degree, rather than complete ignoring in a way that would more pressingly raise Calhoun’s concern. Not noticing would be volitional arrogance, rather than confidence.

**IV. How to be Modestly Confident**

Incessant daily demands on our willpower call for—to adapt a phrase of Kierkegaard’s—a paradoxical and modest confidence.[[19]](#footnote-19) The combination can seem difficult and even troubling, even if coherent. It seems we must constantly remember our limitations in order to avoid overcommitment, but also constantly ignore them in boldly absorbing ourselves in the task at hand. Is such dissociation even possible? If it is, can it really be good for us? It can seem, instead, neither psychologically feasible nor desirable. This objection is worth considering in some detail.

A proper relation to one’s own willpower can be usefully compared to one of Kierkegaard’s descriptions,in *Fear and Trembling*,of a “knight of faith.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Such a person, Kierkegaard says, can be outwardly very ordinary, and look “just like a tax gatherer” or a “*bourgeois* philistine”:

This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things….He delights in everything he sees, in the thronging humanity, the new omnibuses….Towards evening he goes home, his step tireless as a postman’s. On the way it occurs to him that his wife will surely have some special little warm dish for his return, for example roast head of lamb with vegetables…. If she has, to see him eat it would be a sight for superior people to envy and for plain folk to be inspired by, for his appetite is greater than Esau’s. If his wife doesn’t have the dish, curiously enough he is exactly the same….Carefree as a devil-may-care, he hasn’t a worry in the world.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The tax gatherer’s reaction to failure is particularly telling. The man is hungry after a long day, and his dinner would be a feast for all to marvel at. But if the dinner he dreams of does not appear, “curiously enough he is exactly the same.” His attention does not turn to disappointment, discouragement, or blame; he continues to take pleasure in his ongoing engagements. He cannot have what he wants, and surely he can see that. But it is *as if* he does not notice. He is in one sense dissociated from failure and disappointment. But this does not cripple or even trouble his otherwise healthy, normal life. On the contrary, his life might, as a result, be all the more absorbed or engaged. The object of his dissociation is specific: it is his disappointments, not his pursuits, that he in one sense ignores. He is not fixated on failure.

Combining volitional modesty and confidence involves this same kind of inattention, with respect to failures of willpower. A recovering alcoholic should know that she would likely not succeed in having “just one drink.” To avoid relapse, she should not dabble at all. But she does not need to—and should not—think about this constantly. As long as she properly limits her exposure to volitional strain—she might, if she needs to, avoid bars—she can and should focus on other things. Like the tax gatherer’s easy recovery from disappointments, this balance of volitional modesty and confidence is often difficult to maintain. But it is not unimaginable or incoherent. Most of us already strive to exercise good judgment without harping too much on the possibility of failure. Many achieve some degree of excellence in that respect.

A recovering alcoholic who is great at handling temptation can be a vivid example of a person who combines the virtues of willpower. One of her admirable qualities is a disposition to exercise willpower when, for example, offered a drink, or placed in a situation of temptation. Another is her disposition to moderate her exposure to volitional strain; she might do a good job avoiding bars, her triggering ex, and even thoughts of drinking, having trained herself to think about koala bears whenever she feels tempted. A third is that she does not focus excessively on the possibility of failure, though she can think about it when necessary. She may have some carefully cultivated good habits and an occasional moment of effortfully resisted temptation. But for the most part, she manages to go on with an active life focused on other things. This kind of achievement can be hard-won, and not everyone gets there. But it does not seem undesirable or troublingly dissociated. On the contrary: it seems admirable, and reasonable to strive for.

While it helps to make intuitive what combining volitional modesty and confidence can look like, Kierkegaard’s example also offers two helpful points of contrast with people who exhibit the virtues of willpower, like our successfully recovering alcoholic. First, unlike the tax gatherer, a virtuous person may not be *exactly* the same when confronted with failure or disappointment. Setting aside all negative reactions, with no room for anger, hurt, disappointment, or grief, would be not virtue but vice: a kind of toxic positivity or at least indifference, with an excess of inattention to the possibility of failure. Volitional confidence is not complete inattention to the possibility of volitional failure. Instead, it is *proper* inattention, putting the possibility of failure aside to an extent that is appropriate or fitting. It can be appropriate to pay *some* attention to possible volitional failure, and especially to actual volitional failures.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Second, unlike the tax gatherer, someone with the virtues of willpower will not take part in *everything*. Volitional modesty requires, first and foremost, taking care not to spread oneself too thin. But one can plan ahead, know one’s weaknesses, and make good decisions, as we can imagine the tax gatherer doing, while also being volitionally confident. One just has to get good at attending to one’s volitional limitations only when, and only to the extent that, such attention is necessary or useful.

Combining volitional modesty and confidence is possible, but nevertheless difficult. In particular, these virtues can pull our attention in different directions. Although volitional modesty is not entirely a matter of attention, it does require some attention to the possibility of volitional failure in planning contexts that properly moderates our exposure to volitional strain. Our recovering alcoholic, for example, sometimes needs to plan to avoid certain bars or parties and various emotional triggers. It is not easy to keep one’s attention on one’s limitations in taking on commitments, and away from those same limitations in carrying out one’s plans. This flexibility of attention is hard to achieve. For theoretical purposes, this is a good result. In the case of willpower, psychological difficulty is an essential datum: dealing with one’s own volitional limitations is not easy, and a picture that made it look easy would itself, for that reason, be psychologically implausible. Volitional modesty and confidence are no easier than courage, justice, or kindness.

**V. One Virtue or Many?**

Someone who combines a healthy disposition to exercise willpower, volitional modesty, and volitional confidence may be virtuous with respect to her willpower. But do we need to think of her as having three distinct virtues? Aristotle (1999, II.7.1107b1), for example, described courage as a fairly complex virtue involving not one but two distinct “feelings of fear and confidence.” Courage, for Aristotle, requires both a proper degree of fear—not excessive, but not deficient, either—and a proper degree of confidence, especially in life-threatening situations such as war (Young, 2009; Curzer, 2012, pp. 19-64; Vigani, 2017). One could describe a single virtue—say, ‘determination’—that requires a complex combination of willingness to exercise willpower, volitional modesty, and volitional confidence. A complex single-virtue view of willpower can include aspects like these, without focusing single-mindedly on ‘powering through’ all contrary desires. Why not think of willpower in terms of one complex virtue, as Aristotle does with courage?

One might also ask: why does it matter how many virtues of willpower there are? It can seem unclear what is at stake in counting these virtues, and on what principle, if any, the enumeration should be based. Although virtue individuation is a relatively underdiscussed topic, philosophers have proposed individuating virtues by their characteristic contexts or spheres of activity, reasons, emotions, and in other ways.[[23]](#footnote-23) It can be troubling that there is no consensus here. Worse still, adding more virtues can seem like a fruitless academic exercise. Alina Beary (2019, p. 9) expresses an “aversion to the heedless proliferation of virtue. I worry that if we continue to splinter the virtues without good reason and ‘discover’ new virtues at every turn, the concept of virtue will lose any real meaning, and certainly won’t be of any practical use.” Beary (2019, p. 9) suggests a “*principle of parsimony*: we should not multiply virtues without necessity.” This is not the place to develop a complete account of virtue individuation. But it is worth asking: is there a real need to ‘multiply’ virtues of willpower?

One approach to answering these questions is to insist that virtues must be relatively simple, and reject Aristotle’s view of courage as itself too complex and unwieldy.[[24]](#footnote-24) But it is not clear that virtues must always be ‘simple’, or what ‘simple’ means. Nor is it clear that any of our three virtues of willpower is internally simple. Excellence in exercising willpower, volitional modesty, and volitional confidence can each involve a delicate set of more particular dispositions and strategies for choosing which temptations to resist and in what way, avoiding overcommitment and idleness, and maintaining, managing, or shifting one’s attention. Rather than insisting on the simplicity of individual virtues, I think we can find a more satisfying answer by drawing on Aristotle’s own views about courage and the other virtues.

Aristotle uses the word *tharros*, translated “confidence,” to name a particular feeling which he describes in the *Rhetoric* as “the opposite of fear” (Barnes, 1984, II.5.1383a16-17). That feeling is a pleasurable “imaginative expectation of the nearness of what keeps us safe and the absence or remoteness of what is terrible” (Barnes, 1984, II.5.1383a17-20; see Pearson, 2009). Aristotelian confidence is a pleasurable feeling of safety, whereas fear is a painful feeling of danger. Confidence helps distinguish the courageous person from the ‘continent’ or self-controlled person, who simply powers through fear. And yet these two feelings are two sides of a single coin, one naturally increasing as the other decreases. An excess in one naturally goes with a deficiency in the other; thus “one who is excessive in fear and deficient in confidence is cowardly” (Aristotle, 1999, II.7.1107b3-4). A deserter who runs from battle is typically both too afraid and lacking in confidence.

On Aristotle’s view of virtue, “virtue…is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (Aristotle, 1999, II.6.1107a1-4); he is famously systematic in naming and describing the excess and deficiency corresponding to each virtue. Because fear and confidence are tightly connected to each other as “opposites,” Aristotle can, arguably, be coherent in describing courage as a single complex virtue that has two corresponding vices: cowardice and rashness. We do not need to pay very close attention to the possibility of simultaneous excess in both fear and confidence. It may be theoretically possible that we or someone we know could be disposed to act and feel both overly terrified and extremely, unreasonably safe. But for practical purposes, this possibility is mostly idle. And for Aristotle, practical purposes are central in a discussion of virtue. As he puts it, “Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study…but to become good” (Aristotle, 1999, 1103b26-29). There are many ways to fall short of courage, and courage is a disposition with a complex internal structure. But Aristotle can also plausibly say that there are two primary vices to guard against here: cowardice and rashness. The identification of a single pair of primary corresponding vices replaces ‘simplicity’, or, if we like, is the kind of simplicity most relevant to seeing courage as a single virtue.

Now imagine that we countenance a single, complex virtue of willpower. What are its corresponding vices? If we think in terms of excess and deficiency, as Aristotle does, even a complex virtue will have two primary corresponding vices. If we give the virtue a name like “determination” or “strength of will,” we suggest that the vices are excessive and insufficient exercise of willpower, and that the virtue contrasts more strongly with the deficiency than with the excess (see Aristotle, 1999, II.8.1108b32-1109a6). We are then drawn back toward a simpler single-virtue view in which the primary vice is insufficient exercise of willpower, with excessive willpower exercise as a secondary vice. We might instead depart from Aristotle’s picture of two vices corresponding to each virtue, and say there is one virtue with several corresponding vices. But then identifying the virtue does little to help us identify and resist the vices. A multiple-virtue view builds in distinctions between importantly different kinds of excess and deficiency: excessive and insufficient exercise of willpower, overcommitment and idleness in planning or exposure to strain, and excessive and insufficient attention to the possibility of volitional failure. These are six vices. Aristotle (1999, 1109b1-2) tells us “We must also examine what we ourselves drift into easily.” A multiple-virtue view makes this a more usefully articulated multiple-choice question.

Imagine a college senior struggling to write a term paper. She is an A student who writes great term papers, and she knows roughly what she wants to say in this one. But this has been an especially exhausting semester, with a big romantic breakup at the beginning and two illnesses in her family partway through. She has carved out the time and has been sitting down to write. But she is having a lot of trouble getting herself to work, and she is staring down a possible F. An advisor has told her to just power through until she can get a break, and she is managing to get some bits of work done that way. But you are concerned about her well-being and her ability to get through the semester. You think that if she pushes this hard, she might have a bigger breakdown and need to withdraw for the semester, as two of her acquaintances did last month. You suspect that even if she succeeds, pushing this hard might stop her from loving her major. She comes to you for advice. What do you tell her?

I would not say: “Just power through until you get a break.” I would say: “Find ways to make this month easier—work with friends, talk through your ideas, take breaks, don’t overuse your willpower, stop cleaning your room for a week or two if you have to. And if you have a bad day, don’t worry about it, the next day might be better.” Although some would suspect that this student is underexercising willpower, the real issue could be that she is overcommitted, exposed to too much strain, and, perhaps, getting into a pattern of anxiously focusing on the possibility of failing to get herself to work. I could be wrong in this particular case. But the point is more general. To think clearly and respond well in cases like these, there does seem to be a real need to ‘multiply’ virtues and vices. If we exercise too little willpower, we let temptations overcome us. If we take on too much, we overtax our willpower. If we focus too much on this fact, our efforts backfire. We need to act and respond well in resisting contrary desires, but also in planning, as volitional modesty does, and in our attention to our limitations, as volitional confidence does. People have importantly different successes and struggles in these areas. Identifying and distinguishing these struggles is likely to help us respond to them.

These distinctions can be crucial when thinking about one’s own moral education. I tend to work hard and collapse hard. In times of burnout, I used to remind myself of the value of my goals and power through until I could no longer think. Eventually, I learned that “powering through” was exhausting, naïve, and counterproductive. I was miserable working, miserable resting, grinded unproductively and needed much longer breaks. A simple single-virtue view, focused on exercising willpower, turned out to be unhelpful and even damaging. But even a complex single-virtue view is limited in its usefulness and conceptual power. What seems most helpful is a view that can distinguish importantly different areas of struggle. Virtue individuation is also vice individuation, and it makes a real difference whether someone is overindulging one’s desires, under-fulfilling them, overexposing oneself to temptation, overprotecting oneself from temptation, ignoring the possibility of volitional failure, or fixating on that possibility. Some of us avoid volitional challenges and give up easily when they arise; others power through while also worrying constantly about the possibility that they will fail in the face of temptation. It seems worth highlighting these differences, rather than insisting that they concern aspects of a single virtue.

Could there still be just *two* virtues of willpower – say, moderation in exercising willpower, and flexible attention? This would still be a multiple-virtue view, but it seems to me less plausible. Flexible attention is *required* in combining volitional modesty and volitional confidence, but not sufficient. Exposing oneself to volitional strain is often a matter of what one takes on or chooses to do, rather than what one attends to or thinks about. Nor is it clear that this two-virtue view offers a helpful picture of the corresponding vices. Inflexible and ‘overflexible’ attention may be bad qualities. But they do not seem to be specific to willpower, or to capture volitional struggles or vices such as overcommitment.

These various virtues, or at least the disposition to exercise willpower, have sometimes been thought to be an aspect of other virtues such as patience, courage, perseverance, and self-control (Roberts, 1984; West, 2021). Could there perhaps be zero virtues concerned with willpower in particular? Is it not enough to say that willpower is one aspect of various familiar virtues? Two replies seem relevant. First, if Aristotle is right, most character virtues are distinct from continence or self-control, and typically do not require resisting contrary desires, as virtuous actions are done with the right feelings. A truly patient person does not have to force herself to wait. Similarly, someone who uses willpower well in refraining from hitting her children does not have the anger-related virtue of mildness, but she does act virtuously with respect to her willpower. The virtues of willpower then have something to offer in many areas related to other virtues. Second, we can manifest virtues of willpower in areas with which *no* other virtues are concerned. You might have a desire to turn left rather than right while on a stroll, or to guess “four” on a die toss, or to try a particular approach to a mathematical proof. Someone with distorted ascetic ideals might resist these desires, and worry that she will fail in resisting them. This seems silly and excessive. Someone with the virtues of willpower might “indulge” these desires, and pick other volitional battles. Thus there can be something for the virtues of willpower to do, even when other common virtues are not relevant.

A further Aristotelian objection is worth addressing. Many virtue ethicists and Aristotle commentators distinguish virtues by their ‘sphere of concern’ or characteristic context: courage concerns fear or danger, temperance concerns appetites for food and sex, and so on (Nussbaum, 1988; Curzer, 2012; Vigani, 2017, pp. 313-4). The virtues of willpower all concern willpower. Does this fact not itself require thinking of them as one single, complex virtue?

The individuation of virtues by sphere of concern is controversial and often resisted, especially in the case of executive virtues like patience, often thought to operate across many different contexts.[[25]](#footnote-25) But again I think we can find a more satisfying answer by drawing on Aristotle’s own views about character virtue.

Some of Aristotle’s distinctions between virtues are initially quite odd, at least to many modern readers. Generosity concerns small expenditures, whereas magnificence concerns large expenditures; magnanimity primarily concerns great honors, whereas another, unnamed virtue concerns small honors (Aristotle, 1999, IV.1-4). Are small and large expenditures really two different spheres of concern? Whatever we think about these particular virtues, two related points seem unavoidable. First, any individuation of virtues by sphere or context of concern will need some way to individuate spheres or contexts. For a recovering addict, being faced with a tempting substance can be a situation worlds away from one in which she is exercising volitional modesty by staying away from bars or enabling friends. We can think of “situations related to willpower” as a single kind of context; but we can also think of dealing with adverse desires, commitment to or avoidance of tempting situations, and thoughts of volitional failure as three importantly different contexts. Appealing to spheres of concern does not force us into a single-virtue view of willpower. Second, like Aristotle, we then need some other kind of considerations to help us individuate spheres of concern. One central kind of consideration concerns the usefulness of these distinctions in moral education. A parent might find one child plagued by doubts about her ability to resist temptation, and another child so determined to build up her willpower that she misses out on opportunities to make friends and enjoy life. These children seem to show different kinds of excess, which call for importantly different kinds of support and education. Here it is insistence on a single complex virtue that can seem like an idle, poorly motivated verbal move. Why insist that there is only one kind of excellence in this area?

Thinking of virtue and vice individuation as an idle academic exercise is natural for those who deny that virtue ethics can be of use in cultivating good qualities. But for those who struggle with volitional challenges, identifying and distinguishing our areas of struggle can be useful and even urgent. In the case of willpower, there are several crucial areas of struggle. I think I now do fairly well resisting temptation without burning myself out. But like many people, I tend to overcommit while also focusing too much on the possibility of failure. So the kind of help I need, and the habits I need to cultivate, are very different from those of people who stay far away from alcohol but struggle to resist it when it is present. These substantive differences are more important than the names we give them. If a complex single-virtue view of willpower can provide clarity and guidance about them, I could accept that view. But I think it will be difficult to cultivate good habits in these complex contexts of temptation, avoidance, and attention without thinking in terms of multiple virtues and their corresponding vices.

**VI. Conclusion**

Philosophy, I have argued, should have something to tell us about responding well to our incessant daily volitional challenges. We should not need to rely mainly on books in the self-help aisle. Nor do we need to wait for a shift in the state of empirical psychology. If we take struggles like these seriously, we cannot wait. Nor do we need to wait for metaphysical clarity about willpower before at least partly addressing its practical challenges. When students ask me for advice about time management, I say: “Don’t manage your time; manage your energy. You have more than enough time to do what you need to do if you find ways to get back your good, fresh energy. Try not to grind through an assignment while you’re burned out and want to quit!” I can talk about volitional energy in this theoretically loose, practically useful way without a worked-out conception of the nature of my students’ volitional capacities and dispositions. I expect that a better understanding of the workings of willpower will be tremendously useful in locating the mean described by each virtue, and in developing better judgment in working toward that mean in practice.[[26]](#footnote-26) But empirical, metaphysical, and ethical thought can proceed in tandem. Talk of ‘willpower’ should not spook us into ignoring the ethics of our responses to fatigue and burnout. Virtue ethics, I have argued, provides one useful way of thinking about those responses.

I have argued that there are at least three virtues of willpower—that is, three virtues concerned primarily with our relation to willpower. There may be more than three. Or it may be that further virtues of willpower are not worth distinguishing. Surely it is good not to brag too much about one’s willpower; but this may be part of modesty or truthfulness. Similarly, knowledge, understanding, and know-how concerning one’s own volitional dispositions are surely good, but may be aspects of more general intellectual virtues. Some might consider simply *having* willpower to be a virtue; but it is controversial whether a mere capacity, ability, or power can be a virtue. Like empirical and conceptual research about willpower, theorizing about the nature and individuation of virtue is both relevant and ongoing. In determining whether there are more than three virtues of willpower, it will be important to ask whether distinguishing further virtues and their corresponding vices is important for cultivating good habits in ourselves and others. I have argued that this question helps us see that there are multiple virtues of willpower. It also helps resist a needless proliferation of virtues.

I suspect that there is also a larger moral to be drawn here about the nature of practical rationality. It is common in philosophy to think of a rational person as someone who keeps all the relevant considerations in mind and does what she believes is best, all things considered. Surely she sometimes does. But a closer look at willpower suggests that a person who deals well with her own limitations is not a person who keeps them all in mind. Nor is she someone who always acts intuitively, without taking her own limitations into account, either. Instead, a person with well-developed rational dispositions is, among other things, a person with *flexible attention*: that is, someone who *can* attend to all the relevant considerations when the situation calls for it, and, at other times, like the tax gatherer, be transported by the thought of roasted vegetables.[[27]](#footnote-27) This flexibility of attention is central to our ability to combine volitional modesty and confidence, and, I suspect, to practical rationality more generally.

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1. Baumeister and Tierney (2011) provide an early summary of findings. On the replication crisis, see Friese et al. (2019), and Vohs et al. (2021), and for a historical review of the psychology of ego depletion that includes the replication crisis and directions for future research, Inzlicht and Friese (2020). A particularly useful recent discussion of the psychology of willpower is Ainslie (2021), printed with 26 commentaries and a reply. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roberts (1984), Santas (1988), Holton (2003; 2009, Ch. 6), Sripada (2010, 2014), Thomas (2014), and Asarnow (2019) focus on metaphysical issues; May and Holton (2012), Doucet and Turri (2014), and Johnson (2019) focus on conceptual issues. All of them mostly leave aside ethical questions. A notable exception is West (2021), on the role of willpower in the cultivation of virtue. For influential discussions of the will, see Kenny (1963) and O’Shaughnessy (1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In what follows, I use “virtues of willpower” to refer to virtues concerned exclusively or primarily with willpower, rather than, in Roberts’ and West’s broader usage, virtues that involve willpower in some way. On this narrower usage, the claim that there are multiple virtues of willpower becomes more controversial. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My usage fits fairly well with common usage, though common usage also shows some variation; see May and Holton (2012), Doucet and Turri (2014), and Johnson (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For background related to these questions, see note 1 above. The questions arise even on my somewhat narrow construal of ‘willpower’ on which willpower includes only resisting or “powering through” temptations or contrary desires, and does not include other forms of self-control such as distracting oneself to avoid paying attention to tempting objects. We can still ask, for example, whether all cases of “powering through” draw on a single resource, and what the difference is between being no longer able to resist or power through and being able but no longer motivated to resist. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Following standard practice, I cite Aristotle by book and chapter number and, for particular passages, using the standard Bekker pagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/power-through>. Last accessed July 27, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For helpful discussions of strength of will as an executive virtue, see Steutel (1999) and Yao (2017). Roberts (1984, p. 227) speaks in the plural of “virtues of will power,” but without arguing against a single-virtue view or exploring the virtues I go on to discuss. Steutel (1999) explicitly includes multiple virtues as “virtues of will-power”; but he focuses largely on strength-centered qualities such as “persistence, endurance and resoluteness”(p. 129), and is, I think, still quite close to a single-virtue view. On the other hand, I would not consider the influential discussion of grit in Duckworth (2016) a single-virtue view of willpower, in part because grit concerns long-term perseverance and includes multiple quite different components, including “passion” or interest in what one is doing. Those with grit “knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted”(2016, p. 8). For these reasons, I think Duckworth’s is not a view about willpower at all. Indeed, Duckworth’s brief comment included in Ainslie (2021) suggests an eliminativist view which drops the notion of willpower. Nevertheless, pluralistic investigations in psychology can be seen as at least an inspiration for multiple-virtue conceptions of willpower. For philosophical discussions of grit, see Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mischel and Ebbesen (1970); Peake, Hebl, and Mischel (2002). Other studies recommend environmental and cognitive changes, such as keeping tempting treats locked away, focusing on their saturated fat content, or even comparing tempting marshmallows to clouds. Resisting an emphasis on brute resistance, Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross (2016, p. 36) have suggested that “strategies targeted at influences outside of the mind are in general better than strategies targeted at downstream mental processes.” Milyavskaya, Saunders, Inzlicht (2020, p. 634) write: “We find that many strategies, including inhibition, are similarly effective and that using multiple strategies is especially effective.” They express tentative disagreement with the view that situational strategies are *preferable* rather than equally good; but their view concurs that a variety of approaches is preferable to simply powering through. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It might also alienate us from our own desires, leaving us disunified, overly guilty, or unhappy. But this is a larger claim that requires more detailed defense, and I will not insist on it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Baumeister and Tierney (2011, p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare Statman (1992, p. 434), who proposes that “modesty is the virtue of being disposed to resist… temptations,” namely, temptations “to think – *mistakenly* – that [one] is superior in his moral status”; modesty then “seems to fit more naturally the category of will-power virtues than that of motivational virtues”(p. 435). Um (2019, p. 303) suggests more broadly that “It is appropriate to understand modesty as an executive virtue, which helps exercise other virtues without having its own characteristic end,” though for Um, because modest persons do not have contrary motivations to overcome, it is “misleading for Statman to characterize modesty as a *virtue of willpower*”(p. 308). These are characterizations of the virtue of modesty more generally, understanding ‘modesty’ in the ordinary sense in terms of willpower or executive virtue—whereas I am proposing, conversely, that we understand virtues of willpower partly in terms of one more particular, volitional form of modesty. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See especially the work by Baumeister and colleagues cited earlier. Virtue theorists might find it useful to think of their own proper response to the replication crisis as a mean between two extremes: the overconfidence of taking the studies at face value and hoping replication works out, and, on the other hand, the discouragement that leads us to give up practical thought about willpower or relegate it to self-help. I think the recent tendency has been primarily toward discouragement. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Like Aristotelian ‘confidence’, discussed below, my use of ‘confidence’ departs somewhat from modern English usage. Also like Aristotle, I am engaged in naming some virtues that do not already have a name. My use of ‘confidence’ for this distinctively attentional virtue is meant to capture the contrast with worry or doubt. The common association between confidence and trust or reliance is also helpful here. Volitional confidence may be an important aspect of self-trust, or at least of self-reliance. But perhaps someone can think of a better name for this virtue.

    One might also wonder: why call these “virtues of willpower” rather than “volitional virtues,” as “volitional modesty” and “volitional confidence” suggest? But remember: my main claim is that there are multiple virtues concerned with willpower. It is uncontroversial that there are multiple virtues concerned with willing or choosing well more broadly. Still, it remains true that virtues of willpower are also volitional virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I follow Aristotle (1999, Book II, Ch. 8) in choosing a name for the virtuous state that contrasts more strongly with the extreme we seem to most typically tend toward. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As critics have pointed out, one can hope to see a car crash, or to get back together with an abusive ex-partner, without endorsing one’s hope or “acting accordingly.” For discussion see Rioux (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Roberts (1984, p. 247) similarly writes: “The third aspect of the virtues of will power is self-confidence,” where this is “confidence of belief in their ability to determine their own destiny…. An athlete needs three things for success: the requisite skills, an enthusiasm for the game, and a belief in his own powers. And the virtues of will power are the athletic side of the moral life.” This is confidence understood as a kind of belief, in contrast to the attentional form of confidence I describe in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Apart from the response I make in the text, I also find talk of attention simpler and more illuminating than Calhoun’s use of the notion of a “phenomenological idea of the future.” For an illuminating discussion of Calhoun and of hope more generally, see Rioux (2021). Although Rioux’s focus is grit rather than willpower, and the motivational effectiveness and rationality of hope rather than the virtues, she helpfully insists on the importance of patterns of attention, as I do here. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kierkegaard (1985, p. 77), describing the “knight of faith,” attributes to him “a paradoxical and humble courage.” I leave aside the details of the knight of faith, apart from one example. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I leave out the details here, and, of course, I do not claim that the right attitude to willpower is one of faith. For discussions of the knight of faith, see especially Lippitt (2003), Daniel (2007), and Carlisle (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kierkegaard (1985), pp. 67-9. I would prefer to switch the genders in the example, but I quote it *verbatim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It is an interesting further question whether and when it is appropriate to feel ashamed of one’s volitional failures, or to blame oneself for them. I doubt that this question can be addressed solely by thinking about the virtues of willpower, and I leave it aside here. Still, if and when shame or self-blame is appropriate, a volitionally confident person can react in these ways. I develop some of my doubts about the usefulness of blame in Chislenko (2019), and discuss the connections between blame and attention in Chislenko (2020, 2021) and in other work in progress. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Nussbaum (1988); Hursthouse (1995) and Russell (2009); and Urmson (1980), respectively, all criticized by West (2016). Beary (2019) draws on Aquinas to develop a more complex theory of individuation based on power of the soul, formal object, and mode. Swanton (2003, esp. pp. 19-21) defends a pluralistic view. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Ross (1923); Urmson (1980, 170) similarly thought that we “should distinguish…two triads and not run them together as Aristotle does”—notably, on the grounds that there are more than two relevant sets of excess and deficiency in the case of Aristotelian courage, as I argue there are in the case of willpower. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See note 23 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a helpful discussion of the costs and value of effort, see Inzlicht, Shenhav, and Olivola (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Compare Peake, Hebl, and Mischel (2002, pp. 313-4), quoted earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)