

Pornography, Addiction, and Human Happiness

Our modern use of the word addiction derives from “self-addict” which, despite sounding like a synonym for narcissist, [really](#) means “to devote or give up (oneself) to a habit or occupation.”

Addict in turn comes from the Latin *ad* meaning “to” and *dicere* meaning “to say, declare; adjudge, allot”.

These days we conceive of addiction more as a kind of physical and/or mental dependence. It is typically used in a context of harm, whether it be objective harms that the addict may or may not recognise as a consequence of their dependence, or the subjective harm of experiencing the dependence as ego dystonic – that is, not consistent with one’s self-concept.

We’re familiar with these two kinds of harms via numerous examples of, in the first instance, drug and alcohol addictions that destroy the health and relationships of the addict, and in the second instance the common refrain “I want to stop, but I can’t.”

It’s fun to look at the origins and historical meanings of words, because we can then see difficult contemporary phenomena from different perspectives.

For instance, the “self-addict” concept from the 16th century would appear to be quite broad in terms of the habits and occupations, and while it could certainly be used to describe an addiction to drinking or drug-taking, it would be equally appropriate in the context of oratory or reasoning and argumentation.

Our concept of addiction has clearly altered in line with our shared historical experience of phenomena like opium addiction

and the physiological dependence it creates in the addict.

Our awareness of the subjective experience of drug addiction became more acute in the 20th century, coinciding with the introduction and popularity of new forms of drugs, a greater interest in the inner world of the addict, and the technological means to publicise and portray personal stories of addiction more sympathetically.

Popular use of the term addiction has expanded beyond the medical definition to such an extent that it now resembles its original, more generic, use. People can be (negatively) addicted to food, TV, checking their smartphones, sex, Facebook, exercise, and so on. But they can also describe themselves in a more benign sense as addicted to most of the same things, to illustrate their passion or enthusiasm.

We've almost (but not quite) returned to the original meaning, wherein it [could be said](#) of a 14th century monk "He was a most virtuous person, and excellently learned, entirely addicted to the study of the holy scriptures, and of sacred history."

To what will you give yourself over?

The modern language of addiction has become useful in a broad range of circumstances because it helps us to think differently about the habits and occupations to which we have given ourselves – self-*addicted* in the original sense.

We can look at something we regularly enjoy – like eating, or checking our favourite websites – and ask ourselves whether these habits might in fact have negative consequences for our health, relationships or other aspects of life, and whether in fact these habits are fully ego syntonic – consistent with our self-concept.

Do I really want to eat so much? Is the desire to eat really authentic, or is it the kind of desire that would disappear if

I were more in command of myself at the right moment?

Do I really want to check my favourite websites every day? Are they really contributing to my life and my happiness, or is it more of the nature of a compulsion? Should I just set my homepage to Mercatornet.com and forget about all the unimportant sites I visit?

Modern addiction allows us to see our habits and occupations as potentially parasitic on our time, energy, and physical and mental wellbeing. But the old concept of addiction is also powerful, because it reminds us that we are in control, that we are making choices as to how we use our time and energies and what we give ourselves over to.

In either case, the lens of addiction prompts us to ask deeper questions about the nature and sources of happiness in our lives.

Reality Check

Some years ago I came across an online community called "[NoFap](#)", an entirely secular support-group that helps its members abstain from viewing pornography and engaging in habitual masturbation.

What makes NoFap interesting is that it is a creation of the internet age. It emerged out of a Reddit thread in response to a 2003 study that found a significant increase in testosterone levels in men who abstained from masturbation for seven days.

The community that evolved from online discussions of the study is neither religious nor moral, yet almost by accident it recapitulates the ancient concept of virtue as being *actually good for you*.

Commenters on the forums detail not only their struggles to achieve abstinence from pornography and masturbation over days, weeks, and eventually whole months, but also their

perceived benefits from abstinence. As one user put it in a recent post:

“The majority of the early days were a flatline but when that ended i can safely say it came with a level of productivity, confidence and focus i have not been able to achieve before in my life. procrastination has been near completely eliminated and i feel the constant urge to be productive.”

The key to the appeal of NoFap for people who might otherwise be completely sceptical of “moralistic” programs is that the reported benefits are holistic. In keeping with the ancient idea of virtue, they benefit not narrowly in an abstract ethical domain but by becoming more *virile* or “manly”.

Thus participants routinely describe physical changes they attribute to increased levels of testosterone, as well as mental improvements like confidence and concentration, better social interactions, more time to devote to meaningful hobbies and interests, and so on.

In keeping with the addiction theme, there are also detailed and often desperate accounts of the inner struggles that accompany the attempted change in habit.

While pornography addiction is a contested concept in a medical context, that doesn’t diminish the struggle and suffering of the many people who – as with many other sources of dependence – find it incredibly difficult to resist established patterns of reward.

The participants in the NoFap community may not be interested in morality or virtue generally, but at least in the domain of pornography, the self-described “first generation of those who went through their teenage years with the existence of high-speed Internet porn” are discovering for themselves some of the hard-wired truths of human nature.

What all addictions have in common

When I first heard of NoFap I came across a post where a member had described his sudden recognition of the cumulative hours, days, and weeks he had spent viewing pornography, and how angry and sick he felt at having devoted all that time to staring at a screen.

Pornography has something of [The Treachery of Images](#) about it: that's not a naked woman you're staring at, just a digital representation of one. The revulsion subsequently felt by some NoFap participants comes in part from seeing for the first time all the time, energy, emotional and cognitive resources dedicated to mere imagery, tricking themselves into feeling a sexual response to an asexual object.

This disproportion between the object of addiction and the pleasure or enjoyment we derive from it is characteristic of all addictions. When the pleasure and pain we feel at the presence or absence of the object far outweighs its objective value or significance, something is clearly awry.

Becoming sexually excited by images and videos may be the quintessential addiction of the internet age, but it is also deeply absurd because images and videos per se are not sexually exciting.

Taking a drug to experience "ecstasy" might be popular too, but it is absurd because there is nothing intrinsically ecstatic about ingesting a tablet.

On this level, addictions are always absurd. In the first instance they break the relationship between reality and pleasure, leading us to seek pleasure in unreal and absurd stimuli.

And implicitly these absurd sources of pleasure mask and obscure hidden wounds, unfulfilled potential, and the promise of real happiness.

The time and attention we devote to objects of addiction is time and attention we could be devoting to real sources of happiness, if we knew what they were. Yet even the fact that we seek pleasure in absurdities, or try to find profound happiness in lesser goods, points to our yearning for that higher and more satisfying happiness.

As one member of the NoFap community wrote, reflecting on “840 days of freedom”:

“I think we in this community know that what we’ve lost includes a lot of different things, but can’t say the reasons for which they are all connected. I think the greatest reason to be motivated to join the fight is the experience of connection I have found myself in, and this existence is no category of life, but encapsulates all of it. It’s living truthfully with another human being. In this the possibilities are endless.”

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