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Rational control

by [Harvey Mansfield](#)

Or, life without virtue.

In the brand new building where I work, the lights go on and off, the shades go up and down, and the toilets flush, automatically, without your having to turn a switch or push a handle. Rational control has replaced individual virtue, which is subject to vagaries and may not be active or awake. The building where I used to work was shared with economists, who, living the sort of life they describe, had no incentive to flush and sometimes failed to do so.

Such virtue is so minimal that it hardly deserves the name, but even actions that are very obviously in your self-interest may be done for you if there is a chance that you might not perform them. As instruments of rational control, the seat belts in your car are inferior to air bags because the former you have to buckle up and the latter save you without your having to lift a finger. In this case your life is involved (though one wouldn't say at stake), and the point is to ...

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