The Puzzle of Skilled Behavior

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Introduction to the Puzzle

The Puzzle: Should skilled behavior count as intentional action?

Intentional actions are those behaviors properly attributed to an **agent** (through the agents reasons, purposes, awareness, or control). Skilled behavior is both more and less agent-involving than other behaviors. Some (e.g. Mele & Moser 1994) say that skill should count as intentional action, and that it is even necessary for intentional action. Others say that in so far as skill proceeds without the explicit involvement of the agent, it should not count as intentional action (e.g. Heuer 2014).

The example of "choking"

Someone "chokes" when she is engaged in a skilled behavior but suddenly finds herself unable to continue. While it matters to the agent deeply that she continue, she cannot. That is, the skilled behavior matters more to the agent than other behaviors, but is also less within the agent's direct control than other behaviors.

Attention & Automaticity

What is Skilled Behavior?

While attention is necessary for novice behavior, as one becomes more skilled in a behavior one uses less **attention**, until that behavior is fully **automatic**. At that point attention is no longer required for the performance of that behavior. In other words, skill allows one to simultaneously perform the skilled behavior alongside other behaviors without much cost to either behavior (e.g. Schneider & Chein 2003).

From research on choking with novice and expert golfers: "Whereas novices and the less-proficient performances of experts benefit from online attentional monitoring of step-by-step performance, high-level skill execution is harmed" (Beilock et al. 2002).

Attempts to Solve the Puzzle

*The **Gain** Approach:* "The level of skill that one possesses is in direct proportion to the amount of control that one exerts over the performance of ones own actions" (Fridland 2014)

*The **Loss** Approach:* "A violinist or a surgeon controls the very precise movements of her fingers, but they are intentional only at a general level" (Heuer 2014)

*The **Combined** Approach:* "The control found in skillful action is that by automatizing a host of basic features, the skilled agent opens up behavioral possibilities that were not available before" (Wu 2013)

But the Combined Approach fails to account for the tension between novice and expert control. In Dreyfus' account of skill acquisition, only the second stage fits this approach (when control moves from a more detailed to a more general level); in the fifth stage control is replaced with something new: an "immediate intuitive situational response that is characteristic of expertise" (2002).

A New Solution: A Dual-Systems Approach to Control

The puzzle of skilled behavior calls for us to distinguish two opposing forms of control. These two types of control are both agent-involving, and so both count as contributing to intentional action.

Rational control allows for more flexibility and oversight, which makes us *feel more in control* of the behavior.

Expert control involves tasks that are more familiar to us, allowing us to *feel more ownership* over them.

This solution delivers the requisite tension that we see in the puzzle of skilled behavior while also showing how skilled behavior counts as intentional action.