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Toward a Phenomenology of Addiction: Embodiment, Technology, Transcendence

 Springer

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*For us everything is concentrated on the
spiritual,
we have become poor in order to become
rich.*

Friedrich Hölderlin

Preface

The topic of addiction has inspired countless number of books, with more being published everyday. In an area dominated by behavioral psychology, sociology, and medicine, however, there have been few attempts to tackle this vexing problem from a philosophical perspective. The study undertaken here ventures into unfamiliar territory, by transposing within the wider compass of the human predicament a problem, which the health-care community approaches primarily in symptomatic terms. To accomplish this end, I will draw upon the insights of key thinkers from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and hermeneutics (e.g., Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricoeur), who speak both directly and indirectly to the problem of addiction that begins to reach epidemic proportions toward the end of the twentieth century (and beyond). By employing the insights of these thinkers to reinterpret and understand anew the individual's struggle with addiction, the philosophical approach of phenomenology ceases to be confined merely to an academic discipline. Instead, such an approach has an interdisciplinary appeal, that is, by reopening a dialogue with the adjacent areas of transpersonal psychology, theology, and literature, in order to cultivate a broader perspective required to address the *changing landscape of the problem of addiction*.

In the last decade, this landscape has shifted dramatically due to rapid advances in technology, particularly as a result of the global outreach of the Internet. Almost every week, a new acronym arises to describe a potentially addictive offshoot of our use of cyber technology, the most recent of which is "shopping under the influence": that is, consuming alcohol while employing various "apps" to purchase products from one's computer, tablet, or phone. This latest form of compulsive behavior seems to combine two different kinds of addiction, e.g., "binge" drinking and impulsive shopping, into a third or hybrid possibility by which the individual can further relinquish his/her inhibitions. As facetious as this example may be, the Internet has nevertheless opened up a "virtual" Pandora's box of ways to become captivated by one's impulses and ultimately fall prey to addiction. Today, addiction has ceased to be an isolated problem reserved to an unfortunate set of individuals. Instead, technology has spearheaded the transformation in which addiction to this or that specific substance, e.g., drugs or alcohol, has given way to a completely new digital venue, transfixing the individual

by the allure of a *virtual world of instant gratification*. The Internet not only becomes a conduit for various ways to become addicted but also gives birth to a completely new category: that is, “cyber addiction,” the compulsive use of digital technology, which becomes dangerously apparent, for example, when people “text” and drive at the same time. With the Internet becoming universally available, and a culture of immediate gratification reinforcing our impulses, it should not be surprising that the problem of addiction has escalated in recent years.

Given these preliminary remarks, let me outline the central themes comprising my inquiry into this rapidly changing *phenomenon*. In Chap. 1, I will highlight the importance of developing a philosophical perspective to address the problem addiction, in contrast to other approaches in the fields of psychology, sociology, and medicine. In the second chapter, I will show how the “life situation” of the addict can provide an example or, in Heidegger’s terms, “formally indicate” the pre-philosophical, pre-theoretical background that we all share—addict and non-addict alike—out of which any genuine understanding of the problem of addiction can first arise. Following the basic precepts of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, we will appeal to the life story or testimonial of the addict, in order to make explicit the individual’s immersion in the struggle of existing, the foremost issue of having “to be,” as the pre-theoretical backdrop for understanding addiction. In this way, a broader philosophical horizon will emerge that will enable us to address the phenomenon of addiction outside the traditional dualisms of mind and body, spirit and nature, which underlie psychology. In the third chapter, I will outline the existential roots of addiction; these originate from the structures of everydayness and harbor the *possibility* of an individual’s becoming victimized by the pursuit of his/her self-indulgences. In the process, we will describe how our simplest desires can be exaggerated into “fetishes” and thus cross over to form the “hook” of addiction. How the manner in which the tendency to disguise, hide, and, most of all, “deny” the problem of addiction determines this “disease” constitutes the topic of Chap. 4. We will discover that these deceptive practices form a web entangling the addict and “enablers” alike, thereby masking the problem *as* a problem, on the one hand, and fostering a climate of *codependency*, on the other.

In Chap. 5, I will examine the birth of the “addiction crisis,” as it broadens its reach within the technological culture of the Internet and its global distribution of the “means” for more people to become addicted. The question then becomes whether the global situation spearheading addiction today exceeds in complexity the insights of any single scientifically based narrative. To develop this critical perspective, I will outline the nexus of variables that create a climate for addiction(s) to flourish, that is, the “perfect storm” in which our inherent frailties as human beings intersect with an extensive culture of “enabling.” While the “human-all-too-human” constants of the problem remain, our understanding of it must evolve in order to recognize how our *culture of conspicuous consumption* and its “commercialization” of fetishes extend the “hook” of addiction from all corners of the globe. Indeed, only by first confronting the wider scope of the addiction crisis, and the technological influences that intensify its grip on humanity, can we address *a new existential challenge*: i.e., that the rise of the “artifice” masks our capacity for self-understanding, even while extending access to both “information” and “entertainment.”

In Chap. 6, I will consider the crisscrossing of various intellectual pathways that led to developing the first program to treat addiction (i.e., the so-called Twelve Steps), thereby outlining the *historical-cultural backdrop* or *interpretive horizon* within which its founder attempted to understand the problem. We will discover that the historical account of this development indirectly reveals a *gap* in the program for treating addiction, which is *only partially closed by appealing to religious maxims*: specifically, the paradox of how a physically based pathology can be overcome through the practice of a “spiritual discipline.” In Chap. 7, I will show how this gap can be bridged through a therapeutic approach that is informed by a philosophical understanding of the self through the temporal-spatial trajectory of its *embodiment* and its tendency to become entangled in the deceptive practices from which a vulnerability to addiction arises. Rather than objectified by the natural sciences, the self reemerges through its immersion in the human predicament, the crisis that it spawns (including addiction), and the struggle to cultivate new horizons of meaning, e.g., through the capacity for transcendence. As we develop our understanding of addiction from out of the individual’s concrete life experiences, the language by which we address this *phenomenon* (of the tendency to become addicted) also changes.

In Chap. 8, we will show how our attempt to carve out a new landscape for understanding (and, indeed, speaking of addiction) implies a strategy for treating the illness. Specifically, any process of recovery or healing must begin from the individual’s capacity for self-understanding and the transformation power of the moment (*Augenblick*) to offset the fetish-like pull of immediate gratification. This recovery and healing must be conceived anew as a path recoiling upon itself in an elliptical orbit that returns, as it were, “each day” to anchor the individual in the “gifting” and initiative of freedom, of “choosing to choose” again and again. The self-inducement of this transformative way of temporalizing departs from the linearly based, clinically oriented model that is assumed as the theoretical premise of various treatment programs. The hermeneutic-phenomenological method redirects the individual to a path whose coordinates are defined as much by the challenge of discovering the meaning of life, as in submitting to any single model of treatment. In this way, the *path* to recovery lies in challenging each individual to reexamine his/her set of priorities and the freedom on which they are based. The challenge of rediscovering the self’s life trajectory, of its striving for transcendence, opens this pathway of healing and recovery.

In the clinical search to find a “cure” for addiction, we return to the basic presupposition concerning the power that language has in prompting the self to take ownership for its existence. Even in the midst of the latest medical advances, the *phenomenon* of addiction may instead remind us of the frailties of human life and how our triumphs are always mired in the conflicts we overcome. When viewed within a larger historical context, addiction is not just about the plight of the addict, but instead is also a signpost in the search for a meditative place of stillness otherwise lacking in our fast-paced culture of conspicuous consumption.

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"The Phenomenological Elements of Addiction: A Heideggerian Perspective," in *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon*: 165–178. Edited by Hans Pedersen and Megan Altman (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015).

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