

How do we control our mind?

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One of the notable features of our mind is that it doesn't come with on-and-off switches that we can use in controlling it. As a result, a crucial facet of maturity is taking care in what we expose our mind to because to some extent our mind has a mind of its own.

More precisely, to some extent some part of our mind has a mind of its own. This is the automatic unit of our mind that consists of many components that are working unconsciously and in parallel 24/7. These processes consist in the many regulatory, perceptual, cognitive, and motor operations that maintain our life and that maintain our awareness of our identity and our awareness of our location in time and space. We normally pay no attention to these automatic processes, taking them for granted. But occasionally — for a few seconds now and then — some such process may temporarily falter, making us aware of it. As an example, if we get lost in thought as we are driving, occasionally our automatic unit may lose awareness of where we are for a second or two until it reestablishes this awareness based on visual information and on recent memory. Even while we are asleep, our automatic unit maintains an awareness of who we are and where we are, and it will awaken us if it perceives auditory stimuli that may indicate a problem or a threat, such as the cry of our young child.

As for controlling what we expose our automatic unit to, here is an everyday example. Imagine accessing the internet in order to achieve some specific, high priority goal, such as placing an order before a discount offer expires. This takes discipline because with a mere click of our mouse button we can access a wide range of interesting websites that serve other goals that we have. We know that if we visit some such website of great interest to us, we may get occupied for some time in examining the content of the site. So in order to avoid getting caught up into such a distraction, we explicitly choose not to visit the website — we explicitly choose not to expose our automatic unit to the content of the website at this particular time.

Such discipline is a facet of maturity, and it is based on knowing how our mind works and how to control it — knowledge that we acquire from our life experience. Such discipline and control enable us to acquire knowledge and wisdom, develop skill, resist temptation, unlearn bad habits, and learn good habits.

In this meeting, we will analyze the volitional control features of our mind so that we can better understand how our mind works and so that we can better control our mind in order to more effectively achieve our goals. I would like to pursue this topic in the following way.

Two facets of volitional control that I identified in the last meeting are the following:

- ◆ **Focusing attention**
- ◆ **Delaying a decision**

I would like to assume that these are the only two facets of direct control that we have. I would then like to attempt to explain all instances of volitional control in terms of these two facets.

More specifically, for any example of volitional processing that anyone may cite, I would like to analyze the example to see how it can be explained in terms of the facets of focusing attention and delaying a decision. If there is an example that requires some other facet of volitional control, then let's identify that facet and show why it can't be explained in terms of focusing attention and delaying a decision.

Attention deficits and hyperactivity

Attention deficits are a notable diagnostic category in learning deficits, giving rise to the familiar acronyms ADD and ADHD. In view of the foregoing model of volitional processing, we can see why attention is crucial to learning and, accordingly, why attention deficits can degrade the learning process.

Hyperactivity is a form of impulsiveness, and this pertains to a deficit in the ability to control the mind in the face of behavioral proposals from the automatic unit. We experience such behavioral proposals as impulses.

Here are links to relevant Wikipedia articles:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ADD>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ADHD>

Technical note

The foregoing analysis makes it sound as if we are a mind within our mind. Such a model is not theoretically useful because it implies an infinite regress of minds. However, speaking from personal experience with my own mind, I think that this is how we should view the situation introspectively in order to improve our volitional processing.

Also note that focusing attention and delaying a decision entail decision-making, but by assumption these are the simplest forms of volitional processing, thereby providing the basis for the complex forms of volitional processing that we normally think of as decision-making.

Meeting format

I will begin by providing examples from human life and from the behavior of baboons and chimps. I will then explain the roles of focusing attention and delaying a decision in terms of my model of the mind, as presented in *Human Life*, Edition 2, and as presented at the last meeting. We will then consider situations of volitional processing of interest to the members, and together we'll see if we can analyze the volitional processing, in each situation, into the facets of focusing attention and delaying a decision.