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Daring to Play Oneself: Gambling, Psychoanalysis and Practical Self-determination

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Abstract: The critical intention of this article does not focus on a comprehensive socio-cultural evaluation of gambling. Rather, its perspective is guided towards ways of picturing gambling and the subject of the gambler in different theoretical contexts. It is argued that one might expand philosophical conceptions of practical self-determination by taking an interdisciplinary look at gambling. However, such an attempt runs into the danger of painting an overly simplistic picture of self-control as self-containment, which can be found in theoretical approaches pathologizing the gambler. In order to avoid such an outcome, an interdisciplinary analogy combining psychoanalytical and philosophical thought is presented. This analogy brings together the perspectives of the analyst and the gambler. By confronting these scenarios of human agency, it is shown that practical self-determination depends on instances of daring that can be related to certain gambling practices, too. The interdisciplinary view on gambling highlights its potentials for self-exploration, without neglecting the fact that an appropriate realization of such a self-exploration requires experiential and interpersonal conditions that often collide with the harsh reality of gambling practices.

Keywords: practical self-determination, personal identity, psychoanalysis, daring, critical methodology, interdisciplinarity

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Introduction and Methodological Remarks

When taking into view contexts and phenomena of play and gambling,² there are several aspects that can be linked to issues concerning human existence on a broader scale. The aim of this paper is to connect the willingness to gamble and the willingness to meet the challenges of practical self-determination as a person.³ The line of argument will join these two perspectives by referring to a representation of *daring*. It follows the hypothesis that daring can be conceptualized as a fundamental attitude of playful openness towards the uncertainties of life. Its value lies in an intensive experience of the oscillation between reflective orientation and self-guidance on the one hand and engaged suspension of this self-guidance on the other. When grasped in the right way, this characterization of daring enables one to take a differentiated look at the willingness to take a risk as a relevant part of human existence. The willingness obtains its relevance from referring to the fragile balance between destructive and

constructive forces of being an individual person in the world. The possibilities of realizing this balance as part of self-determination, however, are seriously put at stake when daring loses its playful character and develops a forced influence on the acting subject. At first glance, gambling represents the end point of such a development: casinos and arcades appear as places where subjects get sucked into a space of futile hopes and forced repetitions.

This paper does not aim to deny the problems of gambling or the socio-economic power structures that are involved in maintaining them. Instead, it will discuss how these problems are not adequately encountered by installing a theoretical perspective, which focusses on pathologizing or condemning gambling and the gambler solely from an abstract point of view. Such accounts fail to question idealized understandings of human capacities, practices and habits. They tend to presuppose conceptions of 'normal' self-control, which then are normatively applied on seemingly 'exotic'

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² This first use of the term gambling necessitates an important clarification: When using it, I mean the mostly American coined institution of contemporary gambling in modern societies. There are interesting accounts of determining cross-cultural conceptions of gambling, which I cannot take into account within the limits of this paper (see Pickles, 2016).

³ In short and with a view to the prefixes of 'self-' used: The argumentation of this paper promotes the view that self-determination relies on regulative and context-sensitive self-guidance instead of fulfilling a fixed and absolute scale of self-control and self-containment.



practices like gambling. Such an approach, which prioritizes abstract ideals of the self towards the concrete manifold of human practices, can be found in philosophical accounts of self-determination, too. However, it is not without alternatives. There are approaches comprehending the human self as always already embedded in a rich field of inner and outer relations. Existentialists combine the appreciation of this relationality with a characterization of human existence being determined by ineluctable tensions between freedom and despair. Since daring and play possess relevant functions in this characterization, the existentialist outlook serves as an orientation in this paper for developing an interdisciplinary perspective on gambling and self-determination. Gambling is explored as a looking glass, under which the complex human relationship with ideals of self-control and self-containment becomes apparent. The goal is to paint a picture including fruitful dimensions *and* destructive aspects of the relation between daring and self-determination. The discussion of gambling shows how both dimensions and aspects can be present in human agency. The argument will take the following form. Firstly, I will present a conception of practical self-determination, which relies on a dialectical handling of the capacities of reason. By questioning rationalistic ideals of self-determination, the idea will be strengthened that the process of determining oneself is not appropriately recognized by installing an ideal of reflective self-containment. Instead, it is more accurately comprehended as an ongoing experience alternating between instances of determining and instances of being determined. This experience enables the agent to acknowledge her self-relation as an open process of change and transformation. This part also explores the idea of self-transformation being essential for self-determination by characterizing its main element as a practice of daring being realized under specific experiential and interpersonal conditions. At the end of this chapter, the philosophical perspective is opened up by building an interdisciplinary bridge between existentialist ideas and psychoanalytic models. This leads to two insights: Firstly, it becomes clear that practical self-determination constitutes itself through scenarios of playfully trying out different dimensions of being oneself. This process involves risky forms of suspending secure and comforting patterns of behaviour, which is why in psychoanalytic practice, the focus lies on a cognitive and affective framing of the analysand and her experience. Secondly, the psychoanalytic setting shows that daring to open up towards new perspectives on oneself depends on feeling secure in a certain environment and being supported by an empathic counterpart.

The idea of playing oneself under secure conditions can be extended to other realizations of human agency and self-determination: play is not only a major part of the human upbringing but also pervades adult forms of agency in actualizations of dreaming or creative

imagination. When it comes to situations determined by specific interpersonal relations, there are also potentials for playing oneself in game scenarios. This is the point where gambling can be taken into view. In order to challenge pathologizing approaches, I will draft an analogy between psychoanalysis and gambling in the second and third part. This analogy brings together the perspectives of the psychoanalytical analysand and the gambler. Its aim is to explore gambling in its potentials to realize the daring being that is essential for practical self-determination. The focus lies on self-comprehension through interplays of body and psyche, experience and reflection on the one hand and interpersonal involvement on the other. Both factors are essential for practical self-determination and crucial in evaluating practices of gambling. Together, they reveal that self-guidance has an ambivalent structure, showing itself in some instances of the gambler's perspective. This ambivalence has a lot to do with daring as experience of living through the fragility of the self and its proneness to inner and outer conditions. However, the analogy has its limits: Gambling is not the same as psychoanalytic practice. It can lead to illness and loss. The loss of self-control, however, can be seen in a more diverse light by parallelizing the perspectives of the analysand and the gambler. Taking their similarities into view delivers a unique view on the fact that suspension of control can be actualized in productive daring under certain circumstances and in certain environments.

The concluding part addresses the more general question, to what use a philosophical perspective can be put when it comes to gambling. I will argue for the view that philosophy should use its interdisciplinary potential to provide a differentiated perspective on what one can learn about the dynamics of practical self-determination by taking a look at gambling *and* its evaluation. In order to strengthen this approach, I will argue and demonstrate that it is possible to combine insights from philosophy, psychoanalysis and anthropology when it comes to relating self-determination and gambling. In the end, an interdisciplinary perspective delivers the insight that gambling can be viewed as a unique mirror of the human ambivalence towards the loss of control, the contingency of life and the dependence on others.

The Fragile Balances of Practical Self-determination

When it comes to philosophical accounts of human agency, there is a tradition of identifying its overall goal with becoming an autonomous and free person, which involves the idea of practical self-determination. This tradition is mainly based on the hypothesis that human beings obtain capacities and skills that enable them to act according to their goals and wishes, so that they are able to realize a conscious self-relation (Davidson, 2001). This way of capturing agency can take a strongly normative route: to realize practical self-determination, actions have to fulfil certain conditions, on which

agents can fail. When it comes to systematizing these conditions, the focus over the course of the development of modern philosophy shifted from identifying certain actions – preferably ones of moral and ethical worth – as being central for being a self-determined and therefore autonomous person to specifying certain *formal* features of agency as a guarantee for securing a proper self-relation. In the history of philosophy, there has been a strong emphasis on linking these features with reference to the human capacities of reason. One of the founding fathers surely is Immanuel Kant who rediscovered the term self-determination for modern times (Kant, 1785/2012). Today, this approach can be found in analytic Kantian philosophers in general (Lovibond, 2004; Velleman, 2009) and for example in Christine Korsgaard’s position in particular (Korsgaard, 2009). According to her view, the universal end of all human agency is practical, rational self-determination and it is fully realized by stepping back and reflectively gaining control over one’s practical conduct. Human agents are able to practically grasp themselves as individual persons when they take a practical standpoint towards their behavioural activities and “pull themselves together” (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 214) in order to successfully perform an act of self-guidance and self-control.

Despite containing mainly formal conditions, such a model sets the bar high for practical self-determination and agency. In order to constitute herself, an agent has to exercise rationality understood as self-controlled reasoning from a neutral standpoint of reflective distance. Moreover, Korsgaard argues for an ethically and morally rich conception of self-determination: Only a constant exercise of reflexive reasoning enables the agent to grasp herself as person with an evaluation system and a potentially valuable way of living. Only rational agency, which fulfils said conditions, leads to being a person and living a good life.

There are of course other ways of framing the self-determining potentials of human agency. Some focus on counterparts of reason in the spirit of David Hume’s rehabilitation of the passions (Hume, 1739/1975),⁴ others question the possibilities of self-determination under modern circumstances like the critical theorists of the *Frankfurt School* (Jepsen, 2012). The main aim here, however, is not to discuss tensions between different lines of thought in philosophy. Instead, the goal is to defend the approach that a philosophical conception of practical self-determination as the normative goal of human agency should take a turn that takes into account the comprehensive reality of this agency and its concrete experience as self-determining process. According to my view, the lifelong process of becoming oneself as an individual person cannot be determined by simply identifying moments of rational control or the

passionate loss of it and putting them together to form a chain of actions.

In order to gain an appropriate picture of practical self-determination, one has to acknowledge the procedural execution of individual acting practice through a personal perspective. As Bernard Williams (1985, pp. 76-77) stresses, truthful self-understanding can only be lived and evaluated *from within* the perspective of the agent, saturated with experience and its phenomenal qualities. But why exactly should such an account be preferred? To answer this question, one has to concretize the idea of becoming and creating oneself in agency. This can be done with the help of two factors that are going to be linked to the acting context of gambling later: the factor of lived through transformation or unexpected change in self-understanding and the factor of being determined by social or interpersonal dynamics of appreciation. Both factors contribute to a picture of practical self-determination not as a hypothetical mass of isolated moments of reflection but as a lifelong process of establishing a balance between seemingly rational self-control and seemingly irrational self-delimitation. In this line of thought, to establish a truthful connection with oneself means to appreciate an attitude of openness towards the fact that self-determination always also entails dimensions of uncertainty and underdeterminedness. It also means to appreciate the idea that there is a unique value in letting go the claim of a distanced overview. Besides Williams, Martin Seel (2002) also combines this idea with a self-critical look on philosophy. Both of them characterize the philosophical outlook as perspective with a strong tendency to idealize rational fixations and distanced reflection. This tendency gains concrete form for example in the problem of philosophical approaches to grasp phenomena like practical irrationality without explaining them away or condemning them in an ethical or moral way.

The remaining part of this paper will follow the methodological direction of these authors, but with a certain twist, which in turn comes with a significant extension: The aim is to concretize the open attitude as practical readiness to dare, to take an existential risk or gamble. This includes both an object-related and a methodological step. Concerning the first, grasping the openness as an attitude of risk and daring also means to take a look at the material conditions of realizing it: What does it mean to put oneself, as a human being with body and psyche at stake? What kind of experiential qualities and affective states are linked to it? These questions refer to the fact that most of the philosophers mentioned tend to stay within a rather abstract picture of self-determining scenarios. The methodological step opposes the tendency of philosophical perspectives to rationalize by confronting

⁴This philosophical tradition can be linked to psychoanalysis, too. Hume’s rehabilitation of the passions finds a conceptual response in George Klein’s theory of the “vital pleasures” (Klein, 1976).

it with perspectives and scenarios that tend to resist clear-cut conceptualization and evaluation when it comes to characterizing human agency and self-determination as act of distanced reflection. The starting point for both of these steps is another philosophical point of view: the existentialist tradition. Its pioneers and representatives like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus focus on human existence being determined by ongoing struggles, the absence of secure norms of reason and morality and a radical coercion of subjective freedom (Aho, 2020). In this line of thought, the following aspects are especially important for my argumentation: These authors emphasize the role of existential 'moods' suddenly occurring in human lives (Aho, 2020, p. 86). These experiences permeate body and psyche of the individuals and shake them from the routines of their everyday selves. The moods can be determined not only as suitable fundament for the idea of practical self-determination realized in scenarios of unforeseen self-transformations. They can also be connected with certain ways of characterizing experiences of gambling. I will return to this parallel later. For now, it is important that this existentialist illustration of the fragile nature of human perspectives and selves also involves daring as a fundamental part of human agency. This idea is developed especially by Simone de Beauvoir in her conception of subjectivity (de Beauvoir, 2004). She emphasizes that to act means to take existential risks since humans are underdetermined and do not have the opportunity to take control over their lives (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 139).

At this point it becomes clear what the other philosophical traditions miss: It is not enough to simply state that humans are determined. Actualizing her unique joining of philosophical clarity and literary concreteness, de Beauvoir conveys how all we can hope for in realizing ourselves is a "situated freedom" (2004, p. 85). We have to physically and psychologically work through and accept the fact that we need others and certain circumstances to transcend our contingent facticity. This is not a one-time thing: We have to risk our unstable self again and again by interacting and planning with others without being able to control their agency. The success of this practice, in turn, depends on how we experience the interaction with the other. Whether and how our facticity is transcended with the help of others is not a matter of abstract planning but of how the interaction is cognitively and affectively realized and experienced. The risk of agency is only comprehended in the full sense when one goes along with how near and far the agent is to someone, how the other feels freed or intimidated by him or her. In order to acknowledge this dependency of becoming oneself in agency on fragile interactions with others, one has to

take both the psychological and the physical aspects of subjective experience and intersubjective contact into account. An existentialist thinker who acknowledges this point thoroughly is Maurice Merleau-Ponty: He develops theories of perception and human interaction that truly acknowledge the fact that we are not only connected with other subjects but are always already touching them and even overlapping with them. Our physical experience that provides the fundament for our self-understanding and limits it at the same time is determined by what other subjects do with their body and psyche (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 1968).

These existentialist insights enrich the idea of daring being crucial for practical self-determination: They make it clear that this process has to be comprehended not in the form of an abstract decision but as a way to put oneself at stake as a physical being, rendering oneself vulnerable not only by doing something but at the same time by exposing one's feelings in an environment and space already shared with others, their experiences and feelings. In order to get all of these qualities and fragilities into view, a philosophical perspective has to move from the abstract space of reasons towards concrete scenarios taken as intensive illustrations that are able to convey the complex interplays of inner and outer conditionalities.

A contemporary example of how this can be done is provided by Jonathan Lear. In his approach towards becoming oneself, he integrates the qualities of experiencing self-transformative processes by taking exemplary scenarios into view. Here, daring takes form not only in thoughts, decisions and actions but in the sound of a cracking voice or the density of interactions full of affective tensions that let the space between the subjects appear like a fighting arena (Lear, 2011, p. 61). This leads me to the next part of this paper, since the reason why Lear is able to combine abstract theories and concrete experiences also lies in his second profession as a psychoanalyst. Hence, the reference to existentialist ideas opens up the philosophical perspective towards other disciplinary connections – by highlighting the relationality of human existence as an interdisciplinary intersection point.⁵

Conditions for Transcending Control – From Psychoanalysis to Gambling

There are several reasons why psychoanalysis is introduced at this point of my argument. It links abstract conceptualization to concrete acting-scenarios. Moreover, psychoanalysis commits itself to appreciate the irrational dynamics of human agency while at the same time having a comprehensive ideal of self-understanding (Gardner, 1993). Based on a unique interplay of theory, technique and practice, it establishes a self-reflective perspective on practical self-

⁵Interestingly, this connection is possible despite many existentialists being vivid opponents to psychoanalysis (Aho, 2020, pp. 15-16.) According to my opinion, this has very much to do with existentialism having a problem mainly with the traditional Freudian psychoanalysis and its tendency to paint a strictly scientific picture of human relations. Since my argument refers to more current developments in psychoanalytical research, these problems fade into the background.

determination (Warsitz & Küchenhoff, 2015). According to psychoanalytical thought, to understand oneself in one's unique form of being and becoming an individual person relies on daring to question oneself. This questioning is not actualized in reflection alone but in experiences of letting oneself go and suspend one's self-containment under certain circumstances. These circumstances are directly linked to the perspective from which self-determination is theoretically grasped: In psychoanalytic practice, the analyst provides a context in which the analysand is able to confront herself with unknown aspects and dimensions of her self. She is supported by the intersubjective relationship with the analyst that guards her from her fears of losing control.

Psychoanalytical practice shows how it is possible to think about self-determination as a concept whose conditions have to be worked out in concrete situations of intersubjective understanding so that the phenomenon itself can be evaluated in its truthfulness and sincerity. Especially modern psychoanalysis roots this line of thought in the fact that human self-relations are determined and permeated by the relationships the individual has experienced (Fonagy et al., 2004). Against this background, practical self-determination has to be understood as a practice of balancing a need for interpersonal appreciation and a need for independent self-assertion (Honneth, 2000). The psychoanalytical setting does not claim to help the analysand to gain back definitive self-containment but to establish a space where she does not have to fear interpersonal disappointment or other negative consequences for not having herself under control. The goal lies in promoting an attitude of serenity towards the unpredictable or opaque conditions of being and becoming oneself.

This dynamic perspective on self-determination roots in both pessimistic and optimistic beliefs about human existence: On the one hand, psychoanalysis regards human agents as beings determined by their vulnerability. On the other hand, it recognizes the creative powers of the human mind and soul (Lear, 2017). This point leads to the second main part of this paper: Like some philosophical accounts (Cremonini, 2012), psychoanalysis regards play as a central part of human development and thriving – subsumed in Johan Huizinga's concept of "homo ludens" (Huizinga, 1938/2011). Psychoanalysts like Donald Winnicott emphasize the point that the world-building powers of the human psyche can be traced back to the creative powers of phantasy and their realization in imaginative play that stems from early childhood (Winnicott, 1969). This power is linked to practical self-determination, too: In psychoanalysis, play and self-determination find together under the directive of trying something and trying to dare something or even oneself. This form of playful self-testing happens, first for its own sake and under protected interpersonal conditions.

With regard to the considerations in the previous section, it is important here to emphasize the role of how this situation is affectively experienced especially on the physical level. On the one hand, psychoanalysis is based on the understanding that self-determination and self-transformation can only be reached by sincerely working through affective mindsets and histories. This understanding commits the analyst to establish a space where the analysand feels safe and cared for. On the other hand, this also means that the analysand has a space where she can safely allow dimensions of herself that need to be tried and acted out to come up. In this process, her body plays a main role – as instrument of resonance, expression and enactment. Combined, these conditions direct psychoanalysis to take affective experiences and their physical conditions very seriously. This, in turn, hints towards another parallel of psychoanalysis and existentialism: Both not only claim to acknowledge the experiential dimension of determining oneself but also take into account that this determination relies on certain interpersonal conditions referring to a space of overlapping physical relations. In both psychoanalysis and existentialism, conceptualizations of intercorporeality (German: 'Zwischenleiblichkeit') can be found (Scharff, 2020). In psychoanalysis, self-transformation relies on playfully daring to try and test oneself through physical expressions and experiences. By doing this, one puts oneself on display, which is buffered by the analyst providing a space of being mutually interrelated where the analysand is being held without her boundaries being violated.

At this point, the aim is to parallelize the idea of self-determination through playful daring with perspectives of gambling in order to take a look at the potential of this picture outside the unique situation of the psychoanalytical setting. On first glance, this might appear as a peculiar move, since gambling is not the typical form of purposeless play. Instead, it is sometimes characterized as its darker, irrational counterpart (Fletcher, 2003). This strategy, however, tends to be a part of discussions that moralize and pathologize the context of gambling. My aim is not to join in this tendency due to two reasons: Firstly, it entertains a distanced point of view. Secondly, it blurs the fact that gambling and play definitely share certain capacities.

Hence, I do not plan to pathologize gambling and gamblers with the help of psychoanalytic frameworks. As a philosopher, my goal is rather to bring together perspectives of psychoanalysis and gambling studies in order to illuminate the conditions of practical self-determination and to look for an appropriate way of evaluating its realizations in common human practices. The aim is to establish a balance between the disciplines and phenomena without introducing a strong kind of hierarchy in theoretical perspectives or in types of agency. It is powered by a theoretical intuition: that the linking of psychoanalytical and gambling perspectives shows how practical self-determination comes with

risks that cannot be avoided because they constitute the seriousness of the matter. Becoming a person involves an existential dare that everything will go as planned as well as the willingness to accept the reality that everything will continue differently than planned. This combination determines human agents in a unique way. The perspectives of psychoanalytical analysands and gamblers share some major aspects when it comes to this situation of daring: They combine a playful practice of dealing with contingency with the threat of existential and unforeseen change of one's most personal constitution in body and psyche. Hence, their shared observation throws a different light on self-control: Self-determination relies on being able to suspend self-containment without getting lost in this suspension. The risks of such a limitless loss, however, still have to be made clear. This task is faced by exploring the circumstances of gambling in the next part. The perspective of the gambler is faced with a main condition of the analysand's experience of playful daring leading to transformative self-determination. It depends on a concrete spatiotemporal constellation, interpersonal company and interrelatedness. In the concluding part, I will argue for the general hypothesis that this amalgamation of psychoanalysis and gambling contributes to a philosophy of gambling: It not only connects gambling to agency and self-determination but the theoretical exploration of gambling to other ways of thinking about agency and self-determination, too.

Gambling as Trial for Practical Self-determination

Before moving on in the argument, it is necessary to make some introductory remarks about the general nature of gambling. These remarks concern two factors: the activity of gambling and the perspective of the gambler. Since the aim is not to explore historical or socio-cultural causes of gambling, I will not try to give a comprehensive picture of gambling and gamblers as such. Instead, some selected features will be highlighted by referring to anthropological definitions of the phenomenon: Gambling constitutes a form of mostly collective and institutionalized activity, which involves subjects "committing valuable items to an event or series" (Pickles, 2016). In other words, they place material bets in order to gain a win from it. This activity has a broad variety of realizations reaching from traditional poker games, over race bets and complicated casino games to slot machines. Gambling has a very strong connection to play and games (Smith & Abt, 2012). As already mentioned, it sometimes is characterized as an adult version of children's play.⁶ However, according to my view, one should not stop at simply stating such an analogy: Apart from the fact that children also gamble (Puzo, 1977), such a view runs into

danger of oversimplifying the complex relation between play and gambling.

At first glance, there seems to be two major differences: Firstly, gambling involves serious bets and stakes with the potential to give rise to existential consequences. Secondly, gambling involves a very particular combination of competence or skill and contingency; gambling activities do not reward effort and training the same way as most games, since they mainly rely on probability and luck (Abt & Smith, 2012, pp. 125, 129, 132). These differences, however, do not change the fact that referring to play is a major part of understanding gambling as a unique form of human agency: Gambling unites a playful context with a situation of serious daring.⁷ This feature has the potential to shape the gambling subject. Thomas Holtgraves argues for the view that gambling promotes character-development, since it challenges the ways in which an individual agent handles the contingency and injustice of win and loss (Holtgraves, 1988). This character-building, in turn, depends on the social collective, in which the gambling takes place. Holtgraves talks about "self-presentation" but these processes can be characterized as aspects of self-determination, too.

Up to this point, gambling has been connected mainly to the following characteristics: It is a form of agency that involves serious daring, represents a certain version of play, puts the individual character of the agent under test and depends on a certain kind of company. All of these points can be linked to another property of gambling, which is highlighted by Mario Wenning (2017): temporality and timing. Gambling is able to confront its gambler with a unique feature of her human existence by installing a specific kind of temporality – time comes to a halt, when everything is set and luck takes place (Wenning, 2017, p. 92).

These characteristics in turn can be linked to the psychoanalytical practice in general and the perspective of transformative self-determination of the analysand in particular. In gambling, the agent is confronted with "fortuna" (Wenning, 2017, p. 83), the unpredictability of life in general and her own way of living it in particular. This confrontation opens up the possibility to experience both the fight with the loss of control and the importance of accepting it, and even the possibility of gaining some valuable insights into one's own character reacting to this wish to have control. The gambler can actively and sensually play with her self-presentation as winner or loser, but at the same time, she has to deal with an imbalance of effort or competence and the results that she cannot control but can interpret as fate or destiny. Both aspects of her situation are caught in a unique form of temporality, which itself cannot be controlled but only lived through. This unique temporal experience has

⁶ From a psychoanalytical standpoint, this statement is not quite right: According to its frameworks, children's play is transferred to dreaming in adulthood.

⁷ Furthermore, gambling and play share another main aspect of human existence: the joy of competition.

similarities with the experience of *moods* the existentialist thinkers present as fundamental modes of human existence and change of life practices: These are realized as unique affective shifts from the everyday experience of oneself as a steady being towards a sudden realization of one's own volatility and contingency (Aho, 2020, p. 87). These *moods* come with the experience of being cut off from the regular spatiotemporal embedding in the world and finding oneself in a certain atmosphere that first of all and mainly is felt in a physical way. They entail constructive and destructive powers, opening up opportunities to be shaken from self-deceptions and leaving the subject prone to inner and outer forces. Such a state and experience can be ascribed to the gambler, too, however it depends on certain circumstances whether it has potentials for authentic self-determination, to which I will come back in a moment.

These characteristics can also be found in psychoanalytical scenarios of self-determination: Time comes to a halt when the analysand dares to experience both self-guidance and its loss, to suspend her fixation on self-control and enters into a realm between play and reality, as-if and serious consequences. In this moment and setting, it is possible to encounter oneself through seemingly irrational acts and transform one's own understanding of self-determination. Lear takes the view that such moments are found in everyday life too, but have a special appearance in psychoanalysis. He highlights the fact that this procedure cannot be grasped as a moment of distanced reflection but has to be appreciated as experience with unique qualities of intensity and awe (Lear, 2011). According to my view, both psychoanalysis and gambling offer perspectives, in which this tension of practical self-determination becomes apparent in its specific qualities of experience: Analysands and gamblers encounter themselves in unforeseen ways that may even appear as being haunted by hidden or unpleasant aspects of one's self. Such encounters are important for an openminded and truthful self-understanding. However, since they require breaking planned and reflective agency, they depend on perspectives of risk-taking and daring as important features. They are able to establish a momentary balance between determination or orientation and contingency. In this picture, practical self-determination takes place *between* guiding one's character and person and being determined by past realizations of this guidance. The determination by the past is experienced as "causality of fate" (Habermas, 1994, p. 330). The wandering between extremes of determination and being determined is present and experienced in its unique qualities in the perspective of the gambler, who is free and unfree, in control and lost, and inhabiting a standpoint of deliberated action and anxious thrill at the same time.

The level on which this interplay of control and its loss is realized can be named as some form of rehearsed agency: Both in psychoanalytical and gambling

perspectives, agents try to expose themselves to the uncertainties of becoming a person in real life. In some sense, the circumstances are sheltered in both cases, as analysands and gamblers can in principle willingly face the boundaries of self-control and active self-determination without being necessarily consumed by it. However, the limits of the analogy between psychoanalysis and gambling come into view at this point, too. Firstly, the parallel of inducing rehearsed agency is limited. While on a very basic level, both analysands and gamblers have the freedom to try themselves out, a closer look reveals that the analysand tries to test her inner world while the gambler plays with the outer world. One can also say that while the analysand learns to identify her tendencies to act out her wishes and fears, the gambler acts them out and realizes her gambling activity as some kind of sublimation. If this is the case, however, another potential of gambling is actualized, which leads to the second limit of the analogy: Gambling does not have an inherent commitment to well-being and thriving like psychoanalysis. Especially with regard to its economic foundations, gambling tends to promote addiction and compulsion instead. This, however does not have to be the case: The gambler's perspective can involve the right kind of free daring and playing oneself. This, in turn, also depends on another parallel with the analysand's perspective, which leads back to the analogy. Its practical realization depends on the right interpersonal context and environment – one of the reasons why psychoanalytical practice cannot be replaced by a casual talk with friends. However, psychoanalysis relies on a very specific counterpart: the analyst and her guidance in the psychoanalytical conversation. In gambling, the other subjects do not play the same role. If at all, they seem to constitute an adverse or even hostile environment of competition, against which the gambler has to stand up.

This first characterization is one-sided, though, which I would like to clarify by taking a closer look at the limits of interpersonality in gambling: In her groundbreaking book *Addiction by Design*, Natasha Dow Schüll (2014) presents a painfully accurate analysis of the machine gambling industry of Las Vegas. In this context, no fruitful daring and trying is found, only compulsion and despair. The reasons for these circumstances are the following: Dow Schüll's analysis focuses on the fact that machine gambling is constructed so that gamblers are caught in an externally determined relation to the machine. They enter the "zone" where self-guidance is given up and lost for the vague promise to escape the hardships of everyday life. Here, it becomes apparent what happens when the fragile balance between determination and being determined is lost. Gambling has the potential to provide an exercise of practical self-determination by mirroring its main dynamics. It is able to actualize a fragile balance between the constructive and destructive dimensions of existential daring by changing between playful thrills and threatening

contingency. When the *zone* takes control, however, there is no balance and gamblers lose themselves under the disguise of entertainment.

This is an interesting point because the failure to actualize potentials of self-determination is bound to interpersonal circumstances and a certain environment: Analogous to psychoanalysis, the potential of daring in gambling depends on social and situational conditions. Gambling tables are not therapy couches and the perspective of the gambler is not focussed and determined on another human being like the perspective of the analysand and its focus on the analyst. However, Dow Schüll's analysis points to the possibility that the capacities of the gambler's perspective to experience self-determination depends on the interaction with real or virtual companions. Daring to play oneself does not mean to surrender to external forces but to find ways to play with them and to identify them in their most common manifestation: the determination by oneself and other human beings. This manifestation of determining forces has a productive dimension for the agent; it represents *both* dependence and appreciation as individual. However, the combination is not possible when the gambler is confronted only with machines being programmed to deceive her. What is needed is a coming together of agents having the same starting conditions. Fitting examples or even role models might be found in friends playing poker or groups collectively playing the lottery and sharing experiences of the fleeing nature of winning and losing as well as of hopes, thrills and suspense. The crucial point here lies in the level of concrete experience and its affective effects of balancing the ominous and playful qualities of daring with the feeling of not being alone. This becomes even more apparent when one takes into account what Dow Schüll says about the material environment that is installed in order to get the machine gamblers into the *zone* (Dow Schüll, 2014, pp. 39f.). On the architectural and design level, everything is done to build a seemingly sheltered space that corresponds with bringing the gambler on the unique, somehow otherworldly temporal level of experiencing the game. One might think that the installation of nooks with dimmed light and sound in the casinos that Dow Schüll discusses provides a space where the gambler feels safe on a physical level. One might compare this to the modern trend of "cocooning" for example. However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that this security tends to be corrupted: The installation of spatial and temporal security is designed to control the gamblers and their affective relation to the game in order to capitalize on it (Dow Schüll, 2014, pp. 49f.). It does not focus on opening space for gambling subjects to find an individual balance between daring and determination.

It provides an instrumental security by shutting off the gamblers from the gaze of other subjects. They do not sit around a table, trying to read each other's eyes while maintaining a poker face – which could be a playful practice of exploring overlapping physical territories. They are kept fixated on a display. Instead of being acknowledged and related to on an interpersonal level, the gambler is caught in a dimension where the balance between control and its suspension is lost, while this loss is hidden behind soft carpets and ambient lights.⁸ The gambler's experience relies on deception, which is crucial in a negative way since self-determination is bound to sincerity. A further point of interest about Dow Schüll's approach concerns the fact that she analyses and criticizes the way industry representatives and especially certain researchers *talk* about gambling: They often fail to problematize the strategy of economic monopolies seeking to maximize earning money from the affective investment of gamblers. Instead, the ambivalent status of gambling practices is explained by focussing on the problematic character of the gambler and her pathological tendencies (Dow Schüll, 2014, pp. 275f., 290f.). A hypothesis which also can be found in other texts seems to refer to the idea that these tendencies have something to do with a lack of self-control. Some theorists like David Fletcher even defend the view that gambling is some kind of dangerous activity in that it triggers a general human tendency to lose self-control (Fletcher, 2003). In this context, the perspective of the gambler sometimes appears like a spectre for normal human beings – the gambler gets stigmatized.

I join Dow Schüll's approach in encountering this line of thought in the following way: Pathologizing, demonizing or even romanticizing the perspective of the gambler fails in two important regards. Firstly, it stigmatizes gambling subjects in blaming them for everything wrong about gambling while neglecting socio-economic conditions and responsibilities at the same time. Secondly, by ascribing fixed conceptions of self-control and other human capacities to the phenomenon in question, it tends to ignore the possibility that gambling can highlight ambivalent features of seemingly 'normal' human agency and self-determination. At this point, there is another possible analogy that should be drawn – both psychoanalysis and gambling are often confronted with the presumption that only pathological or sick individuals engage in them. This ascription is fruitless as far as it presupposes a fixed understanding of normality and pathology that cannot be questioned or challenged. Such understandings, however, presuppose a serious and open confrontation with said phenomena. When it comes to self-determination and its conditions, this also means to take these forms of human agency seriously in

⁸ This does not mean, however, that material environments cannot play any constructive role for experiences of self-determination, daring and self-transformation. There is not enough room in this paper to explore this thought to a greater extent, but for the sake of the interdisciplinary focus of my argument, I want to highlight the fact that there are psychoanalytical approaches that focus on the role of material objects and environments for self-understanding, too. See (Searles, 1960).

challenging common conceptions of the relevance of self-containment and self-control. The interdisciplinary look at the gambler's perspective shows how self-determination does not only involve playing with one's self-understanding but jeopardizing securities and even getting entertained by it – assuming the environmental and interpersonal circumstances are right.

Some Implications for a Philosophy of Gambling

This paper is shaped by the theoretical intuition that a philosophy of gambling should not start with the question of whether gambling is a valuable human practice or not. This does not mean that it cannot include strong normative principles and evaluations. Nevertheless, in my view, philosophy is well-advised to step back from an immediate evaluation and recollect its own critical and methodological capacities that involve questioning common conceptions, definitions and terms of human practices and self-understandings on a more general level. This specifically includes its own disciplinary self-understanding as well as those of other scientific disciplines. In some studies of gambling, the phenomenon tends to get explored and conceptualized under a fixed conceptual frame: Gambling irritates otherwise stable human capacities of orientation and control, therefore it should be handled with caution. Terms like self-control and pathology play a main role in this context. Such an approach should raise some critical questions especially since it may come with serious ethical or moral evaluations about gambling preventing a valuable way of life and about gamblers' failure to fit the mold of a 'normal' since self-controlled person.

Instead of adding its voice to this chorus or trying to counter it by romanticizing gambling and the gambler, a philosophy of gambling should try to take a critical glance on the theoretical practice of simply incorporating such a unique phenomenon into existing understandings. The first question should not be whether gambling meets the conditions for self-control. Instead one should ask if the conceptualization of self-control as a major point of self-determination is appropriate to understand the potentials of the diversity of human agency illuminated in practices like gambling. At this point, Dow Schüll's methodological approach provides an orientation for aspects and attitudes that are crucial for such an endeavour: Putting her anthropological point of view into a very unique use, she does not simply quantify her research object – gamblers – with the help of fixed categories of evaluation. Instead, she focuses on qualitative research and engages with her interview partners and their stories in order to draw an extensive picture of how gambling is practiced. In doing this, her approach is similar to psychoanalytical methods: Both of them aim to take the actual experiences of subjects into account in order to develop an understanding of human practices, agency and self-determination that integrates their ambivalences, ambiguities and

balances into an engaged theoretical point of view. Here, sincerity unfolds as a norm not only of self-determination but of the methodological perspective, too. They also share a practice of empirical research, an institutionalized activity philosophy, as such, is not part of. However, this paper aimed to demonstrate that philosophy can relate to other disciplines in order to establish an account open to conceptual analysis as well as the diversity of acting practices and open to truthful references to the actual subjects determined by taking their perspectives seriously. Phenomena like gambling seem to hide on the brink of agency at first. On further inspection, they reveal the human ambivalence towards control, contingency and dependency on others in a unique way by referring to concepts like fate, luck, irrationality or destiny, which themselves tend to escape theoretical reflection. However, these nevertheless name phenomena that can be experienced as comprehensive qualities of a personal agency leading to an encounter with oneself. By opening up towards interdisciplinary lines of thought, philosophy can avoid neglecting the potentials of these phenomena.

Against this background, it is reasonable to draw one preliminary evaluative conclusion: Gambling as such, like other forms of agency, is not good or bad, but entails a potential to open up perspectives on the self-determination potentials of daring. From the perspective of the gambler, the actualization of this potential depends on interpersonal relations and a sincere environment. From the perspective of theoretical exploration, an appropriate theory of these actualizations depends on a self-critical analysis of fixed conceptions and ideals as well as an open attitude towards their diversity. This paper explored such an analysis with the help of interdisciplinary perspectives. Following the spirit of openness, these considerations might be developed further in a critical sense that refers to the spirit of the *Frankfurt School* of critical theory: Gambling, as well as human agency as such, has to be discussed as phenomenon and as symptom of societies. A philosophy of gambling questioning conceptual frameworks being focused on pathological structures and seemingly fixed ideals of self-containment leads to the question whether they reproduce a blindness towards societal powers and responsibilities. This view limits an open and critical discussion of self-determination, a term which originally promises the realization of freedom and autonomy. Such a limitation takes place whenever theoretical frameworks confuse freedom with an idealized picture of self-control.

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