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Addiction, Compulsion, and Agency

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Abstract I show that Pickard's argument against the irresistibility of addiction fails because her proposed dilemma, according to which either drug-seeking does not count as action or addiction is resistible, is flawed; and that is the case whether or not one endorses Pickard's controversial definition of action. Briefly, we can easily imagine cases in which drug-seeking meets Pickard's conditions for agency without thereby implying that the addiction was not irresistible, as when the drug addict may take more than one route to go meet her dealer.

Pickard argues against the view that addiction is compulsive. She identifies a dilemma that is supposed to be fatal to the view that addiction is compulsive: either addictive desires are resistible or the behaviour they cause is not an action. The counterintuitiveness of the latter disjunct should, supposedly, lead us to accept the truth of the former disjunct and therefore Pickard's view that addiction is not compulsive.

> …neurobiological data do not establish that addiction is a form of compulsion and that control is nil. From a

> philosophical perspective, we should immediately be sceptical of any such conclusion on conceptual grounds. We commonly hold that what makes a piece of behaviour an action, as opposed to a mere bodily movement, like an automatic reflex, is that it is voluntary. This means that there is the capacity for genuine choice between courses of action. Minimally, there must be at least two choices: to act in a particular way at a particular time, or not to. There is thus a dilemma facing the claim that addictive desire is genuinely irresistible. Drug-seeking and drug-taking behaviour appears to be deliberate, flexible, and involve complicated diachronic planning and execution. It bears all the hallmarks of action. But, for it to be action as opposed to merely automatic reflex, alternatives must be available: minimally, it must be possible to refrain. Hence either addictive desires are resistible and the power to do otherwise remains or, despite appearances, the behaviour they cause is not action. (Pickard, 2012: 42)

Here I argue that, contrary to Pickard's claim, the dilemma that she identifies is not fatal to the view that addiction is compulsive. But there is an important preliminary point to be made about Pickard's definition of action: Pickard says that what distinguishes mere bodily movements from actions is that the latter are voluntary, and she goes on to define voluntary action as requiring,

minimally, that the agent be able to either "act in a particular way at a particular time, or not to" (42). Actually, in contemporary philosophy of action, the talk is hardly ever of 'voluntary' action and almost always of 'intentional' action. But that is a minor terminological issue: the problem is rather that the dominant view in contemporary action theory, the so-called Causal Theory of Action, defines action in terms that are very different from the ones endorsed by Pickard here. Some movement is an action, in the classic definition due to Davidson (1963, 1971, 1973, and 1978), if it is intentional under at least one description. And for a movement to be intentional under at least one description that movement needs to have been caused by a primary reason which rationalises at least one of its descriptions (a belief-desire pair in Davidson's original reductive version (1963), otherwise often an intention in more recent non-reductive versions (Bratman 1984 & 1987, Mele&Moser 1994)).

This standard account of action does not require that the agent be able to either act or not act. The reason why this causalist account of action has established itself, as opposed to the one proposed by Pickard, should be quite obvious: an account of action requiring that the agent be able to both act and not act entangles the definition of action in the perennial debate on free will and determinism: it may be said, for example, that Pickard's definition of action requires a libertarian metaphysics.[1]

1 See Frankfurt 1969, Fischer 1994, and van Inwagen 1983 for some classics in this debate. For my own work on the topic, see Di Nucci 2010, Di Nucci 2011a, Di Nucci 2011b, and Di Nucci 2012.

Having put Pickard's definition of action within the wider context of contemporary philosophy of action, let us now look at the dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is a version of the thesis that Pickard argues for, namely that addictive desires are resistible. The second horn of the dilemma is, according to Pickard, implausible: that would be the claim that the behaviour caused by addictive desires does not count as action. Pickard's description of such behaviour is supposed to make it plain that it must count as action: "Drug-seeking and drug-taking behaviour appears to be deliberate, flexible, and involve complicated diachronic planning and execution. It bears all the hallmarks of action" (42). Imagine a drug addict who seeks to buy a dose of heroin. Can we really claim that none of the complicated performances that she will need to successfully bring to completion in order to get her dose of heroin counts as an action? She will have to get dressed and leave the house; alternatively, she may have to find her phone and dial the dealer's number; maybe she will have to find a cash-machine; she may even need to drive to it. At least some of these performances, Pickard is certainly right, must count as actions if anything does. So we agree with Pickard that the second horn of the dilemma is implausible. Does that establish the truth of the first horn of the dilemma, Pickard's thesis that addiction is not irresistible? Pickard's argument is that the performances involved in drug-seeking, such as telephoning and driving to a cash-machine, will count as actions only if alternatives are available

and the agent is able to refrain from these performances. But, so Pickard, if the drug-seeking agent has available alternatives and is able to refrain from drug-seeking performances such as telephoning with her dealer and driving to a cash-machine, then addiction is not irresistible because the agent has open alternatives and is able to refrain.

But Pickard's conclusion that addiction is not irresistible does not follow, and there are two independently sufficient ways to show that: firstly, it does not follow because there are prominent alternatives to Pickard's definition of action. Indeed, as only a small minority of those working in the philosophy of action today would endorse Pickard's definition of action, then it is highly problematic that her conclusion that addiction is not irresistible depends on a very controversial definition of action. Causalists will be able to argue that the drug-seeking performances in question count as action without having to concede that addiction is not irresistible, because causalist will not appeal to open alternatives and being able to refrain from acting in accounting for drug-seeking as action.

This is not the place, though, to offer a full blown argument for or against Pickard's definition of action or the Causal Theory of Action.[2] But there is a

2 And here I do not want to suggest that the Causal Theory of Action is right: there are plenty of interesting challenges to it: Frankfurt 1978, Dreyfus 1988, Hursthouse 1991, Goldie 2000, Zhu 2004, Pollard 2003 & 2006, Sartorio 2005 & 2009, Alvarez 2010, Collins 1997, Dancy 2000, and Stout 1996 (see also Di Nucci 2008, Di Nucci 2009, Di Nucci 2011c, and Di Nucci 2013); not to mention the classics of the so-called Logical Connection argument against causalism,

second independent way of showing that Pickard's claim that addiction is not irresistible does not follow from accepting that drug-seeking counts as action, which does not depend on rejecting Pickard's definition of action. That our drug addict may either drive through town to get to her dealer or alternatively take the ring road shows that she has open possibilities and that, supposedly, when she drives through town, she could have refrained from driving through town – she may have taken the ring road instead. But that there are multiple ways of seeking out her drugs does not yet show that she may have resisted the urge to procure herself some heroin. Indeed, when she drives through town to get to her dealer, she may have refrained from driving through town. But that is not enough: because taking the ring road would have counted as refraining from driving through town but would not have counted as resisting her addiction. My little story is a counterexample to Pickard's dilemma because it meets the conditions for agency without thereby meeting the conditions for resisting addiction, thereby showing that Pickard's dilemma is not fatal to the claim that addiction is irresistible.

Here I have shown that Pickard's argument against the view that addiction is irresistible does not go through. In conclusion I should say that, even if it had been a sound argument, I doubt it would have established Pickard's general

Anscombe 1957, Hampshire 1959, Melden 1961, and von Wright 1971.

thesis that addiction is not a compulsion. And this is because we may indeed think that addiction is not irresistible but that it is still a compulsion.[3]

3 This is not the place to present and defend an alternative view, but the following would fit the bill: addiction is a compulsion because addicted behaviour is such that not performing it is more difficult than performing it. That may be a good way to characterise the compulsive character of addiction which does not depend on the implausible claim of irresistibility. But whether or not this alternative can be defended cannot be established here and this task will have to be left to another paper.

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