Coping: A Philosophical Exploration

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Abstract

Coping is customarily understood as those thoughts and actions humans adopt while undergoing situations appraised as threatening and stressful, or when people's sense of who they are and what they should do is significantly challenged. In these cases, coping thoughts and actions help one endure and hopefully overcome these stresses, threats, and/or challenges. Discussions of coping are common among psychologists, but nearly absent from the philosophical literature despite their importance in theories of agency and for closely related concepts like resilience. Building from psychological theories of coping, I offer a first philosophical exploration of the concept by showing how it can relate to and enrich extant work on agency and resilience and contribute to a more nuanced account of agency itself, especially as exercised in less-than-ideal conditions.

Keywords: Coping, Agency, Resilience, Stress, Trauma, Normative assessment.

1. Introduction

In common parlance, to cope means "to manage, deal (competently) with, a situation or problem" (Oxford English Dictionary). More technically, psychologists understand coping as the ways individuals deal with *stress* (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004), where stress is defined as "a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes that are directed either toward altering the stressful event or accommodating to its effects" (Taylor 2015: 113).[1] Situations prompting coping might range from the mundane—as when navigating the normally stressful periods of our lives, such as the transition from childhood to adolescence, or common challenges of adulthood (conflict in partnership, parenting, work/job)—to increasingly more exceptional circumstances, such as the loss of a loved one, acquiring a severe illness (acute or chronic), facing mental health issues, or enduring abusive or discriminatory environments (sexual harassment, toxic workplaces, or more

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[1] The notion of coping under investigation here is restricted to Western societies. This restriction is methodologically important in that it circumscribes the scope of the investigation and acknowledges the possibility of there being diverse norms and interpretations of coping behaviors beyond these geographic and cultural boundaries.

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systematic forms of social injustice or oppression). Coping might involve dealing with traumatic or stressful circumstances individually, but it can also occur in communities or groups, such as in response to natural disasters, during a pandemic, or in the aftermath of wars or forced migration.[2]

Discussions of coping are common among psychologists, but nearly absent from the philosophical literature despite their importance in theories of agency and for closely related concepts like resilience. This paper outlines a place for coping within the philosophy of action in the hopes that doing so will not only enrich closely related concepts, but also help inform further research on the thus far undiscussed ethical implications that a close analysis of coping brings to the fore. I start by introducing the concept of coping as it is characterized within existing psychological theories. I then proceed to make a case for a philosophical exploration of coping by showing how it can relate to and enrich extant work on agency and resilience. I propose a philosophical characterization of coping and outline a way to determine the agential boundaries of the coping process. In the last section I address the issue of the normative assessment of coping and conclude by pointing to the most pressing areas for continued research.

2. Psychological Accounts of Coping

Psychologists have been discussing coping in earnest since at least the 1960s (Lazarus 1966), alongside the study of stress. Interest in the concept grew in the subsequent decades up to the advent of positive psychology, when theories of coping became operationalized through several intervention programs aimed at developing coping skills and building 'resilience'.

Frydenberg (2017) identifies two broad psychological theories of coping that can be found in the literature: the Appraisal Theory and the Conservation of Resources Theory. The Appraisal Theory, developed most prominently by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984; cf. also Folkman 2010, Folkman and Moskowitz 2000, 2004, Taylor and Stanton 2007) characterizes coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral *efforts* to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are *appraised* as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 141, italics added). The emphasis here is not only on demands being appraised as taxing or exceeding resources, but also that the appraisal (and the efforts to respond to the appraisal) is carried out by the coping individual. Whereas traditional, and by now outdated, psychological approaches (such as the animal and the psychoanalytic ego psychology models) consider coping as an automatic passive ability humans employ, Lazarus and Folkman differentiate their theory by foregrounding the *active* character of coping, as distinct from automatized adaptive behaviors (1984: 130 ff.).[3] They also contribute to the shift in focus from viewing coping as a matter of psychopathology/disorder/disfunction to one of ordinary human experience with the potential for growth and flourishing.

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[2] Although coping can be carried out collectively, as discussed briefly in the next section, my central focus here is on individual coping.

[3] They also focus on coping as a *process*, rather than a trait, and they urge readers not to confound coping with its outcome(s) and to avoid equating coping with mastery (1984: 138 ff.). Related to this last point, some attention in philosophy has been paid to another sort of coping: the perceptual model of practical wisdom as a skillful, absorbed or engaged way of 'coping' with the world (Gehrman 2016).

Rather than focusing on personal appraisal by the individual, the Conservation of Resources Theory is more focused on the circumstances requiring coping efforts (Frydenberg 2017: 36) and highlights the notion of *resources*, which are "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued" (Hobfoll 1989: 516) and that individuals "strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect" (Hobfoll 2010: 128). This theory characterizes coping as a process that allows one to obtain or reserve more resources (material, cognitive, emotional) in the face of "objective elements of threat and loss, and *common* appraisals [of a situation] held jointly by people who share a biology and culture" (Hobfoll 2010: 127, original italics).[4] The *intersubjective/social* dimension plays a major role in the characterization of what Hobfoll calls "resource caravan passageways*"*. This term represents "the environmental conditions that support, foster, enrich, and protect the resources of individuals, families, and organizations, or that detract, undermine, obstruct, or impoverish people's resource reservoirs", with social support representing "one of the most robust single markers of resiliency resources, after SES [socio-economic status] and race are accounted for" (Hobfoll 2010: 129, 131).

Despite their different emphases, the two theoretical frameworks are generally considered complementary (Frydenberg 2017: 31) and they converge in emphasizing the *dynamic* character of the coping process—involving a stressor (acute, episodic acute, traumatic, or chronic), the person(s) engaging in the coping effort, and the environment—and, generally speaking, its *active* character. They also emphasize that coping is a *process,* involving thoughts, behaviors, and emotional reactions, and which is often described as "voluntarily undertaken to confront the [stressful] event" (Taylor 2015: 135), under the agent's control, direct action, planning, and goal attainment efforts (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997, Schwarzer and Taubert 2002). That coping is characterized as having an active character makes it a natural object of interest to philosophers of action (see *infra*, section 3).

Further, on the psychological view, the coping *process* can be schematized as unfolding through different phases. Its trigger is a stressful—i.e., negative, uncontrollable, ambiguous, or overwhelming—event, which needs not be perceived as such. In other words, the appraisal might occur unconsciously or automatically (Lazarus 1991). The *appraisal* of the stressful situation occurs in two steps. First, a situation is appraised as a threat, loss/harm, or challenge (*primary appraisal*). Second, the individual assesses that their internal and external resources in their current configuration are inadequate to cope with the stressful situation (*secondary appraisal*). External and internal resources act as moderating factors in the assessment of the situation and its effects on the individual, on the one hand, and in influencing the kind of coping strategy adopted, on the other.

Following the primary and secondary appraisal, a *coping response* occurs. At that point, the person may adopt different *coping strategies*, which psychologists have grouped under three categories:

emotion-based coping: "involves clarifying, focusing on, and working through emotions experienced in response to a stressor" (Taylor 2015: 141), i.e., emotion regulation. It comprises "strategies such as avoiding, distancing, accepting, or seeking emotional support" (Frydenberg 2017: 34);

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[4] Cf. Kirmayer et al. 2011 for a social-ecological view of resilience (and hence the coping process) rooted in Indigenous communities and worldviews.

problem-based coping: “attempts to change negative emotions and stress through generating and evaluating alternative solutions that may involve learning new skills to manage stresses” (Frydenberg 2017: 134);

meaning-focused coping: “through the process of positive reappraisal, the meaning of a situation is changed in a way that allows the person to experience positive emotion and psychological well-being” (Folkman and Moskowitz 2000: 116). Spirituality and mindfulness are among meaning-focused coping strategies (Frydenberg 2017: Chapter 10).

Coping outcomes might then range from physiological changes (positive or negative), the restoration (or not) of psychological functioning, and the resumption (or not) of usual activities. From the psychological perspective, resilience,[5] understood as positive adaptation, is considered one of the possible outcomes of the coping process (Frydenberg 2017). Finally, the coping process might also be followed by a *tertiary appraisal*, whereby the individual assesses the outcomes of their coping responses and actions (Taylor 2015: 136; Frydenberg 2017: 69).

As mentioned in the opening, coping can also involve more than one individual. In the psychological literature, what marks a coping process as *communal* rather than individual is a shared appraisal of the problem as ‘our’ problem (rather than ‘your’ or ‘my’ problem) (Rentscher 2019), which may lead to “a cooperative problem-solving process salient in coping with both individual and collective stressors” (Lyons et al. 1998).[6]

One last important characterization of coping provided within the psychological literature is the distinction between different coping *styles*, notably, the ‘avoidant’ (minimizing, denying) and ‘approach’ (confrontative, vigilant) styles, and their correlation with short-term and long-term effectiveness or success, respectively (Taylor 2015: 140; cf. also Taylor and Stanton 2007). Although psychologists are careful to avoid labelling coping as adaptive or maladaptive without appropriate consideration of personal and situational factors (Frydenberg 2017: 55), there is consensus on differentiating between *non-productive* and *productive* strategies, where the former include self-blame, dwelling on the negative, and tension reduction behavior (such as crying, screaming, drinking, taking drugs) (Frydenberg and Lewis 2014). Whereas productive strategies include “reducing or eliminating stressors, tolerating or adjusting to negative events or realities, maintaining a positive self-image, maintaining emotional equilibrium, enhancing the prospects of recovering if one is ill, keeping physiological, neuroendocrine, and immune systems relatively low or restoring them to pre-stress levels” (Taylor 2015: 144). *Flexible* copers, who use more than one (predominant) coping style, are overall most successful in dealing with stress, especially when the stressor is chronic in nature. Generally, ‘approach’ coping is understood to be more effective than ‘avoidant’ coping (*ivi*: 218, 230, 296).

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[5] Psychologists do not converge on a single unanimous definition of resilience, but different accounts propose “certain determinants, elements, or capacities that are present when a person can be described as resilient” (Lotz 2016: 50). Across the board, however, there are two main dimensions recognized as central to resilience: exposure to adversity and manifestation of successful adaptation. The manifestation of successful adaptation is not necessarily connected to adversity but can be the result of a process of growth and development (Masten 2001), which might be voluntarily undertaken (the key example being athletes).

[6] Valach (1995) emphasizes the social nature of coping, considering its social origin, the “social embeddedness of coping modalities”, as well as its social consequences.

In the spirit of *implicational* philosophical psychology (Miyazono and Bortolotti 2021), which explores the implications of the concepts and studies developed by personality, social, and clinical research psychologists for philosophically relevant issues, my aim here is to outline a place for the phenomena of coping within the philosophy of action, with particular reference to the issue of how to determine the agential boundaries of the coping process, before raising some issues important for its normative assessment.

3. Coping: A Philosophical Characterization

Despite its close connection with the more widely investigated topic of resilience (see Russell 2015, Lotz 2016), coping is still an under-explored concept in philosophy. This is surprising given that the converse is true in psychology, where coping is a widely operationalized (i.e., researched and measured) and a by far more robust concept than resilience (Frydenberg 2017: 4-5). Thus, providing a philosophical exploration of coping may help complement extant philosophical accounts of resilience and agency.

Inspired by and expanding on psychological research, contemporary philosophical work on resilience delineates the notion in two ways. First, by specifically linking it to conditions of adversity and trauma, as "a capacity to confront, absorb, withstand, accommodate, reconcile, and/or adjust to conditions of adversity, setback, and challenge in the pursuit of desired or desirable goal or states" (Lotz 2016: 50).[7] Second, and more broadly, by characterizing it as "a central virtue […] in human life generally", which is "expressed in the ability to adapt positively to significant adversity" (Russell 2015: 159). Qua virtue, resilience "involves the ability to make correct choices and to plan wisely to cope with or overcome significant adversity" (*ivi*: 164) and is "essential for every human agent in the pursuit of a flourishing life, given the value of pursuing goals and aspirations that lie beyond [one's] present capabilities and resources" (Lotz 2016: 50).

Building upon the psychological characterization of coping reviewed in the previous section, I will retain the conceptualization of the relationship between coping as a process and resilience as one of its possible outcomes/products (Frydenberg 2017: 4). If we interpret resilience as one possible product of an agent's coping, then a characterization of coping offers explanatory power and completeness to extant philosophical characterizations of resilience. In terms of the philosophy of action and agency, having a clear characterization of the coping process and its agential boundaries might provide an enriched and more nuanced account of agency itself, especially as exercised in less-than-ideal conditions.[8]

So, what *is* coping from a philosophical perspective? Susan Brison offers a first example of philosophical attention to this phenomenon, although not under the guise of 'coping', specifically. In her 2002 book *Aftermath*, Brison provides a rich account, informed by trauma theory and first-personal accounts (her own and others'), of the process of 'remaking of a self' faced by survivors of

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[7] Importantly, Lotz's definition is meant to capture features of resilience ('absorb', 'withstand') beyond the "*active* states of response and action" (2016: 50, emphasis in the original).

[8] As part of an effort to provide a complete theory of agency by looking at what is involved in the pursuit of long-term goals, Morton and Paul (2019) have focused on *grit* as "a trait or capacity that consists partly in a kind of epistemic resilience" "in the face of setbacks suggesting that success is not forthcoming" (178, 175).

"overwhelming, life-threatening violence of human origin (e.g., child abuse, rape, war, torture, the Holocaust)" (2002: 139, n. 5). She claims that traumas associated with these kinds of experiences 'undo' a victim's self along three different dimensions—bodily, narrative, and agential. The efforts to address this undoing, at the center of her book, constitute what I call coping.

Two other philosophers explicitly refer to 'coping', but neither of them focuses on providing a definition, account, or characterization of the notion. In his 2014 paper, John Christman investigates what distinguishes "healthy" from "agency-undermining" cases of coping with adversities. He seems to understand coping as an "adaptation" or "adjustment to life's challenges" or "unforeseen and uncontrollable" or "severely altered (and constrained) circumstances" (2014: 202-3). "Adaptation" or "adjustment" are construed, in turn, as involving "fundamental shifts in key aspects of persons' practical identities, where they are forced by circumstance to renegotiate their sense of themselves, their value priorities, and their plans and projects" (*ivi*: 206). More recently, in a collection of essays on various topics—such as hope, death, love, reconciliation, self-management, and counsel, some of which qualify as coping strategies—brought together under the umbrella of coping, Luc Bovens understands coping as "muddling through life's challenges" (2021: 4).[9]

There are two main differences between Christman's use of the notion of coping, Brison's account of the remaking of a self in the aftermath of trauma, and the phenomena of coping I am interested in exploring here. First, whereas Brison and Christman are interested in coping under conditions of trauma and oppression, my understanding of the notion here includes also more mundane and ordinary cases of coping, such as dealing with the transition to new stages of life and with daily hassles, which are minor but chronic stressors, or coping with situations that are appraised as challenging (i.e., positive stress/eustress).[10] Second, in my view, adaptation and adjustment, which Christman understands as equivalent to coping, are achievement terms and should not be conflated with the notion of coping.[11] In other words, referring to the psychological conceptualization of coping overviewed above, Christman seems to understand coping as a product/result/outcome, rather than a process. However, what Christman indicates as being involved in 'adapting' and 'adjusting' are instances of exercising one's agency—specifically, while renegotiating one's sense of self in the face of adversities. Characterizing coping as an exercise of agency, as opposed to a state or achievement, seems to be a better candidate for the processual notion of coping that I am after here, and one that is in continuity with the psychological characterization provided in the literature and outlined above.

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[9] Valmisa (2021) provides a characterization of coping grounded in Chinese philosophy of action. Our analysis here is restricted to Western approaches (cf. *supra*, footnote 1).

[10] Positive stress (*eustress*) describes the cases in which the coping process is triggered because the situation is appraised as (positively) 'challenging' rather than 'threatening'.

[11] There is linguistic support for understanding coping in functional terms (i.e., 'aimed' at something) and as involving the exercise of agency: the verb 'cope' is defined as "to manage, deal (competently) with, a situation or problem" (Oxford English Dictionary); "to deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties" (Merriam Webster Dictionary); "to deal with problems or difficulties, especially with a degree of success" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Still, in continuity with Brison and Christman, I retain the element of a (re)negotiation of one's sense of self.[12] My proposed philosophical characterization of coping is thus that *coping* consists in *making effort(s) to maintain or adapt our agency, which involves maintaining and/or restoring our sense of self, plans, and psychological well-being, through times of physical change and psychological challenge.* These efforts will unfold over time (are diachronic) and involve and be directed at thoughts, emotions, actions. At times, they might also consist in a bootstrapping exercise, whereby one must exercise their agency in order to restore or restabilize it. In other words, coping *might/can* be agential. In agreement with the psychological view, I also conceive of the coping process as triggered by a negative or positive stressor, such as when a situation is appraised as threatening or harmful, or as positively challenging (primary appraisal) as when taking on a new job in a new city, and one's current internal and external resources are perceived as inadequate to cope with the stressful situation (secondary appraisal).[13] Given that the appraisal, as well as many coping responses, often occur unconsciously, one might wonder how, exactly, is agency involved in the coping process?

4. Coping and Agency

According to one way of understanding the notion, agency is a matter of self-constitution and self-maintenance and is exemplified by the conduct of an organism that is "ultimately directed at the organism's self-maintenance, that is, at securing its continuous survival in response to the ultimate existential threat: that of dissolution and death" (Ferrero 2022: 10). Agency as self-maintenance can however be understood as manifesting on a scale of intensity—from the small, everyday coping we cannot escape, such as dealing with momentary hunger, stress, and anxieties, to the intense coping involved in dealing with extraordinary circumstances, such as the loss of a loved one or a limb. From within this self-constitutional view, *coping* could be considered the most fundamental and primitive mode of exercise of our agency, including the biological and sub-personal processes underlying its more robust manifestations. In what follows I will focus on delineating the relation between coping and agency understood in a more robust sense.

Roughly speaking, the 'standard' conception of agency is meant to capture the difference between mere *happenings* and an agent's *doings* (Frankfurt 1978, Velleman 1992) and characterizes agency as the capacity to act intentionally and for reasons (Schlosser 2019), where both intentional action and reasoned action are understood to be 'conscious' and purposive/directed.[14] In a coping scenario, delineating the boundaries of agency through the distinction between mere happenings and doings applies in that while experiencing stress and having to cope with challenging or traumatic circumstances are things that *happen* to someone,[15] insofar as the agent *can* exert *some degree of conscious awareness/control/direction* about how to respond to such events, the coping process can be made intentional and, as such, can be something that the individual *does* and that therefore involves, at least at certain stages of the process and to some degree, their agency.

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[12] In psychology the 'self' is characterized as "the totality of the individual, consisting of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical" (APA Dictionary of Psychology). Psychologists identify different functions of the self: self-identity, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-control, and the "self as agent" (i.e., "the self that has goals, plans, and control over voluntary actions" and "plays a role in a psychic process", APA Dictionary of Psychology). All the functions of the self relate to coping in that coping might be aimed at restoring or (re)negotiating each of them.

[13] For a skeptical view about the compatibility of evaluative theories [of emotions] in psychology and philosophy, see Teroni 2021.

[14] Throughout the paper I assume the standard conception of intentional action and my characterization of coping is in principle compatible with different accounts, or theories,

This does not mean that unconscious coping does not qualify as coping. Here I am just drawing a distinction between coping that is unconscious and coping that is or can be made conscious and therefore has the potential to be carried out/done intentionally, i.e., under the agent's awareness/control/direction.[16] So, while the triggering of the coping process might happen unconsciously and, in some cases, the agent might enact certain coping responses and not be aware *that* they are coping (unconscious coping), the possibility of conscious or agential coping lies in the fact that, in some cases, they can make some of their coping efforts/responses intentional by engaging their agential capacities (e.g., purposefulness, intentionality, goal-directedness/attainment). This possibility is, after all, what grounds many intervention programs,[17] which target the development and strengthening of coping skills with a view to increase productive coping and decrease non-productive coping.

Moreover, agential efforts might be involved even in the seemingly most 'passive' cases of coping—i.e., when one responds to a stressful situation by 'accepting' it (adopting a more passive approach or letting go of control). Coping efforts might therefore range from unconscious, especially at the level of appraisal, to more agential, for example when trying to 'make sense' of a difficult situation (see the *emotion-based* and *meaning-focused* coping strategies presented in section 2), or 'accepting' it for what it is and trying to let go of the stress, or engaging in deliberate planning (cf. *problem-based* coping strategies) to remove the stressor.

Considerations about the agential boundaries of the coping process—i.e., how much of the agent's conscious awareness/control/direction is involved in it—should not, however, lead to overemphasize the role of the agent in the coping process. The fact that the agent *can* bring their coping efforts under agential control does not mean they will always succeed at doing so. Rather, the *can* refers both to the *capacity* and the *opportunity* for the agent to exert their conscious

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of intentional action (for the distinction, see Schlosser 2019), for example, Bratman's (1987, 2018) and Korsgaard's (2008, 2009).

[15] A caveat is in order here. Although stress is a *subjective* reaction to a stressor and despite individual variability in reactivity to stress being affected by genetic makeup, prenatal and early life experiences (cf. Taylor 2015: 118), major life events, traumatic events, as well as chronic conditions usually represent stressors for any individual.

[16] I cannot here thoroughly address unconscious coping. I start with conscious, controllable coping because it might provide a grounding from which to compare unconscious coping. Further, focusing on (even if only theoretically) controllable coping may be most immediately efficacious. For example, therapy and 'coping skills development' programs consist in large part in the process of making the unconscious, conscious, so as to improve the efficacy of our coping strategies.

[17] Stress management programs include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Taylor 2015: Chapter 7) and Coping Effectiveness Training (Kennedy and Kilvert 2017). Cf. *infra*, footnote 18.

awareness/control/direction over their responses to the challenging or traumatic event within certain boundaries.

Taking into consideration some of the nuances of the psychological account above, we can say that the agential boundaries of the coping process are both agent-dependent and time-dependent: different agents (or the same agent at different times or stages in their life) will be differently able to exert *conscious awareness/control/direction* throughout/over the coping process, depending on the internal and external resources they can rely on at the time when coping is required.

In this section I have provided a way to distinguish agential from unconscious coping, where the former involves some degree of conscious awareness/control/direction on the part of the agent at some stage of the coping process. It should be noted, however, that a higher degree of agential involvement in the coping process does not guarantee the successful resolution of the process nor necessarily imply a positive evaluation. To understand why, I will turn to the issue of the normative assessment of coping.

5. Assessing Coping

Now that we have a better grasp of the fruitfulness of carving out space for the concept of coping in philosophy of action and an outline of what the agential boundaries of the coping process might be, we can start to think about the evaluative dimensions of coping. The question is: What constitutes 'better' and 'worse' coping?

The philosophical characterization of coping advanced in the third section outlined two main functions of the coping process: the maintenance and/or restoration of one's sense of self and one's agency, on the one hand, and of one's psychological well-being, on the other. Whether coping aims at maintenance or restoration depends in large part on the nature of the physical change or psychological trial that triggered the need to cope. Less stressful triggers may test or push an agent's ability to maintain their agency without causing notable damage, but a markedly traumatic event may disrupt agency to such an extent that it cannot be maintained in its current form and must be repaired. Compare for example, coping with a difficult house guest for 48 hours, moving to a new city or country, coping with the permanent loss of a limb, or with the aftermath of violence and abuse. The aim of coping then varies according to the circumstance and, arguably, ranges from those situations where agential *maintenance* seems likely or possible, on one end of the spectrum, to those where agential *restoration* seems more likely to be required, on the other.

While there is some overlap between the psychological and the agential dimensions of coping in that the capacities involved in maintaining human agency are in great measure psychological, the standards of evaluation pertaining to agency are distinct from, and sometimes in tension with, those pertaining to psychology.

From the psychological point of view, I have mentioned that there is a broad consensus on differentiating *non-productive* and *productive* coping strategies. The main standard of evaluation at play within psychology is *health*, understood not as the absence of illness, but rather as the balancing of physical, mental, and social well-being. According to this biopsychosocial model, biological, psychological, and social determinants all interact and contribute to health and illness (Taylor 2015: 5). Coping outcomes are then assessed as positive or negative in relation to the promotion of health along the three different dimensions provided by the health determinants, and productive coping strategies are those that positively correlate with greater health and well-being along those dimensions, while non-productive ones negatively correlate with those outcomes (Frydenberg 2017: 54, 71-72; cf. Taylor 2015: 116-19, 135-44).

From an agential point of view, assessing coping depends on how we cash out what maintaining or repairing agency amounts to/involves. My delineation of the agential boundaries of coping in the previous section revolved around the notion of intentional agency. Psychological studies have repeatedly shown that an increased sense of control and self-efficacy are central to effective coping,[18] and one might be tempted, given the centrality of the notion of control for the philosophical characterization of agency I rely on, to interpret them in support of cashing out the (agential) success criteria of coping in terms of an *increased* control over the stressful situation or oneself. There is, however, also evidence suggesting that increased control, along with good psychological and behavioral adjustment, might come with a high price in terms of physical health, especially in adverse and unjust socio-economic conditions.[19] More modestly, conscious awareness that one is undergoing stress or trauma, might be a more promising candidate.

Whether unconscious coping is as successful as conscious and agential/intentional coping is an empirical question. For some people, unconscious processes working below the level of conscious awareness, such as dreaming, might be perfectly effective coping mechanisms.[20] However, given the focus of 'coping skills development' programs on bringing the coping process to the awareness/consciousness of the agent, and inasmuch as flexible copers are better copers (cf. *supra*, end of section 2), then *successful coping* will involve being able to detect/recognize the situation as one of coping (i.e., to cope *agentially*, however minimally so) and deploying different coping strategies—and therefore directing one's *conscious* awareness/control/direction to different 'items' (thoughts, emotions, actions)—depending on the situation at hand (*flexible* coping).[21]

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[18] The Coping Effectiveness Training in the context of acquired physical disabilities (Kennedy and Kilvert 2017), for example, is a psychoeducational intervention that aims to "improve strategies for assessing stress", "break down stressful situations into manageable sections", and "teach a range of coping strategies that can be used to tackle stress across different situations" (424). Within that context, 'adaptive' coping is defined as resulting in the "effective management of stress and an increase in the likelihood of gaining control" (426).

[19] Following the implementation of character-skills training into curricula targeting the enhancement of self-control among students of low socio-economic status, a five-wave study of African American teenagers of rural Georgia by Miller and colleagues suggests that for those students "self-control may act as a 'double-edged sword' […] facilitating academic success and psychosocial adjustment, while at the same time undermining cardiometabolic health" (2015: 10326). The price these students seem to pay for improved psycho-social well-being (at least along two of the three determinants of psychological well-being) and higher (agential) self-governance is faster epigenetic aging, which impacts biological/physical health, the first of the three determinants of health.

[20] Thanks to Anca Gheaus for drawing my attention to this case as an example of effective coping.

[21] A more substantial normative assessment of coping along the agential dimension will involve also considerations pertaining to the agent's autonomy—i.e., their ability to self-govern/make decisions for themself. This is the road taken by Christman, who addresses the question of "what marks off the cases of agency-undermining adaptation from those

An *overall/all-things-considered assessment* of the coping process will have to account for both the psychological and the agential dimension and, importantly, consider the coping agent in the totality/complexity of the coping situation, i.e., in relation to at least (a) the stressor and its nature, (b) the agent and their psychological, personal, and socio-historical features, (c) the resources, both internal and external, they can draw on throughout their coping, as well as (d) the version of themself (including their sense of self and plans) to which their coping aspires. Satisfying criteria under one dimension at the expenses of the other will amount to less than successful coping.

Overall, *successful coping* will be a process that moves an agent as close as possible to what the agent *believes* to be a version of themself that allows them to overcome the stressful or challenging event, which includes, notably, moving toward a state of increased psychological well-being (in the biopsychosocial sense mentioned above). As a result, the most successful outcomes of the coping process are those whereby the agent goes through it 'unscathed', i.e., by maintaining their agency (including the maintenance of their vision of who they want to become) without too much damage (*neutral outcome*), or by growing into an improved or just changed/new version of themselves that they come to accept and possibly value (*positive outcome*). On the other hand, coming out of the coping process 'worse for wear', either psychologically or agentially (*negative outcome*) will count as less successful coping. There will be cases when the coping efforts (be they agential or not) will not meet any success in their implementation. In other words, not all attempts at coping are successful. Unsuccessfully coping may result in a range of outcomes from ongoing negative perception of one's own self and agency to suicide. Despite their negative outcome, the efforts to overcome the stressful or traumatic situation still qualify as 'coping'.

The resolution of the coping process into a neutral, positive, or negative outcome also relates to coping's temporal boundaries. For acute stressors, the coping process comes to an end whenever psychological well-being is re-established or cannot be further improved and the agent can resume exercising their agency (go ahead with their life plans) without the extra burden of dealing with the stressor. For chronic stressors, even if the coping process might not have a clear end because the stressor cannot be removed, the coping process might have a provisional end when the agent has updated their version of themselves to include a minimally neutral or positive view of the chronic stressor and its maintenance—in other words, when the stressor is included in the agent's vision of 'the new me' such as when accepting the loss of a limb or the acquisition of a chronic disease like Multiple Sclerosis.

Relatedly, when coping becomes the main/default mode of exercise of one's agency, it might be an indication that something is wrong, albeit not necessarily with the agent themselves; they might be doing whatever is in their power to cope with their circumstances and doing it quite successfully, but still be stuck in a struggle of *never-ending/constant* coping. Of course, factors pertaining to the individual's distinctive psychological makeup, traits, and capacities might be key to coping successfully, but equally important for the assessment of coping—in all cases of coping, but especially in extreme ones—it is important to look at the

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where self-government is maintained" (2014: 202). Albeit very important, the relation between coping and autonomy and the related issue of 'adaptive preferences' formed in response to/under oppressive and unjust conditions are topics for another paper.

broader context, such as the interpersonal and social resources the individual can rely on, or against which they have to 'battle' while coping.

The 'belief condition' I included in delineating successful coping allows for the possibility that an agent might successfully cope with a situation, both psychologically and agentially, by harboring positive beliefs about a version of themselves past the challenging or stressful situation, even though those beliefs might be seemingly overly optimistic or somewhat illusory. As some authors have pointed out, positive, optimistic beliefs can play an important role in supporting agency by fostering the individual's sense of competency, efficacy, as well as the desirability and attainability of certain goals in critical times (Bortolotti 2018). Inasmuch as these positive beliefs are instrumental in helping the agent cope, their optimist (and sometimes illusory) character is not necessarily bad. While effective in sustaining coping in the short run, however, when these beliefs turn into instances of self-deception—i.e., the phenomenon according to which an agent believes something about themself or their situation despite evidence to the contrary—they might backfire at sustaining agency in the long run, or have significant moral costs/harms for the agent themself and others, thereby calling for a more sustained rational and moral scrutiny (see Bagnoli 2012).

The agential and psychological success criteria of coping have therefore some important limitations. Successful coping can sustain the agency of bad/immoral people or contribute to the maintenance of unjust and oppressive social arrangements, sometimes via the contribution of the very victims of such oppression and injustices, at great moral costs. In other words, the agential and psychological success criteria of coping might not be morally neutral.

In a time where discourses about psychological resilience are ubiquitous, the notion of coping, of which resilience is a possible outcome, is under-explored in philosophy. In this paper I have argued that a philosophical exploration of coping is needed to enhance and enrich extant theories of agency and resilience. After reviewing the two most prominent psychological theories of coping, which both emphasize the active character of much of the coping process, I have advanced a philosophical characterization of coping grounded in the philosophy of action that, while continuous with the psychological theories, raises distinctive normative questions related to the evaluation/assessment of coping.

Avenues for future research include a more thorough exploration of the agential aspects of coping (for example, the role and limits of practical reasoning in the coping process and the relation between communal coping and collective agency) and a full-fledged exploration of its moral and political implications (in relation to the notions of autonomy, rights, consequences, character, and care, and their reciprocal balancing in applied scenarios, as well as an analysis of the responsibilities associated with the undertaking and facilitation of the coping process), ideally complemented by a comparative analysis of the concept of coping and its relation to agency across different cultural norms and boundaries.[22]

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