
IF ADDICTION IS AN ANSWER, THEN WHAT WAS THE QUESTION? TOWARDS A CULTURAL AND A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ADDICTION

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Abstract

Addictions are considered in this paper as a unitary disease in which all of its forms are characterized by the same psychological laws. These are the strong will for control, the resort to phantasy and the dislike of reality, and the use of the world instead of real healthy relationships. Theological implications are discussed in order to shape a pastoral attitude that will be effective in this postmodern alienation of the subject.

Keywords: pastoral care, postmodernity, cyberspace, control, addiction

1. Introduction

The topic of my article describes an impressive contradiction of the postmodern subject, which I would term ‘a voluntary alienation of the person’. It reveals an amazingly generalized willingness for addictions in the heart of an era which has struggled to achieve and thus is now capable to enjoy the triumphant declaration of freedom and independence!

In other words, the paradox resides in that the more the lack of external dependency on enslaving factors and all sorts of tyrannies, the more numerous are the ways invented in order to deliberately subjugate human internal freedom.

In my opinion, in order to study this phenomenon, one needs to perform a general ‘macroscopic’ research on the subject of addictions as an undivided collective problem, so as to determine its cultural and psychological causes. Otherwise, there is the danger to tackle them in a fragmentary way and according to insufficient criteria. That is, there have been ecclesiastical voices throughout the years, that tried to explain the development of addictions, usually by claiming that they have a unique cause; for some this cause was the loss of religious faith, for others it was the lawlessness of our society, others argued about the moral decay in our times etc.

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Although all the above mentioned interpretations can be true, I have the feeling that we have failed to promote a deeper understanding of the phenomenon within a theological framework. Thus we deprive ourselves of the chance to act upon it comprehensively and efficiently, both from a preventive and a therapeutic point of view.

2. The psychodynamics of the problem

From a social and epidemiological perspective, several traits of addictions are worth attracting our careful attention:

- Addictions are no more a problem of margin as in the past, since it has become a disorder of ‘good’ people and ‘good’ families too. This shift can be frustrating to those who are prone to easy conclusions about apparently ‘failed’ families or individuals.
- There exist a wide range of addictive behaviours: illegal substances, smoking, alcohol, food, and spectacle (TV, web surfing), digital communication (chatting, social media), video games, gambling, sex. The available options are now more than ever before.
- Cultivation of fear and mere prohibitions of these behaviours are not effective anymore. Instead, they induce curiosity, trial, and violation of rules.
- Not all addictions are life threatening, nevertheless all of them are harmful to the mental health and the moral integrity of the person.
- Youth’s ‘non-dignity’ addictions can shed now light to adults’ ‘dignity’ addictions.

What is the clinical significance of addictions as seen from a psychiatric perspective? Clinical experience shows that any addiction can serve for the psyche as one or more of the following scenarios:

1. Manifestation of *depression* and simultaneously a means for ‘consolation’ from its pain;
2. Self-made anti-*anxiety* treatment;
3. Cover and at the same time ‘prevention’ of externalized symptoms of *impulsivity*, which would take a more overt and annoying (maybe even delinquent) form should the person had not resorted to rather introvert modes (e.g. to the digital world);
4. New expression of *compulsive* pathology in the form of scanning for information or consumption or pleasure;
5. Illusion of *borderline* personalities that they achieved an identity and can modify it as they like;
6. Channels for a *perverse* pathology.

But, in the light of so many diverse forms and objects of addiction, why is it considered to be a unitary disease? At least three characteristics warrant a positive answer: a) all types of addiction are characterized by the same psychological laws; b) one can ‘jump’ from one type to another; c) all have the same spiritual consequences. (I will soon amplify on all three). However, such a

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divergent clinical population, in order to converge to the same addictive behaviour, needs necessarily other non-clinical conditions which will act as ‘organizers’. Those conditions are contemporary cultural and existential factors. In these I would count the following ones:

1. *Fear in front of freedom* (a perennial characteristic of human beings) that creates the need for resort and submission to another ‘ego’ (for example, to the artificial ‘ego’ of the computer or the cyberspace);
2. Need for undoing the *existential void* or even chaos [1] which ends up to techniques of pseudo-filling;
3. Organization of the *anxiety about hope* along predictable and ‘safe’ axes [1];
4. *Illusion of control* on a “central tank of unlimited possibilities” [1, p. 77-78], a control that provides with a fantasy of *omnipotence*;
5. Remedy of the “*empty self*” that was created by a decreased social continuity [1, p. 41].

Let us note here that we really need the biological research on addiction and its medical treatments, yet they may expose us to the risk of ‘instrumentalizing’ addiction as a supposedly ordinary medical problem on which the subject consequently has little capacity for prevention and intervention [2].

3. Cultural roots

Although the addiction phenomenon has been a constant presence everywhere and throughout the history, the causes of its current peak must be sought in the passage from the modern to the postmodern era. Plainly put, this is the equivalent to the passage from *word to experience, from persuasion to allurements*, shifts that were facilitated by postmodernity (Table 1).

Table 1. Critical differences between Modernity and Postmodernity

Modernity	Postmodernity
Emphasis on thought and logic	Emphasis on senses and pleasure
Priority of persuasion	Priority of experience
Argument	Seduction
Dominant public figure: ideology	Dominant public figure: advertisement
Struggle for freedom: external	Struggle for freedom: internal

In modern times, the spotlight was placed on ratio, which had to be convincing, while in postmodern times, the focus is on the optic nerve and on emotions, which have to be stimulated. In that way, it is obvious why addictions gain power over the human soul, as they possess *the power of the irrational*.

Postmodernity has become synonymous to the society of *spectacle and cyberspace*. The society of spectacle seems to have colonized our entire daily routine, while breeding within itself the ambition to push the human soul

towards a complete surrender. Meanwhile, technology has allowed us having immediate access to an immense array of representations, something inconceivable in the past.

Simultaneously, a reality that had started to develop in the 20th century has also contributed to vulnerability towards addictions. This is the society of *abundance*, where objects of addiction (things, purchases, activities) are widely available and easily accessible.

The combination of these two social and cultural developments has led to a seductive alienation [3], which makes an alteration of human psyche. This is more probable in those who are additionally characterized by a biological inclination towards addiction. Indeed, within the addiction phenomenon the entire human psychosomatic dimension is manifest. For example, one may observe that an addictive behaviour is favoured in the case of those personalities that have a stronger impulsive or compulsive disposition, as both of these two inclinations share biological roots.

Yet, reducing the addiction phenomenon to merely somatic predispositions makes injustice to its complexity. Despite the efforts made by contemporary Psychiatry and Psychology to think basically from a biological point of view, addictions unfold their true nature when they are being treated as issues stemming from the complexity of the human nature.

4. The illusion of control

From a psychodynamic point of view, the main reason lies in the idea of *control*. A subject bound by an addiction more or less faces the urge to exert control, which becomes an obsession. For example, those who depend pathologically on other persons manage to control the others' lives by imposing their will on them and manipulating them. Also addicts to substances almost never admit that they have no control; they prefer to phantasize that they are able to stop abuse any time they wish, thus phantasizing a complete control. We should include here too those addicted to the digital world (cyberspace), be it pornography or computer games, who foster the delusion that they exert an absolute control over the object of their desire (women they crave, imaginary enemies etc).

I believe that we must pay greater attention at the illusion of control, as it is incompatible with relationship. A real relationship is unpredictable and not subject to control, and this is exactly what the addict wishes to avoid. Actually it is the addicted person's lack of interest in or inability to establish a human bond that is consistent, rewarding and maturing, that makes addiction more popular. It is obvious that such a bond is not likely to allow control over the other part. On the contrary, entering a relationship of those qualities with the other presumes a certain self-surrendering to an alteration process the other prompts. It also means a voluntary refusal to control the other person, for otherwise the relationship would be devoid of respect and ultimately love.

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Thus, the current increase of addictions is due to some extent to a culturally induced *inability to build and sustain healthy relationships*. If addiction is an answer, then what was the question? It seems to be the anxiety in front of a not easily handled world. In other words, what we are dealing with here is a shortage of love.

The illusion of control contains in itself the vision for omnipotence, which has always been very popular for humans. One who uses addiction with the purpose to feel omnipotent and to counterbalance a narcissistic trauma, does so because phantasy gives one a greater pleasure than reality does, *if narcissism and senses are at stake*. But if deep interactive joy and growth are the pursued goals, reality proves far much stronger than phantasy.

This is where we must draw a line of distinction between pleasure, satisfaction, and joy, which is unknown to most people; this ignorance sets the bases for the addiction mechanism. *Pleasure* is derived from stimuli relevant to the somatic senses or to narcissism. This is the lowest level because it is the easiest one; one does not need a personal contribution to achieve pleasure, or sometimes one can simply buy it. *Satisfaction* is achieved through fulfilment of goals; it requires the person's effort. And *joy*, in the highest level, comes out of healthy and enriching relationships (with spouse, with friends, with children, with God etc), and is strongly associated with *love*. The struggle of the society of spectacle and consumerism is to convince people that joy is acquired through pleasure; or rather, that joy coincides with pleasure... This illusion generates addiction. Within this illusion desire suffocates [4].

5. Desire in the middle of false accomplishments

Perhaps it would not be psychodynamically precise to claim that addicts have been attached to the object of their desire. We had better say that the addicted person has emotionally invested *in the process itself of searching and finding* the desired object of the addiction. In other words, one has been tied to the exposure to an intense psycho-somatic experience, to an excitement which is generally identified by the public as an 'adrenaline rush'. This is exactly the aspect for which we should consider addiction as an *autoerotic* process. The sensibility and the experience of the subject become the reference point, and the psyche gets closed.

When is the subject open? *Openness of being coincides with a persistently pending desire* which is the same to say that the other is meaningful for the subject and not reduced to an instrumental object (most often related to pleasure as, for example, in pornography). As new technologies are offered in abundance to fulfil any 'desire' (actually read: impulse), the true desire suffocates. What they eventually achieve is to convince that experience of lack is something bad, a handicap of being, whereas it makes an ultimate privilege of the existence. The lack of any gratification of desire, namely its refusal to be fulfilled with anything offered in this world, indicates its capacity for openness to love for real persons, God included.

If these take place within any kind of addiction, then it becomes more evident when addictions get to target persons as attraction spots. Although in such cases the ones before our eyes are real persons in flesh and blood, in the dependents' innermost reality they do not exist in and by themselves, but only as a pretext to stage once more the game of 'hunting' the other, which means either submission, or the certainty of having control over the other, according to which side of the 'relationship' both parties are in.

A true relationship is synonymous with freedom. When fear shows up to usurp freedom (a perennial temptation of human nature), the main preoccupation of the psyche is to avoid any trauma (or its recurrence when there had been an unpleasant experience linked to it). Then it leads to the emergence of a need to resort and submit to another 'ego' that is constructed imaginatively so that to provide with the illusion of control either over the person on whom one is dependent, or over that artificial 'ego' of the computer, or over some kind of personal wealth that creates a phoney glamorous ego. This is where we also have to notice the addictive dependence on other persons, which is developed both inside a couple and inside unhealthy groups, such as sects.

6. Emptiness of the self and the new superego

The postmodern collapse of ideologies - even religious ones - has left an empty space not only in the field of ideas, but especially in the human psyche, a *void* that took the form of an existential vacuum, or even a psychopathology. An ideational system has the power to transform (best scenario) or legalize (worst scenario) those elements that the human psyche deems as unacceptable, and to redirect them towards collective goals. Without any ideology, psyche is exposed to its own disrupting and aggressive impulses, to which the ideology used to be a functional excuse (having undoubtedly some evil consequences at times). Therefore, the need to overcome the existential void or the internal chaos ends up inevitably in pseudo-fulfilment techniques, attained through things or experiences.

A relevant example is the domain of pleasure. Contrary to the traditional authoritarian superego that modernity knew and which fed many modes of rebellion against it, postmodern superego surprises us by 'sanctifying' pleasure; it not only allows it but it further *imposes* it:

"In the epoch of global capitalism, the rise of the superego and of the society of enjoyment finds its apotheosis, allowing the transition toward the duty to enjoy to occur with incredible rapidity. Rather than living in a society that prohibits enjoyment, we are increasingly living in one that commands it. We live under the reign of a tyrant for the next millennium - the superego." [5]

Such a commandment, indeed unique in human history, would have disruptive social results if technology did not provide with the appropriate means; maybe that's why it did not appear before the electronic era: society knows how to protect itself. Without cyberspace to absorb, a commandment to enjoy would destroy human bonds and networks structure. He continues: "The

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society of commanded enjoyment finds itself in a paradoxical position: it drives the subject toward an enjoyment that would threaten the society's very existence. Hence this enjoyment must be given a direction that sustains it while ensuring social stability. The image provides this direction. Rather than allowing for enjoyment in the Real, it allows for an image of enjoyment- enjoyment without its traumatic dimension." [5, p. 70]

Technologies of image and communication, as useful as they may be, not only hinder access to reality but they do so in its name. By claiming to be representatives of reality they introduce a positivism which declares with self-confidence that *there is no lack in the subject*. But in order to get initiated to the other's enigma, one has unavoidably to pass through both the mere reality of oneself and the elusive desire of the other. Any form of addiction is at the same time *a distortion of desire assuming both a 'full' subject and a universe made of easy, manageable objects*.

Cushman introduced the concept of the 'empty self', adding that consumerism (which nowadays should include consuming of images as well) is the dominant answer of society to hopefully fill the void [6]. But the void has to be created first. Some people, because of their personality, do not need an artificial creation of the void; they would continue to buy useless things and services even if advertisement did not exist. Yet they are few and cannot sustain the economic system. The global capitalistic network, in order to preserve itself and expand further, needs to create that void into as many as it can, so that the tendency to buy useless goods or services may become prevalent.

Advertisements struggle to convince us believe that our desire is fulfilled only through yielding to sensual drives. However there is no adequate object of desire in this world [7], so a real fulfilment is never attained through addiction. That is the reason why, immediately after the first enthusiastic pleasure fades, the psyche is urged to re-experience it, as an endless torment, just like Sisyphus. As a matter of fact, this repetitiveness is what the power of addiction feeds on. If addiction is an answer, then what was the question? Apparently the anxiety induced by both a pending desire and a longing for an excessive 'fullness' [8].

7. Tasks for a pastoral practice

What should be the principles for a meaningful ecclesiastical response to addictive culture that would pay tribute to Theology? Speaking about Theology, it is needless to say that it must definitely be *relational* as a result of Incarnation and should also promote real selves in the faithfuls because only a real self is able to be offered as a 'first matter' to be sanctified.

As I have mentioned before, no negative attitude (disapproval, fear, prohibition) is pastorally effective any more. Even an inspired asceticism is for sure indispensable but it is not adequate. People cannot implement abstinence from addiction pleasures without being simultaneously rewarded and strengthened by strong meaningful healthy bonds with other people and God.

I would suggest three principles of pastoral praxis carried out in a positive way:

- Love makes the only antidote to hedonism,
- Healthy interpersonal relationships can protect against impersonal pleasures,
- Embracement of reality instead of imagination

The three principles are interwoven because they stand for different aspects of the victory of love against control; or otherwise put, they emphasize the prevalence of reality over phantasy. The humorous motto ‘the real problem with reality is the lack of background music’ proves true to the degree that our motivation for life relies basically on phantasy. In such a case we need an artificial ‘music’ to make things more pleasant and we remain unable to discern the real ‘music’ that can be derived out of real persons and relationships. Society of spectacle and consumerism is really an expert composer of such an artificial ‘music’.

Pastoral counselling and spiritual guidance have to face the problem of reality more effectively by helping people distinguish between pleasure, satisfaction, and joy; that is, they have to help people discover the ‘music’ in others’ souls as they are and not as they are expected to be. They also have the mission to point the way toward the ‘music’ hidden in God’s silence. This task seems the only way to facilitate unfolding and establishing personal intimate relationships with God that can prevent formalities, fanaticism, indifference, instability, and other spiritual morbidities.

Furthermore, pastoral praxis has to develop strategies that will make the ecclesiastical organization itself a real self, namely a source of inspiration and encouragement instead of a mechanism investing in illusions and creating disillusionment. Also pastoral counselling and spiritual guidance have to help Christians unveil their own addictive traits and orientate themselves towards fostering a healthy relationship with God and the others. By doing so they will be assisted in not reifying other persons or God’s gifts by not treating them as means for egocentric gratification but as steps for further maturation and for shaping an Eucharistic attitude.

8. Conclusion

As a conclusion, addiction is a both psychological and spiritual disease of our souls, as well as an illness of our civilisation and of the communitarian climate that we belong to (family, sect, Church, etc), which undermines human nature and leads it to impoverishment. Through a negative way it reminds us of how human nature should function and also forces us to consider a proper organizing of public and private life. Theology and pastoral praxis have been assigned by preserving human nature and persons in the high level meant by their Creator and furthermore motivating them toward salvation. Thus the urge to rediscover an authentic spiritual life rings particularly true for the Church, as

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it is fundamentally true that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (II Corinthians 3.17).

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