

Article

Spiritual Addiction: Searching for Love in a Coldly Indifferent World

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Abstract: I describe “spiritual” addiction as a felt compulsion to seek surrogates in the absence of that spirit of unconditional love underlying core personality change. We awaken to a “real” world akin to a prison in which all sides seem morally compromised, so any choice seems to necessitate sacrificing our conscientious relationship to the truth. Thus, spiritual addiction runs deeper than physical and psychological addictions to include socially accepted “addictions” to all we associate with “success”—including our morality and religion. All that we seek may be grounded in a collectively imbibed prejudice toward truth itself. If so, such a prejudice, underlying spiritual addiction, compromises our will, reason, feelings, actions, and character—including all of our relationships. It underlies the reality of a collective *moral* crisis which, we show, is more deeply a *religious* crisis tempting us to doubt the reality and attainability of that unconditional love that provides a foundation for hope. To overcome the prejudice underlying spiritual addiction, we show how unconditional love can be realized by placing conscientiousness in the foreground of concern as we are guided by the most reliable moral and spiritual witnesses in our history distinct from any religious group claiming to speak in their name.

Keywords: spiritual addiction; faith; truth; hope; reason; religion; love; reality; collective moral crisis



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“Most of us achieve only at rare moments a clear realization of the fact that they have never tasted the fulfillment of existence, that their life does not participate in true, fulfilled existence, that, as it were, it passes true existence by. We nevertheless feel the deficiency at every moment, and in some measure strive to find—somewhere—what we are seeking”. (Buber 1958, p. 172)

1. Introduction

In this paper, I describe spiritual addiction as a felt compulsion to seek surrogates in the absence of a spirit of unconditional love. This paper will demonstrate how the presence of unconditional love is paramount to core personality change—and how its surrogates, as manifested in various forms of addiction, are rooted in a collective prejudice toward truth itself.

Let us consider the following illustration. The adult daughter of my first psychoanalyst once lovingly referred to him as a “spiritual atheist”, which he welcomed. Apparently, there was something about “spirituality” in its contextual connection with his atheism that allowed him to separate it from religion while also enabling him to avoid a wholesale physicalist reduction of the distinctive value of human life. As I took it, he liked to see himself portrayed as a person of character, devoted to the pursuit of truth or, in the language of existentialists, an “atheist of good faith”. By contrast, I was once asked by a small group of Christian philosophers what I was working on at that time. I said I was doing independent research on true and false religion in light of the Holocaust and the testimony of a sub-group of Holocaust witnesses, such as Primo Levi, Jean Amery, and others whom I regarded as “atheists of good faith”—even prophetic-type “witnesses”—of an event I believe has cosmic significance for humanity in view of what it reveals about the moral condition of humanity today.¹ They looked confused, perhaps shocked, which

quickly morphed into a look of disdain. For “good faith”, from their perspective, only applied to religious believers, if not solely to Christians, Protestants, or their particular Protestant denominational sub-group. Of course, my analyst would say the opposite is true: that a theist or “believer of good faith” is an oxymoron.² Religious faith seemed to him so manifestly separable from the spirit of a truly good or moral life that only a person governed by blind and/or bad faith could claim otherwise.

How could such a disparity of viewpoints be understood, much less reconciled, if at all? How is it understood and resolved in any case? Consider a couple seeing a therapist in hope of reconciling their marital conflicts. As each partner expresses their point of view, one might think they were from different planets: each side seems fixated on defending themselves by blaming the other. Each uses whatever form and measure of truth or power they can to try to convince themselves, if not their partner and the therapist that they are right and the other is wrong. Reason itself is being used as a cosmic servant, or what Martin Buber called a “thing-like object” or “It” to advance one’s own agenda. We have here a form of *faith-in-reason* rather than *faith-in-truth*.

What is the therapist to do? If they are familiar with Aristotle’s maxim that in most disputes the truth typically lies somewhere in the middle,³ they know that the conflict cannot be reconciled insofar as even one of the partners is defensively closed off from empathically seeing and acknowledging truth on the other side. That is, that without a genuinely good faith, or *faith-in-truth* attitude placed above one’s felt need to be right, there can be no reconciliation. Without this, the partners are not “arguing” in the sense of rationally collaborating to see and embrace a more comprehensive truth. To counteract this warfare, the therapist ideally role models such a good faith attitude, i.e., a spirit or character governed by sincerity, empathy, and unconditional love.⁴ They provide a safe environment in which the patients are influenced—not compelled—to lay down their defenses and open themselves to see the truths on both sides. Little by little, they begin to trust that truth itself is not against them and that it is only by opening themselves up to increasingly see more clearly a more comprehensive truth that their conflict can be resolved. They may even discover that together they might realize an even higher good than they could alone. Increasingly, they are enabled to not only see but internalize that spirit of unconditional love underlying core personality change.

By unconditional love, I mean something that includes isolated good intentions and actions and good character traits (which Aristotle (1962) called virtues) but also transcends these. I mean a foundation-level state or condition of fidelity toward truth itself, i.e., a way of being. This is not blind or bad faith; nor is it *faith-in-reason* which may invert means and ends as illustrated above. It is *faith-in-truth* itself where the appeal to faith in contrast to—not opposed to—knowledge implies humility or “an absence of a certainty that promotes arrogance”.⁵ This kind of faith can grow through rational or experiential insight; that is, one evolves from lower to higher forms of faith or trust in truth as one sees that truth more fully as it really is.

Thus, unconditional love implies a supreme love for truth and/or what is truly good; this love supersedes our love for anything else, especially the desire to comply with any individual or group self-centered agendas, e.g., appeals to blood or race, gender, nationality, or even religion and science. Such an appeal is hardly new. Carl Rogers was not the first to appeal to unconditional love as the power for core personality change. Plato refers to love as “the friend of man . . . who opens the way to our highest happiness”. Freud tells Jung that “psychoanalysis is in essence a cure through love”. Viktor Frankl says that “the salvation of man is through love and in love”. Additionally, Pitirim Sorokin refers to “the royal road of all-giving creative love” as the only way to create “a mental, moral, or material millennium”.⁶

My general aim in this paper is to speak to those sincerely motivated by *this* kind of good faith to consider the possibility that we are collectively suffering from a prejudice toward truth itself that underlies what I am calling *spiritual addiction*. I am claiming that in the process of waking up to what we call the “real” world, this unconditional love appears

so pervasively compromised by individual and group self-centered agendas that we are tempted to doubt its reality and/or realizability, which tempts us to embrace surrogates. The practical significance of this cannot be sufficiently underscored: if unconditional love is the power requisite for core personality change (i.e., the fulfilment of human nature), and if such a pervasive conditionality of love motivates spiritual addiction (the compulsion to seek surrogates), then the mere belief that we cannot realize such a good inherently works against that good faith willingness to open our minds and hearts to even see and acknowledge that we are enslaved to our prejudices. We may fail to wake up enough to realize that we are unwitting accomplices in a process leading to our own self-annihilation. Or, to put it in other words, we may not realize that we are sitting on a fence within a vast moral gray area, pretending to be innocent bystanders in fear of taking the reality or our moral freedom and responsibility too seriously on one hand, or not seriously enough on the other. We do not take to heart how this becomes the fertile soil for the creation of previously unimagined forms of evil, such as the 100 million deaths from genocides and democides in the last century alone, along with the literal and imminent destruction of our environment and world. The worst among us feed on our indifference.

1.1. Defining Spirituality

Toward counteracting this consequence, my aim in this paper is to bring into the foreground of our investigation spiritual addiction as a form of *moral* or spiritual lack, which insofar as it is acknowledged moves us, akin to hunger, thirst, pain, or any other lack, to search for what can relieve it.⁷ I intend to show that it is the pervasive nature of this morally compromised state that primarily underlies our addictions in general. For what would motivate us to struggle to overcome our addictions if we believe that unconditional love is nothing but a fantasy or illusion and, as such, lacks the requisite power to counteract the escalating forces of destruction we see all around us and within us?

To return to our initial illustration of the conflict between atheists and theists, I intend to show that this collective moral problem is more deeply a religious problem in a way *similar* to the critique of religion by atheists in general,⁸ but unlike them, I intend to use the testimony of a sub-set of atheist witnesses of the Holocaust, e.g., Primo Levi and Jean Amery, to show that this collective moral problem is not limited to what we call “religion”, but includes atheists and our secular or scientific community as well. Levi’s testimony of the absence of any moral difference between atheists and theists in the microcosm of Auschwitz—and the macrocosm of our world today—is not motivated by any scapegoating tactic aimed at blaming the other side to elevate one’s own, as if atheists have greater moral power than theists or they alone have the requisite power to counteract our present course toward human self-destruction. Nor are these witnesses claiming that reason in and of itself can provide this power (as Amery (1980) graphically illustrates in the powerlessness of “The Intellectual in Auschwitz”). Rather, their testimony is an indictment of us all, atheists and theists alike. Whatever we call our religious faith and scientific reason, they are just different forms of corruption of the human heart or conscience demonstrating our lack of faith in unconditional love. Stronger still, unlike a great many atheist existentialists, this sub-group of atheist witnesses are not indicting reality or existence itself; nor even any possible super-natural or non-material God at its core. Rather, they are indicting the elevation of individual and group self-centered agendas above true goodness itself. They are referring to our lack of a Buber-like intimately loving, “I & Thou” connection in all our relationships, including our relationship to ourselves. From this vantage point, I claim our collective moral problem is more deeply a religious problem because while the map revealing to humanity the way to realize this love has been transmitted through the mediation of the most reliable religious witnesses in our history, that map has been concealed by spiritually vacuous forms of mainstream religion claiming to speak in its name.

To be clear, I am not claiming there are no real or significant moral distinctions to be drawn between individuals, but that such distinctions are typically drawn within a prejudiced moral gray area. My appeal to Levi as not only an atheist of good faith, but

a prophetic-like witness, is especially relevant here. For if he is right about the lack of any difference in *moral* power between atheists and theists, then on what rational grounds can we lay claim to a foundation for hope to counteract the rising dark tide of a moral de-evolution imminently culminating in our self-annihilation? To be sure, some theists may interpret this as a good thing—as an apocalyptic revelation of an end of times scenario—but other theists may view this as a prophetic warning precisely to prevent such a catastrophe. Either way, I suggest that the reality of the challenge itself is becoming increasingly difficult to deny. Levi, at least, is not appealing to a secular or scientific hope in preference to a religious hope, but the lack of an adequate moral foundation for hope on both sides.

The significance of religion, then, enters the foreground of our concern in that it is the *only* historical vehicle in and through or by which such a collective moral education has been revealed. For example, one can easily trace the most therapeutic doctrines in Freudian psychoanalysis to religious history. Thus, the danger of a wholesale rejection of religion lies in throwing away the baby with the bathwater. My appeal to an orientation of good faith subject to an experiential process, by contrast, concedes the atheist's claim that our present forms of religion are morally compromised while nonetheless warning us of the danger of embracing an anti-religion extreme as if we can avoid any faith commitment in some primary value worthy of human trust.

In other words, to resolve this collective moral and religious problem, I distinguish the spirit from the form of religion. By the *form* of religion, I have in mind the tendency of theists to subordinate their faith in truth to faith in themselves or their own doctrines and ritual practices, as though one specific religion (or any) is necessary for the realization of a truly good life. By contrast, the *spirit* of religion refers to faith in truth and true goodness as the one thing needful, so that doctrine and practice are subordinated to that primary value. This spirit, then, is manifested or incarnated in the lives of the most reliable spiritual witnesses in our history (i.e., those marked by the purity of their devotion to the truth and their fullness of insight about reality), though not necessarily in the lives of those claiming to speak in their name.

However, insofar as the contemporary atheist sees no such exceptional moral power in the lives of theists today while theists profess to have that morality they so evidently lack, both remain subject to different kinds of prejudice. They are similar to two antelope so intently engaged in defending themselves and attacking the other that neither sees the lion about to pounce on and devour them both.

In contrast to religious demands for compliance, my aim is to direct our attention to witnesses who do not ask us to exercise blind faith in them but invite us to look and see for ourselves what is truly worthy of our deepest trust. Such a spiritual religion of the heart calls us toward potentially endless creative development on the stable foundation of truth. It has power not only to breathe new life into what is of genuine value in any form of religion we may identify with, but also to encourage us to create new forms by the revelation of a transcultural religion of the heart consistent with Augustine's maxim, "love and do as you please". That is, place your faith in truth and true goodness and you will fulfill the spirit of any genuine moral law.

1.2. Structure of the Paper or Steps to Realize This Aim

I will first present the case of a patient, Brandon, who, as with Levi, has sufficiently awakened to the "real" world⁹ that his awareness of our present condition is undermining his hope for humanity and himself. This awareness of our contingent condition and belief about our prospects for hope underly his felt unwillingness and/or inability to pursue socially accepted goals. My aim is to use this case to bring into the foreground of our investigation both the character of this spiritual emptiness and what can implicitly fill it. We shall especially narrow in on Brandon's claim that despite this increasing awareness of the real world, there is also a growing experiential awareness of the reality of unconditional love, which has the power to counteract the aforementioned rising dark tide. It is this, he claims, that has kept him alive over the past two years. This faith in true goodness, then,

presents itself to him as an alternative to both a naïve and illusory false optimism on one hand, and a pessimistic, if not wholly nihilistic, insistence on the unavoidability of human selfishness on the other.

With this case before us, we will then briefly ask ourselves whether, or to what extent, our current addiction literature (along with our broader educational context) speaks to this problem. To this end, we will primarily look at Lance Dodes' theory of psychological addiction as underlying all addiction. My intention here is not to provide a meta-analysis or critique of all prevailing theories of addiction, nor even to examine a theory of addiction that is the most recent or widely accepted. Rather, I am merely using Dodes' theory as a kind of rhetorical device to bring into the foreground of our investigation the possibility of a deeper spiritual addiction underlying addiction's physical, psychological, moral, and social symptoms. My hope is that such an example may be sufficient to illustrate the general avoidance within current theories of precisely the foundation-level moral and spiritual problem at issue here.

Toward providing a solution, I narrow in on this deeper moral and spiritual problem implicit in Dodes' account. I highlight the way all prejudice works by aligning itself with what is, or purports to be, the highest revelation of truth and value in our history. That is, the only way the power of truth can be avoided, manipulated, or controlled is by appearing, akin to a shapeshifter, to be the very thing one is not. Thus, we see why every original religious (or scientific) form of revelation actually manifesting the spirit of truth is invariably followed by a chameleon-like imitation without it.

We are then prepared to see why the most subtle barrier in our way to such a truly good or spiritual life is what I call "good parent (teacher, therapist, leader) syndrome". That is, the tendency of those in the highest positions of authority to compare themselves *within* a morally compromised norm rather than raising the moral bar by comparing themselves with the very best moral or spiritual examples in our history. I suggest that what is most needed here is not merely our acknowledgement of this prejudice in the highest places of authority, but the understanding of the likely cost of this acknowledgement, viz., the possible loss of one's following, along with the likelihood of others using this acknowledgement to elevate their own lust for power. However, I also point out that this is precisely the cost we must be willing to pay if we are to serve a truth and goodness greater than ourselves.

2. Case Presentation

2.1. Brandon

Brandon¹⁰ is a 35-year-old single heterosexual male, out of work for the past 2 years,¹¹ and on the verge of becoming homeless. He refers to his general condition over this period as being profoundly depressed and in an almost constant state of anxiety that intrudes into his sleep and most of his waking hours.¹² Although not actively suicidal, in his darkest hours, he has wondered if it might be better if he was dead rather than suffer this "endless pain". In such moments, he sees no light at the end of the tunnel, as if life were an unbearable burden which he must bear, if only to spare his mother and a few close others from blaming themselves for his death.

2.2. A Typical Day

Brandon typically wakes from a sleepless night to an onslaught of anxious thoughts and feelings that threaten to overwhelm him. He consistently arrives at his 7 a.m. daily psychotherapy sessions 20 min late, wearing dirty clothes, un-showered, and disheveled with unkempt hair and beard. He complains of the squalor in the temporarily free apartment in which he lives: clothes, take-out food containers, cigarette butts,¹³ and empty beer and liquor bottles strewn across his dirty bedroom floor and the corners of his bed. He condemns himself for his felt *unwillingness and/or inability* to clean this mess up. He lacks the motivation to even buy food more than once a day. He insists he cannot muster the strength to look for a job.

When asked, he can predict beforehand what is likely to occur each day. After therapy, he will drive to a local liquor store to buy whatever number of whiskey shots he feels in that moment he will need to make it through the day. He will drink 1–2 shots in the liquor store parking lot in hope this will provide enough motivation to buy something to eat before returning home to play online multiplayer video games for most of the day, interspersed with drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and cannabis.

2.3. Therapy and an Existential Crisis

Most surprising to his parents, relatives, and friends is that Brandon has been in therapy for the past 10+ years, along with periodic psychiatric evaluations and treatment with psychotropic medications. When asked why he does not find another therapist, he insists that without this therapist he would probably be dead. To be clear, for most of this 10-year period he was not in the same condition he is in now. Prior to these past 2 years, he only went to therapy once per week, and by outside behavioral appearances, he was very successful—working as a producer with a six-figure salary, living in a nice apartment, with a large and supportive social network of friends. However, his increasing experience of the “real” world—especially in the form of a toxic work environment, culminated 2 years ago in an existential crisis, at which time the floor his life was standing upon seemed to give way. His increased reliance on the addictions mentioned above were inadequate to enable him to cope with his anxiety, which culminated in him quitting his job.

2.4. Moments of Hope

Brandon’s experiences over the past 2 years have not been entirely dark. In certain moments he has felt hope in the dawning of a new day, or less anxious after meditating with his therapist for 5–10 min at the start of his sessions. He has especially felt calmer after taking a walk with his therapist along the LA River. Above all, he has experienced bursts of optimistic energy when his therapist has been able to provide a mirror for him to see his real strengths and prospects for hope. Thus, despite his seeming lack of outward progress from the vantage point of socio-cultural values such as having a good job and other signs of “normal” functional behavior, he senses and, at times, sees a form and measure of real inward growth. When he does, he finds himself more able to vividly recall, and be nourished by, not only seemingly isolated or random glimpses of light at the end of his dark tunnel, but a more tangible sense that his struggle—even over the past 2 years—might actually be symptomatic of a deeper, ongoing form of progress. He can imagine that his suffering is rooted less in any deficiency limited to or originating in him than in a deficit he had imbibed from his infancy from a broader social context, and that his addictions are symptomatic of a deeper and more pervasive spiritual lack or deficiency. He can sense that the profound emptiness and pain he feels revolves around a form of collective cold-indifference, rather than any alleged happenstance, and he can understand that his pain might even be of value in moving him to look to see more clearly and acknowledge more deeply a human-caused moral complicity—this acknowledgement being the only thing that could relieve his suffering.

2.5. A Closer Look at Brandon’s Addictive Behavior

Although in the past 2 years Brandon has been able to do without alcohol, other addictive substances, and even video games for several months at a time, over the past 6 months or more, he has averaged 8–10 drinks a day. He knows that whatever amount of alcohol he buys he will drink; that the more he drinks, the more depressed he will become; and that the more depressed and anxious he feels, the more he will drink. It seems clear to him that his depression, rather than his alcohol consumption, lies at the root of his problem. Alcohol is not the driving force underlying his addiction. It is precisely because of this that he does not know how much liquor he will buy until he actually arrives at the liquor store and sees how he psychologically feels. This decision has essentially nothing to do with physical symptoms of tolerance or withdrawal. Reason and willpower in the moment

of acute anxiety and despair seem to play virtually no role in his “decision” to drink. He does not seem able to even re-direct his attention to less anxiety producing thoughts that might move him in a direction opposed to the thoughts and feelings driving his addictive behavior. In short, Brandon feels virtually powerless to do anything constructive, as if the only thing he is able to do is embrace or succumb to the seduction of those addictive behaviors that momentarily shift his attention away from his emptiness and pain. He does this despite knowing that these actions will invariably leave him feeling worse at the end of the day and, as the days and months add up, even more hopeless by reinforcing his conviction that he cannot change.

2.6. A Concrete Example of Brandon’s Powerlessness

One Monday, Brandon came to therapy feeling unusually confident in his ability to buy only four shots of alcohol that day, in part because he had only three and a half shots on Sunday, two shots on Saturday, and one shot on Friday. He was especially motivated because of plans to visit his family on the East Coast in a few days. He wanted to arrive sober, clean-shaven, and wearing clean clothes. However, despite this relative progress, he felt so paralyzed by anxiety that he could not even clean his clothes at the laundromat and considered having the cleaners wash them for him. However, he felt ashamed at the thought of not being able to clean them himself. His therapist asked, “How would you feel at the end of the day if you succeeded in drinking only three shots (instead of four), ate a healthy breakfast, and had clean clothes even if washed by the cleaners”? Brandon said he would feel pretty good. So, after leaving therapy, he went to the liquor store and purchased three shots, drinking only one before going out for breakfast.

While eating, however, he began to dissociate, as if he was being assaulted by two different and opposed spiritual (non-audible personal) voices. On one hand, there was the “usual” voice of his therapist, attuned to his experience and striving to collaborate with Brandon’s truest and best sense of himself. On the other hand, he imagined his parents and relatives, friends and broader social world shaking their heads at him for being a failure or loser without a job and a weakling for being unable to control his own behavior. Worse, in this moment he imagined his therapist judging him in the same way, as if—despite what his therapist might have said to the contrary—he sensed his therapist was frustrated with him and in that frustration judging him for stubbornly refusing to play a responsible role in his own recovery. He believed his therapist, similarly to his family and everyone else, did not understand what he was experiencing. Thus, instead of helping him, they were actually collaborating in his suffering, even if unintentionally. This made him feel unbearably alone. He felt condemned in their eyes, as if the primary causal root of his addictions was some moral deficit in him for which he should feel guilty and ashamed. It was in that critical moment (Dodes 2002, p. 54) that Brandon felt driven to not only drink his remaining two shots, but to rush to a liquor store to buy a fifth of whiskey. He then sat in his car for 2 h, drinking about two more shots from that bottle,¹⁴ feeling overwhelmed with guilt, shame, and sorrow as he tearfully and unsuccessfully tried to find the strength of will to wash his own clothes rather than suffer the ignominy of depending upon a cleaner to do it for him.

2.7. Therapeutic Misattunement and Confession

Brandon did not go to the cleaners. However, he did feel safe enough the next morning to tell his therapist what he had experienced the previous day. He said he sensed, on a gut level, his therapist’s frustration with his lack of “sufficient” outward or behavioral progress. He felt that his therapist had shifted from remaining empathically attuned to Brandon’s experience to being more concerned with Brandon’s outward behavior, regardless of his therapist’s underlying motives.

As Brandon talked, his therapist reflected on similar experiences of his own and how such a lack of attunement and understanding from those he had most relied upon had negatively impacted him in the same way it did Brandon. This moved him to confirm or validate Brandon’s intuitive experience. He did not defensively attribute it to Brandon’s

“subjective perspective” while inwardly holding an opposing perspective. Rather, he openly acknowledged his feelings of frustration and his felt need for validation as a “good-enough” therapist (Winnicott 1965), as they collaboratively explored their shared sense of broader social forces influencing us all to “fit in” to group self-centered agendas at the cost of sacrificing allegiance to one’s own conscience, i.e., what Brandchaft et al. (2010) would call “systems of pathological accommodation”.

2.8. *Toward a Cure*

In that moment of authentic, empathic connection, or what Buber (1970) called a dialogical I and Thou understanding, Brandon no longer felt unbearably alone as he did the day before. He said that the previous day’s experience of abandonment by his therapist felt worlds apart from the spirit he now sensed emanating from his therapist, as if he were a truly ally, struggling as best he could to understand Brandon’s inner world. His therapist was once again standing with him not only as a fellow traveler struggling to climb the same mountain, but also as a guide with a bit more experience to help Brandon see a way out of his present disorientation and darkness. In other words, his therapist seemed able to hold a true hope for him, which Brandon could not yet see for himself, but could nevertheless rely upon until he could see it for himself.¹⁵ His therapist’s awareness of this objective truth about Brandon’s condition also brought with it a kind of moral power¹⁶ that could and did enliven Brandon’s will to care for himself. This power¹⁷ seemed greater than the therapist and Brandon themselves, yet it was experienced by them both in a way that reassured Brandon that there really was a way out of his present darkness.

This is what seemed lacking in that moment when Brandon found himself in despair in his car. It seemed as if his therapist, in his own frustration, was trying to influence Brandon to rely upon his own will separate from his own experiential sense of such a true hope and that sense of hope he previously saw in the eyes of his therapist. In that moment of frustration, his therapist placed himself between Brandon and that revelation of hope instead of helping Brandon see it more clearly and fully for himself. In that moment, therefore, his therapist lost sight of the vital instrumental role he played in tangibly collaborating with that spirit of truth and love on Brandon’s behalf. In short, in that moment, his therapist had, in fact, abandoned Brandon to his own resources rather than continuing to empathically suffer with him to help him see and feel that truth for himself.

2.9. *A Call for a Collective Confession*

What especially hit home for Brandon’s therapist was not merely the realization of his own empathic misattunement, but the realization of his own need for a far more intimate and continuous experiential connection with that spirit of truth and love that could alone make tangibly present the meaning, purpose, and primary value of human life. This is not an appeal to a spiritual life separated from our physically embodied life. Nor is it an appeal to a spirit that only speaks to theists. Rather, it is an appeal to a spirit of truth and love speaking in and to and through each and every one of us, which can only be actualized and internalized within us when we are willing to invite it in. For it cannot compel us without violating who or what we are. This is what Brandon most needed in that moment when he sat sobbing in his car, desperately trying to hear that loving voice within himself, but he could not because it was obstructed—not only by a coldly indifferent world, but by the one person he had come to trust more than anyone else.

2.10. *Toward Further Elucidating the Meaning of Spiritual Addiction and Why It Matters*

I contend that Brandon’s case illustrates no mere subjective psychological problem limited to him or within him. Despite real and significant subjective differences in our experiences, there is a sense in which we may all suffer from such a spiritual emptiness or addiction not grounded in our neurobiology, nor the more specific deficits of our individual parental and cultural upbringing. I am not appealing to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)-type moral, religious, or even spiritual diagnosis of this problem and solution—at least

not as this is commonly understood.¹⁸ On the contrary, I contend that the primary barrier to a truly healthy spiritual life is an implicit, if not explicit, assumption by both theists and atheists today that a truly conscientious or altruistic life is impossible to realize, if not pathological (Oakley et al. 2012).¹⁹

In more religious terms, I am referring, to take just one example, to Gandhi's criticism of a pervasive tendency he observed among Christians of his day to lay claim to privileged spiritual status while also defending a religious doctrine of salvation in sin rather than a doctrine of salvation from sin that can speak to the moral struggle of atheists and theists of good faith alike (Gandhi 1993). Salvation from sin might be compared to fidelity in a truly healthy developing marriage, which requires an increasingly strong commitment and eschews any alleged necessity of being unfaithful at all, much less repeatedly or habitually. The idea of salvation from sin can speak to the moral struggle of atheists and theists of good faith alike. The collective moral indictment, of course, does not deny real and significant moral differences between us as atheists and theists. It only points to a problem which, although suffered by us all, is all the more suffered by conscientious atheists and theists, which places them in a different camp from the unconscientious on both sides.

3. Review of the Addiction Literature

Demonstrating that there is a general moral and religious bias in the addiction literature, along with an account of its causes, would require an investigation beyond the limits of this paper. Specifically, it would require an examination of the ontological, epistemological, and ethical commitments or assumptions of current research as grounded in Hume's empiricism, Kant's failed attempt to overcome Hume's epistemological skepticism, and current post-modern subjective interpretations of Husserl's phenomenology.²⁰ Since I cannot do this, it must suffice for me to posit that the current naturalistic or physicalist emphasis for understanding addiction is an extreme reaction to a prejudiced religious cultural context, a reaction which has, over the past 100 years or more, increasingly broadened to include psychological and broader environmental influences. This corresponds with major psychotherapeutic shifts in orientation and emphasis beginning with classical behaviorism (physical), psychoanalysis (psychological), humanistic-existentialism (free will and moral responsibility), multi-culturalism (broader social influences), and transpersonalism (self-transcendent good). Despite their initial emphases, as each of these orientations have evolved, they have adopted a more integrated and interdisciplinary orientation. My use of Lance Dodes' psychological approach to addiction, therefore, may be viewed as a rhetorical device to bring the moral/spiritual aspect of addiction into the foreground of investigation while fully conceding the appearance of me simplistically dismissing the real and significant contributions of this collaborative struggle to make sense of and resolve our most foundation-level human problems.

3.1. Physical Addiction

Clearly, Brandon has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol manifested in symptoms of physical withdrawal and tolerance (Dodes 2002, p. 70). However, he has also been able to overcome this physical dependence and be alcohol-free for many months at a time. The same holds true of his addictions to other substances, e.g., nicotine and benzodiazepines. This confuses him: if he sometimes feels a non-compulsory *desire* for social drinking without any felt *necessity* to drink, while at other times he feels a form of *compulsion* to drink despite a *desire* not to drink, why should he believe alcoholism is a neurobiological *disease*, necessitating life-long abstinence?²¹ Why should he have to abstain from alcohol but not substances such as benzodiazepines, etc.? More importantly, if he can lower his anxiety, as well as lessen his feelings of depression, by re-directing his attention by means of meditation or other mindfulness practices, then why believe these symptoms are primarily, if at all, rooted in his biology?²² He wants to know what this power is, and how to gain access to it, so that it might free him from his enslavement to this, that, or any addiction. Brandon's earlier described experience, along with his own familiarity with drug addiction

studies such as the famous Rat Park experiments,²³ are consistent with Dodes' claim that there is virtually no scientific evidence for any genetic or neurochemical basis for any addictions, regardless of results from twin studies, adoption studies, or direct gene studies, along with similar arguments against addiction as being rooted in one's brain chemistry (*ibid.*, p. 98ff).

3.2. Current Approaches to Addiction

More current approaches to addiction as physical claim to be integrated by including environmental considerations. Yet, insofar as "environment" is used in such approaches as a catch-all term to include anything other than what a researcher regards as most acceptably physical, such approaches may not imply any shift of ground. As [Peele and Alexander \(1998\)](#) put it, "this new theoretical synthesis is less than meets the eye: It mainly recycles discredited notions while including piecemeal modifications that make the theories marginally more realistic in their descriptions of addictive behavior". For example, the authors of a 2021 journal article ([Heilig et al. 2021](#)) acknowledge widespread scientific criticism of substance addiction as a brain disease, but nonetheless assert "that the foundational premise that addiction has a neurobiological basis is fundamentally sound". They point out that the brain disease model was originally presented as an "effective response to prevailing nonscientific, moralizing, and stigmatizing attitudes to addiction", which treated addiction as simply "the result of a person's moral failing or weakness of character, rather than a 'real' disease".²⁴ They concede that "any useful conceptualization of addiction requires an understanding both of the brains involved, and of environmental factors that interact with those brains". They state that the disease model "in no way negates the role of psychological, social and economic processes as both causes and consequences of substance use".²⁵

In short, such a token concession to environmental causes may be interpreted to support the authors' fundamental materialistic prejudice: "If not from the brain, from where do the healthy and unhealthy choices people make originate"? Or, as powerfully articulated by Francis Crick, "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules". This is hardly the humility that the atheist "Four Horsemen" ([Hitchens et al. 2019](#)) lay claim to as the mark of scientific investigation. As Sam Harris puts it, "Scientists in my experience are the first people to say they don't know. If you get scientists to start talking outside their area of specialization, they immediately . . . say things like, 'I'm sure there's someone in the room who knows more about this than I do' (*ibid.*, p. 52)". Or, as Richard Dawkins puts it, "Science may or may not . . . solve these Deep Problems. And if science . . . can't answer them, nothing can. Certainly not theology (*ibid.*, p. 21)". To me, at least, such claims are hardly exceptions to a rule. They purport to go far beyond any mere criticism of current moralizing views of addiction. On the contrary, they express a widespread and rationally unsupported naturalistic and deterministic bias rejecting the indeterministic causal role of human moral freedom and the knowledge of objective moral values. As such, it appears to me as a strawman argument used to simply dismiss an entire cumulative history of human experiential moral wisdom as unworthy of serious rational inquiry.

3.3. Psychological Addiction

With respect to Brandon's addiction to video games, which obviously does not involve withdrawal and tolerance, such a disease model of addiction seems unable to account for the specific character of the compulsion involved. According to Dodes' alternative account: "An addiction, then, is truly present only when there is a psychological drive to perform the addictive behavior—that is, only when there is a psychological addiction" (*ibid.*, p. 74), regardless of whether the addiction also involves substances capable of causing symptoms of withdrawal and tolerance. In keeping with Dodes' account, Brandon is aware of an inner psychical conflict between his desire for healthy functioning²⁶ and his desire for the object

of his addictive behavior. Although in some moments the object of his addictive behavior powerfully moves him to embrace it above his health, at other times his concern for his health exercises a more powerful constraint such that he is both more willing and able to act in a healthier way. In the moments when he believes/feels most socially invalidated and/or overwhelmingly anxious, trapped, or out of control, he feels a more powerful need to embrace the addictive object to momentarily restore a sense of control. In other moments, by contrast, when he believes, sees, and feels a sense of worth and/or hope for positive change, the aforementioned sense of powerlessness is diminished.

3.4. AA Model of Spirituality and Addiction through the Lens of Lance Dodes

Given my primary concern with spiritual addiction, let us now turn to Dodes'²⁷ critique of AA in view of what seems to be his implicit rejection of any type of moral, spiritual, and especially religious basis for addiction. This seems especially needful given that AA is the most widespread, if not the only, kind of treatment available to those suffering from addiction. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the myths about addiction Dodes describes are implicitly if not explicitly ascribed to AA. As mentioned, Brandon's own experience resonates with a cause of addiction deeper than the biological or physical, but as an atheist/agnostic, he is also extremely skeptical of religious ideations that presume an absolute moral authority he believes they lack. Thus, he is inclined to agree with Dodes' critique of AA-type religious explanations of addiction and their associated moralizing accounts.²⁸

Dodes claims that according to AA, an "addict"²⁹ such as Brandon must hit rock bottom (*ibid.*, p. 93), which Dodes interprets as AA saying that Brandon is to regard his slips or setbacks as "failures" within a process that must necessarily culminate in a "near total collapse" before he can realize the disease at the root of his addiction(s). If Dodes' interpretation is correct, then according to AA, this collapse would lead Brandon to the realization of the necessity of surrendering his will to a higher power (*ibid.*, p. 95ff). However, given Brandon's ability to control his addictions for periods without such a total collapse in addition to his atheistic orientation, how could he conscientiously identify with these claims despite his felt need for some kind of tangible social support?

With regard to surrendering his will to a higher power in particular, if this is intended by AA (as per Dodes) to mean giving up any form and measure of agency to another—even to a "god"—how is such a wholly dependent relationship supposed to enable the addict to play even a collaborative role in one's own recovery? Brandon already feels pressure by both religious and secular groups to blindly conform to their respective forms of prejudice; how much more, therefore, is such an absolute demand by AA likely to compound this problem? This lies at the heart of his problem, *viz.*, not merely the moral conflict he senses between his willingness and ability to act in his own best-interest, but the influence of a broader social context demanding blind conformity to group agendas above his own conscience. On one hand, he senses that there is some active and collaborative role he can and should play; on the other, he feels the need for a self-validating collaborative relationship with others, such as his therapist, in the healing process.

Another myth that Dodes attributes to AA is the necessity of counting one's days of sobriety (*ibid.*, p. 96ff). Dodes states that "restarting from zero is the dark side of this tradition" and that "it is both punitive and unrealistic (*ibid.*, p. 96)". That is, he interprets AA to be treating such slips as "failures" or as "backsliding" into the same condition one was in before. If so, then it would seem not only inaccurate and punitive, but even more likely to feed the self-condemnation that already seems to be driving Brandon's addiction. By contrast, Brandon would definitely concur with Dodes that his slips do not imply that he has failed to make any real and significant progress toward overcoming his addiction, and that the temptation to believe the contrary might actually blind him to see the real progress he has made and is making.

Brandon's progressive awareness is also especially relevant for Dodes' interpretation of AA's claim that the addict has a problem with knowing reality. As Dodes points out,

there seems to be no evidence that those suffering from addictions have more of a problem with knowing reality than the non-addicted. Not only do studies show the opposite is true,³⁰ but the more Brandon has awakened to see the real world, the more he seems to find his overwhelming anxiety and despair reasonable. In other words, he is suffering from a form of existential anxiety and despair grounded in a collective lack of meaning, purpose and value for human life generally as well as his own life in particular, which is fueling his addictions.

3.5. Further Reflections on Dodes' Myths

While in some ways, Dodes' "debunking" of AA myths supports our understanding of addiction through Brandon's eyes, in other ways it misses some important alternative explanations. It dismisses the spiritual as a monolith rather than considering AA's interpretation as only one possibility. Looking closer at Dodes' assessments, we can see where a spiritual interpretation might actually be helpful in the understanding of addiction and further our pursuit of the idea of a spiritual addiction underlying addiction as a whole.

First, with respect to Dodes' rejection of one needing to surrender to a higher power: does this not equally, if not all the more so, apply to any so-called secular or scientific theories claiming authority for the correct understanding of addiction and its treatment? Is Dodes, for example, not asking his patients to willingly surrender their self-reliance to him (a higher power) to gain sufficient access to that knowledge requisite for change that he has privileged access to? On the other hand, let us assume that the most reliable religious witnesses in our history³¹ acknowledge the necessity of some form of self-surrender to a higher power. This surrender may refer only to a willing surrender to what one increasingly sees to be of the highest value for one's life, along with surrendering previously held prejudices obstructing one's way to that good. This kind of surrender implies no rejection of the self or one's will or freedom. On the contrary, by opening the door to the highest vision of reality we are capable of, it expands our freedom and creative potential indefinitely. It might be compared to a willing commitment to a partner within a collaborative relationship that not only nourishes each partner individually, but also enables them together to create a value greater than each could realize alone. Thus, Dodes' interpretation of that self-surrender to a higher power that reduces a person to a slave in relation to a tyrant is not representative of the viewpoint of the most reliable religious witnesses in our history. As John Wesley put it, "You cannot force the conscience of anyone. You cannot compel another to see as you see. You ought not to attempt it. Reason and persuasion are the only weapons you ought to use".

I should add that the relationship between free will and the grace (love or goodness) of any form of higher power (e.g., the love of a parent, therapist, medical doctor, or even a good God) is one of the most if not the most complex and controversial problems in our moral and religious history. Within Christianity, for example, one finds apologists on both extreme ends. Nor can any of us avoid taking our own stand in a way that invariably manifests itself in all our relationships, including psychotherapy. This may help us to appreciate Brandon's struggle over the extent to which the lack of power he feels over his addictions is rooted in his own will and/or an inability influenced by imbibed prejudices and ongoing social demands to pathologically accommodate to this or that group's agenda. It is more than likely, therefore, not only for atheists biased toward religion, but also for theists biased toward atheism, to embrace one extreme or the other in a way that misinterprets their true relationship.

As for Dodes' interpretation of AA's dark side in insisting on the necessity of counting one's days of sobriety, Dodes is not, presumably, claiming that slips are necessary, much less inherently good. On the contrary, one might reasonably believe that it is precisely because repeated slips tend to reinforce addictive habits that this might motivate greater vigilance in the effort to form healthy habits. However, as difficult as it is to overcome unhealthy habits in the formation of healthy ones, it may be as difficult, if not more difficult, to maintain the reformed habit. The longer one is able to do so—and this almost universally by means of

positive reinforcement from one's social surroundings—the greater the power to maintain or retain that progress. Thus, the demonstrable ability to remain sober for a long period of time (by means of a potentially validating social context such as an AA group) may actually work to: (a) empirically confirm the addict's conviction that he can overcome his addiction indefinitely; and (b) further motivate greater vigilance (in relying upon such a cohesive social support network) to overcome even the most subtle temptations towards strengthening his resilience. In short, in opposition to Dodes, AA's counting one's days of sobriety need not imply that one has made no progress or has fallen back to where one was at the start. I believe the relevance of this for a spiritual cause of addiction revolves around the appeal to such a life-long social context. In view of our distinction between the spirit and form of a religion (or any group), we would do well to ask whether one's identification with any AA group promotes just another form of prejudicial group mind or, alternatively, works to increasingly nourish one's relationship with that spirit of truth and goodness that liberates us to be our true selves whether in or outside the group.

Finally, as for Dodes' interpretation of AA that the addict may know reality even more than the non-addict—while at odds with AA's specific spiritual beliefs—does not imply that both the addict and so-called non-addict are free of a more deeply shared prejudice toward reality itself. Indeed, this is the testimony of the most reliable religious witnesses in our history. They include but do not reduce reality to physical reality. They appeal to a far broader reality, along with a far broader empirical or experiential awareness of it than the narrow empiricism of our day. For present purposes, the latter, in contrast to the former, treat our ability to experientially know moral, spiritual, and religious values as no less confirmable as our knowledge of anything else.³² As in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", those who have gone so far as to discover that they are being deceived by blind leaders of the blind (theistic or atheistic) are still far from seeing reality outside the cave. Thus, behind the veil of darkness and despair that we increasingly discover characterizing our so-called "real" world is the possibility of a reality of truth and love, wonder and beauty that extends far beyond our ability to imagine, much less see, relative to our present condition in the cave. It is not that we all cannot see it and realize it, but that we cannot see it insofar as we continue to believe there is nothing to be seen. This is why these witnesses, as opposed to atheists and theists demanding blind faith in them, call each and every one of us to open our eyes to undertake the requisite experiential process to see the truth for ourselves.

Is this not consistent with what good therapists attempt to do with their patients? Do such therapists not travail with and for their patients, to help them see that their despair for themselves and humanity is rooted in our collective unwillingness and/or inability to see and adequately mirror the true worth of our children? Insofar as the therapist can do this, the patient is enabled to see through the veil of that overarching prejudice to find the freedom to love.

4. Analysis and Solution

Having looked at some of the characteristics of spiritual addiction in Brandon's case and having briefly examined Dodes' account of psychological addiction, I now want to bring into the foreground Dodes' implicit acknowledgement of the primacy of moral values in the problem of addiction. In so doing, I intend to expound my own view of addiction as a reaction to a form of moral or spiritual bankruptcy.

Moral vs. Social Power and Weakness

Dodes repeatedly refers to the way in which addicts such as Brandon tend to be incredibly cruel in blaming themselves for being unable and/or unwilling to overcome their addictions (ibid., p. 12). They believe they should feel guilty and ashamed. These beliefs may be so convincing that the addict feels almost driven to suicide to relieve this constant emptiness and pain (ibid., p. 13). Dodes rightly claims that the moral beliefs driving this suffering are both false and the cause of the addict's suffering, and he attributes them to a prejudicial social context. But why does the addict believe these claims? How

does Dodes know that these beliefs are false? How can a patient, such as Brandon, be helped to distinguish these false, socially imbibed prejudices from true values within a process of coming to know them as the apparent means to overcome any form of addiction?

First, insofar as we are willing and able to empathically sit with Brandon sobbing in his car, we may feel less inclined to blindly assume that he is willingly deceiving himself and/or others. He certainly seems to be deeply suffering from forces he does not understand and thus has no immediate control over. We may also find ourselves more willing and able to empathize with him insofar as we too feel the weight of the demands for blind conformity to group prejudices. Additionally, if we can recognize these things, we may also begin to appreciate, with Brandon's therapist, the possibility of a role we may all be playing in Brandon's suffering as long as we avoid putting such prejudices to the test of our own evolving experience of the truth. Is this, or something similar to this, not what Dodes is directing our attention to with respect to false yet pervasively accepted moral and religious judgments of the addict?

Dodes is right: the fact that a person suffering from an addiction, such as Brandon, may believe and feel he is primarily or solely responsible for his addiction does not imply that that belief is true (or true in the specific sense that he believes). As Dodes puts it, "we live in a culture that frequently treats people with addictions as if their problem was caused by a moral deficiency . . . even though this is not true (ibid., p. 79)". Notwithstanding these culturally imbibed moral beliefs, myths, or prejudices and their correlative feelings, the person suffering from an addiction is not, according to Dodes, morally culpable, stupid, or even morally weak. However, "since no one has helped them find a reasonable explanation for their addiction, it is easy for them to assume it's due to moral weakness or stupidity as if these were the only logical explanations" (ibid., p. 12). In support of his contention that the problem of the one suffering from an addiction is not due to his unwillingness to act rightly, as opposed to some form of innocent ignorance and correlative powerlessness or inability, he appeals to one case after another in which those suffering from an addiction believe and feel, similarly to Brandon, that they "can't stop" (ibid.), that in the case of addictions we are confronted with a form of subjective inability as opposed to any mere unwillingness to change.

Dodes then claims (ibid., p. 14) that what is driving or causing any addiction is something psychological within the individual. What precisely does he mean by this? A reasonable interpretation is that Brandon has been psychologically indoctrinated by outside social forces to believe (falsely) certain cultural moral myths or prejudices which, insofar as he continues to believe them, he lacks the requisite power to counteract them. Yet, as previously mentioned, Dodes seems to sweepingly reject any form of moral, spiritual, or non-physical cause other than what he calls "psychological", which itself begins to seem suspect given his appeal to drives. At least it suggests an appeal to Freud's biologically instinctive drives—a word that fails to distinguish influencing or constraining causes applicable to human freedom from physically determining forms of causation applicable to creatures that lack this freedom. Dodes describes a patient who believes he is inherently a failure, and thus feels like a failure, and is thus moved to act like a failure, which, in turn, seems to confirm the patient's original false belief. As the patient puts it, "Once a failure, always a failure" (ibid., p. 46). We do well to look at the lawful sequence between belief, feeling, action and confirmation.

Dodes seems to conclude from such cases that the uncontrollable drive underlying addiction is not rooted in awareness but in unconscious feelings. But again, what does he mean by this? Feelings are not vacuous or directionless. One is not merely anxious or depressed, but anxious and depressed about something. Additionally, this is not contradicted by the fact that the something in question may not be unconscious in the sense of not being immediately in the forefront of one's awareness. Indeed, what else do psychotherapists do but help the patient to see increasingly more clearly for themselves what things are influencing or motivating those feelings? An appeal to moral feelings, such as feeling guilty, ashamed, or worthless, is inseparable from moral beliefs and the objective moral values of

those beliefs and, as such, they are not literally unconscious.³³ In short, what is motivating the addiction is not mere subjective feelings or instinctual drives, but precisely false or conflicting beliefs about moral values or moral reality.

To apply this to Brandon's case, such an acknowledgement of his and our capacity to know such values implies no imposition by the therapist on the patient of any set of moral beliefs, religious or anti-religious. This is consistent with helping a patient to distinguish what is true and false with respect to any kind of object. It appeals to the patient's own ability to see and distinguish for themselves what truly is and is not in their own best interest. In other words, given such a treatment goal, the patient's will certainly plays a necessary role in recovery, at the very least in the form of the willingness to acknowledge that there is a problem to be resolved and to collaborate with the therapist and/or others in discovering what that problem is. In this case, this certainly involves putting the patients' imbibed moral prejudices to the test of their own evolving experience.³⁴ For example, a patient has been told by his parents that he is a "bad child" and treated as such throughout his childhood. Of course, there are many "bad" actions that the parents can point to in seeming justification of their claim. But what originally motivated those actions? As this is explored in detail and in depth, the child may come to realize that he believed he was worthless because his parents treated him that way, even to the point of making him the family scapegoat so the parents could avoid addressing their own shortcomings. As the child comes to see with increasing clarity this theme repeating itself in one case after another, this brings with it increasing power over his previously held "vague" and false beliefs about it. As Plato-Socrates, and the entire Western tradition of philosophy, have claimed, "knowledge (of the right kind) is power". They are referring to experiential knowledge as opposed to mere abstract knowledge.³⁵

If all this is true, then the problem of addiction is a problem of moral weakness after all, which is not changed by the fact that it is not limited to, nor even necessarily originating in, the person suffering from an addiction, but is primarily or initially rooted in a prejudiced social environment working against the development of that experiential moral insight that increasingly brings with it the power to overcome any addiction. What the patient needs, therefore, is a genuinely empathic, caring, and insightful therapist (and/or other) willing and able to provide a safe, non-morally judgmental environment within which the patient can learn to distinguish true from false moral judgments, knowledge which brings with it the power to will and act in accordance with it.³⁶ However, insofar as I am right about such a pervasive morally prejudicial context, we may also appreciate how difficult it may be for a patient or any of us to access this moral reality and its power.

The problem of moral weakness, therefore, is not properly accounted for by appealing to what the person suffering from an addiction is willing or able to do in the present moment, as if Brandon was supposed to simply "lift himself up by the boot-straps" and stop drinking. Nor is the problem of moral weakness limited to those we call addicts alone. It has to do with a pervasive lack of moral awareness and its correlative form of power that would, if it were sufficiently present, empower us to realize the best versions of ourselves. The root cause of our addictions as unhealthy displacements, therefore, is not limited to this or that person's "psychology", inner subjective world or "psychic reality". Nor is it limited to any shared characteristics of "addicts" alone in contrast to "non-addicts" by virtue of any posited "addictive psychological predisposition", as Dodes seems to suggest. Rather, it lies in the way we initially imbibe a form of collective moral prejudice that powerfully influences us to place our individual and group self-centered agendas above our conscientious fidelity to the truth.

5. Social Influences or Causes

5.1. Parental Asymmetrical Role

Toward a better understanding of the origin of this prejudice³⁷ and the way to overcome it, let us take it for granted that our parents play the most powerful role in the initial formation of their children's character—for better or worse. In the best sense, "good-

enough" parents both embody and outwardly manifest a kind and degree of love or goodness that even an infant can viscerally sense is trustworthy. The child feels uniquely loved, not only because he is inherently loveable and thus should be loved, but because the child is loved. This intangible spirit of love is tangibly incarnated in the life of these loving parents and increasingly internalized by the child as both a specific and generic kind of "voice", or inwardly felt presence, that initially defines the child's core sense of self and self-worth.³⁸ Additionally, insofar as the child's connection to this voice is maintained and strengthened by the social context in which the child lives, it all the more deeply and powerfully roots itself to define the quality of the child's will, mind, feelings, actions, habits, character, and life as a whole, as it extends outwardly to positively influence everyone and everything he comes in contact with.

However, where is such an unconditional love to be found outside of movies or the story books we read to our children? Sooner or later, at least, we come to realize that most parents tend to fall short of being "good enough" in this sense. But what precisely does this mean? Instead of the child awakening to find such an internalized purely good inner voice grounding his life, he³⁹ finds an opposing harsh or critical voice enmeshed with it. In some cases, this self-invalidating inner voice may have so much presence and power in and over him that he feels possessed by or enslaved to it. Despite all his attempts to vanquish it by reason⁴⁰ or mere force of will on the one hand, or by concealing it from himself on the other, to minimize the suffering it causes him, it may seem to be an alien presence so fully in control of him that he feels powerless to free himself from it.

Note that the presence of both positive and negative inner voices within the child is entirely consistent with a parent providing for their child's so-called "basic needs". For it is precisely here where we may appreciate humanistic-existential psychology's emphasis on a uniquely human moral or spiritual need that is necessarily manifested in the intentional act of providing for any and all of our children's needs.⁴¹ In other words, love is not a spiritual luxury or addendum to human life, but rather its presence or absence essentially defines the character of all that we think and do. To put it in still another way, as with breathing polluted air, this critical, judgmental, invalidating inner voice should not be present within us at all.

What, then, if the child awakens to a broader social real world only to find the same conditioned, compromised, or polluted love everywhere?⁴² In Brandon's words, "this infection is present in every one of us in varying degrees, and largely undermines the pursuit of the voice of truth and goodness. Which is why it is more important than ever for therapists (and all other authority figures) to reflect on their own myriad potential 'infections,' predispositions, or prejudices". In this way, he's certainly right. How else can this moral infection be eliminated and the conscience restored to a state of purity? Without this, we are all the more tempted to believe that this pervasive selfish cold-indifference infecting the love we all profess defines the very essence or nature of what it means to be human, if not also the character of reality itself.⁴³ The root problem here, therefore, does not revolve around an opposition between religious "faith" on one hand and atheistic "reason" on the other, but around the temptation to place our faith and reason in serving one side or the other above our fidelity to the truth.

In short, given the child's relative lack of experience, how he initially viscerally feels and subsequently conceives of himself and reality depends almost entirely on the beliefs or conceptions—not yet veridical perceptions—he initially imbibes on his parents' knees. But as his experience broadens, he is increasingly able to see for himself whether or to what extent the beliefs or prejudices he has imbibed are consistent with his growing awareness. If the two are at odds, and if his parents and the groups he most identifies with demand he choose their side above his own conscience, he suffers a form of existential anxiety, moral suffering or spiritual trauma, i.e., a conflict at the very core of his being.⁴⁴ Note that the dilemma arises not solely or primarily because of the parents' or in-group's prejudices, but because of their complicit refusal to acknowledge these prejudices, which influences the child to either assume that what is missing must be his fault or, at least, to avoid as

taboo looking too closely at precisely what is missing. If the child is punished for daring to express his own voice as in the old saying, “children are to be seen and not heard”, he is increasingly less likely to speak up again. He viscerally senses he must comply, “brown-nose”, or embrace a “false self” or form of “imposter syndrome” to survive in such a world.

What is the child to do in such a social context or world? How can we resolve this dilemma of sitting on a moral fence in which either extreme of being too good or too evil seems too costly? As illustrated in Brandon’s own comment above, what is needed is for us to acknowledge that there is a problem regardless of whether or to what extent it is understood. This would then motivate us to look more closely at the nature of that problem, lack, or need so that, as with hunger or thirst, we would be moved to search for the kind of thing that can alone meet that need. We would be moved, therefore, to search for a safe enough non-judgmental social environment in which we can express our own voice, i.e., what we actually think or believe and feel. Within such an environment, akin to standing with another on a mountain trail, we may then undertake an experiential developmental process—a road less travelled, leading toward an ever more comprehensive vision of the truth as worthy of our deepest trust. Indeed, every culture in our history refers to such a process by means of familiar metaphors such as climbing a mountain, swimming toward a beacon of light, or the search for the way out of Plato’s Cave. Such a process effectively reverses or counteracts the opposing process of our initially prejudiced moral education. This is the core issue I am claiming underlies spiritual addiction, viz., that we are generally attempting to sit on a fence, holding onto opposing fundamental primary values, as if this could be done without real and indelible moral consequences.

We may now better appreciate Brandon’s moral progress despite his symptoms. Despite the appearance of failure in view of behavioral symptoms that include feelings of despair, suicidal ideology, and functional paralysis, he states, “my present concern is how to move forward in life given my growing realization that the prejudices I’ve imbibed do not align with my current values. It’s not that I don’t have more prejudices to overcome. I am aware that I am sitting on the fence of indecision, which is increasingly moving me to take to heart my own measure of responsibility. As Walden put it, ‘As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.’” He is increasingly realizing, I believe, that there are moral laws, no less than physical and psychological laws, involving real and unavoidable, immediate and indelible moral or spiritual consequences of every moral intention and action, including our attempts to sit on the fence of indecision as alleged “innocent bystanders” (Merton 1966). Similarly to choosing to remain in a toxic marriage, the choice to sit on this fence works to increasingly enslave our will or heart, along with our mind or reason, feelings and actions to that toxic spirit, until we become unwitting accomplices in our own spiritual, psychological, and physical self-annihilation. We are in desperate need of genuine moral guidance.

But where do we find this guidance? To answer this question, perhaps we might consider “when” as opposed to “where”. For if the great obstacle in our way of realizing a truly and fully altruistic life revolves around such a relatively prejudicial and complicit form of ignorance, it may no longer be surprising that the primary means by which this ignorance is maintained is by the use of false comparisons, such as the identification of “normal” with “healthy”. Within such an unhealthy norm, we tend to compare ourselves with others within the same morally or spiritually diseased condition, which not only blinds us to the reality and danger of such a soul-destroying disease, but in so doing makes us increasingly insensitive to that healthy moral pain of true guilt moving us to search for a viable cure. What we need, therefore, is not to deny, run from, or medicate-away this pain, but to heed what it has to teach us. Instead of comparing ourselves to the worst, or seeming worst, among us to make us feel better by elevating an impoverished self-image, we need to lift rather than lower the moral bar by looking for guidance from the spiritually healthiest or most unconditionally loving in our collective history instead of limiting ourselves to those within our immediate empirical social surround.

5.2. Simplicity of the Law of Moral/Spiritual Personality Change

We have looked at the way a child raised in the healthiest environment would imbibe that spirit of unconditional love and be initially formed in its likeness, just as a child raised in the most malignantly narcissistic environment would imbibe that spirit. Both extreme possibilities, along with the vast moral gray area in between, would all be instances of a single “law of love”: that who or what we most love or entrust ourselves to, we become similar to.⁴⁵ Despite this initial influence, however, we observed that by virtue of our moral freedom, we can change in any direction. A child raised by the very best of parents can choose to continue on that path or act contrary to that initial influence.⁴⁶ By virtue of the same law, even if one’s parents and broader social context fall far short of such loving care, insofar as the child is willing and able to search for healthier role models—even in our collective past—that capacity can be nourished. Thus, we observed the potentially life-changing impact on the young⁴⁷ of genuinely good teachers, therapists, and leaders, as well as good friends, partners, and groups, whether past or present. Indeed, such a genuinely healthy social support network is rightly considered the cornerstone of psychotherapeutic cure across theory and technique (Sorokin 1954, p. 61ff). But why can we not build such a truly tangible social support network on the foundation of a moral education of humanity itself evolving over time?

5.3. On the Complexity of Personality Change: The Role of Religion

Let us consider Gandhi’s criticism of Christian missionaries in India as a relatively recent case to help us distinguish true from false forms of not only moral but more deeply religious claims about reality. Gandhi and others at that time describe how “Christianity” became a stench rather than a rose-like aroma for desperate Hindu and Muslim Indians who felt forced to convert to Christianity in exchange for food and medical care from Christian missionaries (Gandhi 1993, p. 45).⁴⁸ But given Gandhi’s belief in the equality of all (major) religions, what may seem paradoxical is Gandhi’s profound heartfelt connection to the Jesus of the Gospels while remaining a life-long Hindu. Along with Martin Buber’s identification with Jesus as his big brother in a common Jewish faith, or the affection for Jesus expressed by the Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh in his *Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (Nhat Hanh 1999), such examples may help us to distinguish our willing faith in the spirit of religion as incarnated in the tangible lives of its most reliable witnesses in our history from religious group self-centered agendas demanding blind faith in their doctrinal claims and ritualistic practices. Specifically, the Christ-like moral character of C. F. Andrews and Gandhi inspired Indian Hindus and Muslims of good faith to follow their moral example without any felt need to convert to any religious group. Properly understood, a Jew such as Martin Buber, a Buddhist such as Thich Nhat Hanh, a Hindu such as M. Gandhi, and an atheist such as Primo Levi might be far more “Christian” in sharing Christ’s spirit than the vast majority of professed Christians. In this we may sense the possibility of a transcultural religion of the heart. We will return to this point shortly.

This example may also help us to appreciate Levi’s testimony of a process of moral de-evolution opposed to religious claims of a *moral evolution*, or a process of revelation and providential redemption, of humanity. In precisely the same way as deceit, albeit not necessary, is inseparably dependent upon the truth it rejects, so too such a moral de-evolution may be inseparably dependent on a collective moral evolution. In other words, this morally devolving process may not be rooted in this or that particular religious tradition, but in a form of generic religious prejudice that atheists as outsiders may be all the more capable of recognizing.⁴⁹ However, this implies nothing about the character of the most reliable religious witnesses in our history, e.g., an Abraham or Moses, Socrates, Buddha, or Jesus whom we might well imagine getting along fabulously not only with one another, but with atheists such as Levi and Amery, in a way that the majority of their professed followers could not. In short, regardless of our identification as atheists or theists, we may be unable to see the wheat because of the weeds.

Such a generic form of religious prejudice may not only erect the greatest barrier to seeing what the most reliable spiritual witnesses in our history share, but also blind us to the tangible reality of this collective moral evolution or progressive revelation and process of human redemption underlying a true sense of hope. We may understand why this collective moral problem is a religious problem in view of the role religion has historically played in transmitting or obstructing the revelation of moral truth. It strikes at the very heart of our deepest moral commitments. Therein lies its power. For, in reaction to this pervasive religious dogmatism or prejudice, our contemporary naturalistic or anti-supernatural attitude may be throwing the baby away with the bathwater. In short, I am claiming that spiritual addiction is not only a response to a collective moral problem, but more deeply a religious problem, because of the way spiritually emptied forms of religion conceal the testimony of its most reliable witnesses. They do not support moral character as the one and only mark of a genuine spiritual life for atheists and theists alike. But how can such religious prejudice be overcome insofar as professed believers are unwilling to humbly acknowledge their infidelity to their own teachers and teachings? How can it be overcome unless we are willing to seek the spirit of truth and unconditional love above any form of religious, anti-religious, or group identification?

5.4. Good Parent Syndrome

More subtle even than this conflict between the “spirit” and the “form” within religion is the way the same problem of systems of pathological accommodation may infect any new form of revealed truth. Thus, the spirit of science becomes conflated with just a new formalism. Science becomes the new religion and scientists the new priests or apologists for the new faith now claiming absolute authority to know the truth. In other words, despite the collective nature of a problem including all of us, it especially revolves around those in the highest positions of power responsible for our education today. Indeed, the relatively good qualities of our parents, teachers, and leaders within such a vast polluted moral gray area all the more tempts us in our need for guidance to close our eyes to their real shortcomings as if to dare compare them to a higher moral standard was akin to an act of betrayal.

To repeat: I am not claiming that there are no real and significant moral distinctions to be drawn within the normal condition of our world. But how can we clearly draw such distinctions insofar as we continue to choose to remain in the haze of the norm of this vast moral gray area in which we now live? How can we see that fullness of light that alone reveals the way to a true hope if we refuse to allow that same light expose the barriers to that way? If we, together with Levi, have dared to awaken so far as to see that there is no specifically moral difference in the lives of modern-day professed atheists and theists,⁵⁰ then it may not be surprising that we would all be tempted to lose faith and hope in any true providential revelation, calling out to and within each and all of us to collaborate with it for the sake of the redemption of us all.

From this perspective, the suicides of the most reliable atheist witnesses of the Holocaust, such as Primo Levi (1986), Jean Amery (1980), and Paul Celan, may appear less, if at all, as an intrapsychic problem with them (as if their testimony about humanity was warped by the extremity of their traumatic experiences) than a problem with our unwillingness to embrace their good faith. I will return to this point in a moment. However, for now, I must point out that even in the case of these witnesses we must distinguish what they see, and thus bear witness to, from what they are merely tempted to believe. They see and bear witness to our continued collective complicity in denial and the present and impending consequences of that denial. They are merely tempted to believe that this denial signifies that we are past the tipping point for hope.

Yet, unlike the atheist Four Horsemen, even they concede that this is not an indictment of reality, truth, or true goodness—nor even an indictment of any possible God or “spiritual higher power” at its core whom they do not see and thus cannot bear witness to. It is an indictment of us all, including themselves. However, it is even more an indictment of

what is called religion today, for they see no such morally healthy “social support network” in the lives of contemporary believers or non-believers. The one and only mark of any true religion of the heart is that support network: the incarnation of unconditional love in our lives. In “Christian” terms, they have not rejected any “living gospel” that they have allegedly “heard” because it is practically nowhere to be seen or found. Indeed, as paradoxical as it may sound, the good faith of these atheist witnesses may be all the more manifest in their suicide, i.e., a form of despair arising from their unwillingness to live in a world in moral denial, actively working to quench the spirit of love in their and our hearts.

The practical implications are radical: on the one hand, the existence of a single such atheist witness, having the moral character and insight of a Primo Levi, powerfully indicts the character of the “faith” of the majority of believers today. For would such a witness not embrace a life devoted to truth and unconditional love if he truly saw it tangibly manifested in even a single case? On the other hand, if there is such a hope for humanity and if that hope is most fully revealed in the lives and testimony of the most unconditionally loving and reliable religious witnesses in our history, then how can we enter into such a life unless all of us—professed believers especially—humbly acknowledge that they and we have been tried and found wanting?

What I am calling “good parent syndrome”, therefore, is not only rooted in the need for such a collective confession. It is not specific to parents, but more broadly refers to anyone in the highest positions of authority or power,⁵¹ having the responsibility to educate or guide the rest of us. This is where confession is most needed; if they profess to have a form of integrity and power they lack, they tempt those they are called to serve to doubt the reality and realizability of the real thing. That is, they tempt their followers to doubt not only them, but all authority, including the authority of the spirit of truth itself manifested in the lives of its most reliable witnesses in our history. This was the lesson that Brandon’s therapist took to heart from his own failure.

Let us apply Brandon’s question to each and all of us, “To what extent is my problem a problem of will or ability? Is it a problem with my unwillingness to do what I know to be right? Or is it a problem with my inability to live the kind of life I know I should because of some form and measure of real ignorance? Is it primarily a problem with me or, rather, with my dependence on this or that group within a prison-like world demanding blind compliance to its will? What I am now willing and able to do about it”?

As I have tried to elucidate, this problem revolves around our will in relation to our awareness of a reality greater than ourselves. It involves our willingness to engage in an experiential process, such as climbing a mountain, of moving from (lower) forms of faith to (higher) forms of faith by (means of increasing) rational insight. If we, as with Levi and Amery, believe that there is no true hope, we cannot but act upon that belief and, in so doing, feed that despair in a way that enables it to evolve into ever more subtle and malignant forms infecting everything we will, think, feel and do on a level deeper than we can consciously or immediately control. We cannot simply will into being faith and hope in a supreme value that we secretly doubt or mistrust. This brings us back to another question we applied to Brandon at the start: what does “holding the hope” for a patient mean other than an actual ability to see a real hope for the patient which the patient cannot yet see or fully grasp for himself? As long as the patient cannot see (in contrast to being unwilling to see) any such faith and hope as he looks into the eyes of his therapist, he may be further tempted to believe that there is no such hope, which undermines his motive to even examine whether that belief is true.

In this sense, the main barrier to healing our collective spiritual addiction—both on an individual and collective scale—is not the worst individuals and groups among us, but the best. Relative to an unhealthy or morally compromised norm, the best among us may well be far more aware than most of us, but relative to a morally healthy norm, they may literally be worlds apart. As with the “priests” in every age who attempt to usurp the true ministry of the spirit, our present-day priests (parents, teachers, therapists, group leaders, or scientists) may rightly fear the consequences of acknowledging their

true condition. They might lose their following, and others might use that confession to promote themselves. But perhaps that is the price we must pay, or the cross we must bear, for any of us to presume to take on that power and its responsibility. Additionally, insofar as we dare to do so, it might even inspire others to do the same. It might even go so far as to motivate an historically unprecedented collective confession or cry from the heart, in spirit and in truth, that can avert the gravest danger we have ever faced.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have described spiritual addiction as a felt compulsion to seek surrogates in the absence of that spirit of unconditional love underlying core personality change. I described our awakening to the real world as akin to a prison in which all sides seem morally compromised, so any choice seems to necessitate the sacrifice of our conscientious relationship with the truth. Thus, I argued, spiritual addiction underlies not only physical and psychological addictions but also socially accepted “addictions” to all that we associate with success. It strikes at the heart of our most cherished value priorities including what we call morality and religion. All that we seek may be grounded in collectively imbibed prejudice toward truth itself compromising our very selves and all our relationships to one another.

I used the case of Brandon to illustrate that at the root of this problem is not merely the fact of such an imbibed prejudice but our collective unwillingness to acknowledge it, and the seriousness of the consequences of that denial. I argued that as long as we continue in this denial, this will only allow the disease to continue on its deadly course. I claimed that the relative lack of individuals and groups in our world today living a truly conscientious, altruistic unconditionally loving kind of life tempts us to doubt the reality and/or realizability of such a life. Stronger still, we are tempted to project this problem with humanity onto reality itself as if this spirit of selfish, cold indifference is rooted in the essence of being human, woven into the very fabric of reality itself, as well as any possible “god” it its core. This, I claimed, lies at the root of our spiritual addiction. Similarly to Brandon, we are all suffering from a form of existential anxiety in fear that there are no true grounds for hope. Additionally, insofar as we merely believe it, we feel it, along with our felt powerlessness to overcome it, which moves us to seek relief by embracing one surrogate or another. We feel angry at forces within us and outside us that we do not understand. We feel hopeless, as if we are unable to truly and substantially change.

Toward finding a way out of this prison, I claimed that insofar as we are willing to acknowledge our desperate condition, the same light that exposes this condition also powerfully moves us to search for a way to overcome it. Denial and despair are not our only options. As we open our eyes akin to children with a beginner’s mind, we enter into a step-by-step experiential process that can enable us to see with increasing clarity that none of us can avoid a faith commitment, along with the lawful consequences of that choice. We must and invariably will choose who or what we will most trust and, depending on the kind of spirit we choose to embrace, will determine what we will become. In this sense, not only can no one avoid a faith commitment, but no one can avoid faith in some kind of “god” or primary value. The only practical question is what type of “god” we will place our faith in—a god defined by truth and unconditional love or a displacement, surrogate, or idol.

This, I claimed, is the problem underlying Brandon’s many addictions. Although he suffered from depression and anxiety even as a child, it did not come to a head until he had within his reach those primary values our society holds before us as practically the necessary and sufficient conditions for a “good life”. In Brandon’s case, it took the form of him becoming the youngest producer in the history of his company and having the realistic prospect of making more than enough money to provide not only for all his so-called basic needs, but all his material desires as well. Yet, for the sake of this worldly success, he would have to subjugate himself even more than he already had to a toxic work environment. He felt dependent on that job, as he once did his parents, as if it were the one and only means

to “live the dream” or realize his hope of creating something of value with his life. Yet, the spiritual toxicity of that environment little-by-little, day in and day out, chipped away at that dream in a way he could foresee would finally result in the loss of his true sense of self and self-worth.

But that is not all, nor is it the worst of it. What he had discovered in his workplace, he was also discovering in every other form of relationship in his life. No longer was the problem merely the shortcomings of his parents or his present work environment, but a toxicity infecting the marriages and families, friendships, communities, and workplaces he saw all around him. Everywhere he looked he saw what the poet, Jones Very, called “The Dead”—one and the same tyrannical spirit demanding we choose a side within a prison-like world in which all sides are compromised. He felt he could find no individuals, much less a spiritual community of individuals, that might constitute for him a truly safe and unconditionally loving relational home (Stolorow 2011). He thought that he and we were all locked within a so-called “real” world governed by immoral and thus irrational forces, where the only law is the blind lust for power to be on top. By means of Brandon’s case, we considered the practical implications of such a collectively unmet spiritual need and why the moral weakness or powerlessness at issue runs far deeper than one’s individual willpower.

We then journeyed beyond this sketch of such a collective spiritual addiction by painting in broad strokes the way to overcome it. We realized there are necessary implications for change grounded in our willingness to acknowledge rather than deny this addiction. We can see that the relative lack of individuals and groups today capable of bearing witness to such an unconditionally loving life does not imply, nor is it experientially a fact, that there are no such examples permeating our collective history up to the present day. Thus, in precisely the same way that we can and do find tangible role models for any other goal-oriented behavior by means of their words in books or even a podcast, the same applies to moral and spiritual guidance. Given the unprecedented growth of our technology, we have all been brought together as we never have or could before. We now have tangible access to the most reliable spiritual witnesses in every culture in our history. If we choose to undertake such a spiritual journey, guided by such witnesses, we will increasingly be enabled to not only overcome our prejudices, but in so doing increasingly internalize the same kind of intimate connection they had with that voice or spirit of truth and love. Importantly, however, despite the real instrumental or mediatorial value of these historical witnesses, their job description is not to have us place our faith blindly in them—nor even in any one of them as the very best—but to help us see for ourselves that the same spirit of truth and love that was so fully incarnated in and through them is right now striving to reveal itself in and to and through us all. Even that spirit’s exposure or indictment of our present condition is not motivated by wrath but by love. Additionally, because it is love, it cannot compel us without violating who and what we are. Such a love can only entreat us to avoid the necessary consequences of our own bad faith by calling us to lay aside our differences as atheists and theists, Jews and Christians, in a collaborative search for that light and power of love that can transform us all.

To apply this more directly to Brandon’s case, let us recall his conflict with his therapist. We may now appreciate the sense in which the problem there was not merely his therapist’s momentary lack of empathic attunement. Nor was it resolved by his therapist’s willingness to merely acknowledge it. Rather, it forced his therapist to acknowledge the compromised condition of his own heart and the extent to which he was and is responsible to do all he can on his part to retain his moment-by-moment connection to that spirit of truth and unconditional love that is life. How else was he to truly “hold the hope” for Brandon, his patient?

He realized that there is no psychological “treatment” that can heal our spiritual addiction. We are not thing-like objects to be “fixed” through any such impersonal means. As a hundred years of psychological efficacy research has come to realize,⁵² we cannot separate any technique (including religious ritualistic practices or universal spiritual disci-

plines) from the intention or motive of those using it, nor, therefore, from that intimacy of interpersonal connection in which alone lies the “one thing necessary” for any genuine cure. The treatment “tool” is you and me. It does not require that we become “great” thinkers or philosophers, medical doctors or psychologists, scientists or priests. Indeed, if this drive for greatness is our primary motivation, it only feeds that hubris that distances us from that genuine humility which is the necessary condition for our access to a love greater than ourselves. This goodness is what Brandon said has kept him alive despite his darkest moments of despair. He believes in the reality and power of love. He has seen it, felt its presence, heard its call. Even now it is calling out to him and us despite our suffering, as if that suffering was uniting us to wounded others and them to us in the realization that none of us can undertake this journey alone. Perhaps we are all children; all climbing a mountain that at its peak may only reveal one new horizon after another beyond our ability to fathom.

“I will remind you of an innocent and ancient story, of a king and his new clothes . . . Tailors deceived a king, telling them they would weave him a wonderful suit which would be invisible to any but good men . . . In the end the naked king paraded out into the street where all the people were gathered to admire his suit of clothes, and all did admire it until a child dared to point out that the king was naked . . . Have you and I forgotten that our vocation, as innocent bystanders—and the very condition of our terrible innocence—is to do what the child did, and keep on saying the king is naked, at the cost of being condemned criminals? Remember . . . if the child had not been there, they would all have been madmen, or criminals. It was the child’s cry that saved them.” (Merton 1966)

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Notes

- ¹ I define “witness” as one marked by both their authenticity or conscientious devotion to the truth and their relative fullness of experiential insight.
- ² It is worth pointing out that despite the popular appeal to “faith vs. reason”, no one can avoid faith commitments, as without them our beliefs could not be subjected to a process of experiential verification and thus serve as true premises in sound arguments leading to an advance in our discovery of truth. This is different from blind and/or bad faith, implying either unexamined prejudices and/or an unwillingness to subject our prejudices to rational verification.
- ³ This should not be taken to mean an exact 50/50 split, but anywhere in between the two sides. However, I am not suggesting that there are no cases of perpetrators and innocent victims.
- ⁴ The humanist psychologist Rogers (1961) presents these qualities as the mark not only of the ideal psychotherapist, but also as qualities defining what it means to become a person in the fullest sense of the word.
- ⁵ An expression often used by Dallas Willard.
- ⁶ Rogers was one of the founders of humanistic or person-centered psychotherapy; Plato (or Socrates), along with Aristotle, the founders of Western philosophy; Freud, the founder of classical psychoanalysis; Frankl, the founder of logotherapy; and Sorokin, the founder of modern sociology.
- ⁷ Although I generally use “moral” and “spiritual” interchangeably, I define spiritual as disembodied personal power, which is not opposed to it being tangibly embodied in the lives of both individuals and groups. I have in mind primarily the spirit of a person as the life of a person which is more than one’s body. It is that which most defines what it means to be a person in the fullest, most evolved, or actualized sense. It refers to the essence or nature of being human, which includes above all a capacity for moral freedom, i.e., to know and embrace (as well as willingly reject) truth and true goodness. I am defining *morality* as the fruit or manifestation of this spirit in and through human intentions and actions in relation to a subjectively and objectively perceived reality of moral values. Given this freedom and these values, an actualized spiritual and moral life manifests itself in terms of

moral character, i.e., a *will* sufficiently guided or conscientiously governed by its fidelity to truth and what is truly good that it permeates all one thinks, feels, and does as it extends beyond one's self to influence all reality.

In way of example, consider the position of "The Four Horsemen" (Hitchens et al. 2019).

Parents commonly acknowledge some difference between what they call the world of children and the "real" world. In the former, they generally have in mind a world in which goodness reigns and anything seems possible—a world of fantasy conveyed in the story books we read to them and the movies we watch with them. By the latter, they generally have in mind a world permeated by selfish cold indifference, i.e., a ruthless, unscrupulous world, akin to a prison, in which we must sacrifice conscience to survive if not thrive.

My aim in using this case is to direct the reader's attention less to the characteristics that define his subjective experience than to those attributes of his experience actually or potentially shared with others—especially value qualities such as authenticity, empathy, and unconditional love. My aim is to bring these latter qualities to the foreground of our investigation to enable the reader to see for themselves whether and to what extent those features are, or potentially may be, embedded in their own "lived experience". These "empirically", i.e., experientially, verified value data provide, I claim, the necessary ground for any sound theory of addiction.

A period that began shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although when asked about the days, weeks, and months of such experiences of hope, he *intellectually* acknowledges those times, but says they generally seem so experientially distant it is as if they were little more than dreams.

He is currently smoking at least 10 cigarettes per day.

He managed to throw the rest away.

I remember putting my son on a block wall in our backyard and standing a foot or so away asking him to jump into my arms. And he did. I stood a step further away and asked him to jump again. And he did. But there was a point at which he could not jump, despite the fact that I knew I could catch him. It was beyond his present ability to trust that I could. An ability that could only be realized as he increasingly discovered he could trust me to that extent. Such examples, as we shall see, reveal an experiential process of moving from "faith to faith" by a rational form of experiential insight. That is, from lower forms of faith to higher forms by means of a fuller, more comprehensive awareness of reality or truth.

As we shall also see, moral power is distinctly different in kind from, e.g., physical, psychological, and social or political forms of power.

As we shall also see, such a "spiritual" appeal is not necessarily reducible to a "religious" appeal. See, for example, the atheist, Sam Harris' reference to such self-transcending experiences (Hitchens et al. 2019, pp. 48–49; Dennett, p. 51).

By this I mean that AA, or any other moral, religious, or spiritual approach, may itself be subject to its own forms of prejudice. It is true that the founders of AA, despite writing for a primarily Christian audience, were aware of the difficulty bound up with their appeal to a "higher power". It is also true that AA has evolved to include atheist, agnostic and non-Christian groups, allowing for broader interpretations of such a higher power. But such groups may still fall far short of providing sufficient access to that spirit of truth that alone provides the requisite power to overcome our suffering.

To avoid misinterpretation, I am not denying forms of pathological altruism. I am pointing to the sense in which the pervasive lack of healthy altruism or unconditional love, may tempt us to doubt its accessibility and realizability as the primary value of human life. Aristotle's, *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, was an attempt to relativize an ethical life for most of us in view of the fact that even Socrates fell short of such a Good. It was not an attempt to deny its value insofar as it could be achieved. The same holds true for the history of Christianity, in which the majority of Christian denominations reacted to precisely this striving after "perfect love" as heretical (see, for example, references to the early Friends or Quakers). In a nutshell, how many of us can say with any genuine authority that we are truly and primarily oriented toward realizing, much less governed in all we think, plan, and do, by our love for truth and goodness? Yet, is that not the foundation upon which all religions purport to stand?

For a more in-depth look at this, see Willard (2018) and Wyner (1988).

As we shall see, Dodes' calls into question such a disease model, whether presented on scientific grounds or AA, in favor of an alternative account amenable to psychological moderation.

The point here is not whether there are, or may be, forms of reciprocal causality, i.e., behavior causing neurochemical and neuroanatomical changes which then causally influence behavior. It is the problem of limiting, reducing, or even emphasizing biological causes over psychological and, as we shall see, moral and spiritual causes.

Studies demonstrating that even with rats addiction is far more complex than appeals to biological causes alone.

Alternatively, one might interpret this "response" as an equally extreme prejudicial reaction to religious forms of prejudice.

Although I am not claiming that understanding the role the brain plays in addiction is not "useful" for understanding how addiction works, is the claim above that the ordinary person cannot understand the cause of their addictions and a way to overcome them without them understanding how their brains work? Does that mean that only "someday" (given such adequate understanding) will we have sufficient knowledge to heal our addictions? Moreover, are the only relevant factors here physical and psychological? In psychotherapy, for example, we may observe how different orientations focus on different aspects of a

more complex whole, e.g., physical, psychological, volitional, transpersonal, multi-cultural. Is everything but the physical to be reduced to environmental?

Experienced peripherally in the act and moving into the foreground afterwards.

I realize that looking at AA through the lens of Dodes' criticism of AA potentially carries with it any misinterpretations he has about AA's actual theories. However, although my intention is not to misinterpret AA or Dodes' position (or interpretations of AA), I am not primarily concerned with either position. Rather, my concern is with a far broader or more generic problem.

Prejudice is not limited to its more obvious forms. Just as "experts" may be tempted to conflate (and, thereby, misrepresent) current forms of cognitive-behavioral-therapy or contemporary relational psychanalysis with their original classical forms, so too may one do the same with AA. Dodes, for example, seems to limit his attention to a more popular and narrow religious/Christian form of interpretation of AA tenets without acknowledging even the possibility of other, more rational, interpretations. More significantly, however, is his seeming use of such myths to reject any form of religious and moral basis for addiction.

Although "addict" is an objectifying term in contrast to "one suffering from an addiction", for simplicity's sake I will often use the former.

See, for example, Alloy and Abramson (1979) on "depressed realism".

As pointed out in the introduction, I can appreciate the offense taken by atheists to any reference to "religious witnesses", just as I can appreciate the offense taken by theists to "atheist witnesses". However, I would ask those on both sides to recall my definition of a reliable witness in terms of sincerity and insight and recognize these are attributes both sides can lay claim to. What marks such witnesses is precisely their tendency to embrace the spirit of religion above blind faith in any dogma and ritualistic practices.

This reality includes the nature and knowledge of numbers and numerical relations; logical propositions and logical relations; aesthetic and moral values; the nature of persons including the self, mind, our ideas and their lawful relationships; and so on.

As inconsistent as "unconscious thoughts" or "unconscious forms of consciousness" are or appear, we generally distinguish forms of consciousness or awareness of objects in the forefront of our minds from our awareness of objects in the periphery or background of our minds. One can be aware that one is breathing without focusing on or being mindful of one's breath. For a more in-depth look at how complex this issue tends to be, see Ellenberger (1970). With respect to these various layers of awareness, see also Assagioli (1965).

This is what we take Husserl to mean by phenomenology as a "presuppositionless philosophy": not an idealized assumption of us being able to undertake a phenomenological investigation from a position without presuppositions, but an ethical attitude or orientation willing to subject any and all presuppositions to an intersubjective rigorous evaluation of their truth.

See Wyner (1988) for an in-depth look at this issue.

I am claiming that there is a distinction between judgments and a judgmental attitude. No one should, can, or does avoid judgments, since that is how we distinguish one thing from another, but a judgmental or fault-seeking attitude should and can be avoided.

I should point out that every culture appeals to some doctrine of "original sin". My approach differs in its appeal to, or emphasis on, our own experience as the basis for any sound doctrine of this origin, rather than taking for granted, or exercising blind faith in, any particular religious theory and its traditionally accepted assumptions. This includes assumptions about a "phenomenological" approach. As I see it, the value of Husserl's "realist" vs. the generally accepted "idealist" approach is precisely its appeal to the use of experiential knowledge in its evaluation of the nature of knowledge itself.

Both specific and generic in the sense that the specific tangible character of the parent is experienced along with the generic character of that unconditional love that may tangibly manifested by others as well.

If it is not already clear, my general use of the male gender pronoun is not intended to reflect a male bias. It merely seemed to me more consistent or less confusing given the primacy placed on Brandon's case. In this regard, I do not attribute to a "God" male gender and in such contexts often use the female gender despite the conviction that "God" would include and transcend such gender limitations.

As per my previous claim, by "reason" here I have in view the kind of abstract reason Hume refers to when he claims "reason is the slave of the passions" (Wyner 1988).

See Maslow and Frankl's correspondence leading to the former's realization that without a self-transcendent good there can be no self-actualization.

As a psychologist patient once put it, "If my mother didn't hold me, kiss me, and tell me that she loved me, who is now going to do that in my life?"

I suggest that if one looks closely enough at the actual descriptions of *reality*—not just *humanity* in its present contingent state—by many "existentialist" philosophers one may observe no mere reference to any value-neutral "meaninglessness" but precisely a *cold* indifference, i.e., an *opposition* to true goodness. Note, for example, Sartre's description of reality in his *Nausea* (Sartre 1964). "Had I dreamed of this enormous presence?... all soft, sticky, soiling everything ... I hated this ignoble mess ... spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither ... I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being ... I shouted 'filth! what rotten filth!' and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth ... I had already detected everywhere a sort of conspiratorial air ... it was there, waiting, looking at one ... I had learned all I could know about existence" (pp. 134–35).

- 44 As previously mentioned, Brandchaft et al. (2010) uses the expression “pathological accommodation” to refer to instances such as this in which a child feels forced to subordinate his own *emerging* experiential sense of what is true, right, and good (i.e., his own voice or true sense of self) for the sake of retaining needed relational ties. See also Winnicott’s (1965) appeal to a false vs. true self. New Testament authors refer to the contrast between the “carnal mind” and the “mind of the spirit”.
- 45 This is evident in the way an adopted child, over time, tends to take on characterological qualities of his non-biological parents in the same way as the biological children. As previously described, how the child initially sees and values reality and himself primarily depends upon this parent–child relationship, regardless of any inherited biological characteristics.
- 46 With respect to this original relational inheritance, I am not claiming that we can erase or in that sense “cure” any form of trauma, much less severe relational trauma. I am, however, claiming we have the capacity to transcend this relational trauma. There is a form and degree of moral goodness that has sufficient power to enable us to transcend not only physical and psychological but even moral trauma. Insofar as one’s capacity for moral growth is not entirely lost, one has some form and measure of access to this primary value underlying real and substantial moral and spiritual transformation.
- 47 To be clear, I am not at all suggesting that substantial personality change is limited to the young. I merely have in mind the way the young are initially more open to such change whereas insofar as we are increasingly subjected to prejudicial conformity with the world, we may be tempted to doubt this possibility.
- 48 Gandhi contrasts this predominant empty form of Christian *profession* with a “truly” spiritual Christianity incarnated in the life of his dear friend C. F. Andrews (Gandhi 1993; Gandhi and Andrews 1989) and other friends such as Jones (1976, p. 44): “The decision of the Mahatma not to be a Christian was arrived at in South Africa . . . How could he really see Christ through all this racism? He did see Christ in C.F. Andrews . . . this racism was often very deeply religious and held to in the name of religion . . . his (Christ’s) followers made him the sponsor of white rule and white ascendancy. How could Gandhi see Christ through that?” In Gandhi’s words, “The church did not make a favorable impression on me . . . They were not an assembly of devout souls . . . going to church for recreation and in conformity to custom . . . I soon gave up attending the service” (ibid., p. 45). From a Sikh perspective, see (Andrews 1934, p. 35): “Neither would he (Sadhu) separate either Hinduism or the Sikh religion by hard and fast lines from the Christian Faith. They were woven out of one texture by the Divine Spirit, and they needed to be interwoven again into one perfect fabric”.
- 49 As in the case of the atheist Four Horsemen.
- 50 For a more in-depth look at the difference between *moral* and mere *social* power, see Wyner (2012).
- 51 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12).
- 52 We must acknowledge that for more than 100 years we have focused on the wrong factors in psychotherapy . . . we must teach students how to create a caring therapeutic environment that emphasizes the personal and interpersonal dimensions of therapy . . . The aim would be to cultivate the trainee’s capacity to connect with clients at a profound level so that clients feel deeply accepted, supported, and understood (Elkins 2015, p. 414).

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