Does everyone know what addiction is?

The philosophy and psychology of addiction are at an impasse. For decades, researchers have focused on solving the so-called "puzzle" of addiction: why do addicts use drugs despite negative consequences (Pickard 2021)? Two types of solutions are common, one appealing to *compulsion* (Leshner 1997; Charland 2002; Holton and Berridge 2013) and another to *choice* (Pickard 2012; 2015; 2020). Neither solution has proven satisfactory and, recently, theorists have started to incorporate further constructs into their solutions, such as community- and self-identity (Sinnott-Armstrong and Pickard 2013; Pickard 2012, 2015, 2020). But even if we find a satisfactory solution, the puzzle ignores many important and overlooked features of addiction: (i) relapse after extended periods of abstinence, (ii) resumed drug use on "special occasions," (iii) the role of curiosity as a risk factor for addiction, and (iv) the high comorbidity of addiction and attention disorders (like ADHD) (Zuckerman 1994; Kashdan et. al. 2004; Lindgren et al. 2010; Anderson et. al. 2011; Leslie 2014; Heyman 2019). These dimensions of addiction not only elude compulsion- or choice-based explanations, but also suggest a central role for *attention* in understanding addiction. Thus, we ask: might addiction be a problem of attention?

We are not the first to detect a crucial link between addiction and attention. In *The Principles of Psychology,* William James (1890) considers whether attention may be central for understanding addiction: "*being a drunkard*...that is the conception that will not *stay before the poor soul's attention*" (565). While James never pursued a full-blown account of addiction—let alone one centering addiction—passing comments like this one, combined with his claim that "what holds attention determines action" (1892: 319), strongly suggest that James views addiction as primarily a problem of attention, rather than of conscious choice, motivational ideals, or compulsion. In fact, his idea has left a very tangible effect on contemporary addiction treatment. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the ubiquitous addiction treatment plan developed in the 1930s, credits James as a primary influence on their conception of addiction (Bevacqua and Hoffman 2010). In scientific and philosophical contexts in subsequent decades, however, James's tantalizing suggestion that addiction is *fundamentally* a problem of attention has been curiously absent.

No one denies that attentional processes are part of addiction's story; passing comments to the effect that attention is somehow involved in addiction are frequent in the literature (Henden 2019; Kennett et al. 2019). But we posit that addiction is a problem of attention in a stronger, more *fundamental* sense. We first show that compulsion- and choice-based explanations implicitly depend on more fundamental commitments regarding attention. For example, advocates of the incentive-salience account, a compulsion-centered view, refer to external cues as "capturing" the attention of the addict (Berridge and Robinson 2017; Anderson, Laurent, Yantis 2011; Field and Cox 2008). On the other hand, advocates of the choice-based explanation focus on addicts' attending to their person-level values or self-conceptions in a reflective, deliberative way (Pickard 2012, 2015, 2020). These types of attention, which we call *environmental* and *reflective* attention, respectively, are certainly part of the story. But they cannot explain the important, yet overlooked, phenomena mentioned above (e.g., "special occasions" of relapse, high curiosity as a risk factor for addiction, co-morbidity of addiction and ADHD).

We then develop a novel account of an additional mode of attention: the *organizational* mode. Drawing on work on perspectives (Camp 2019) and an analogy with moods, we characterize this organizational mode as a disposition toward different ways of structuring *how* one is attending rather than *what* one is attending to. Unlike the environmental and reflective modes, the organizational mode is characteristically *holistic* and *non-intentional*; thus, organizational attention can be understood as a style of attention in the way that "being joyful" or "being melancholic" are holistic frames or styles in the affective realm. We identify *rigidity* and *flexibility* as key dimensions along which styles of organizational attending can vary. A *flexible* organizational mode can structure, frame, and orient attending with an agility that is sensitive to the variably textured internal and external environment, as well as the agent's shifting practical and theoretical interests. A *rigid* organizational mode of attending, on the other hand, assumes the same structuring, framing, and orientation of attention, regardless of changes in the internal and external environment or the agent's interests. As with moods, this rigidity or flexibility is not voluntary and is, at best, distally controlled.

Ultimately, we argue that this organizational mode of attention is central for understanding addiction. Addiction is often described as a problem of *rigidity* over and above its given object. That is, addicts often experience a general feeling of being "enslaved" by a system of routines and habits that *holistically* anchor their life and that cannot be sufficiently explained by a more restricted, object-focused compulsion. Our picture explains this rigidity: an addict often too narrowly structures, frames, and orients attention in a way that non-addicts would acknowledge swings free from their richly and variably textured internal and environmental interests—e.g., lacking more beneficial stress coping-mechanisms, reframing tools, or modes of problem solving given goals. In addition, the organizational mode can better explain why the addict appears to lack voluntary control—a central desideratum of current theories of addiction. A non-intentional mode of structuring and framing attention is not easily accessible from the reflective mode of attention and is not related to the number of objects attended to (environmental mode of attention). Our notion of a rigid organizational mode also offers novel insights into overlooked features of addiction. For example, empirical evidence suggests that "absorption," an element of curiosity characterized by a tendency toward intense engagement, is a risk factor for substance abuse (Lindgren 2010; Kashdan 2004). Our account can uniquely explain this finding by pointing to absorption-curiosity as a manifestation of the rigid organizational mode of attention in addiction. Finally, we draw further connections between rigidity and the attentional difficulties characteristic of ADHD, laying the foundation for an account of addiction that can make sense of the still unexplained comorbidity of ADHD and addiction.

Bibliography

Anderson, B. A., Laurent, P. A., & Yantis, S. (2011). "Value-driven attentional capture." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 108 (25).

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics.* trans. Reeve. Hackett.

Berridge, K. C., & Robinson, T. E. (2016). Liking, wanting, and the incentive-sensitization theory of addiction. *The American Psychologist*, *71*(8), 670–679.

Bevacqua, T., & Hoffman, E. (2010). "William James's "sick-minded soul" and the AA recovery paradigm: Time for a reappraisal." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *50*(4), 440–458.

Braver, T. (2012). "The Variable Nature of Cognitive Control: A Dual Mechanisms Framework." *Trends in Cognitive Science* 16 (2).

Camp, E. (2019). "Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding." In Stephen R Grimm (Ed.) *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*. Oxford University Press.

Charland, L. C. (2002). "Cynthia's Dilemma: consenting to heroin prescription." *The American Journal of Bioethics* 2 (2): 37-47.

Doyle, B. (2007). *Understanding and treating adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.* American Psychiatric Publishing.

Field, M., & Cox, W. M. (2008). Attentional bias in addictive behaviors: a review of its development, causes, and consequences. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, *97*(1–2), 1–20.

Flores, C. (2021). "Epistemic Styles." *Philosophical Topics*, *49* (2), 35–56.

Frankfurt, Harry G. (2004). *The Reasons for Love.* Princeton.

Gardiner, Georgi. (2022). "Attunement: On the Cognitive Virtues of Attention." In *Social Virtue Epistemology*. Routledge.

James, William (1890 [2019]). *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Dover.

James, W. (1892). *Psychology: The Briefer Course.* Dover.

Henden, E. (2019) "Addiction as a Disorder of Self-Control." In H. Pickard & S. H. Ahmed (Eds.)

The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction, pp. 45-53.

Heyman, G. M. (2019). "Deriving Addiction: An Analysis Base on Three Elementary Features of Making Choices." In H. Pickard & S. H. Ahmed (Eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction*, pp. 23-33.

Herdova, M. (2015). "Simply irresistible: addiction, responsibility, and irresistible desires." *Journal of Cognition and* N*euroethics* 3 (1): 195-216.

Holton, R., and Berridge, K. C. (2013). "Addiction between compulsion and choice." In *Addiction and self-control: perspectives from philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience,* ed. Levy, N., Oxford.

Holton, R. (2006). "The Act of Choice." *Philosopher's Imprint.* 6.3.

Hommel, B et. al. (2019). "No One Knows What Attention Is." *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics* 81 (7): 2288–2303.

Hupfeld, K., Abagis, T, and Shah, P. (2019). "Living "in the zone:" Hyperfocus in adult ADHD. *ADHD Attention Deficit & Hyperactivity Disorders,* 11(2)*,* 191–208.

Kashdan, T, Rose, P, and Fincham, F. (2004). "Curiosity and Exploration: Facilitating Positive Subjective Experiences and Personal Growth Opportunities." *Journal of Personality Assessment* 82(3). 291-305.

Katsafanas, Paul (2011). "Activity and Passivity in Reflective Agency." In Russ Shafer-Landau, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*: Volume 6. Oxford University Press.

Kennett, J., McConnell, D., & Snoek, A. (2019). "Reactive Attitudes, Relationships, and Addiction." In H. Pickard & S. H. Ahmed (Eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction*, pp. 440-451.

Korsgaard, C. (1996). *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge.

Leimkuhler, M. E. (1994). "Attention deficit disorder in adults and adolescents: Cognitive, behavioral, and personality styles." In J. M. Ellison (Ed.), *Psychotherapists guide to neuropsychiatry*. Plenum.

Leshner, A. (1997). "Addiction is a brain disease, and it matters." *Science,* 278 (5335), 45-47.

Leslie, I. (2014). *Curious: The desire to know and why your future depends on it.* Basic Books/Hachette Book Group.

Levy, N. (2010). *Addiction and compulsion.* In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Levy, N. (2013). "Addiction and self-control." In *Addiction and self-control: perspectives from philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience*, edited by Levy, N. Oxford.

Lindgren, K, Mullins, P, Neighbors, C, and Blayney, J. (2010). "Curiosity killed the cocktail? Curiosity, sensation seeking, and alcohol-related problems in college women." *Addictive Behaviors* 35. 513-516.

Mele, A. (1990). "Irresistible desires." *Nous* 24 (3), 455-472.

Mele, A. (2003). *Motivation and Agency.* Oxford.

Nguyen, C. T. (2020). *Games as Agency.* Oxford University Press.

Pickard, H. (2012). "The purpose in chronic addiction." *AJOB Neuroscience*, 3:2, 40-49.

Pickard, H. (2015). "Psychopathology and the ability to do otherwise." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90 (1): 135-163.

Pickard, H. (2020). "What we're not talking about when we talk about addiction." *Hastings Center Report* 50, no. 4. 37-46.

Pickard, H. (2021). "Addiction and the self." *Noûs* 55 (4):737-761.

Raz, J. (2002). *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action.* Oxford.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W., and Pickard, H. (2013). "What is addiction?" In *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of psychiatry*, ed. Fulford, B., Davies, M., Graham, G., Gipps, R., Sadler, J., and Stanghellini, G. Oxford.

Smithies, D. (2011). "Attention is Rational-Access Consciousness." In Mole, Smithies & Wu, *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays*. Oxford.

Steglich-Peterson, A, and Varga, S. (2025). "Curiosity and Zetetic Style in ADHD." *Philosophical Psychology.* Vol. 38, No. 2.

Velleman, D. (2000). *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford.

Velleman, D. (2004). "Replies to Discussion on *The Possibility of Practical Reason.*" *Philosophical Studies* 121.

Wallace, R.J. (2006). *Normativity and the Will.* Oxford.

Wallace, R. J. (1999). "Addiction as a defect of the will: some philosophical reflections." *Law and Philosophy*, 18.

Watson, G. (2004). *Agency and Answerability.* Oxford.

Watzl, S. (2019). "What attention is. The priority structure account." *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 14(1).

Wu, W. (2014). *Attention.* Routledge.

Wu, W. (2024). "We Know What Attention Is!" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 28 (4): 304–18.

Zuckerman, M. (1994). *Behavioral expressions and biosocial bases of sensation seeking.* Cambridge.