

The freedom to be addicted

Freedom and addiction may look like opposites, but are in fact polarities that feed on each other, says William Pryor.

Whether it touches our lives directly or not, addiction is a price we all pay for living in freedom. Not any old idealistic freedom, but the liberty championed by politicians of every hue in the 21st century. A double-bind freedom that might seem to be at the other end of the corridor from addiction, but its being hoist as the fundamental good of modern times leaves many staring into an abyss with nothing to be free for, no place to be free, no aspirations to cherish, no sense of who or what it is that has been set free.

And yet, and yet, in this empty freedom it is impressed upon us that we are free to choose whether to take the stuff, to do the things to which we become addicted. This is where the myth of 'addictive substance' arises – how else can we explain that, up to a certain point, we are apparently free to choose what we take or do, but after we have crossed that river, we become slaves. It must be the stuff what done it.

In this mythology, addicts are not free. They are slaves, trapped at the other, the dark end of the passage, in portable prisons built from the stoned highs around which their addictions revolve. But a special kind of medical slave to whom we can give treatment – at best, a get-out-of-jail card, at worst, a furnish-the-jail-with-more-comfort-and-stability prescription. Freedom and addiction may look like opposites, but are in fact polarities that feed on each other.

It's hard to challenge the dogma of liberty beloved by neo-con right and new labour alike: it confuses freedom from oppression with the notional freedom to act that individual selves are thought to have. These two ideas have become interchangeable, but are in fact utterly different.

Few would say oppression is a good thing – we all want to be free from it. But then the other freedom is thrust upon us. We will make you free to be yourself, to enjoy the fruits of capitalism, but we're going to have to watch you with CCTV cameras that tell you to pick up your litter. You are free to drink whenever you want, to gamble as recklessly as you like, but not to indulge in things we have come to regard as evil; heroin for example. It's a liberty thoroughly qualified, but only for your own good. It's a liberty thoroughly confused, a double bind, a conflicted *cul de sac*, but it's all we can think of. When you seek refuge from this dead end, becoming addicted can seem an attractive option; at least it does away with choice. The politicians' liberty has no value in and



'What's the point of being free if that freedom gives you nothing and leaves you all alone in that nothingness? If existential angst is the overriding experience you are free to go through, then the simplicity, certainty, comfort and even the imprisonment of the addict's life are going to look attractive.'

of itself, because the self that is free, the individual that would assert its rights, is an empty thing.

In parallel with the ascendancy of the self as the prime icon of belief in the last 50 years, so the dogma of liberty has blossomed. With the decline of organised religion, liberty has become as good a value as any to justify capitalist liberal democracy, a value we can shape our lives around. But it also casts a dark shadow, a dank place filled with questions, anxiety and isolation freely stirring the turmoil most people live in. What's the point of being free if that freedom gives you nothing and leaves you all alone in that nothingness? If existential angst is the overriding experience you are free to go through, then the simplicity, certainty, comfort and even the imprisonment of the addict's life are going to look attractive.

Thus it is that addiction arises from a confused notion of liberty. Yes, we must be free from oppression, but no, the freedom to be ourselves, free will, is not an absolute good! How can it be when we have no clue as to what it is that is being free? The self is a fragile construct, a story we have to keep on retelling to keep sane. Frequently it collapses under the weight of its own mythology and expectation and we seek other forms of security, stability and comfort, often those found fleetingly in addiction.

Maybe we should ask what it is to be free from addiction, to be unaddicted? A very different liberty. Oddly, it has a similar shape to the deluded state the addict achieves in his first few highs – apparent freedom from the burdens, frustrations and delusions of the self. But unaddiction, being unhooked, does not suppress, or even merely cope with the insecurities of the self, but actually embraces them in a state of being that transcends the myths of self. Though it is a construct, the self with all its stories is the source of all addiction. We are free to be addicted until we discover that to be unaddicted is to be truly free.

Albert Einstein, of all people, said: 'The true value of a human being can be found in the degree to which he has attained liberation from the self.' Unhooked Thinking explores such philosophical approaches to addiction in the belief that they are at its core.

Unhooked Thinking 2007 runs from 9 to 11 May at the Guildhall, Bath. www.unhookedthinking.com