

IRRATIONALITY IN PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY: THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract: The philosophical study of irrationality can yield interesting insights into the human mind. One provocative issue is self-defeating behaviours, i.e. behaviours that result in failure to achieve one's apparent goals and ambitions. In this paper I consider a self-defeating behaviour called *choking under pressure*, explain why it should be considered irrational, and how it is best understood with reference to skills. Then I describe how choking can be explained without appeal to a purely Freudian subconscious or 'sub-agents' view of mind. Finally, I will recommend an alternative way to understand self-defeating behaviour which comes from a synthesis of Peter Strawson's explanation of 'self-reactive attitudes', Mark Johnston's notion of 'mental tropisms', and revised Freudian descriptions of the causes of self-defeating behaviour.

Choking Under Pressure

Steven Berglas and Roy Baumeister (1993) define choking under pressure, for either individuals or groups (sports teams in particular), as failure under great pressure to perform at a level that they are capable of attaining.¹ Choking under pressure raises interesting problems for philosophers and psychologists, and illustrates recent work on irrationality and associated moral theory;² moreover, because it is an individual as well as a group phenomenon, it challenges Freudian and sub-agent descriptions of irrational behaviour.

How choking occurs can be clarified by understanding the natural performance process and how one may lose control of that process. Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1990) describes five different stages of skill in playing chess and driving an automobile: stage 1 is called the *novice* stage, where one learns basic features of the game, the basic features of driving, or the basic moves free of contextual situations. In stage 2, the *advanced beginner* starts to gain experience in coping with real situations, such as knowing when to shift up or down if an automobile's motor is straining or racing, or when a king's side is weakened in a game of chess. Stage 3 is the stage of *competence*, reflecting increased experience and the adoption of a hierarchical view of decision-making.

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¹ Berglas and Baumeister (1993) is a popular self-help book, and we use it only as a point of departure for our discussions, without committing ourselves to any of its theorizations.

² It is important to note that this paper argues that choking under pressure is an irrational behaviour. Others have disputed that irrationality as such exists. For example, McCrone (1994) argues that social context shapes what we call rationality, which is actually a 'role which we have learnt to play'. In the later sections of this paper, where I discuss the role of self-reactive attitudes in choking under pressure, the reader will find an account that is actually compatible with McCrone's.

In stage 4, *proficiency* results when an individual — after experiencing many emotion-laden situations, choosing plans in each, and obtaining vivid, emotional demonstrations of the adequacy or inadequacy of the plan — can make additional, rapid connections to handle such situations. ‘The performer involved in the world of the *skill* “notices” or is struck by a certain plan, goal or perspective. No longer is the spell of involvement broken by detached conscious *planning*’ (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1995, pp. 3–4; my italics). The final stage, stage 5, is that of *expertise*. ‘With enough experience, and with a variety of situations seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the proficient performer seems gradually to decompose classes of situations into subclasses, each of which share the same decision or tactic. This allows an *immediate, intuitive response* to each situation’ (*ibid.* p. 5; my italics).³ The major difference between Dreyfus’ first three stages and the last two is the additional element of skill acquisition, and the increased reliance on learned skill rather than mindful cognition as expertise is achieved.

Berglas and Baumeister’s description of choking behaviour is consistent with Dreyfus’ views: choking under pressure occurs when one who has developed certain skills and attained a certain level of proficiency and expertise, then becomes so self-conscious that they ignore those skills in favour of cognitively tracing out steps as a novice would. For both Dreyfus and Berglas and Baumeister, skills involve the ability to do things without thinking about them or, more precisely, without attending to the details of the process. The knowledge of how to perform becomes overlearned, automatic and unconscious; and proceeds without any involvement of the conscious mind. In other words, if one thinks about the task too much, one interferes with the natural skills that have been learned. This interference is what causes people to choke under pressure. The essence of choking is that the conscious mind tries to get involved in these well-learned, automatic, skilled processes that normally run without conscious interference. This involves a shift in attention: you start to pay attention to yourself, to what you are doing, and especially to how you are doing it. The increased attention to self interferes with the execution of the task at hand. This explains why an increase in self-consciousness before a skilled performance is typically thought to increase the chance of choking under pressure. Such increases in self-consciousness may follow from the presence of a crowd at a baseball game, television cameras at the filming of a solo performance, or compliments and praise directed at a performer before a competition.

On the surface, choking under pressure may not seem irrational; many would simply explain choking as ‘getting nervous in a pressured situation’. As Berglas and Baumeister explain it, choking involves people losing control of their own natural performance process. Usually an individual or team affected by choking wants very much to succeed and are trying their best to perform well, yet somehow they cannot make themselves do what they want; they have lost control in some sense over their minds and bodies. This attention to mind and body clarifies to an extent how choking can occur in contexts as seemingly divergent as sporting events, musical performances, and test anxiety.

³ For example, ‘an expert driver knows by feel and familiarity when an action such as slowing down is required; he knows how to perform the action without calculating and comparing alternatives . . . what must be done, simply is done’ (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1995, p. 5).

Choking Under Pressure as Irrational

Now that we have a clear description of choking under pressure, we can go on to describe how this particular type of self-defeating behaviour can be claimed to be an irrational behaviour. Irrational behaviour typically involves making inferences, holding beliefs, or performing activities that are counterproductive to that individual's goals or aims. Self-defeating behaviours, such as choking under pressure, do involve these misdirected inferences, beliefs and actions.

The irrationality of choking under pressure becomes clear when we outline the thought process of someone involved in a choking situation. One who is about to perform an action in which they are skilled would, if believing and behaving rationally, be able to rely on their own acquired skills to carry them through the performance. Instead, the irrational performer is made self-conscious by some factor, then irrationally begins to pay conscious attention to their activities in a way they have not needed to since they were a novice. The performer believes, falsely, that by paying extra attention to the details of the performance they will be able to improve that performance. They act on this irrational belief, not realizing that if they were able to stop being self-conscious and rely on their acquired skill they would perform quite well. They pay conscious attention to the details of what they are doing, and have an uncharacteristically bad performance. In the attempt to achieve their goal of living up to the high expectation placed upon them, they irrationally infer that to perform well they should pay attention to details of their performance when they actually have the skills and intuitive responses to carry themselves through.

Now that we have established the irrationality of choking under pressure, we can explore the relationship between choking and the current literature on the moral implications of irrational and self-defeating behaviour. One article which I believe has special relevance for choking is Peter Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' (1963). Strawson outlines two types of *reactive attitudes*, which are (1) parts of a continuum of attitudes and intentions which others may hold towards us; and (2) the kinds of attitudes and feelings to which we ourselves are prone (Strawson, 1963, pp. 49–50). One major type of these reactive attitudes are those which are held by offended parties (parties who feel that they have been morally wronged by someone) or those of beneficiaries of good will (Strawson, 1963, p. 56). The type of reactive attitude which sheds the most light on the phenomenon of choking is self-reactive attitudes.⁴ As Strawson describes them, self-reactive attitudes look inward: they are attitudes which are associated with demands on oneself for others. I would assert that Strawson's self-reactive attitudes point to a key aspect of choking behaviour: in cases of choking behaviour, we place excessive demands upon ourselves via an increase or a harshening of self-reactive attitudes.

⁴ As Strawson describes these attitudes:

I have considered from two points of view the demands we make on others and our reactions to their possibly injurious actions. These were the points of view of one whose interest was directly involved (who suffers, say, the injury) and of others whose interest was not directly involved (who do not themselves suffer the injury). Thus I have spoken of personal reactive attitudes in the first connection and of their vicarious analogues in the second. But the picture is not complete unless we consider also the correlates of those attitudes on whom the demands are made, on the part of the agents. Just as there are personal and vicarious reactive attitudes associated with demands on others for oneself and demands on others for others, so there are self-reactive attitudes associated with demands on oneself for others (Strawson, 1963, p. 57).

During an episode of choking under pressure, one becomes excessively self-conscious and so pays excessive attention to the details of what one's performance requires. That excessive self-consciousness must be very much like Strawson's self-reactive attitudes, attitudes which centre on others' opinions and the demands placed upon the individual. In the case of choking under pressure, that individual's skills are ignored due to those reactive attitudes and the individual chokes. Many of the clearest examples of choking give evidence of Strawson's self-reactive attitudes: giving a speech on television (one worries about others' reactions to oneself to an excessive extent); a solo performance on the piano in front of family and friends; and Martina Navratilova's experience in trying to complete the Grand Slam of tennis tournaments (winning the four largest tennis tournaments in the same year) in 1984.⁵

Avoiding Choking Under Pressure

What would the connection between self-reactive attitudes and choking under pressure tell us about how to avoid choking? I would assert that this analysis of choking under pressure, with special attention to Strawson's self-reactive attitudes, shows us something beyond Strawson's own analysis. Self-reactive attitudes, to a point, add to our moral life in that they aid in making moral judgments and really give us a kind of moral conscience without which human life could be considerably more nasty, brutish and short. But, as choking under pressure has shown us, too much self-reaction can be disastrous for what we hope to achieve in life.

Ironically, self-reactive attitudes seem to serve us quite well in day-to-day life. These attitudes play a major role in helping us to judge daily moral situations; but in high-pressure situations self-reactive attitudes do us little good since they seem to cause us to stop relying on the skills we have developed, and instead cause us to revert back to a novice stage in which the details of the performance suddenly seem to demand extra attention. When a situation involves sufficient pressure and therefore sufficient reactive attitudes, we seek the security of attention to detail rather than rely on our own skills and confidence.

Teams Choking Under Pressure

The third reason choking under pressure is an important phenomenon to analyse is the fact that choking is not only an event affecting individuals under pressure, but also whole groups. A prime example of such a group is the 1985 Toronto Blue Jays. The Blue Jays were playing against Kansas City for a regional pennant and a place in the World Series. The series of games was played partly in Kansas City, and partly in Toronto. When the series returned to Toronto, the Jays needed just one more win to secure the pennant and go to the World Series. It should have been easy for the Jays

⁵ Navratilova had won Wimbledon, the U.S. Open and the Australian Open, and was attempting to win the French Open. At first, she played at her usually incredible level of skill and expertise; but during her last match something seemed to change. She had won five games without losing any and was only two points away from winning the match when abruptly, mysteriously, her skill seemed to desert her. She lost a series of points, lost the game, and lost her next game as well. Fortunately she did recover and win, but the brief period of trouble reflects the pressure she was under, and specifically the pressure of millions of peoples' expectations of her. It is probably no accident that the episode occurred just when she was about to win the Grand Slam and enlarge her place in tennis history significantly (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 98).

to win one game at home against a weak opponent, but they seemed to fall apart on the brink of great success. They lost the final two games of the series in embarrassing fashion, making more fielding errors in each of those two games than they had made in the first five games combined (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 76).

Here we have a clear case of a team choking under pressure, rather than specific individuals. Many of the individual players made errors during the last games at Toronto, at different times during the game and despite an apparently sincere desire to win. One possibility for explaining the Blue Jays' loss is what Berglas and Baumeister call the 'home-field disadvantage'. Normally, teams fare better in their home stadiums; but according to research on championship games the home field advantage may disappear and even reverse when a championship or pennant is on the line. The research compiled wins and losses of World Series games from 1926 to 1982. The study found that for the early games in each World Series, the expected home-field advantage was found: home teams won approximately 60 percent of their games. However, in the final game the home field advantage disappeared and home teams lost 60 percent of the time. It appeared that home teams fared worse when a championship was on the line than when they played in earlier games against the same opponent (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 89).⁶

The most telling aspect of this study was the rate of fielding errors: if a shortstop drops a ball in a baseball game, it is not because the batter hit the ball especially well; indeed it is actually nearly impossible to bat in a way that causes fielding errors. It was found that visiting teams did not change their rate of fielding errors from the early games to the final games, but the home teams approximately doubled their rate of fielding errors in the final games (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 89).

Freud and the Sub-agents

The study on home team fielding errors shows a clear case of team choking. I would assert that this example of team choking provides evidence against Freudian and sub-agent models of choking under pressure and self-defeating behaviour.⁷ Freudian and sub-agent models of self-defeating behaviour are founded on a description of the mind as split into particular parts. The interactions of these parts are used to explain how self-defeating behaviour happens: usually the explanation would involve the subconscious 'tricking' the conscious into doing what is irrational or self-defeating, even though the conscious would and should be able to recognize the behaviour as self-defeating if given a fair chance to do so. A more general sub-agents or homuncularist model of the mind would explain irrational behaviour in much the same way. One example of a sub-agents model would be that of David Pears, as argued against in Mark Johnston's article 'Self Deception and the Nature of Mind' (1984). Pears argues that in the case of self-deception, it is possible that one sub-agent deceives

⁶ It is important to note that this particular section of this study, on wins and losses, is not necessarily conclusive; this is because the home teams may not have been choking in the final games, the visiting teams may have been performing at a higher level for the last game.

⁷ It is difficult to argue against utilizing Freud in describing self-defeating behaviour, since the literature itself is full of Freudian terminology. While I do not intend to completely disavow the Freudian terminology or Freud's insights, I do intend to synthesize what insights I take to be of value in Freud with other theorists' work; as will be done in later sections.

another sub-agent (or a 'main system'). Johnston outlines the major tenets behind the subagent model, and argues against it since it is based on a premature response to the paradoxes of self-deception, and a misrepresentation of what actually occurs in a case of self-deception. I would agree with Johnston, particularly because of the problems group self-defeating behaviour present to the sub-agents view. It seems implausible to claim that each member of a choking team has a lying sub-agent at work in their individual mind, which goes about its deception at the same time and place as the lying sub-agents of the others in the team.

Another possible explanation for team choking would be a contagion model, in which the contagious emotions of members of a team would inspire many individuals to choke while the team itself is not properly said to choke. In the next sections, I give an account which I believe is compatible with a description of contagion, although I would not argue that contagious emotions between team members is a necessary condition for choking to occur. In his book *The Irrational Organization*, Nils Brunsson describes the way in which individual members of a group will look at and interpret the same situation differently, and engage in a variety of behaviours in response to the same situation. The point of organizing, according to Brunsson, is to reduce the variety of potential behaviours: 'the existence of the organization ensures that its members will act within certain limits both now and in the future' (Brunsson, 1985, p. 7).

Johnston and Mental Tropisms

Johnston presents an alternative to the sub-agent, or homuncularist view: an unintentionalist view, which holds that self-deception occurs and that to be deceived may be simply to be misled, without at any point being intentionally misled by any sub-agent. Such a view recommends that, rather than conceive of subagents deceiving each other, we should speak in terms of mental tropisms. Mental tropisms are subintentional mental processes, non-accidental yet purpose-serving mental regularities which cause a sequence of events in the mind: for example, 'anxious desire that p, or more generally anxiety concerning p, generates the belief that p' (Johnston, 1988, p. 66).

It would be plausible to present these mental tropisms as an alternative description for what occurs in a case of individual self-defeating behaviour, with minor revision. Going back to our example of an individual performing in front of an audience, that individual may have an 'anxious desire that I succeed at this performance and that everyone think highly of me, or anxiety concerning my success at this performance and that everyone think highly of me; and this anxiety generates the belief that *if I concentrate on the details of this performance* I will succeed here and everyone will think highly of me.' Here we borrow Johnston's notion of a mental tropism and add a contingent statement (if I concentrate on the details . . .) which explains the apparently irrational attention to detail and concern with self-reactive attitudes. Mental tropisms might help to clarify what occurs in a case of individual self-defeat and choking under pressure, but we are still left with the problem of group choking under pressure. In cases such as teams choking, it hardly seems plausible to posit some sort of 'group mental tropism' which occurs at precisely the same situation for all members of the team. But, the notion of contagion or contagious emotions is compatible with my account: all the members of a team may actually inspire one another, through the shared emotions of a team experience, to utilize the same or

similar mental tropisms, and to feel the same concern with self reactive attitudes. This would inspire the many members of a team to choke, as individuals, yet summing up as a case of team choking. Here we can avoid descriptions of the different parts or sub-agents of each team member's mind being tricked at the same time, or descriptions of 'group mental tropisms'.

Others may argue against the tropism account, claiming that choking actually involves an agent who fully realizes that their performance will be marred by self-consciousness, but is unable to turn off that self-consciousness. Such an account may actually be compatible with the revised tropism account given here; one can plausibly describe a case of choking in which a performer decides that concentrating on the details of the performance (instead of self-reactive attitudes) will actually make them less self-conscious. The point here is that such an attempt to avoid self-consciousness by concentrating on the details is mistaken and will usually not succeed, especially in the case of an expert, for whom concentrating on the details will only make the choking more pronounced.

At this point, the other ways in which Freud and psychoanalysis have been used to explain self-defeating behaviour as well as choking deserve to be analysed.⁸ One such deviant view of self-defeat grew out of Freudian analysis, a view which claims that interpersonal pressures rather than a general fear of success is central in cases of self-defeat: 'the notion that interpersonal pressures may motivate self-sabotage' (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 87). The central insight which I believe this deviant view points to is that Strawson's self-reactive attitudes may reflect the pressures one feels from the awareness of interpersonal pressures and in turn are related to self-defeating behaviours like choking under pressure. In other words, even a Freudian argument that self-defeating behaviour can be summed up as a fear of success (and a subconscious fear of the adult responsibilities associated with success) is compatible with and perhaps explained better in terms of the self-reactive attitudes Strawson describes. The very same self-reactive attitudes Strawson describes may be the foundation of the fear of success and adulthood that Freudian psychoanalysis describes: one may simply worry about and internalize others' attitudes to the extent that the additional reactions and evaluations success will bring about are too much to handle. Here is a way in which the self-reactive attitudes of Strawson actually enrich Freudian accounts and are foundational to such accounts.

This combination of Strawson's self-reactive attitudes, Johnston's revised mental tropisms, and the revised Freudian description of interpersonal pressures all issue in the same point about choking under pressure and self-defeating behaviours more generally: such behaviours have everything to do with self-consciousness and concerns about what others will think of one's performance. This also lends further foundation for my prescriptive notion stated earlier: there are times when it is helpful

⁸ One such explanation of choking is that people choke because they fear the possibility of fulfilling a dream or becoming a success. Berglas and Baumeister describe the 'fear of success' explanation as one of the more widely accepted psychoanalytic explanations for self-defeat, although they proceed to explain the phenomena in a radically different way. They note that Freud concluded that 'people occasionally fall ill precisely because a deeply rooted and long-cherished wish has come to fulfillment', and this fulfillment causes a sense of guilt that prevents them from enjoying their success (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, pp. 86–7). Thus Berglas and Baumeister do take the Freudian descriptions of self-defeating behaviour seriously, but feel that it is but one of many accurate descriptions of self-defeating behaviour.

and perhaps necessary to avoid excessive self-reactive attitudes, because such self-reactive attitudes add to the self-consciousness which causes choking under pressure, and may play a role in other varieties of self-defeating behaviour.

Another argument might hold that choking is simply poor performance. It seems that the poor performance account would need to take note of how some poor performances come about for more interesting and complex reasons than others. Lack of preparedness, lack of experience, and lack of aptitude each might result in bad performance, but I hope that in this paper I give a provocative explanation of how an *expert* might give a poor performance. In such cases we do not expect an expert to give a poor performance, and so one must give a more complicated account of the emotions, attitudes and mistaken beliefs that might inspire an experienced professional to give a poor performance. In his book *Motivated Irrationality*, David Pears describes the history of the poor performance or incompetence argument as it applies to irrational behaviour in general, and explains why one might require a more complicated explanation:

Freud overturned a view of reason, common since antiquity, according to which it is a completely independent force. Evidently, it is a force that is stronger in some people than in others, and, when it comes to action, it is less often frustrated in some agents than in others. But the old idea was that there is no interfering with its inner working . . . This view was challenged by Freud, who argued that failure of rationality can often be attributed to a wish and gave the support of a theory to something that was already half accepted by popular wisdom. The result was a new scene in which it struck people as absolutely obvious that failures of rationality, like failures to execute movements in the external world, are produced either wilfully or by incompetence and it was naturally assumed that the two causes are entirely distinct. The case for inserting an intermediate possibility has been developed by cognitive psychologists in the last twenty years. They argue that, even when no wish is operating, a failure of rationality may not be produced by incompetence. For in many cases of this kind the person is perfectly capable of processing the information correctly and even understands the principles governing its correct processing, and yet he goes wrong. A neo-Freudian would have to attribute such errors to bad luck, but the new suggestion is that reason itself has certain bad habits that produce them (Pears, 1984, p. 9).

In the quote above Pears describes the basic incompetence or poor performance explanation, the Freudian 'wish' alternative, and what he calls the intermediate view. The intermediate view argues that some cases of irrational behaviour cannot be explained by a wish or incompetence, but that 'reason' itself may need to be redescribed. In other words, activities that seem to involve a rational thought process may actually involve rather irrational bad habits. I would argue that these irrational bad habits may involve the self-reactive attitudes and mental tropisms previously discussed. Moreover, I would argue that in cases where an expert chokes under pressure, we need to give the type of intermediate account Pears describes, since a true expert would probably not have a wish to fail, be incompetent, or have a bad performance.

The Moral Status of Choking Under Pressure

The point that there are times when having excessive self-reactive attitudes can be dangerous and detrimental to one's success automatically leads to the issue of whether or not one can be held as blameworthy for one's own choking under pressure.

At first the question may seem a bit cold: why would we want to regard someone as morally reprehensible for getting too self-conscious and forgetting to allow their skills to carry them through an important task, and simply reflecting too hard and too long on the details of their performance or activity? Some moral theorists in the history of philosophy have rather distasteful answers to this question. A brief sketch of three such moral theories and their responses to choking under pressure follows.

Kantian moral theory emphasizes the primacy of the rational self, and as such would not even consider seriously the notion of behaving in such irrational ways as choking under pressure. The moral agent, for Kant, is first and foremost a rational agent; an agent who purportedly has a certain level of self-knowledge and a capacity to derive the moral law for itself. Further, Kantian moral theory has a distinct focus on acting from duty. Acting from duty does not leave much room for self-consciousness, especially if we consider the famous example of developing one's talents. As Kant notes in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, as a rational being one necessarily wills that all one's faculties should be developed, inasmuch as they are given to one for all sorts of possible purposes (Kant, 1785, p. 423). The development of talents arguably includes acquisition of and reliance upon skills. It is reasonable to infer that Kant would never want us to be so self-conscious that we could not proceed in the development of our talents, such as playing music before an audience, or winning the World Series with our skills in baseball. In the case of Kantian moral theory, then, it would seem that choking leaves much to be desired, and is clearly morally reprehensible.

Another major school of moral thought, Utilitarianism, claims that we must always do whatever will tend to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, and that one must judge the moral worth of an action on its consequences rather than the intentions behind the action. In the case of choking behaviour, we can imagine cases where someone choking under pressure will individually bring about much good and much pleasure; for example, if Hitler had choked under pressure after the earliest Nazi victories, at a key point in the early stages of World War II, many lives would have been spared at the death camps of the Nazis. Conversely, we can easily imagine a scenario in which a different individual chokes under pressure at a given time and a great amount of sorrow and displeasure results.⁹ These examples illustrate that Utilitarianism provides a view where the choking itself does not come under moral scrutiny, but its consequences do.

A third moral theory comes from Aristotle, who focuses on happiness as actively using reason well. Aristotle describes a character-based moral theory: one should try to become habituated into the right moral character by doing those activities which would be most likely to be performed by one who has a properly developed moral character. Actions have moral worth if they are done in accord with a good moral character. Courage, as well as other virtues, are central aspects of the well-developed moral character: one must have courage to pursue rational activity, and not be over-courageous or too bold, or under-courageous and too affected by fear. Putting this notion of a well-developed moral character together with the idea of using reason well,

⁹ David Letterman's appearance as the host of the Academy Awards in 1995 may count for some as a case of a very successful individual in the entertainment industry choking under the pressure of finally achieving a lifetime goal of hosting the awards as his mentor, Johnny Carson, had many years earlier. His appearance was also a major disappointment to many of his fans; his performance seemed out of sync and not up to his usual standard of wit.

one can reasonably conclude that proper self-knowledge and knowledge of how to achieve one's goals are very important for Aristotle. If we accept the account of choking under pressure as irrational, then for Aristotle one who chokes under pressure is at the very least morally underdeveloped, if not morally accountable for their apparent incontinence. And if one wants to see choking under pressure as rational activity that somehow goes astray, then for Aristotle, one who chokes under pressure also has an underdeveloped moral character in so far as they lack the self-knowledge and the courage to confidently use their skills and achieve their goals. They mistakenly attempt to use their cognitive abilities to concentrate on the details of the task at hand, rather than relying on their properly conditioned moral character and experience of acting in accord with the moral virtues; they do not use reason actively and well.

More recent attempts to clarify the moral implications of self-defeating behaviour have taken insights from all of the moral theorists previously mentioned. One such analysis can be found in Christian Perring's article *Addiction, Self-Defeating Behaviour, and Mental Illness* (1994). Perring holds that self-defeating behaviour, and more specifically addictive behaviour, should be understood primarily as action performed to avoid pain (either physical or psychological), where the addict is unable to take advantage of alternative options. Further, 'the distinction between physical and psychological addiction has no moral significance, and that we should understand addiction as reducing the freedom of the agent primarily to the extent that it causes him or her physical and psychological pain and distress when the addictive action is not performed' (Perring, 1994, p. 2). In terms of the moral status of the agent's actions, Perring notes that 'often if we can associate behaviour with a very particular external cause, we tend to excuse it more' (Perring, 1994, p. 17).

For instance, the psychiatric symptoms of mercury poisoning include xenophobia, anxiety and severe irritability. Even though xenophobia might typically be thought of as morally reprehensible, when we discover a particular xenophobic action to be the result of mercury poisoning, we would tend to forgive it. This reaction of forgiveness occurs because the case of xenophobia would not normally be seen as an autonomous action, it is instead seen as an effect of the mercury. More complicated are cases like genetic predispositions to alcoholism and drug addiction: in those cases, the connection between an external cause and a resulting behaviour is much less clear. However, there still appears to be adequate reason for giving those who are addicted some kind of moral leeway. Perring concludes that when the object of an addiction is the only way a person can alleviate pain and suffering, we should not blame the addict for giving in to her addiction on that occasion, but that we can hold the addict responsible for not seeking better alternatives and seeking treatment to end the addiction (Perring, 1994, p. 19).

This analysis of self-defeating behaviours, and especially addictions, provides insight into the moral implications of choking under pressure. When someone chokes under pressure, one should ask if there is a clear relationship between an external cause and the resulting behaviour, like that in the previous example of mercury-induced xenophobia. As Berglas and Baumeister note, there is evidence to suggest that people can become immune to choking by maintaining a very low level of self-consciousness (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 95). If this is the case, then perhaps choking under pressure should be regarded as at least somewhat worthy of moral scrutiny. An individual episode of choking under pressure would not be

something for which we would want to criticize someone, but we would want to hope that the individual who is afflicted by choking would be willing to either try and reduce their level of self-consciousness, or become more used to dealing with their self-conscious states. Thus it follows from our analysis of choking under pressure that there are two promising ways of dealing with choking under pressure: since choking under pressure results from pressure putting an individual into a highly unfamiliar state of self-awareness or self-consciousness, then one must either reduce their tendency to become self-conscious or learn to deal with self-consciousness in a better way that will not result in choking. If you don't become self-conscious under any or most circumstances, then you are not likely to choke under pressure; and if a self-conscious state is familiar to you then you will not be greatly handicapped by it (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993, p. 97).

As this paper has attempted to show, the type of self-defeating behaviour commonly known as choking under pressure provides important and useful philosophical insights into the area of irrational behaviour. Through a careful analysis of choking under pressure and comparing that phenomenon with others described by Dreyfus, Johnston and Strawson, one can arrive at a richer conception of self-defeating behaviour. Similarly, my description of the irrationality of choking under pressure provides a challenging test for traditional moral theories such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue/character-based moral theories. By outlining the moral implications of similar types of self-defeating behaviour, such as addiction, one can develop a moral groundwork and prescriptive suggestions that enrich our understanding of self-defeating behaviour.

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