

# Addiction Is a Choice

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## Introduction

They have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints.

King James Bible, 1 Cor. xvi.15 (1611)

### You Choose Your Addictions

'Addiction' is a fine old English word meaning commitment, dedication, devotion, inclination, bent, or attachment.

Particular addictions may be good or bad. Some folk are addicted to music, others to books, others to walks in the country. Some are addicted to a religious doctrine or community, be it the Roman Catholic, the Mormon, or the Zen Buddhist. Others are addicted to a political philosophy, like liberalism, socialism, or anarchism, or to a 'cause', like animal rights or free trade.

Some people are addicted to another person: perhaps their spouse, perhaps their latest flame. Others are addicted to a habit, like getting up early every morning. Michelangelo was addicted to painting and sculpting, Einstein was addicted to physics, Proust was addicted to writing, Gandhi was addicted to independence for India. Many others, of course, have been equally addicted to these pursuits, but have lacked exceptional talent.

Sometimes addictions fade gradually. The ardent lover becomes the jaded husband, or the heavy drinker of alcohol gradually moderates. Other times, one addiction is suddenly replaced by another: the ardent lover of x becomes the ardent lover of y, or the heavy drinker becomes instead a born-again Christian. Malcolm X relates how converts to the Nation of Islam quickly abandoned any of their former drug-taking habits.

An addiction is not exactly the same as a habit, though one can be addicted to a habit. John Stuart Mill refers to "A man who causes grief to his family by addiction to bad habits." Addiction is a fondness for, or orientation toward, some thing or activity, because it has meaning, because it is considered valuable or even sacred. In some cases, people may be addicted to something because they find it enjoyable, and this, of course, also reflects their values: such a person believes that the right way to live is to seek enjoyment.

Human life is always involved with addictions, and would be wretched and worthless, perhaps even impossible, without addictions. *Addico, ergo sum*. Yet human life can be devastated or horribly blighted by ill-chosen addictions. A simple example would be that of an adolescent drawn into an apparently warm and benevolent religious group, which only gradually comes forth in its true colors as a destructive cult of collective suicide. Another example might be a young person in the 1930s, becoming a Communist or a National Socialist.

Addictions are indispensable. Addictions—and only addictions—can open us up to all that makes life rich and fulfilling. Yet addictions can also have appalling consequences. The conclusion is clear: choose your addictions very carefully! Nothing is more vital for a young person than to select the right addictions. Addictions we approve of are called 'virtues'. Addictions we disapprove of are called 'vices'.

### Can Addiction Be Involuntary?

In recent years, the word 'addiction' has come to be used with quite a different meaning. It is now taken to refer to any activity which individuals engage in, deliberately and consciously, and are *physically unable* to stop themselves pursuing. Thus (it is claimed) the

heroin addict cannot refrain from injecting himself with heroin, the alcohol addict or 'alcoholic' cannot refrain from swallowing alcoholic beverages, Bill Clinton cannot refrain from having sexual relations with his subordinates, the overspending housewife cannot refrain from buying 'unnecessary' things in stores, and the compulsive gambler cannot stop gambling.

In this newfangled sense of 'addiction', I maintain that 'addiction' is a myth. I deny that there is any such thing as 'addiction', in the sense of a deliberate and conscious course of action which the person literally cannot stop doing. According to my view of the world, the heroin addict can stop injecting himself with heroin, the alcohol addict can stop himself from swallowing whiskey, and so forth. People are responsible for their deliberate and conscious behavior.

I find it difficult to avoid smiling while solemnly stating the above, since it's so manifestly true. Most people are tacitly aware that it's true, regardless of what the pundits tell them. But leading 'authorities'—usually journalists who know nothing—keep on telling the public that 'addicts' *physically cannot stop doing* whatever it is that they do (and the authority objects to them doing).

As a simple and ludicrous example, take the campaign against smoking tobacco. We are constantly being told that cigarettes are addictive, and that this means that teenagers who start smoking will be 'hooked' for life.

Meanwhile, millions of heavy, habitual, lifelong cigarette smokers have quit smoking, the vast majority of them without any professional help or 'treatment'. Inescapably, for these millions of smokers, smoking was a choice—was presumably *always* a choice, even during the decades when they were smoking every day. How do the proponents of the 'involuntary addiction' ideology respond to this evidence? Amazingly, they claim that, while those smokers who chose to quit were indeed able to make that choice, exactly those smokers who have not so far quit smoking are unable to do so! Notice that according to this way of thinking, individuals demonstrate their inability to make a choice simply by making the 'wrong' choice, the one we wish they hadn't made.

In the pursuit of such ideological campaigns, any absurdity will be accepted. For example, what is it that smokers are addicted to? Nicotine, say the anti-smoking fanatics. But there are many ways to get nicotine into one's body: injection, swallowing tablets, a skin

patch, and so forth. The vast majority of the injurious health effects attributed to smoking (such as lung cancer) have nothing to do with nicotine. The fear of lung cancer has induced millions of individuals to give up smoking cigarettes, but it has induced very few to start swallowing nicotine tablets. Evidently, we are witnessing confusion and incoherence, even at the most elementary level.

“Those who believe absurdities will commit atrocities,” said Voltaire. Pointing out such simple blunders as those mentioned above will not always be immediately effective in persuading the anti-smoking crusaders to abandon their illiberal and monstrous campaign of repression. They are *addicted* to their anti-smoking bigotry. Their addiction does not relieve them of responsibility for their actions. We are all responsible for our addictions and for the actions we perform in pursuit of our addictions. The anti-smoking bigots have chosen their addiction—a particularly nasty one whose ill-effects fall mainly on other people, not themselves. They are addicted to the notion that the police should chase people who live incorrectly, forcing them to comply with the currently fashionable definition of a wholesome lifestyle. The same goes for all those who wage a *war on people*, calling it a ‘war on drugs’.

## Changing One's Addictions May Be Hard

It is often not a simple matter to induce people to give up their vicious addictions and replace them with virtuous ones. Their values, the principles that give meaning to their lives, need to be transformed. They may not share our opinion as to which addictions are virtuous and which addictions are vicious. But even if they do share our opinion, in the sense that they assent to it, they may hold other beliefs which imply a continued commitment, that is, a continued addiction, to the old way of life. The transition from one addiction to a different addiction—from drunkenness to sobriety, from sexual promiscuity to marital fidelity, from frequenting the local casino to frequenting the local Episcopalian church—may be a difficult struggle.

A person with an addiction may come to believe that this addiction is not really for the best. That person may decide it would be better to abandon it. But because all our beliefs, values, habits, and physiological responses are an intricately woven web, that person

may often find the ‘tug’ of their old addiction quite powerful. Turning away from the thing which has been the pivot on which one’s existence has turned, the altar at which one has worshiped daily, the central activity of one’s life, may take effort and application. It may not be as easy as snapping one’s fingers. There is no need to dream up some far-fetched, scientifically worthless fantasy about ‘physical addiction’ to account for this fact, familiar as it has been down the ages. Or do we really suppose that a nineteenth-century African villager, converted to Christianity by white missionaries, a villager who then suffered the most agonizing terrors because he was no longer performing the rituals required to placate the animistic spirits of his traditional culture, was suffering from a medical condition, physical dependence upon animistic religion?

In saying that addiction is a choice, I don’t mean to imply that it is always an *easy* choice. I don’t deny that people have problems, and among these problems may be attachments which are difficult to break off, undesirable habits that are hard to shake. ‘Breaking up is so very hard to do’, says the old pop song. It’s true of practices as well as people.

I do not, of course, dispute that many people are properly objects of our compassion and help because they feel that their lives are out of control. Indeed, I have spent much of my working life as a psychologist trying to help such people. I have often found, however, that a person suffering from a harmful addiction (‘presenting with’ it, as we psychologists like to say), whether to the ingestion of a chemical substance or to some other pattern of behavior, actually has a different problem in his or her life, a problem not obviously related to the addiction. When that problem is resolved, I often find that the person abandons the harmful addiction.

It’s ironic that the ideologues of ‘involuntary addiction’ make it more difficult to help such people. They do this by preaching that addiction to the practice of consuming a chemical substance, such as alcohol or cocaine, is a disease. Their first job, they believe, is to convince ‘addicts’ that they are sick, and therefore not responsible for their actions. In my judgment, this is just about the worst thing we could possibly tell such people. To someone engaged in a bitter struggle to give up one way of life and find a replacement, it is discouraging and demoralizing to be informed that their old way of life is somehow fated, predetermined by their body chemistry. It’s

also untrue. I always advise such individuals that they can control themselves and their lives, that they have the power to renounce an old addiction, if they really want to. This, I believe, is helpful to them. It's also the truth.

In this book, I sometimes compare drug addiction with religion. Religious devotion or piety is one of the most familiar addictions. Another is romantic love, the addiction to another specific individual, a potential sexual partner. I do not make these comparisons to demean religion or love, or to defend drug addiction. I merely seek to accentuate an underlying similarity.

Though drawing attention to parallels among different addictions, I don't maintain that all addictions are on a par. When it comes to the consumption of chemical substances, I like a glass or two of wine or scotch, and occasionally more than two. I also sometimes, usually earlier in the day, like a cup or two of good strong coffee. I don't consume heroin, cocaine, or tobacco, and if asked for my advice, I generally recommend against consuming those substances. On the other hand, I utterly oppose the government's 'war' against the people who consume or provide these substances. If asked for advice, I would also recommend against joining the Moonies, Transcendental Meditation, or Scientology—or, for that matter, a purportedly therapeutic religious cult like Alcoholics Anonymous. And similarly, I completely oppose government persecution of these cults.

Since there is an underlying similarity between addiction to religion and addiction to drug-taking, I favor extending the First Amendment 'establishment' and 'free exercise' clauses to drug-taking. It is no more the business of the government what chemical substances you put into your body than it is the government's business where or in what manner you practice your religion. Following a remark often attributed to Voltaire, I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Following Thomas Szasz, I disagree with the drug you take, but I will defend to the death your right to take it.

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## Two Ways of Looking at Addiction

We be virgins, and addicted to virginity.

Robert Greene, *Arcadia* (1590)

Today, just about everyone believes, or says they believe, that addicts—including regular smokers, heavy drinkers, frequent gamblers, presidents who seduce interns, and people who run up credit card debts—can't help themselves. They are driven by an irresistible compulsion, and this compulsion is allegedly a medically recognized disease, which can be treated.

"Just about everyone" includes politicians, government officials, social workers, addiction treatment providers, physicians, ministers of religion, and the media. There is, however, one exception: those people who actually know something about the subject. These are the psychologists, physicians, and social scientists who have researched addiction, and those others who have closely followed their findings and the ensuing scholarly debates. These people are divided on the issue; their views are more diverse than those of the politicians and media, and it is fair to say that many of them are increasingly skeptical of the disease model. As we shall see, the results of research on addiction certainly do not bear out the disease theory, and are actually hard to reconcile with it.