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The Worlding of Addiction

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Addiction can be partially seen as a *worlding*; as a lived-out set of ecological relations. Based on existential-phenomenology, the lived-world of the addict is described as a particular way of being in the world. Although attained through active addiction, this way of being endures beyond active addiction into recovery. Active addiction is characterized by *narrowness* and *withdrawal* from the world; recovery from addiction entails an embrace of the world. This movement into recovery is described as *broadening* and *reaching out*, a way in which the world is opened up to be experienced in all its breadth and spiritual significance. The clinical implications of this perspective are described and explored.

It is common to try to understand addiction in terms of chemistry, biology, character predisposition, emotional coping, or personality issues. By contrast, this article focuses on the life-world of the addict by describing commonalities adopted by those who suffer from addiction. I contend that addiction has the effect of *worlding* the world of the subject. This *worlding* is a unique matrix of lived-relations to things, to others, and to time. This way of being in the world does not dissolve or change when active addiction stops, but, in fact, persists. Thus, one of the key factors in recovery is the adoption of another way of being in the world.

A few preliminary remarks are necessary before proceeding. For the most part, this article deals with those who suffer more severe forms of addiction, and the data are drawn from my work over the past decade in London. This work includes individual and group psychotherapy with in-patients and out-patients. In this time, I have worked extensively with heroin, cocaine, crack, alcohol, and cannabis addicts. I have also worked extensively with gamblers (setting up with colleagues the first UK National Health Service [NHS] gambling service) and, to a lesser extent, with sex addicts. I suspect that these ideas are applicable across a variety of addictions, and can apply to milder forms of addiction that *world* in similar ways. However, some caution may be in order in how widely the notions presented here can be applied.

The terms *addiction* and *addict* also need clarification. These designations are specifically chosen terms and are not meant as a vocabulary of denigration. Although other terms, such as the *subject-of-addiction* or the *addicted-subject*, may be more accurate, these terms are unwieldy and clumsy. Perhaps the most important reason for using these terms is that they are commonly adopted by the subjects about which this article is concerned. Furthermore, in a way, the term *addict*, itself, inhabits the world of the addict.

*World* should be understood in this article in the phenomenological-existential sense, as the matrix of meanings inherent in the things, space, and relations lived out by the subject. This
matrix has been termed the life-world (Lebenswelt) by Husserl (1954). This matrix of meanings is, by definition, beyond the subject, but also paradoxically the very ground or foundation of the subject. In focusing on the world, we are called on to ask several questions. What sort of world does the addict inhabit? What are the addict’s relations to things in their world? What are the addict’s lived-spatial relations? These questions and others are addressed through the use of an existential-phenomenological analysis. It should, however, be noted that a complete phenomenological description of addiction would involve analyses of other dimensions of existence, such as the lived-body, lived-time, and relating to others. I have attempted to explore these dimensions elsewhere (Kemp, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) and, therefore, restrict the discussion here to the life-world of addiction, even if this is not entirely possible. The definition of world as used here also implies Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world.

**BEING-IN-THE-WORLD**

Heidegger’s (1927) *Being & Time* changed the landscape for understanding human existence. It showed that the human subject is a being-in-the-world, rather than an encapsulated psyche per-chance in a world. It is, therefore, impossible to understand subjectivity apart from the context in which the subject is at play. There is no behavior that does not respond and address a meaningful world and, therefore, there is no analysis outside of, or devoid of, contextual meaning. In *Being & Time*, Heidegger referred to existence, but in the 1930 essay *The Essence of Truth*, he changed this to ek-sistence (Richardson, 1967). Heidegger was attempting to demonstrate the ecstatic nature of human being. It is ecstatic in that it is essentially outside of itself in the world. Sistence denotes “standing” while ek denotes “outside of.” Thus, human existence stands outside of itself, outside of itself in the world, the world of things and other beings. The nature of being human is, therefore, essentially transcendent in that it is as much founded locally in the lived-body as it is beyond itself in the all that is, which is the world.

The being of humanity is thus a unity of self and world, a “significant unity” (van den Berg, 1972, p. 37), an engaged unity. In fact, to separate out self from world is artificial and risks implying that these are separable entities. There is no self without a world through which it operates, and no world exists that is not opened and lit by the being-process of a human self (Luijpen, 1969). This so-called separation has arisen over the last two centuries as a result of the rise of scientistic thinking, embodied in technological attitudes and practices. De Koning (1982) argued that phenomenology, itself, emerged to reestablish our relation to things disturbed by these developments. Subject and object are now at a distance from one another. There is an artificial gap, which needs to be abolished. Phenomenology does this reconnecting, by going back to the things themselves, and by seeing in the relation to things, the nature of humanity.

World can thus be further defined as the totality of possible meaningful relations to things and beings. We are in the world to the extent that we have meaningful relations with the things and beings that populate that space. If things have no meaning, then they also do not exist for us (van den Berg, 1982). “If we don’t see the significance, we don’t see anything at all” (van den Berg, 1972, p. 38). In other words, we are unable to meaningfully engage with that which is devoid of meaning, significance, or value. This opens another way to understand a subject’s being-in-the-world, which is through an analysis of the things that populate the subject’s world. How does the subject live the things of their world? Which things have meaning? What is the character
of the things in the subject’s existence? This tells us a great deal about their existence. It opens up the truth of the world. But the things referred to here are not merely concrete objects. As Eadie (1967) pointed out, humans “do not live only in the ‘real’ world of perception but also in the worlds of imagination, of artistic creation, of social institutions, and in the ideal worlds of mathematics and purely formal thought” (p. 247). Any attempt to go back to the things themselves requires a nuanced understanding of thing.

It is very common, with our modern consciousness, to reflect on things that are experientially available to us. However, what phenomenology realizes is that this reflective state does not allow for a foundational access to things. Reflection is founded on a more primordial relation to things. This is a prereflective natural relation of lived-being to life-world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Second-thought, or reflective accounts, are not to be dismissed, but prereflective lived relations to the things which populate our worlds reveal a more essential truth. Prereflexively, we are open to the world as bodily-engaged subjects. The later Heidegger of the *Zollikon Seminars* was to emphasize the open nature of Dasein; he referred to this as perceptive-receptive world-openness (Heidegger, 2001). Although this openness is humanity’s essential nature, it can be corrupted or truncated. Implicit in the *Zollikon Seminars* is the idea that when openness is disrupted, pathology follows. Therefore, man is capable of closing its relation to the world, but this is never without consequences. As van den Berg (1972) puts it, to be ill “means, above all, to experience things in a different way, to be different yonder, to live in another, maybe hardly different, maybe completely different, world” (p. 45).

## ADDICTIVE EXISTENCE

Being an addict is a particular form of illness. Our question here, however, is: What is the lived experience of addiction? It would be possible, of course, to ask the addict to look into his soul or into his mind and provide a description. However, as beings-in-the-world we could rather ask for a description of their homes, their friends, and objects with which they interact. How can we describe this world that the addict lives in? What is their existence?

In one of the weekly groups I run on a detoxification ward, I ask three volunteers to describe a typical day, which is written up on a board. Afterward, the other members of the group make comments and tell their stories, most of which are remarkably similar. This similarity exists because addiction pulls its subjects into a particular way of being-in-the-world. Addiction worlds in a consistent manner. Over several years, I have heard hundreds of these typical days and there is an uncanny consistency in the stories.

To give some density and narrative, two accounts are sketched. I relate these in the first person with my clarification in brackets. The first is a common alcohol dependency story.

I get up around 6 or 7 in the morning. I usually save a can [of beer] from the night before to help stop the shaking. I go out to the local store to buy my drink for the day. I use several different stores, as I don’t want them to recognize me buying every day. I am back soon, as I want to avoid other people. I never make conversation and if I see someone I know, I cross the street to avoid them. I will drink a couple of cans quickly once I am back home and then I go back to bed for a few hours. Otherwise, I watch television. I sometimes go to the pub in the afternoon, but this is rare these days, as money is scarce. If I need more drink, I might go out again, but I hate going out. I go to the supermarket once per week as I hate being around so many people. It might give me a panic attack. In the evening,
I watch television. I have trouble sleeping, and drink is the only thing that helps me to sleep. I usually fall asleep around 11 pm, but I often wake up many times through the night.

The second is a typical day experienced by a heroin addict.

I get up around 11 am. I go out straight away and pick up my meth [methadone] from the pharmacy. Then I meet a friend or, sometimes on my own, I try to make some money. Usually I steal from local supermarkets and sell stuff to a woman I know who runs a pub [bar]. Once I have £20 or £30 I go and score [buy drugs]. I go back to my flat and use. If I am in the mood, I might go out again to get more money and score again. But most days, I stay in after that. I might call a friend, but usually it is just me on my own at home. I watch TV or listen to music and smoke a few joints [cannabis]. My sleeping is bad and so I stay up till about 4 am, or some days even 6 am. Then I try to sleep.

What these accounts reveal is in sharp contrast to images of alcoholics and drug addicts as hedonistic subjects. The happy drunk who is in the pub entertaining the crowd, or the perpetual pleasure-seeking drug addict are far removed from these accounts. Often the participants in the group will comment: ‘We need to get a life!’ Words such as boring, dull, awful, and trapped are common. My own word to describe these existences is narrow. There is very little breadth to these lives. Most days are identical to the previous; Groundhog Days. There is almost no variety, and very few people, populating these accounts. The world and others are avoided as a systematic strategy. The objects that populate the world of the addict are also devalued. Except for the television, little has much value to the severe addict. Money has value only as far as it can be turned into substances to be consumed. In summary, the following are common features: (a) withdrawal from the world, (b) very little contact with others, (c) very little movement or physical activity, (d) excessive leisure activities (usually TV watching), and (e) monotony.

What is also apparent from the previous descriptions is how very little these severe addicts move about in their world. Movement is usually restricted to the procurement of their addictive substances. The world, or its things, is not physically engaged with. They are perhaps thought about, but certainly they are not manipulated. Severe addicts also spend excessive amounts of
time watching TV, or at least they spend a great amount of time with the television on, often in
the background. Many have revealed how they keep the television on throughout the day and the
entire night, often sleeping with it on. It should go without saying that these same individuals
also have profound sleep problems. It would seem that the television replaces real others in
the lives of addicts. Unable to enter into relations with others, the artificial other, the talking
head, furnishes some experience of the human other. However, there is no real relating here,
no dialogue. The addict is passive and spoken at. Perhaps unremarkably, that is often the way
I, as a therapist, feel in relation to the addict—passive and spoken at, rather than with. I am
not suggesting that television causes this, but it may explain why the severe addict is drawn
to such an encounter. And this is related to another major feature described, which is that of
monotony. There is very little variety or change evident in the lived existence of the severe
addict. This is often the feature that the addicts I work with notice or comment on first, that their
days as dull, boring, and lifeless. These negative states are interspersed with the high or relief
that substances or addictive behaviors provide. Therefore, drugs or drink become even more
important in this situation, for they help to quell this day-by-day dullness. They take away or
suppress the negative feelings created by the way life is lived by the addict.

In summary, I have noted that addicts, through active addiction, adopt a life style, a way of
being, a *worlding*, which steadily truncates their world. This narrowing usually ends in the bed-
room and in their fantasies. In this small space, people and experiences are actively eschewed,
things progressively lose their value, and relating is reduced to the monotone of perpetual tele-
vision. It almost goes without saying that all previous activities, especially pleasurable and
enriching activities, slowly die away. The addict does very little, and interacts very little. Others
are avoided and the addict becomes increasingly isolated as almost total withdrawal sets in. The
addict then becomes the embodiment of modern individualism (Shanahan, 1992), a distorted
caricature of the individualist, pathologically apart and trusting only themselves. This links to
the ideas of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), who identified a variety of self-reliant
narcissism at the heart of alcohol abuse (AA, 2001). And added to this is a technocratic reliance
on drink, or drugs, or the Internet, or the flashing lights of the casino. The addict typifies and
embodies the ultimate technocratic individualist.

**LIVED-SPACE**

So far, I have characterized the existence of addiction as narrow and withdrawn, as a movement
toward individualism and a technocratic way of being. Now it is important to deepen the analysis
of the relation of addicts to world by exploring the lived-space of their existence. I have already
noted that, in the most simple sense, addicts live without breadth in their lives. I have also
observed that this narrowness can be clearly seen in the places they inhabit. They tend to keep
to a narrow range of places and routines. Deviation and exploration are limited. *Narrow* and
*withdrawal* are words that imply space and the use of space. Existentially, we are interested
in lived-space. Fuchs (2007) provided a contemporary definition of lived-space:

Lived space may be regarded as the totality of the space that a person prereflectively ‘‘lives’’ and
experiences, with its situations, conditions, movements, effects and its horizon of possibilities—
meaning, the environment and sphere of action of a bodily subject. This space is not homogeneous,
but centred on the person and his body, characterised by qualities such as vicinity or distance, wideness or narrowness, connection or separation, attainability or unattainability, and structured by physical or symbolic boundaries that put a rigid or elastic resistance to movement. (p. 426)

*Lived-space* is a phenomenological term that describes not quantifiable and measurable space, but rather how space is lived in an existential sense (Bollow, 1961; Minkowski, 1970). As shown previously, for addicts this can mean that lived space is often reduced to their homes. Often it means a reduction to a particular chair or their bed. Space is constricted to narrow pathways both indoors and outdoors. The environment, which constitutes the subject as a being-in-the-world, is resisted and avoided. Therefore, being, itself, becomes avoidance and constriction. The lived-space of the addict is narrow. Specific avenues are tread, but these are rarely deviated from or expanded. The world of the addict also acquires more clarity. It is not a world that holds and protects or fosters exploration. Rather, it is a place that creates anxiety, fear, and trepidation. For the addict to be in the world, it needs to be reduced to a most manageable form. It needs to be predictable and closed. The ambiguity, complexity, and challenge of the world cannot be faced, at least not sober. The world is then simplified, contained, and inoculated. Just as drugs and addictive processes reduce and change emotional life, so, too, does the process of addiction lead to a reduction of lived-out-space.

Although there are many forces that push the addict back into a narrow range of existence, there are some attractions to be noted. Certain lived-spaces attract the addict. These might be the bar, the liquor store, the casino, or the crack house. It may be a place more oblique, like a phone booth where calls to the local dealer are made. These places have a positive valence for the addict, which explains why they are often drawn back to such places even when in recovery. The addict is caught in vicious push-pull cycle. They are pushed out to partake in their addictions, while simultaneously pulled in to avoid the contingencies of the world. With this, the horizon of possible lived-experience starts to shorten. The horizon then becomes very near. This mimics the shortened time horizon in addiction (Kemp, 2009c; Winter, 1999). The impact of this is to deaden the imagination and the freedom and hope of possibility. What becomes most important is to control existence at all costs. Emotions are controlled through substances and addictive processes reduce and change emotional life, so, too, does the process of addiction lead to a reduction of lived-out-space.

**RECOVERY AND THE OPENING UP OF THE WORLD**

It will be useful to consider a treatment case, which I have appropriately disguised. Terry described himself as a “supreme addict,” having moved from heroin addiction to alcohol abuse, and then on to gambling. In between, he also described being addicted to the dance scene, even though he had not abused drugs during this period. Terry, now in his late 40s, was thrice divorced, had three children he was estranged from, and lived in a homeless person’s hostel in a central London location. His overriding concern at the start of treatment was avoiding gambling outlets, which are ubiquitous in central London. He was also filled with a deep-seated shame about his appearance and the people he lived with and near. Thus, he tended to stay in his hostel room most of the day. He listened to the radio, played games on his mobile phone, and read free newspapers. Although he had not gambled for several months, Terry claimed to have no friends, support, or
sense of achievement. Over a period of many months that we worked together, Terry was able to see that, although his isolation helped him not to gamble, it also completely hindered his recovery. He first tried a local church, trying to recapture his Catholic roots, but this only increased his sense of shame. Next, Terry tried to attend a Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meeting. Again, he felt overcome by grief and shame. A breakthrough came when he was able to attend a voluntary work scheme with a hostel worker. Put now in a position of helping, rather than being helped, Terry saw his place in society changed. In a period of rapid change, Terry contacted his children, started a new intimate relationship, and tried GA again. He moved quickly from being isolated and inside himself, to being out in a variety of new relationships and relations. The quality of our therapy work also significantly changed. There were several set-backs, lapses, and relapses, but after a further three months, Terry announced that he had accepted a place in a Catholic rehabilitation center. I later heard that after he completed his treatment, he took up a job at the center. How can we understand this rapid shift in recovery?

It is a commonly held belief that the most difficult thing to achieve in addiction is to get addicts to stop using. This is incorrect. Getting them to stop is relatively easy, even for complex drugs like alcohol and heroin. The real difficulty is helping them to stay stopped. And it is here that our analysis of the worlding of addiction proves very clinically useful. For a meaningful recovery to take place, the addict will need to move beyond their previous narrow existence and to embrace life in its fullest sense.

Of course, there is much more to recovery than merely broadening life, but it is a vital step that is often overlooked. The real danger is that when substances or processes (such as gambling) are given up, a void opens up in the life of the addict. The short-term management of this void is vital, and this is mostly recognized and catered for by treatment. For example, in the 12-step fellowships, there are “90 meetings in 90 days.” It could also be a day program or time in a residential rehabilitation setting. Once beyond the initial survival of this crucial period, the addict is gradually left more and more to their own devices. However a more crucial question now emerges: how to live. And the easiest answer for the addict is to live as before. It should be remembered that many addicts have lived as addicts for many years, perhaps even decades. For some, it is the only adult way of living they have ever known. Living as before, narrowly and withdrawn, although easy, also has a protective function. A retreat from others and things is an avoidance of any temptation. There is a certain logic to it, but there is also a certain outcome—relapse.

The addiction field has known that life style and relapse are linked for many years, and this is generally referred to as life-style balance (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985). I wish, however, to rename it phenomenologically as broadening and reaching out—the opposites of narrowness and withdrawal. Broadening entails a process of moving out into the world. Perhaps it is a reacquaintance with previous activities, perhaps the adoption of new behaviors. Certainly, it requires courage and persistence. In the process, the things of the world start to acquire meaning and value. Crucial steps are often those of work, recreation, and service. Work is not always paid work, but there seems to be an important aspect here, often neglected, as work legitimizes identity in ways other practices rarely do. Recreation can be a terrible challenge and very disappointing. Nothing gives pleasure quite like crack or a big win. The addict has to accept lesser, more mute forms of pleasure. Another aspect, which often blossoms in a successful recovery, is service and spirituality. This is obviously part of the 12-step process, but is often noted even in those who do not follow this path. Service, the process of giving to others, allows others to emerge as significant others,
who then exist as sites of meaning. In its most powerful form, the spirituality developed allows the world to emerge as an openness, within which the sacred can be concretely engaged.

Reaching out, which is slightly different to service, is more mutual and simple. It is aimed at the others who were previously systematically avoided. This is no easy endeavor for the recovering addict. There are usually many interpersonal barriers, which need to be overcome, especially with family and loved ones (Kemp, 2009b). The raw fear, which has led to avoidance and interpersonal withdrawal, needs to be worked on in a steady and measured way. However, reaching out is not just to others, but also to the things of the world. This is often rediscovered in simple practices, such as cooking, gardening, getting a pet, or taking an art class. In this way, simple things start to regain their character and density. Things start to have value and significance.

Considering Terry again, I note how isolated he had become in his attempt to stop gambling. This served a certain function, protection from temptation. Yet it also served to truncate meaning and the experience of the world. Through a number of attempts, Terry managed to reach out and broaden his world. He acquired a place, a set of interpersonal relations, and his spirituality blossomed. Terry managed to overcome his self-sufficiency through helping others. These new developments served as a foundation, which allowed his recovery to go to another level with his decision to attend a rehabilitation program. And it became a part of his ongoing recovery after he decided to remain, in service, at that program.

There are, to this researcher’s mind, many pitfalls and hidden barriers here, as there are many roads to this end that cannot be the focus here. Certainly the how of this process has not been described. In many cases, this is a long and complex process. What is, however, essential is that the narrowness and withdrawal, which characterize addiction, be recognized and addressed. It is to go beyond stopping and into a starting that reaches out into the world with courage and an open heart.

CONCLUSION: BRINGING THE WORLD TO SIGNIFICANCE

When the subject takes up the way of being, which is generally designated as addiction, a particular set of world-relations is developed. These include a valence toward withdrawal from the world and a correlated narrow existence. The lived-space of the addict is then emptied, not only of human contact, but also of things. Meaning, which is derived from the lived-contact with others and things of value, slowly dissipates. We can add to this the thingly nature of drugs, which reveals their technocratic (Kemp, 2009a) and temporary nature (Kemp, 2009c). The addict is, therefore, drawn into a relation to the temporary and the produced. The addict then seeks to find purchase, stability, and meaning through purchasing their addictive substance or process of choice. They, therefore, buy and consume in an ever-vicious relentless cycle.

In all this, one should not forget that addicts live in a real world, which they did not create, in which meaninglessness and a rushed pace of life are prevalent. Our current times are deeply technocratic, industrial, and consumption-orientated with a growing ideology of individualism. Addicts find that their socio-political world a veritable playground for an addictive way of being. The addict is perfectly suited to their world and their world is perfectly suited to addiction. Perhaps this is the symmetry that is inherent in Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world. We world the world, and the world worlds us in return. There is a continual shaping and reshaping.
Here I find perhaps another reason why the addict withdraws from the world. It is to escape a milieu that makes addiction too easy, too possible, and, therefore, too dangerous. The socio-political world may be the perfect playground, but the game is life and death. So some stability needs to include the destruction, repudiation, and distancing of the world. However, this places the addict in a paradoxical position with respects to their ecstatic, transcendent world-open nature. It is, without doubt, not by chance that 12-step fellowships (AA, NA, GA, etc.) consider addiction to be a spiritual disorder. In addiction the transcendent nature of self and therefore the other is deeply in question. To recover means not just to open up to the other as person, group, world, or God. It is to open up to the self-transcending nature of being itself. Recovery, as spiritual health, is to take up and live the world as the given and gifted embodiment of the sacred bounty which life itself is.

REFERENCES

Author Note

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