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A Nobel Winner Can Help You Keep Your Resolutions

By VIRGINIA POSTREL

WHY make New Year's resolutions? If you need to start a diet or get up earlier in the morning, why wait until Jan. 1? Why not do it today? New Year's resolutions do not make any rational sense.

While perfectly logical, that analysis misses the point. New Year's resolutions help people cope with some of the most difficult conflicts human beings face.

So argues one of the economics profession's greatest experts on conflict, Thomas C. Schelling, who shared this year's Nobel in economic science for, in the words of the citation, "having enhanced our understanding of conflict and cooperation through game-theory analysis."

Professor Schelling, now a professor emeritus at the University of Maryland, is famous for his work on conflicts between nation-states, particularly those with nuclear weapons.

One of his best-known ideas is "precommitment." One party in a conflict, he demonstrated, can often strengthen its strategic position by cutting off some of its options to make its threats more credible. An army that burns its bridges, making retreat impossible, is a classic military example.

Others involve strong diplomatic commitments. By passing a law saying the United States will defend Taiwan if it is attacked, for example, Congress gives future administrations less flexibility in dealing with a crisis, but the threat makes an attack less likely.

In the early 1980's, Professor Schelling applied similar analysis to individuals' internal struggles, seeking to develop what he called "strategic egonomics, consciously coping with one's own behavior, especially one's conscious behavior."

The problem, he suggested, is that pretty much everybody suffers from a split personality. One self desperately wants to lose weight or quit smoking or run two miles a day or get up early to work. The other wants dessert or a cigarette, hates exercise or loves sleep.

Both selves are equally valid, and equally rational about pursuing their desires. But they do not exist at the same time.

"What I have in mind is an act or decision that a person takes decisively at some particular point in time, about which the person's preferences differ from what they were earlier, when the prospect was contemplated but the decision was still in the future," he wrote in "Ethics, Law and the Exercise of Self-Command," (available online at <http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/schelling83.pdf>). "If the person could make the final decision about that action at the earlier time, precluding a later change in mind, he would make a different choice from what he knows will be his choice on that later occasion."

New Year's resolutions help the earlier self overrule the later one by raising the cost of straying. "More is threatened by failure than just the substance of the resolution: one's personal constitution is violated, confidence demoralized, and the whole year spoiled. At least one can try to make it so," wrote Professor Schelling in "The Intimate Contest for Self-Command," a 1980 essay in his book "Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Errant Economist" (Harvard University Press, 1984).

As many a broken resolution demonstrates, those consequences often are not a big enough deterrent. To make success more likely, Professor Schelling's work suggests a few additional strategies.

One is a mild precommitment: not keeping sweets or tobacco in the house, for instance. At the very least, this step forces you to delay indulgence until you can go to the store — and allows time to recover your resolve.

Another approach is to use bright-line rules, which make it harder to cheat through clever reinterpretation. That may explain why many people find it easier to eliminate whole categories of food, like carbohydrates, rather than simply to cut back on calories.

"Just as it may be easier to ban nuclear weapons from the battlefield in toto than through carefully graduated specifications on their use, zero is a more enforceable limit on cigarettes or chewing gum than some flexible quantitative ration," Professor Schelling wrote.

He once resolved to smoke "only after the 'evening meal.'" That rule "led to tortured reasoning Thanksgiving afternoon, or flying west across the Atlantic with perpetual afternoon, and it stimulated lots of token sandwiches on leaving the ski slopes to drive home."

For those who cannot face the prospect of an eternity without a favorite indulgence, there is the strategy of delay. Instead of resolving to go without, you give yourself permission to smoke or drink or eat chocolate cake again within a specified time — say, three hours — after deciding to go off the wagon. Like having to go out to buy supplies, this strategy allows time once again to resolve not to indulge.

A twist lets the newly resolute self reset the clock at any time. “I have spoken to distance runners who, as exhaustion approaches, pick their stopping places a mile in advance, with the rule that any place more distant can be picked at any time before they reach the current target, and once picked even by the most fleeting resolve it becomes controlling,” Professor Schelling wrote, wryly noting that it is not always obvious which self should be in control. “I think I know whose side I’m on, and I’m sorry for him.”

A slight variation allows a third “self” to mediate between the two in conflict by enforcing a prearranged deal: the chance to sleep late at the price of skipping TV at night, for instance, or a new dress in exchange for losing 10 pounds.

This system works, however, only on two conditions. First, the incentives have to be strong enough. Then, wrote Professor Schelling, “the ‘someone’ who wants to turn off his alarm with his eyes closed has to believe that another ‘somebody’ will later have the fortitude to administer the punishment or deny the reward, when ‘they’ are really all the same person.”

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Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/29/business/29scene.html>