



Breakdown of Will

George Ainslie

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Ainslie argues that our responses to the threat of our own inconsistency determine the basic fabric of human culture. He suggests that individuals are more like populations of bargaining agents than like the hierarchical command structures envisaged by cognitive psychologists. This perspective helps us understand so much that is puzzling in human action and interaction: from self-defeating behaviors to willfulness, from pathological over-control and self-deception to subtler forms of behavior such as altruism, sadism, gambling, and the "social construction" of belief.

Breakdown of Will Details

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From Reader Review Breakdown of Will for online ebook

AMS says

Had high hopes but.....

The book at the start was amazing and seemed to tackle all the feelings and dilemmas that an addict goes through.

But then from chapter 4 or so onwards, the book became too detailed, technical, complicated, and simply unhelpful.

I was hoping the book will get to providing a clear strategy for the addict to overcome his addiction, but this never came in the book, which was a big disappointment.

Maybe someone can come along and summarise this book in the form of an infographic animation, then bring something PRACTICAL out of it instead of just focusing on the analysis of the different theories about addictions.

Alex says

The book is not altogether right, but it is hugely interesting. ...a very inspiring read.

Risto Saarelma says

via <https://meaningness.com/further-reading>

Richard Wu says

I wonder sometimes if a sufficiently advanced art critic may by the cover of a book determine its contents, which would be all the more impressive if the cover were in no way inspired by material it covered.

Fortunately, our task is not so difficult. From an ocean of violet smoke is inscribed a glowing rectangle with sharp boundaries, framing a portrait of, presumably, our beloved psychologist in his younger days. His mouth is open and his teeth are faintly clenched. He stares at us, brow furrowed, with a sense of horrified bewilderment.

But the real key lies in the portrait's composition. It seems like it began as a photograph, then a computer generated a pointillist grid of equally sized squares within which grayscale circles of varying radius arrange themselves to give—when viewed as a whole—an impression of the original photo. Ainslie's thesis, of course, is that while the experience of being a self may feel like one phenomenological unity, it may be no more than a sort of Schelling point or BATNA, if you prefer, for the endless series of competing interests of which the mind actually consists. In the neurological Congress, the prize of attention may be awarded at one moment to the Smoking party and to the Diet party the next, with none having the power to override the intermittent filibusters of the insufferable Pain party.

Research has shown that even while we're asleep, our behavior can be shaped by differential comfort. Thus our behaviors can grow to obtain reward without the well-scrutinized process we call "volition." [p.60]

We sputter about this world in total unawareness of the vicious war being at all times waged by the ecosystems of miniscule homunculi deciding what we desire, how we'll act, who we are, the slightest shift in sleeping position amounting no less than to a Darwinian annihilation of the impulses proposing that in fact shifting your foot one centimeter right might feel better, too faint to have their fuss heard. Even the very patterns of our thoughts are calculated according to the logic of the market, with this or that approach going to the highest bidder, who not only wins the way we think but in so doing amplifies the utility we get from that pattern, in that circumstance—carving, as I like to say, the desire paths of the soul.

But Ainslie's hyperbolic discounting model has far greater ambitions than illuminating the recursive mechanics of reification. It wishes to reconcile the grand questions of philosophy. Of fate and free will, of reason and emotion, of logical positivism and social constructionism. Here is a juxtaposition by which I cannot help but be struck: the self-assurance of the text's academic quietude and the mighty pillars of paradox it purports to destroy. Curiosity impels one to ask now whether it succeeds, and if so, how, and to what extent, but I will not steal Ainslie's thunder nor butcher his words. I will simply state that the general argument is worthwhile if only for its originality, or barring that, its daring; judge for yourself if he pulls himself from the cliff.

Intending is the classification of an act as a precedent for a series of similar acts, so that the person stakes the prospective value of this series – perhaps, in the extreme, the value of all the fruits of all intentions whatsoever – on performing the intended action in the case at hand.
[p.127]

I refuse to believe anyone who has so much as a passing interest in such volumes picks them up hoping, explicitly or subliminally, to change or *improve* how their minds work or, perhaps more accurately, how they act in the world, after digesting the information wherein contained. Still are we lured by such prospects though we may have long ago and through extensive experience concluded their materialization to be fantasy. But in the spirit of the original hope, I propose an avenue of practice; Ainslie identifies the salience of short-range interests and the possibility of their categorization through the rational Will. The ideal is then to maintain a state of awareness within which one can identify when these short-range interests pop up and code them as such in order to develop a distaste or disdain for the feeling, thus over time weakening their grip as a category. To all those capable of such feats, kudos; reality looks a little different. Reality is when you check Facebook or Twitter and hate yourself for falling prey to their wiles *yet again* even though you know the nature of the beast already, like a fencing match where your opponent is so kind to tell you exactly where he's going to strike before he lunges and you can try your best to dodge or parry but he gets you every time because he's just that much more skilled and what can you do but get hit. If that analogy was too flat then one might say you dig the dopamine hit just *that much more* than you dislike the resulting self-disgust and so are willing to pay the latter as price for the former. "Subpar local maxima," as others might say.

A quick mind can put together rules in any number of ways, so finding evasions is also easy.
[p.86]

In the final analysis, Ainslie's theory is an economics of the unconscious. This is remarkable because this shadow realm has remained, to the best of my knowledge, impenetrable to the modern standards of empiricism. Thus it is infinitely curious how Ainslie managed to piece his theory together. Has he always possessed some strong internal sense of split selves which he only now finally managed to rationalize into coherence? One can only suppose. But regardless, I see in piceoeconomics the possibility of a science, which

is more than can be said of all the psychoanalytic speculation of the last century, however descriptively accurate it can in some cases be.

Favorite quotes

“In modalities where an organism can mentally reward itself, surprise is the only commodity that can be scarce.” [p.170]

“Attuned as we are to modern efficiency in the developed world, we don’t recognize the oppressiveness of an environment so rationalized that much of our natural idiosyncrasy has been anticipated and either harnessed or selected out.” [p.159-160]

“People can learn to get hungry just when food is available, for instance at mealtimes. When food is never available, that is, under starvation conditions, people learn to avoid generating appetite entirely.” [p.68]

“Ulysses planning for the Sirens must treat Ulysses hearing them as a separate person, to be influenced if possible and forestalled if not.” [p.40]

“[J]ust as with species of animals, there are surroundings where an interest is able to attack a competing interest and other surroundings where it’s vulnerable to attack.” [p.62]

“Indeed, a major factor in the decay of civilizations that have been peaceful for long periods may be the replacement of indirect processes by efficient ones; as they become efficient, they become unaccountably less rewarding.” [p.196]

“While science stands by, mystified, people keep wrecking their own lives.” [p.28]

Balaji says

The right direction in understanding self regulation.

R says

The assumption of human rationality may be one of the most flawed assumptions in the domain of decision science. Once critique for this assumption comes from George Ainslie. George Ainslie in this book explains that our decisions are influenced by different zones of preference that exist in our behavior. He lists the following 5 zones of temporal preferences - Optimal, Compulsions, Addictions, Itches and Pains.

He argues that interests in one range of these temporal zones conflict with the interests in other zones. Reason and passion bid for control of person’s behavior using the same kind of currency. At any moment we make a decision our addictions compete with our compulsions or our optimal behavior compete with our itches. In that sense optimal behavior is just one of many sort of behaviors that we would exhibit. In general these behaviors are not naïve mistakes but the product of robust motives that persist despite an awareness of the behaviors’ cost.

The book is a tough read and may required some knowledge of theories in Decision Science to understand

author's argument.
