

In the Cave: Philosophy and Addiction

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Philosophy is one of the oldest areas of inquiry. Out of control behavior fueled by alcohol and other drugs is one of the world's oldest problems. What could these old timers offer each other? Philosophy has a long, stable relationship with reason and more specifically, the relationship between reason, emotions and the will. Addiction seems to involve a total abdication of reason, a messy tangle of emotions and a lack of will.

I introduce the notion of addiction as a subject of philosophical inquiry here for a reason. I am a philosopher, yes, but I am also an alcoholic who has been sober for more than 24 years — only the last four of them as part of a recovery program. I am often asked how I got and stayed sober for those first 19 years; it was because of philosophy, which engendered in me a commitment to living an examined life, and gave me the tools and concepts to do so. My training in moral philosophy made it natural for me to wrestle with issues of character, responsibility, freedom, care and compassion in both work and life.

Philosophy has always been about the pursuit of knowledge, but one that included the higher aim of living a good and just life. This pursuit has involved examining the nature of just about everything. Socrates's guiding question was "what is it?" The "it" in question could be justice, piety, beauty, courage, temperance, or knowledge. For Socrates, these are the crucial virtues around which life should turn. Socrates's agenda was to draw the line between what appears to be just or pious and what justice or piety really is. In the person of Socrates, Plato provides the powerful tools of conceptual analysis and allegory that can be fruitfully applied to the questions about addiction.

In his pursuit of knowledge about the nature of virtues, Socrates first had to debunk popular opinions about them. The debunking took the form of a dialogue but in reality more closely resembled a cross examination. Socrates looked for the essence, necessary property or ineliminable trait that made particular acts pious or just. Socrates interrogated every definition offered to him by asking for examples, pushing and pulling against those definitions, turning them inside out and upside down, stretching that definition to see if weird things followed, exploring what follows when a particular definition is put into practice and excavating hidden assumptions behind those definitions.

This isn't exactly glamorous work but it is vital in the pursuit of knowledge of any sort. This kind of work prompted the 17th-century philosopher John Locke to describe himself as an under-laborer, clearing away the rubbish that gets in the way of acquiring knowledge. We now call this work conceptual analysis, one of the most powerful tools a philosopher has to wield.

How might philosophy approach or provide us with a better understanding of addiction? Socrates would ask, "What is it?" He would not be alone. Psychiatrists, psychologists, chemical dependency counselors and people in recovery programs the world over are constantly asking this question. Neuroscientists have now entered the fray, searching for both the cause and effective management of addiction. Yet there is no consensus. Defining addiction remains an area of heated debate.

Yet despite differences of opinion, most of us can recognize — and through recognition, perhaps better understand — certain behaviors and situations in which "normal" use of alcohol or other drugs turns to destructive dependency.

A sort of recognition may be found in examining allegory, in this case, a very familiar one from Plato. Allegory — a story that functions as an extended metaphor and has both literal and figurative meanings — is clearly not science. But it does offer the potential for a sort of insight that conceptual analysis can not. An allegory allows us to unpack many of those dimensions that escape more scientific description. With the cave allegory that Plato offers in the “Republic” to draw the line between appearance and reality, we have a potentially powerful tool for understanding the crisis of the addicted person. Briefly, Plato’s allegory is this:

There is a cave in which prisoners are chained facing a wall. They cannot move their heads and therefore cannot look sideways or behind; they only can look forward. Behind them are a burning fire and a half wall where puppeteers hold up puppets that cast shadows. To the chained men, the shadows are real; they have no conception of the objects that cause the shadows. Appearance is mistaken for reality, and thus there is no real knowledge.

Now imagine that the prisoners are released from their chains. They look behind them and see the objects that caused the shadows. Most likely they will be confused and horrified and unwilling to accept that these objects caused the shadows. Imagine now that the prisoners start to leave the cave. They will be painfully blinded as soon as they encounter light. Once their eyes begin to adjust, they will be confronted by a harsh bright world with a whole host of horrifying objects. Some of the men will flee back to the safety of the darkness and shadows, valuing the familiar more highly than the unfamiliar. Anyone who returns and tells his friends who are still enchained what he has seen will be regarded as a nut lacking any credibility. Other men, once their eyes have more fully adjusted to the light, will want to stay above ground. Such people come to realize that world of light is the real one where genuine knowledge is possible. One further point to consider: some of the people who have seen the light of truth and reality need to go into the cave to help those who are still enchained to leave the cave. This is the philosopher’s burden, according to Plato.

This allegory is richly wonderful for understanding addiction, relapse and recovery. Most people who become addicted become enchained to their drug of choice. The word “addiction” comes from the Latin verb “addicere,” which means to give over, dedicate or surrender. In the case of many alcoholics, for instance, including my own, this is just what happens. What had perhaps started as fun and harmless use begins to grow troubling, painful and difficult to stop. The alcoholic becomes chained to alcohol in a way different from others who “drink normally.”

In various scenarios of addiction, the addicted person’s fixation on a shadow reality — one that does not conform to the world outside his or her use — is apparent to others. When the personal cost of drinking or drug use becomes noticeable, it can still be written off or excused as merely atypical. Addicts tend to orient their activities around their addictive behavior; they may forego friends and activities where drinking or drug use is not featured. Some may isolate themselves; others may change their circle of friends in order to be with people who drink or use in the same way they do. They engage in faulty yet persuasive alcoholic reasoning, willing to take anything as evidence that they do not have a problem; no amount of reasoning will persuade them otherwise. Each time the addict makes a promise to cut down or stop but does not, the chains get more constricting.

Yet for many reasons, some people begin to wriggle against the chains of addiction. Whether it is because they have experiences that scare them to death (not uncommon) or lose something that really matters (also not uncommon), some people begin to work themselves out of the chains. People whose descent into addiction came later in life have more memories of what life can be like sober. Some will be able to turn and see the fire and the half wall and recognize the puppets causing the shadows. Those whose use started so young that it is all they really know will often experience

the fear and confusion that Plato described. But as sometimes happens in recovery, they can start to come out of the cave, too.

The brightness of the light can be painful, as many alcoholic or drug dependent people realize once their use stops. Those who drank or used drugs to numb feelings or avoid painful memories may feel defenseless. This is why they will retreat back to the familiar darkness of the cave. Back with their drinking friends, they will find comfort. This is one way to understand relapse.

Others will make it farther out of the cave and have their eyes adjust. They will struggle to stay sober and balanced. So many of their old coping behaviors will not work, and they are faced with a seemingly endless task of learning how to rebuild their emotional lives. Some will stay clean and sober for a good while and later relapse. People relapse for all sorts of reasons, and often these have to do with old patterned ways of thinking and behaving that make a roaring comeback. When people who have had some sobriety relapse and go back to the darkness of the cave, they may be met with derision — an “I told you so” attitude.

Those who do make it out of the cave and manage never to relapse again are few and far between. They know just how precarious their sobriety is and what they need to do to maintain it. People with long-term sobriety are often the ones who need to go back down into the cave, not as saviors, but for their own survival. People with years of sobriety often say that newcomers help them to stay sober because their pain, loss, and confusion are so fresh. Their stories remind old timers of enchained life in the cave. Old timers can share their stories too and in the process show them different ways to be in the world.

Of course, our stories are real and deeply personal, but like allegories they can wield a transformative power. Transformation can come from many sources, including some of the earliest and most profound investigations in philosophy. Plato’s cave, Montaigne’s cat, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, Nietzsche’s myth of eternal recurrence, Wittgenstein’s fly in the fly bottle, and feminist conceptions of self-identity — to name but a few — are ready companions in the pursuit to understand the complexities of addiction, relapse and recovery.