

## XV SHAPING OUR MENTAL LIVES: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF MENTAL SELF REGULATION

DOROTHEA DEBUS

The present paper considers our ability to ‘shape our own mental lives’; more specifically, it considers the claim that subjects sometimes can and do engage in ‘mental self regulation’, that is, that subjects sometimes can be, and are, actively involved with their own mental lives in a goal directed way. This ability of mental self regulation has been rather neglected by contemporary philosophers of mind, but I show why it deserves careful philosophical attention. In order to further our understanding of the nature of the phenomenon of mental self regulation and to locate it within the wider context of our everyday (mental) lives and the world we live in, I proceed to develop some conditions which need to be met in order for a subject to be able to engage in mental self regulation. In developing those conditions we find that compared to the physical realm, our mental lives are a rather elusive domain in the face of attempts at intervention, and our ability to intervene in our own mental lives is rather fragile. We also find that our ability to regulate our own mental lives in many cases depends on our possession of mental skills and mental know how. Both these observations in turn throw new light on our understanding of the nature of the human mind.

### I

*Setting the Scene.* The topic at the heart of the present paper is our ability to ‘shape our own mental lives’. Healthy, mature human beings are able to play an active part in how their own mental lives develop, and thus, healthy, mature human beings are able to shape their own mental lives. This claim might seem surprising, for when we think about what our own mental lives are like, it seems that the events which occur in our own mental lives often ‘just happen’ to us: We find ourselves with a thought, or an emotion, or a perceptual experience, and that’s just how things go—that’s just what happens in our mental lives. What is more, in some cases what happens in our

mental lives seems ‘inflicted’ upon us—for example, one might feel overwhelmed by a strong emotion—and in those cases, what is happening in our own mental lives seems beyond our control.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, both these observations are accurate, and they indicate that we are often passive with respect to our own mental lives. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that at other times we also can be, and frequently are, actively involved with respect to our mental lives. For example,

(Emma’s Case) when coming home at night, Emma feels a little sad, so she puts on some music which she knows will cheer her up.

As in this particular case, more generally we can be, and often are, actively involved with respect to *particular events* (or particular processes, or particular states of affairs) which occur (or obtain) in our own mental lives.<sup>2</sup> We also can be, and sometimes are, actively involved in shaping what might be called our *mental dispositions*, *mental habits* and *mental character traits* (such as intellectual virtues and vices). We arguably also can be, and sometimes are, actively involved in determining the *colouring*, or the *tone* of our mental lives—as Wittgenstein (1980, 927) once called it. However, the latter two abilities in important ways *depend* on our ability to be actively involved with relevant particular events which occur in our mental lives. I therefore suggest that we here focus on subjects’ active involvement with respect to *particular events* which occur in their own mental lives.

## II

*The Mental Self-Regulation Claim.* A subject’s active involvement with respect to a particular feature of her own mental life is often *goal-directed* in a specific way: the subject has a view as to how she would like the relevant aspect of her own mental life to develop, and her active involvement with the relevant feature of her own mental

---

<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt (1988, pp. 59–60) offers a perceptive description of relevant phenomena, but the focus of his discussion lies elsewhere. As far as relevant regulatory activities are concerned, Frankfurt (1988, p. 68) simply states that their nature ‘is very obscure’.

<sup>2</sup> In the following, I will often talk of ‘events’ as shorthand for ‘events, processes or states of affairs’.

life aims to promote a development towards that goal. For example, when Emma feels a little sad and puts on some music which she knows will cheer her up, she does this with the goal of feeling more cheerful. We might capture this goal-directedness by saying that subjects *regulate* aspects of their own mental lives. Thus,

(Regulation) when I here say that a subject ‘regulates’ a certain aspect of her own mental life, I mean to say that the subject is *actively involved* with that aspect of her own mental life in a *goal-directed way*, and the goal in question concerns the relevant aspect of the subject’s own mental life.

Note that, as I use the term here, a subject’s being ‘actively involved’ with an aspect of her own mental life does *not* necessarily require an *action* on the part of the subject; in the present context, someone might also be said to be actively involved with a certain aspect of their own mental life if they *could* act on it in some way, but do not act because the relevant aspect of their mental life develops in the way they would like it to anyway.

Sometimes, a subject might be said to be actively involved with her own mental life without that active involvement having a goal concerning an aspect of the subject’s own mental life: in some cases subjects might be said to be actively involved in their own mental lives without having any particular goal at all, and in other cases subjects might be said to be actively involved in their own mental lives with a goal which does not concern any aspect of their own *mental* lives. However, such cases do not fall within the remit of our present investigation. I am here interested only in cases in which the subject *has* a relevant goal, and the goal in question concerns an aspect of the subject’s *own mental life*.

Subjects can, and do, regulate a wide range of different types of occurrences in their mental lives. Amongst other things, subjects sometimes regulate their emotions, their thoughts and beliefs, their desires and intentions, their memories, their attention, their experiences of pleasure and pain, and their imaginings. Some relevant examples might be sketched as follows:

- feeling a little sad and putting on some music which one knows will cheer one up;
- setting out to think about a certain matter more carefully in order to form well-grounded beliefs on the matter;

- setting out to ‘dissolve’ and ‘get rid of’ a desire to stay in and watch TV tonight by thinking about going for a swim, expecting that this in turn will produce a desire to go for a swim;
- setting out to remember where one left one’s keys;
- repeatedly bringing one’s attention back to what someone else is saying in the face of a persistent distraction;
- engaging in breathing exercises in order to reduce the severity of a current pain experience;
- setting out to imagine a scheduled job interview in a way which one deems to be conducive to doing well in the actual interview.

The present list of examples, as well as wider everyday (self-)observation, suggest that

(Mental Self-Regulation Claim) subjects sometimes engage in mental self-regulation; that is, subjects sometimes can, and do, regulate (aspects of) their own mental lives.

More precisely, in light of the examples just sketched, it seems plausible to hold that subjects can, and sometimes do, regulate whether relevant mental events do or do not occur in their mental lives—either by bringing it about that a relevant event which has not yet occurred does occur, or by letting a relevant event which occurs continue to occur, or else by bringing it about that a relevant event ceases to occur; and for those mental events which do occur in their mental lives, subjects sometimes also can, and do, regulate which properties these mental events have.

### III

*Why Mental Self-Regulation Matters.* The Mental Self-Regulation Claim should be of interest to philosophers, for the following two reasons:

- (i) In order to gain an understanding of the nature of the human mind, we need to understand how our mental lives develop across time, and how various factors influence that development.
- (ii) But then, if we are able, as the Mental Self-Regulation Claim has it, to shape our mental lives by means of mental

self-regulation, this ability is bound to play an important part in determining how our mental lives develop.

- (R1) An understanding of the phenomenon of mental self-regulation will therefore be crucial for any attempt to gain a full understanding of the nature of the human mind.
- (iii) What is more, if we are able to shape our mental lives by means of mental self-regulation, we might be able to shape our mental lives for the better, or for the worse.
- (R2) Our ability to shape our own mental lives by means of mental self-regulation should therefore also have axiological implications which deserve closer attention; the Mental Self-Regulation Claim gives us good reason to explore issues in what we might call ‘the ethics of mental life’.

These are two good reasons to explore the Mental Self-Regulation Claim further. But then, so an interlocutor might observe, we are sometimes also able to regulate the mental lives of *others*;<sup>3</sup> so why should we here limit our investigation to the phenomenon of mental *self*-regulation?<sup>4</sup> In response, we might consider a parallel between our present topic, the topic of mental self-regulation, and the topic of self-knowledge, which has found more intensive attention in recent philosophical debates. It does not seem very surprising that philosophers often consider our ability to gain knowledge about our own mental lives independently and separately from our ability to gain knowledge about the mental lives of others; for at least at first sight, it seems that we might have some special epistemological ‘first-person authority’ over our own mental lives, a certain authority which we have when making judgements about our own mental lives, but which we lack when making judgements about the mental lives of others. Quite analogously, one might, at least at first sight, hold that we have some special *agential* ‘first-person authority’ over our own mental lives, a certain authority which we have when exerting regulatory control over our own mental lives, but which we lack when regulating the mental lives of others.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, realizing that Peter feels a bit sad, Laura tells Peter a joke which she knows will cheer him up, Peter starts to giggle a bit, then he laughs, and soon he feels much more cheerful again.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Joseph Raz for raising this question.

Of course, parts of our account of the phenomenon of mental self-regulation might (with the necessary changes) also be fruitfully used in an attempt to account for our ability to regulate the mental lives of others; and just as some have argued that self-knowledge is more similar to knowledge of other minds than one might at first expect, we might also find that our ability to engage in mental self-regulation differs less from our ability to regulate the mental lives of others than one might at first sight expect. Be this as it may, present considerations give us good reason to begin with an exploration of the phenomenon of mental *self*-regulation, and to postpone a consideration of our ability to regulate the mental lives of others.<sup>5</sup>

I take it that the Mental Self-Regulation Claim itself is not contentious, so there is no need to defend it here; instead, I here aim to develop and explicate the claim in detail.

More specifically, therefore, the main question of the present paper is this:

(Main Question) Given that mental self-regulation *is* possible, *how* is it possible (that is, what are the ‘enabling’ conditions which make it possible); and how can the phenomenon of mental self-regulation be located within the wider context of our everyday lives, and the world we live in?

In addressing this question we will, or so I hope, come better to understand a phenomenon—namely, the phenomenon of mental self-regulation—which has often been ignored by contemporary philosophers of mind, but which should, as we have just seen, be of central importance in any attempt at understanding the nature of our minds fully.

#### IV

*Guidance, Intervention, and Effective Agency.* In order for a subject to regulate something, it seems plausible to hold, it is necessary that the subject be able to *guide*, in a goal-directed way, how the object

---

<sup>5</sup> There are some other interesting links between the topics of self knowledge and mental self regulation. Greater self knowledge might improve one’s ability to engage in mental self regulation. However, self knowledge might not always be *necessary* for mental self regulation, at least not in those cases in which, as I argue below, mental self regulation depends on the subject’s having certain habits and skills. Furthermore, our own mental lives are, as I show below, a comparatively elusive domain, our ability to regulate our own mental lives is comparatively fragile, and even with a great amount of self knowledge this will arguably remain so.

of her regulatory activities develops. For example, in order for a policewoman to regulate the flow of the traffic, it is necessary that she be able to guide the flow of the traffic, and that she be able to do so in a way that promotes her goal of making the traffic flow smoothly. Analogously, it seems plausible that

(Guidance Condition) in order for a subject to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life, it is necessary that the subject be able to guide how the relevant aspect of her own mental life develops, and that she be able to do so in a goal-directed way.

In order for a subject to be able to guide the development of a certain process in a goal-directed way, it seems necessary in turn that the subject be able to *intervene* in the process in a goal-directed way. For example, in order for a policewoman to be able to guide the flow of the traffic with the goal of making the traffic flow smoothly, it is necessary that the policewoman be able to intervene in the flow of the traffic in a way that is conducive to reaching her goal.

Accordingly, we have reason to hold that

(Intervention Condition) in order for a subject to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life, it is necessary that the subject be able to intervene, in a goal-directed way, in the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life.

Next, we should ask what we are talking about when talking about ‘an intervention’ here. At its most basic, it seems that when we say that a subject ‘intervenes’ in a certain event, we mean to say that the subject *acts* in a way which is *effective*, that is, in a way which brings about a change in the targeted event, a change which would not have occurred otherwise. Thus, we have reason to accept that in order for someone to intervene in a certain event, it is necessary that the subject act with respect to the relevant event, and that she act in a way which is effective, that is, in a way which brings about a change in the targeted event, a change which would not have occurred otherwise. This seems true for cases of intervention quite generally, and should therefore also be true for cases in which a subject intervenes in the unfolding of an aspect of her own mental life. Together with the Intervention Condition, it entails that

(Effective Agency Condition) in order for a subject to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life, it is necessary that the

subject be able to act with respect to the relevant mental event (or process, or state of affairs), and that she be able to act in a way which is effective, that is, in a way which brings about a change in the targeted event (or process, or state of affairs), a change which would not have occurred otherwise.

Taken together, the Guidance Condition, Intervention Condition and Effective Agency Condition specify some important enabling conditions for mental self-regulation. Thus, they help us to answer the earlier question as to *how* mental self-regulation is possible, given that it *is* possible.<sup>6</sup>

## V

*Special Features: A Comparison.* Next, we should try to characterize the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in the unfolding of their own mental lives in the context of mental self-regulation. In order to do so, we might fruitfully compare cases in which subjects intervene in aspects of their own mental life with simple, paradigmatic cases of everyday interventions in (purely) physical processes in our own physical environment.<sup>7</sup>

We regularly intervene in purely physical processes in our own physical environments. For example, we are all familiar with the following simple, paradigmatic cases:

- catching a ball that would otherwise smash a window;
- joining in with a group of people who are moving chairs around a room;
- pushing the pedals of one's bike harder in order to go faster.

---

<sup>6</sup> When philosophers compile lists of necessary conditions, they sometimes aim ultimately to compile a list of necessary and *jointly sufficient* conditions, thereby offering a definition, but this is not our goal here. Rather, in determining some necessary conditions for mental self regulation I aim to elucidate how our ability to engage in mental self regulation is related to, and dependent on, other abilities we have, which should help us to understand the place of mental self regulation within our wider (mental) lives, which in turn should further our understanding of the phenomenon of mental self regulation itself. (Thanks to Amanda Green for prompting the present comment.)

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the present comparison it might also be fruitful to compare interventions in one's own mental life with interventions in one's own body, and with interventions in the mental lives of others.

A comparison of examples of this sort with cases in which subjects intervene in aspects of their own *mental* lives might in turn lead to the following observations:

The actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in (purely) physical processes in the physical world in everyday contexts are *always physical actions*. By contrast, the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in an aspect of their *own mental life* are sometimes physical actions, but at other times might plausibly be described as *mental actions*.<sup>8</sup> For example, a subject who asks herself where she left her keys intervenes in an aspect of her own mental life—she tries to bring it about that she remembers where she left her keys—and she does so by means of what might plausibly be called a ‘mental action’, namely, asking herself (quietly, ‘in her mind’, as it were) where she left them.

Secondly, we find that all actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in (purely) physical processes in the physical world in everyday contexts bring about a change in the relevant process in virtue of a causal relation which obtains between the intervening subject’s action and the relevant change. By contrast, while the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in an aspect of their own mental lives sometimes bring about a change in the relevant aspect of the subject’s own mental life in virtue of a causal relation which obtains between the intervening subject’s action and the relevant change, at other times the relation which obtains between the intervening subject’s action and the relevant change is (also) a *reason-giving relation*. For example, asking oneself to add 44 and 35 gives one reason to think ‘79’.

## VI

*Not Both Direct and Precise.* A third, and I think the most important and most telling, difference between interventions in physical processes and interventions in one’s own mental life is this: the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in everyday (purely) physical processes are, in simple, paradigmatic cases, usually both direct and precise; that is, relevant actions directly engage with the

---

<sup>8</sup> The phenomenon of mental action has long been neglected by philosophers, which, as Wu (2013, p. 247) aptly puts it, is surprising ‘[g]iven the armchair nature of their work’. However, new philosophical work on the topic has recently been collected by O’Brien and Soteriou (2009), and in Part II of his recent monograph Soteriou (2013) offers a careful consideration of mental action. Soteriou (2013, ch. 9) also offers some interesting considerations as to *why* the phenomenon might have been neglected by philosophers for so long.

very physical process in which the subject wants to intervene, and subjects can control the outcome of their actions in a precise manner. By contrast, so I would like to suggest, the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in aspects of their own mental lives when engaged in mental self-regulation are, in simple, paradigmatic cases, and indeed the great majority of cases, either indirect or imprecise (or both), but they are usually *not both direct and precise*.

In order to develop and support the present suggestion, we should first get clear about the terminology upon which the suggestion relies. We might clarify our terms as follows:

(‘Direct’ and ‘indirect’) When a subject intervenes in a particular event (or process, or state of affairs), to say that the relevant action on the part of the subject is ‘indirect’ is to say that the subject acts upon the relevant event by acting on *another* event, which in turn has an effect on that event which is ultimately the target of the intervention; to say that the subject’s action is ‘direct’ is to say that the subject’s intervention in the relevant event is *not* indirect.<sup>9</sup>

(‘Precise’ and ‘imprecise’) When a subject intervenes in a particular event (or process, or state of affairs), to say that the subject’s relevant action is ‘precise’ is to say that the subject *can predict*, and *can control*, the changes brought about by her action in a suitably specific way; to say that the subject’s action is ‘imprecise’ is to say that the subject *cannot* predict, and *cannot* control, the changes brought about by her action in a suitably specific way.

With these terminological stipulations in place, we should give some further consideration to the earlier claim that, in contrast with simple, paradigmatic cases of interventions in everyday (purely) physical processes,

(Not Both Direct and Precise) the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in aspects of their own mental lives in cases of mental self-regulation are, in simple, paradigmatic cases, and indeed in the great majority of cases, either indirect

---

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Markus Schlosser for raising a problem with an earlier formulation of this distinction, and to Rory Madden for help with reformulating the distinction so as to avoid that problem.

or imprecise (or both), but they are usually not both direct and precise.

Everyday (self-)observation suggests that this is a plausible claim, as we can see when considering the following list of illustrative examples:

- putting on music to cheer oneself up: indirect;
- asking oneself where one has put one's keys, hoping that the question will bring up a memory: imprecise;
- engaging in breathing exercises to reduce the severity of a pain experience: indirect;
- setting out to think more carefully about a particular matter: imprecise;
- thinking about the option of going for a swim so as to dissipate a desire to watch TV: indirect.

Considering some examples from this list in a little more detail, we find that when a subject engages in breathing exercises to reduce the severity of a pain experience, the subject's intervention is indirect, because (at least usually) the subject's breathing is not a constitutive element of her pain experience, but the subject has reason to believe that an intervention in her breathing will in turn have an effect on her current pain experience.

When a subject sets out to think about a particular matter more carefully—for example, when she asks herself why exactly she thinks that the death penalty should be abolished—the subject's intervention in her own mental life is imprecise, because she cannot predict or control in any suitably specific way what changes in her mental life will be brought about by setting out to think about the relevant matter. Indeed, if she was able to predict and control relevant changes in a suitably specific way, she would not have to sit down to think about the matter, because her being able to predict relevant changes would entail that she already has a view on the matter, so it lies in the nature of setting out to think about something more carefully that one can only intervene in one's mental life in an imprecise manner in those situations.

More generally, the present set of examples makes it plausible that in very many cases in which a subject intervenes in an aspect of her own mental life when engaged in mental self-regulation, the action which the subject engages in is *indirect*; that is, the action which the subject engages in is not directed at that element of her own

mental life which she ultimately wants to intervene in (and the action is often not even directed at any element of her own mental life), but is rather directed at a feature of the situation other than the relevant element in which she would like to intervene; the feature at which the subject's action is directed is such that if the subject acts upon this feature in the appropriate way, the resulting changes will in turn bring about relevant changes in that element of the subject's mental life which she ultimately wants to intervene in, and the subject understands this.

In many other cases in which a subject intervenes in an aspect of her own mental life when engaged in mental self-regulation, the action which the subject engages in is *imprecise*;<sup>10</sup> while the action which the subject engages in might well be *direct*, the subject cannot predict, and cannot control, the outcome of her action in any suitably specific manner. Indeed, in many cases in which a subject sets out to engage directly with the very element of her mental life which she wants to intervene in, the subject tries to 'prompt' relevant changes in her own mental life (for example, setting out to remember something, setting out to imagine something, or setting out to think something through). Such 'mental self-prompting' usually sets off some (sub-personal) psychological process that might eventually lead to (personal-level) changes in the subject's own mental life which are of the kind the subject was hoping for; but the workings of the relevant (sub-personal) process, that is, the 'mechanisms' involved, are usually opaque to the subject; and what the precise outcome of a relevant 'prompting' might possibly be usually is not only beyond the subject's control, but is also unknown to the subject at the time at which she engages in the 'prompting' action. The subject's action itself therefore is a bit of a 'stab in the dark', and it is rather imprecise with respect to determining its outcome.

Thus, we have reason to hold that

(Not Both Direct and Precise) the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in aspects of their own mental lives in cases of mental self-regulation are, in simple, paradigmatic cases, and indeed in the great majority of cases, either indirect

---

<sup>10</sup> The following train of thought is in some respects inspired by Strawson (2003), but I do not mean to take sides in the debate on mental action which Strawson himself is concerned with.

or imprecise (or both), but they are usually not both direct and precise.<sup>11</sup>

## VII

*An Exception: Perceptual Experiences.* Actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in their own perceptual experiences in cases of mental self-regulation present us with an important exception to the ‘Not Both Direct and Precise’ claim, because it seems that such actions often are both direct and precise. Some examples of relevant actions might be set out as follows:

- closing one’s eyes in the face of a gruesome scene on screen;
- moving one’s hand over the silky fabric to feel the smoothness of its surface;
- coming to hold one’s nose while walking across a field which has just been fertilized.

Arguably, all of these actions *are* both direct and precise. For example, when a subject moves her hand to hold her nose to stop her olfactory experience of the freshly fertilized field, she knows exactly what is going to happen once her fingers have reached her nose—her olfactory experience of her environment will cease more or less completely—and this is exactly the change which she aims to bring about; thus, the relevant action should count as *precise*. It also seems plausible to accept that the delivery of sensory information via a subject’s sense-organs is a constitutive part of relevant perceptual experiences, so that a subject’s action which is directed towards those aspects of one of her sense-organs which make the delivery of relevant sensory information

---

<sup>11</sup> As the ‘Not Both Direct and Precise’ claim only speaks of ‘the great majority of cases’, it allows for exceptions. I consider a large class of such exceptional cases in the next section, but some cases might *wrongly* appear to be exceptions. For example, try to imagine a pink elephant; it is likely that you will find yourself with vivid visual imagery as of a pink elephant; but then, so an interlocutor suggests, the action which has led to your having this visual experience is both direct and precise. In response, we should point out that there is a huge range of different kinds of mental images that might arise when one instructs oneself to imagine a pink elephant; one might imagine a huge pink creature in the middle of the room, or a cute little pink drawing on a piece of paper, or one might have some vague visual experience as of an elephant in a zoo, painted pink all over. Thus, an intervention in one’s own mental life which is based on the instruction to imagine a pink elephant should rather be classified as imprecise. (Thanks to Richard Yetter Chappell and Alison Hills, who both independently suggested that the present case be considered here.)

possible should be understood as an action upon (a constitutive element of) the very perceptual experience itself; this in turn means that the subject's action of holding her nose should also count as *direct*.

Thus, we find that at least *some* of the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in their own perceptual experiences in cases of mental self-regulation present us with an important exception to the 'Not Both Direct and Precise' claim. However, this in turn should not be very surprising. For perceptual experiences are those elements of our mental lives in which our mental lives are most closely and most directly 'enmeshed' with the physical world around us; indeed, one might plausibly hold that perceptual experiences are partly constituted by the physical world around us. But then, if a subject's perceptual experience is partly constituted by the physical world around her, then in an attempt to intervene in her own perceptual experiences, the subject can simply intervene in one of those constitutive parts of the experience which can be found in the physical world around her, which in turn means that we should *expect* that the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in their own perceptual experiences in cases of mental self-regulation are often both direct and precise.

Now, when trying to name paradigm cases of mental events, one might quite easily come to think of perceptual experiences. However, with respect to mental self-regulation, cases in which subjects regulate their own perceptual experiences are clearly exceptional cases, and they should most definitely *not* count as paradigmatic cases of mental self-regulation more generally. On the contrary, for the great majority of cases of mental self-regulation (such as the self-regulation of emotions, thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, memories, experiences of pleasure and pain, and imaginings), relevant actions are usually not both direct and precise. Thus, although the actions which subjects engage in when they intervene in their own perceptual experiences might often be direct and precise, we can continue to endorse the 'Not Both Direct and Precise' claim.

## VIII

*An Elusive Domain and a Fragile Ability.* Many philosophers hold that our own mental lives are what we are most intimately *acquainted with*, and what we are aware of in some direct way, while our awareness of the physical world around us is in important ways indirect.

However, we now find that as far as our abilities to *intervene* in the relevant domains are concerned, things are structured in exactly the opposite way: while in simple, paradigmatic cases we can, and do, intervene in events in the physical world by acting upon them in both direct and precise ways, the great majority of our interventions in our own mental lives are indirect or imprecise (or both). Thus,

(Elusive Domain) our very own mental lives are a comparatively *elusive* domain in the face of our attempts at regulatory intervention when contrasted with the physical world.

Furthermore, compared to interventions which are direct, interventions which are indirect entail more ‘steps’ on the way towards the goal which the subject aims to reach; the more steps there are the greater the chances are for things to go wrong and for the relevant attempt to fail; and accordingly, interventions which are indirect are more prone to failure than interventions which are direct.

Similarly, compared to interventions which are precise, interventions which are imprecise entail much less control on the part of the intervening subject over the events that are prompted by the subject’s intervening action, which in turn leaves more room for the subject’s attempt at reaching the relevant goal to fail, and accordingly, interventions which are imprecise are more prone to failure than interventions which are precise.

We therefore have reason to hold that interventions which are indirect or imprecise (or both) are more prone to failure than interventions which are both direct and precise. Hence,

(Fragile Ability) while our ability to regulate (purely) physical processes in our everyday environments is rather robust, our ability to regulate our own mental lives is comparatively *fragile*.

However, an opponent might object to this claim as follows:<sup>12</sup>

- (i) If the goal which a subject is trying to reach is imprecise, then the fact that the intervention by which the subject aims to reach the relevant goal is imprecise does not make the relevant intervention more prone to failure than a precise intervention would have been.

---

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Joseph Raz for raising the following set of issues.

- (ii) But then in cases of mental self-regulation, the goal which the subject is trying to reach often *is* imprecise.
- (iii) Thus, the fact that in cases of mental self-regulation relevant intervening actions often *are* imprecise does *not* entail that our ability to regulate our own mental lives is more fragile than our ability to regulate (purely) physical processes.
- (iv) Thus, the Fragile Ability claim is false.

In response, we should question the objection's premiss (i). Consider an archer whose goal is for her arrow to hit any point on a large wall. This is an imprecise goal. Nevertheless, the archer is less prone to failure if her intervention in the situation entails a lot of control (that is, if her intervention is precise), and she is more prone to failure if her intervention in the situation entails hardly any control (that is, if her intervention is imprecise). For example, assume that the archer has been blindfolded and has no idea which direction the wall is to be found in—in this case, while her goal is very imprecise, the archer has very little control over her action, and will be more prone to failure with respect to reaching her imprecise goal than she would be if she was able to *see* the wall she wants to aim at, which would give her more control over her action.

Thus, even with an imprecise goal, compared to interventions which are precise, interventions which are imprecise leave more room for the subject's attempt at reaching the relevant goal to fail; accordingly, interventions which are imprecise are more prone to failure than interventions which are precise. Premiss (i) of the opponent's objection is false, and we can continue to endorse the Fragile Ability claim.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Do the Elusive Domain claim and the Fragile Ability claim delineate *categorical* differences or differences *of degree*? If one holds that the physical and the mental realm are two categorically different realms of intervention, interventions in one's mental life might well count as categorically different from interventions in one's physical environment. However, the differences delineated here are differences of degree: according to the Elusive Domain claim, our mental lives are a *more* elusive domain in the face of attempts at regulatory interventions when compared to the physical world, and according to the Fragile Ability claim our ability to regulate our mental lives is *more* fragile than our ability to regulate physical processes. (Thanks to Mary Leng and Amanda Green who both independently raised the present question.)

## IX

*A Query and a Response.* However, someone might doubtfully ask, aren't there cases in which our interventions in (purely) *physical* processes are also indirect or imprecise (or both)? If so, wouldn't this speak against the Elusive Domain claim and the Fragile Ability claim?

Our interlocutor might offer some examples in which interventions in (purely) physical processes could be described as either indirect or imprecise (or both), as follows:

- moving the levers of a digger to bring it about that a hole is dug so that a house can be built: indirect;
- baking bread: imprecise;
- oiling parts of a sewing machine in order for one's sewing to go more smoothly: indirect;
- making high-energy particle beams collide (e.g. at CERN): imprecise.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that each of the cases listed here might plausibly be described as either indirect or imprecise (or both). More generally, we might therefore grant that there *are* cases in which interventions in (purely) physical processes are either indirect or imprecise (or both). However, it seems that those cases (usually) present us with rather complex interventions in the physical world, and the fact that such complex interventions in the physical world might (sometimes) plausibly be described as either indirect or imprecise (or both) seems compatible with our earlier claim that in simple, paradigmatic cases we can, and do, regulate events in the physical world by acting upon them in both direct and precise ways.

Thus, even though there are cases in which subjects' interventions in (purely) physical processes are either indirect or imprecise, we can continue to endorse the Elusive Domain claim as well as the Fragile Ability claim.

---

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Clea Rees and Keith Allen who both independently suggested that examples of the present kind be considered here.

## X

*The Understanding Condition.* Next, we should consider the role which a subject's own *understanding* of her situation plays in her ability to regulate her own mental life. Quite generally, it seems plausible to hold that in order for a subject to be able to intervene in the unfolding of a certain process in a goal-directed way, it is necessary that the subject understand what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the unfolding of the relevant process are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of the relevant process, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make an intervention in the relevant process effective in reaching her regulatory goal.

For example, in order for a policewoman to be able to intervene in the flow of the traffic with the goal of making the traffic flow smoothly, it is necessary that the policewoman understand what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the flow of the traffic are, how these factors contribute to the flow of the traffic, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make an intervention in the flow of the traffic successful in reaching her regulatory goal of making the traffic flow smoothly.

Analogously, one might suggest that in order for a subject to be able to intervene in the unfolding of a certain aspect of her own mental life in a goal-directed way, it is necessary that the subject understand what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her mental life, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make an intervention in the relevant aspect of her own mental life successful in reaching her regulatory goal. This, together with the Intervention Condition, entails that

(Understanding Condition) in order for a subject to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life, it is necessary that the subject understand what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to

make an intervention in the relevant aspect of her own mental life successful in reaching her regulatory goal.

The ways in which subjects who engage in mental self-regulation satisfy the Understanding Condition in relevant situations in turn can, and do, vary along various different dimensions.

First, when subjects engage in mental self-regulation, their understanding of relevant features of their situation is sometimes very rudimentary, and at other times it can be very sophisticated. For example, when a subject puts on some music in order to cheer herself up, it seems that the subject's attempt at mental self-regulation requires a rather sophisticated understanding of the link between emotional states and different types of music;<sup>15</sup> it arguably also presupposes an understanding of *person-specific* conditions—the subject might understand that putting on the relevant kind of music will cheer her up, because she knows that she herself does like this kind of music (while she also knows that other people detest it). By contrast, when a subject tries to remember where she put her keys, it seems that the subject's understanding of the situation is rather rudimentary. A subject who tries to regulate her mental life by prompting herself with a question about her own past actions ('Where did I leave my keys?') hopes that this question will bring about the occurrence of a relevant memory; the subject's 'mental self-prompting' usually sets off some (sub-personal) psychological process that might eventually lead to (personal-level) changes in the subject's own mental life which are of the kind the subject was hoping for; but the workings of the relevant (sub-personal) process, that is, the 'mechanisms' involved, are usually opaque to the subject; and what the precise outcome of a relevant 'prompting' might possibly be usually is not only beyond the subject's control, but is also *unknown* to the subject at the time at which she engages in the 'prompting' action; thus, the subject's understanding of the situation seems rather rudimentary.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it seems plausible to assume that in those cases in which a subject aims to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life and the regulatory action on the part of the subject is imprecise, the fact that the action is imprecise (that is, the fact that the subject is

---

<sup>15</sup> Our subject's understanding of the situation might, while being sophisticated in some respects, still be limited in others—for example, she might not know *why* the relevant kind of music usually cheers her up. (Thanks to Alison Hills for raising this issue.)

<sup>16</sup> On related issues, see also Eilan (1998, pp. 187–9).

unable to predict and control the changes brought about by her action in a suitably specific way) is (at least in part) due to the fact that her understanding of the relevant situation is quite rudimentary.

## XI

*Theoretical and Practical Understanding.* A second dimension along which the ways in which subjects satisfy the Understanding Condition can vary is this:

(Theoretical or Practical Understanding) When subjects engage in mental self-regulation, their understanding of relevant features of their situation is sometimes *theoretical*, but very often subjects' understanding of relevant features of their situation is *practical*.

Cases in which a subject employs a theoretical understanding of the situation in order to regulate her own mental life are arguably rare, but do occur.

For example, consider Bob, who has heard from a friend that breathing exercises of a certain kind are especially useful in regulating severe pain experiences; Bob has not had any pain experiences for a long time, so he has not tried this out yet. However, he now finds himself with a severe pain experience and puts his theoretical understanding of the situation to good use: applying the theoretical understanding provided by his friend, he engages in the breathing exercises which his friend has told him about, and soon his pain experience is less severe.

Thus, a subject's ability to regulate her own mental life sometimes *can* depend on the subject's having a theoretical understanding of relevant features of the situation. However, in many cases of mental self-regulation, a subject's ability to regulate her own mental life will not require any such theoretical understanding. Rather, in order for a subject to be able to regulate her own mental life, it is sufficient that the subject have a practical understanding of relevant features of the situation. In order for a subject to have such a practical understanding, it is in turn sufficient that the subject have relevant 'know-how' which *entails* a practical understanding of the situation.

## XII

*Practical Understanding, Know-How, and Skills of Mental Self-Regulation.* As a first step in an attempt to spell out this claim, I'd like to suggest that

(Mental Know-How) all healthy human beings beyond the age of early childhood do have some 'mental self-regulatory know-how', that is, they have some knowledge of how to regulate their own mental lives.

But then, what exactly does it mean to say that we all have some mental self-regulatory know-how?

In answering this question we might begin by considering other, non-mental cases of regulatory know-how: Anna knows how to ride a bike—for example, she knows how to accelerate on a bike. Phil knows how to sail a dinghy—for example, he knows how to sail in a circle. Analogously, so it seems plausible to hold, Emma knows how to regulate her own mental life—for example, she knows how to bring it about that she imagines next week's job interview in detail and in a way that is conducive to her doing well in the interview.

Recent discussions of know-how have focused on cases of know-how concerning processes which are predominantly physical (such as riding a bike, or sailing a dinghy). These discussions might be enriched by some more careful consideration of cases of know-how concerning processes which are predominantly mental (such as regulating one's imagination of a future event).

In the philosophical literature, there are two prominent recent accounts of know-how: following [Stanley and Williamson \(2001\)](#), some hold that know-how is ultimately a form of propositional knowledge; others follow [Ryle \(1990\)](#) and hold that know-how is knowledge 'of its own kind', not a mere automatism, but not propositional knowledge either; rather, so they say, know-how is *sui generis* knowledge. Luckily, we do not need to take sides in this debate here, because defenders of both views agree that

(Know-How Entails Practical Understanding) a subject's know-how with respect to a certain domain entails a *practical* understanding of relevant situations; that is, a subject's domain-specific know-how entails a practical understanding of what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the

unfolding of various domain-specific processes are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of relevant domain-specific processes, and how the subject herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make interventions in the relevant processes successful in reaching particular goals.

Thus, if Anna knows how to ride a bike, this know-how entails a practical understanding of what some of the many different factors which jointly determine her moving along on the bike are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of the process of moving along on the bike, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make effective interventions.

Next, we should clarify what it means to say that someone has ‘practical understanding’. When we say of a subject that she has practical understanding, this seems to imply that the relevant understanding relies on various dispositions and abilities which it might not be possible to spell out in anything but demonstrative terms (for instance, ‘*This* is how one should cycle down a muddy single track on a mountain bike’); in addition, someone who holds that know-how is *sui generis* knowledge might also say that practical understanding is a kind of *non-propositional* understanding.

Applying our present considerations to the case of mental self-regulation, we find that we have reason to endorse the following claim:

(Mental Know-How Entails Practical Understanding) A subject’s mental self-regulatory know-how entails a practical understanding of relevant situations; that is, a subject’s having some mental self-regulatory know-how entails the subject’s having a practical understanding of what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the unfolding of relevant aspects of her own mental life are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of relevant aspects of her own mental life, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make an intervention in relevant aspects of her own mental life successful in reaching her regulatory goals.

Thus, if Emma knows how to regulate her emotions, this know-how entails a practical understanding of what some of the many different factors which jointly determine her emotional experiences are (such as the impact of different kinds of music on her emotional states);

how these factors contribute to the unfolding of emotional experiences (for instance, that cheerful music might alleviate a feeling of sadness); and how these factors might be manipulated in such a way as to make interventions in the unfolding of the relevant emotional experience successful in reaching a particular goal (for instance, that putting on some cheerful music might help in reaching the goal of making a feeling of sadness disappear).

Just as the skill of riding a bike can be more or less well-developed, so the skill of mental self-regulation can also be more or less well-developed. There are intrapersonal as well as interpersonal differences with respect to the skill of mental self-regulation: a subject might gain more mental self-regulatory know-how over time and thus come to know how to regulate her own mental life better, and some people have greater mental self-regulatory know-how than others. We might explain these differences as differences in sensitivity—that is, we might hold that with respect to the case of mental self-regulation just as with other cases of skill, ‘the elements which constitute [the] skill, as they become more and more refined, become more and more sensitive to context’ (Fridland 2014, p. 83). As with other skills, it seems plausible to assume that subjects can cultivate and further develop their skills of mental self-regulation. More generally, we have reason to hold that our ability to shape our own mental lives often importantly depends on our having relevant *skills* of mental self-regulation.

### XIII

*Conclusion.* The suggestion that we can ‘shape our own mental lives’ and that healthy, mature human beings are able to play an active part in how their own mental lives develop might at first sight seem surprising. However, as we have meanwhile seen, subjects can, and often do, engage in mental self-regulation, that is, they can be, and often are, actively involved with their own mental lives in a goal-directed way. In an attempt to understand this ability better, we have addressed the question as to how mental self-regulation is possible and have determined some ‘enabling conditions’ of mental self-regulation; we have found that in order for a subject to regulate a certain aspect of her own mental life, it is necessary

(Guidance Condition) that the subject be able to guide how the relevant aspect of her own mental life develops, and that she be able to do so in a goal-directed way;

(Intervention Condition) that the subject be able to intervene, in a goal-directed way, in the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life;

(Effective Agency Condition) that the subject be able to act with respect to the relevant mental event (or process, or state of affairs), and that she be able to act in a way which is effective, that is, in a way which brings about a change in the targeted event, a change which would not have occurred otherwise;

(Understanding Condition) that the subject understand what some of the many different factors which jointly determine the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life are, how these factors contribute to the unfolding of the relevant aspect of her own mental life, and how she herself might interact with those factors in such a way as to make an intervention in the relevant aspect of her own mental life successful in reaching her regulatory goal.

These conditions in turn should further our understanding of the phenomenon of mental self-regulation.

Somewhat surprisingly, in contemporary philosophy of mind our ability to shape our own mental lives by means of mental self-regulation has been rather neglected. I hope that the present paper has shown that the phenomenon deserves our careful attention, and that an understanding of the phenomenon of mental self-regulation is crucial for any attempt at gaining a full understanding of the nature of the human mind. What is more, as we said earlier, if we are able to shape our mental lives by means of mental self-regulation we might also be able to shape our mental lives for the better, or for the worse. Our ability to shape our own mental lives by means of mental self-regulation should therefore also have axiological implications which deserve closer attention. Indeed, the observation that we are able to engage in mental self-regulation gives us good reason to explore issues in an area of research which we might call ‘the ethics of mental life’,

an area of research which I think should provide great opportunities for innovative and worthwhile philosophical work in future.<sup>17</sup>

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of York*  
*York YO10 5DD*  
*UK*  
*dorothea.debus@york.ac.uk*

## REFERENCES

- Eilan, Naomi 1998: 'Perceptual Intentionality, Attention and Consciousness'. In Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 43: Current Issues in Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 181–202.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1988: 'Identification and Externality'. In his *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 58–68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fridland, Ellen 2014: 'Skill Learning and Conceptual Thought: Making a Way through the Wilderness'. In Bana Bashour and Hans D. Muller (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophical Naturalism and Its Implications*, pp. 77–100. London: Routledge.
- O'Brien, Lucy, and Matthew Soteriou (eds.) 2009: *Mental Actions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ryle, Gilbert 1990: *The Concept of Mind*. London: Penguin Books.
- Soteriou, Matthew 2013: *The Mind's Construction. The Ontology of Mind and Mental Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stanley, Jason, and Timothy Williamson 2001: 'Knowing How'. *Journal of Philosophy*, 98, pp. 411–44.
- Strawson, Galen 2003: 'Mental Ballistics or the Involuntariness of Spontaneity'. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103, pp. 227–57.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1980: *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wu, Wayne 2013: 'Mental Action and the Threat of Automaticity'. In Andy Clark, Julian Kiverstein, and Tillmann Vierkant (eds.), pp. 244–61. *Decomposing the Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>17</sup> My work on the material presented here was made possible by a generous grant from the 'Philosophy and Science of Self Control' project at Florida State University, sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and directed by Al Mele; the views expressed here are my own. I am very grateful to the John Templeton Foundation, and especially to Al Mele, for their support.