

Addiction, Identity, and Disempowerment

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Abstract: Supposing that addicts choose to act as they do, rather than being compelled to behave in particular ways, what explains the choices that they make? Hannah Pickard has recently pointed out that we can go a long way to answering this question if we can make sense of why addicts value the ends they pursue. She argues that addiction is a social identity that gives purpose and structure to life and that the choices that addicts make are valuable to them as ways of sustaining this social identity. But if addicts freely make choices towards ends that they perceive as valuable in terms of a social identity to which they contribute, and therefore if addiction involves the deployment of quite considerable agential apparatus, how are we to hold on to the natural assumption that addictions are disempowering? In this paper I present an answer to this question. Drawing on the resources of the phenomenological tradition, I argue that some social identities give purpose and structure to life in a way that inhibits, rather than enables, the exercise of a capacity that is central to our form of life. I elaborate the hypothesis that paradigmatic cases of addiction involve this sort of disempowering social identity.

Keywords: Addiction, Social Identity, Disempowering, Heidegger, Agency

I

On the assumption that addicts exercise choice and are not compelled, how are we to explain the fact that they choose to act in ways that are detrimental to them? In a recent article, Hannah Pickard has advanced a novel answer to this question. She points out that if the ends addicts pursue seem valuable to them, then this goes a long way to explaining their choices. We need only explain how these ends come to seem valuable to addicts, despite appearing harmful to those looking on. Pickard's thesis is that in at least some paradigmatic cases, addicts value the ends that they pursue because they see them as part of their social identity.¹

To have a “social identity”, on the account Pickard defends, is to self-consciously belong to a social kind “associated with specific sets of beliefs, values,

¹ Pickard (737–761).

and behaviours, to which members are expected to conform *in virtue of their membership*”.² On this basis, she draws a parallel between “addict” and “non-addict”, understood as two distinct social identities.³ Identifying as a non-addict typically involves understanding oneself as a member of a community committed to the goal of mutual support. This goal is pursued through the establishment of a “program” or “system” that lays out rules that participants are expected to follow and are encouraged to enforce. Similarly, identifying as an addict typically involves understanding oneself as a member of social group structured by rules that govern appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. In both cases, the group and its norms provide direction and structure to the lives of its participants, in terms of which certain ends appear valuable.

In this paper I shall assume that addicts are not automata; they deliberately act towards ends that somehow appear to be worthwhile at the time. I shall also not dispute Pickard’s claim that the adoption of a social identity goes a long way to explaining why addicts value the ends they pursue. I shall, however, offer an answer to a question that is raised by these assumptions. If addictions involve exercising the capacity of choice so as to act towards ends for the sake of sustaining a social identity—and therefore involve the deployment of quite significant agential apparatus—how are we to hold on to the natural intuition that addicts are nonetheless disempowered in important ways? Otherwise put, if addicts *retain* the power to exercise choice, and *retain* the power to pursue a social identity, what power, if any, is lost? In answer to this question, I will argue that there are different kinds of social identity, which differ with respect to how they give structure and purpose to life. More specifically, I shall argue that some social identities enable, while others inhibit, an ability that is central to our agency: the ability to be oneself. On the basis of this distinction, I will elaborate the hypothesis that the structure and purpose provided by “addict” serves paradigmatically to impede the ability to be oneself. In this way, I aim to build upon Pickard’s analysis to explain how addictions can be severely disempowering despite deploying significant agential resources.

The central claim of my paper—that some social identities impede the ability to be oneself—will take some spelling out. Firstly, I shall need to elaborate what I mean by “the ability to be oneself”. I undertake this task in section II by presenting Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological account of agency. Having identified the structure and role of the ability to be oneself, I will need to show how this ability can be impeded by some social identities. I undertake this task in section III. In section IV, I marshal some *prima facie* evidence to elaborate the hypothesis that paradigmatic cases of addiction involve a social identity that impedes, rather than

² Pickard (2021, 746).

³ Patrick Biernacki draws a similar parallel between the so-called “addict-identity” and other identities. He holds that “recovery [from addiction] refers to the processes through which a new calculus or arrangement of identities and perspectives emerges and becomes relatively stabilized. This process entails a different articulation of identities in which the identity as an addict becomes deemphasized [. . .] relative to the other identities existing or emerging as part of the person’s overall life arrangement” Biernacki (1986, 25).

enables, the ability to be oneself. I address some worries with my hypothesis in section V, before concluding in section VI with some further considerations in support of my account.

Before I begin, I should make clear some limitations of this paper. Firstly, I take for granted that addicts are not compelled to do what they do. This is, to be sure, a highly controversial assumption and I will not try to win over anyone to my point of departure; my aim, rather, is to contribute to the growing literature on addiction as a disorder of choice.⁴ Secondly, I will not attempt to provide an account of addiction, where this involves developing a general theory that applies to everything that we would want to call by that name. I will argue, instead, for a conceptual distinction between kinds of social identity with respect to their relation to an ability of central importance to agency, and I will elaborate the hypothesis that paradigmatic cases of addiction impede this ability. I leave it to further study to vindicate or repudiate the hypothesis that I elaborate here.

II

The aim of this section is to provide an account of an ability—the ability to be oneself—and to make the case that it is of central importance to agency. I will do so by way of an extensive elaboration of Martin Heidegger’s development of these ideas. This will require us to spend a considerable amount of time working through Heidegger’s analysis. Heidegger’s account of agency is, however, complicated and nuanced. For the sake of ease of exposition, I will impose some distinctions that Heidegger does not make in the terms I introduce, but which should nonetheless help us to clarify his position. More specifically, I will distinguish between four layers of ability. As should become clear in what follows, I understand these layers to be conceptually dependent, in that the identity of each layer is only given by specifying its place within the whole structure of agency of which it is a part, which whole will come into view only gradually as I introduce each stratum.⁵

Let me start with the first stage of Heidegger’s account of ability, in which he outlines what I shall call “first-level abilities”. First-level abilities are abilities to be drawn into action by immediate solicitations of the environment. Here is Heidegger’s introduction of the idea through an example of a sprinter poised at the blocks:

In a position to . . ., this means first: he is fit for it. Yet not simply this, but at the same time it also means: he ventures himself, has already become resolved. To actually be capable is the full preparedness of being in a position to, which lacks only the *releasement* into enactment, such that when this is at hand, when it has imposed itself, this means: when the one who is capable sets himself to work,

⁴ As well as Pickard’s own contribution, see Heymann (2009), as well as Segal (2017).

⁵ I therefore read Heidegger as committed to the view that agency should be viewed as a “strong whole”, to borrow David Bell’s discussion of mereology in phenomenology: A strong whole depends on its proper parts, and they in turn depend on it: a strong unity involves the mutual dependence of whole and parts”, Bell (1999, 20-ff).

then the enactment is truly *practice* and just this. It is nothing other than setting oneself to work.⁶

The athlete might have to exercise considerable self-control in order to block out the sound of the crowd, such that she is actively involved in maintaining her state of readiness. But all this self-control is directed towards setting herself up to be released by the sound of the starting pistol. The word translated as “releasement”—*Enthemmung*—might otherwise have been rendered as “disinhibition”, Heidegger’s point is that although there is often effort involved in preparing for and holding yourself in readiness for action, the enactment of an ability such as sprinting is paradigmatically spontaneous and drawn from the agent, rather than instigated by an explicit choice. Indeed, if the athlete had to pause for thought before setting off it might well cost her the race. If she is properly prepared, in contrast, then at the sounding of the gun no decision is left to be made; she lets herself be set into motion.⁷

A second point to draw from this example is that readiness for disinhibition involves being attuned to the environment in such a way that the athlete is disinhibited only by those features of that environment that afford the enactment of her abilities. As she is poised in the blocks, much of the environment passes her by entirely. The athlete may be completely unaware of the commotion on the outfield, focused as she is on listening out for the sound of the starting pistol. When the gun fires, she is solicited into spontaneous action by just this feature of her surroundings. As Mark Wrathall summarises Heidegger’s position, our first-level abilities serve to “polarize the affordances of the environment into solicitations to act”⁸ and, in this way, to disclose the environment to us as an articulated field of possibilities for action.

Before moving on, let me draw out one further aspect of this first level of ability that shall be crucial for the position I develop below, namely, the way in which abilities of this level play out in time. I have argued that first-level abilities are exercised in response to present solicitations from the immediate environment. The sprinter responds to the solicitation to run *now*. To exercise a first-level ability, then, is to be disinhibited in the here and now by a present solicitation that draws one into action. I shall call the time in which the exercise of first-level abilities takes place a “first-level temporal horizon”. As we shall see, each of the subsequent levels of ability I describe is exercised in its own temporal horizon, each of which encompasses and informs the temporal horizons of the abilities of lower levels.

If we left the analysis at this point, there would not be much to separate human abilities from the abilities of non-human animals. Both involve inhabiting an environment in such a way that certain features of that environment disinhibit the spontaneous enactment of an ability. Think here of a dog galumphing happily across a field, hot on the heels of a hare, deaf to the exhortations of its owner. Indeed,

⁶ Heidegger (1995a, 188).

⁷ In this way, and as Matthew Burch has recently argued in detail, Heidegger’s view stands in contrast to contemporary paradigms according to which action depends upon some form of prior deliberation (Burch [2018, 942]).

⁸ Wrathall (2017, 22).

Heidegger describes the animal's relationship to its environment in precisely these terms.⁹ On his view, animals inhabit their environment in such a way that they are surrounded by a "disinhibiting ring" of solicitations that pull them into enacting their abilities. He does, however, also spend considerable time distinguishing the animal's way of inhabiting an environment from the human's way of existing in a world. A crucial point of difference, as he sees it, turns on the way that our first-level abilities are informed by and embedded within what I shall call "second-level abilities". These are our abilities to aim at goals, typically disclosed through our participation in social practices.

Both the athlete and the crow on the outfield are spontaneously released into a form of motion by the sound of the starting pistol; each, in its own way, takes flight. In contrast to the crow, however, the athlete's abilities are informed by her understanding of the goal she is aiming for: winning the race. This goal is available to the athlete on account of her self-conscious participation in the social practice of athletic competition. Compare her response to the starting pistol to that of the official overseeing the race. She too is drawn spontaneously into activity, making sure that the sprinters are obeying the rules of the race. In this way, the same entity in the environment—the starting pistol—affords and solicits different spontaneous responses from different human populations. The difference between their ways of responding is to be explained in terms of the difference in the goals they have, which difference is itself explained in terms of the different roles each population understands itself to occupy within the cultural practice of athletic competition.

Let me now briefly describe the differences between the temporal horizons of first- and second-level abilities. As we have seen, first-level abilities take place within the circumscribed horizon of the here and now, in which we are immediately disinhibited by a present solicitation. Second-level abilities, however, embed first-level abilities in a broader temporal horizon that encompasses a future goal towards which we are directed and in terms of which our first-level abilities are attuned. A further point needs to be made. The goals towards which second-level abilities are directed can be finally achieved in time. Consider, for example, the ability to build a house. This is a second-level ability: it is directed towards a goal disclosed within the context of a social practice, namely, construction. The goal towards which the ability is exercised—the construction of the house—can be finally achieved in time, since there is a point at which the house is complete and the exercise of the ability comes to an end. As we shall see presently, this point will mark a major difference between second-level abilities, on the one hand, and abilities of the third and fourth level, on the other.

There is, to be sure, much more detail that could be added to the elaboration of Heidegger's way of developing these ideas.¹⁰ But let me briefly summarise the

⁹ Heidegger (1995b, 196-f).

¹⁰ I have dramatically simplified Heidegger's discussion of the relationship between practices, abilities, and the disclosure of the world for the sake of brevity. For an extended discussion, see Batho (2021). For a sophisticated analysis of the importance of practices in disclosing the world, see Haugeland (2013, 187–220); for a discussion of ability in relation to the self, see Wrathall (2013, 235–241; 385–387).

position I have elaborated so far. Our first-level abilities to be spontaneously released into action are informed by the practical ends of our second-level abilities, such that to spontaneously respond to a present solicitation of the environment is at the same time to be on the way to fulfilling a future goal disclosed typically through participation in a social practice. Our second-level abilities thus inform our readiness for disinhibition by our surroundings, by providing an end towards which our first-level abilities are attuned. Heidegger further complicates this account, however, by claiming that our second-level abilities are informed by that for the sake of which we pursue goals at all, namely, the ends of what I shall call third-level abilities, and which he calls “abilities-to-be”.¹¹

The sprinter is in the midst of acting towards a goal: winning the race. But this is not the only practice that matters to her. When she finishes the race, she may have to undertake another set of actions concerning how she presents herself to the media. Later on, she may have to attend a dinner in her honour and schmooze with politicians. In this way, the sprinter’s second-level ability to compete in a race sits alongside other second-level abilities, such as the ability to competently deal with the media or to attend social functions. It is no accident that her abilities have lined up in this way, however: she has cultivated these specific capacities, and has thereby articulated her life into a pattern of second-level abilities, out of concern for *being a sprinter*. This is what Heidegger has in mind with the notion of an “ability-to-be”, and which I am referring to as “third-level ability”. It is not the ability to *do* this or that, but the ability to articulate yourself *as* someone or other by patterning your life into a structure of second-level abilities expressive of the concern for being that sort of person.

Being an athlete is not, on Heidegger’s account, simply a matter of adopting a set of norms that govern which second-level abilities you should cultivate, as though what it is to be an athlete is given in advance. Rather, being an athlete is a matter of being concerned to figure out what it means to be an athlete, and therefore being gripped by the problem of figuring out how to pattern your life as an athlete in your own case.¹² This means that the process of articulating life of which the exercise of third-level abilities consists is not simply a matter of following a pattern revealed in advance, but of revealing the pattern in the process of articulating it. Suppose that our athlete recognises that her dominance in the hundred metre sprint is waning. That way of being an athlete is coming to an end for her. But this presents a problem: how is she to continue *as* an athlete, given that she cannot carry on as before? She might find herself looking to take up a different sport, less dependent on the explosive energy of sprinting, but still expressive of her athleticism, or she might look to start coaching, or to work for an athletic association, or something along these lines. In any case, the fact that she has a problem to deal with demonstrates Heidegger’s point that *being an athlete* involves finding oneself with the problem of having to

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell, 1962), 235–241 and 385–387. See also Large (2021).

¹² For a development of this reading of Heidegger, see Batho (2019), and Batho (2021).

work out what it means to be an athlete, such that one articulates one's life into a pattern of second-level capacities through reckoning with this task.

On Heidegger's view, then, our third-level abilities—such as the ability to be an athlete—are abilities to make sense of ourselves *as* athletes, friends, parents, and so on. These abilities are exercised through the patterning of life into an articulation of second-level abilities. In this way, third-level abilities inform second-level abilities by articulating the context in which they have their place and meaning. Accordingly, even the exercise of our first-level abilities expresses our third-level abilities: our athlete, for example, is spontaneously released into action in order to win the race for the sake of making sense of herself as an athlete.

The exercise of third-level abilities—abilities-to-be—takes place within a qualitatively distinct temporal horizon to second-level abilities. To recall, the exercise of second-level abilities takes place within a temporal horizon circumscribed by some finally attainable end, such as winning a race. This horizon encompasses and informs the much tighter horizon of first-level abilities, which are restricted to solicitations in the immediate present. As we have seen, however, the end of third-level abilities is *being someone or other*, where this involves making sense of what it means to be that sort of person. And unlike the ends of second-level abilities, which can be attained once and for all, making sense of oneself in a particular way has no conceivable point of completion in time. Consider, for example, what is involved in exercising the ability to be a father. Unlike exercising the ability to build a house, which ceases when the end is complete, the ability to be a father has no point of completion in time. To be a father is to be continually figuring out what that means for you in the progressively changing context of your life, as emerging demands require new skills and responses and, therefore, a change in the pattern of your second-level abilities.¹³ Consequently, the temporal horizon in which abilities-to-be are exercised is necessarily open-ended and ongoing. This makes for a qualitative contrast with the temporal horizons of first- and second-level abilities: third-level abilities are only exercised *over* time, towards ends that are constitutively not finally completable, and first- and second-level abilities are only exercised *in* time, towards ends that can be completed once and for all.

Before we can pull the scaffolding down from around Heidegger's position, we need to add one final tier to the hierarchy of abilities. On Heidegger's view, all of the various abilities-to-be for the sake of which we act are subordinate to a *final* for-the-sake-of-which—namely, *being oneself*—which is the end of the crowning ability of our agency, the ability we *are*, namely, the ability to be oneself. Here is Heidegger's introduction of this idea in *Being and Time*:

Dasein exists for the sake of a potentiality-of-being of itself. Existing, it is thrown, and as thrown, delivered over to beings that it needs *in order to* be able to be as it is, namely *for the sake of* itself. Since Dasein exists factically, it understands itself in this connection of the for-the-sake-of-itself with an actual in-order-to. That

¹³ For a classic discussion of this point, see W. Blattner, *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146ff.

within which existing Dasein understands *itself is* “there” together with its factual existence. The wherein of primary self-understanding has the kind of being of Dasein. Existing, Dasein *is* its world.¹⁴

This is, to be sure, a difficult passage. But we can glean a few key points. We have seen that Heidegger gives an account of first-level abilities by appeal to their place within second-level abilities, and an account of second-level abilities by appeal to *their* place within *third*-level abilities. Thus, to exercise a first-level ability is to be spontaneously released by a solicitation of the immediate environment towards a distal practical goal that is for the sake of making sense of oneself in some particular way. Similarly, in the passage just quoted Heidegger is offering an account of third-level abilities by appeal to their place within a fourth and final level of ability, the ability we *are*, namely, the ability to be oneself. More specifically, rather as third-level abilities are exercised through patterning our second-level abilities around our concern for being this or that sort of person, similarly our fourth-level ability is exercised through patterning our third-level abilities around our concern for being ourselves. We articulate ourselves as athletes, fathers, friends and so on by patterning our second-level abilities in some way, and we articulate ourselves *as the specific individuals we are*, by articulating our various abilities to be athletes, fathers, friends and so on into a pattern that dynamically forms our lives as a whole. Our sprinter, for example, is not entirely wrapped up with the concern for being an athlete: she is also concerned to be a friend, a sister, a businessperson, and so on. She exercises her ability to be *herself*—above any beyond being any specific sort of person—by weaving her life into a pattern of such third-level abilities out of concern for figuring herself out.

Let me now summarise the position I have been elaborating. On Heidegger’s view, the ability to be oneself is constitutive of the sort of being that you are. This is what I called the fourth-level ability. You exercise this ability through patterning some number of concrete ways of making sense of yourself, such as figuring out what it means for you to be an athlete. These are what Heidegger refers to as “abilities-to-be” and which I referred to as “third-level abilities”. To make sense of yourself in any such way, however, is to bring a host of practical goals into orientation towards an overriding concern with the question of the meaning of your commitments. The abilities to pursue such goals are what I called “second-level abilities”. Each of these abilities is itself a way of informing various first-level abilities in terms of goals. And these first-level abilities disclose the environment in terms of solicitations towards their enactment. So, to enact a first-level ability is typically to exist as “the polarization of the affordances of a situation into particular solicitations to act” for the sake of some way of making sense of yourself, as a way of exercising the ability that is constitutive of the sort of being that you are: the ability to be oneself. With each “level” of ability comes a distinctive temporal horizon within which the exercise of the ability takes place and which informs

¹⁴ Heidegger (1962, 333) (translation modified).

the temporal horizon of all lower levels. First-level abilities are exercised in the here and now in response to immediate solicitations of the present environment. Second-level abilities are exercised towards practical goals, typically disclosed by participation in social practices. Both first- and second-level abilities are therefore exercised *in time*, towards completable ends. Third-level abilities, however, are exercised *over time*, through articulating your life around the open-ended concern for figuring out what it means for you to be, for example, an athlete. This process is open-ended, on-going and has no conceivable point of final completion. Similarly, the fourth-level ability, the ability we are, can only be exercised over time, through exercising specific third-level abilities that constitutively draw on abilities of both the second and first level.

Now that we have a sketch Heidegger's position in view, in the following section I shall elaborate how a particular kind of social identity involves the exercise of first- and second-level abilities to the detriment of the exercise of abilities of the third and fourth level.

III

The following passage is taken from Simone Weil's criticisms of manual labour, as she experienced it during a period of factory work:

Existence is not an end in itself but merely the framework upon which all good, both real and imagined, may be built. When all objectives vanish and existence appears starkly stripped of everything, it no longer bears any relation to what is good. Indeed it becomes evil. [. . .] A similar kind of slavery persists whenever people find themselves in the same position on the first and the last day of a month, of a year, or of twenty years' effort. The similarity lies in its being equally impossible for them to desire more than they already possess or to direct effort towards the acquisition of what is good. Effort is for survival.¹⁵

In Weil's view, manual labour is not necessarily problematic, but the social and economic conditions of her day made it so by placing huge difficulties in the way of the worker's attempt to let her labour matter for the sake of anything beyond acquiring the means of survival. Weil is not, I take it, claiming that it would be impossible to participate in the practice of manual labour for the sake of some good, even under the conditions she was describing. Indeed, she was able to embed her own experience within an attempt at transformative social practice! But she *is* claiming that the avenues open to her co-workers were vanishingly small. Consequently, factory work greased the skids towards the possibility of falling into a form of activity that was not for the sake of some good, but was for the need to attain the material needs on the basis of which one might then act in light of a concern for some good. On Weil's account, then, there is an important difference between acting in order to acquire the means of survival and acting for the sake of some good. To be sure, the

¹⁵ S. Weil, "Prerequisite for Dignity of Labour", in Weil (2005, 265). I am grateful to Tom O'Shea for alerting me to this example.

former is involved in the latter; you cannot act for the sake of some good if you do not have the material means of survival. But the former does not entail the latter; the attempt to simply get by might exclude the activities that the acquisition of the means of survival might otherwise support.

I think that Heidegger's account of agency gives us the means of analysing systematically the possibility that Weil vividly portrays, to wit: the workers found themselves enacting first- and second-level abilities in a way that impeded the exercise of any third-level ability, that is, any specific way of making sense of themselves. In contrast to the athlete whom we imagined above, the workers' ability to handle the machines was not cultivated as part of the process of dynamically organising their second-level abilities around an orienting concern for making sense of themselves in some way or other. Consequently, it is not merely that the workers' labour left no time for other things; they were so constrained by the pattern of their work that their lives could only be played out *in* time, towards the ends of first- and second-level abilities, rather than *over* time, towards the ends of third- and fourth-level abilities. As a result, they experienced contractions of entire qualitative dimensions of temporal experience and severe impediments in their ability to be themselves. Their lives became their daily work, rather than an open-ended process of articulating a pattern expressive of concern for making sense of themselves, within which their work might have taken place as a limited and meaningful phase.

To further clarify the idea, consider the relatively benign if not worryingly familiar example of playing a mindless game on your phone. You play the game so as to take a break from your work or just to wind down. In this way, the game presents itself as a phase in the exercise your ability to articulate your life into a pattern of activity and rest for the sake of making sense of yourself as, for instance, a writer, which is itself a phase of the exercise of your overarching ability to articulate your life into a pattern of such ways of making sense of yourself. But the game draws you in. You spend far longer playing it than you had originally intended. And this has consequences. The longer the break in the day continues, the less it is recognisable as a part of a dynamic pattern of activity and rest expressive of the attempt to make sense of yourself as a writer. Rather as musical note played too long and too loudly sounds less and less like a part of a composition and more and more like an interruption in the articulation of a meaningful pattern, so too the time spent on your phone becomes a point around which your day is disintegrated, rather than a phase of the development of its meaningful shape.¹⁶

Each example presents a form of social identity that consists in mastery of a set of social practices and which gives purpose and structure to life. Clearly, the workers understood themselves to belong to a social group structured by norms that gave purpose and structure to their lives, and we can assume for the sake of argument that

¹⁶ Of course, it could be that playing the game becomes for you part of a pattern of articulating your life in terms of a different concern, such as being a gamer. But it could also be the case that playing the game remains inexpressive of any such overarching concern, that it does not become the means of the exercise of the ability to make sense of yourself in some way, such that your days are increasingly taken up with playing the game absent any concern for questions of what it means for you to be anyone at all.

the norms of playing the game were made available in a similar way. But in each case the purpose and structure given to life by the social identity adopted blocks the dynamic articulation of life into a pattern of second-level abilities, which process of articulation is the exercise of the ability to make sense of oneself in some specific way, which itself is a phase in the exercise of the ability to make sense of oneself as such. The upshot is that the adoption of either social identity and the active pursuit of its norms inhibits the exercise of any third-level ability, impedes access to the third-level temporal horizon, and therefore stymies the exercise of the ability that we are, the ability to be oneself.

Now, both Weil's description of her colleagues' experience and my cautionary tale of gaming are extreme: it may strike many as implausible or patronising to suggest that Weil's co-workers really were entirely incapable of acting for the sake of any good, as she suggests, and it might seem curmudgeonly to suppose that games can so easily devastate lives. And I agree: rarely, if at all, does life become so contracted. Nonetheless, these examples allow us to see a limit case that real examples approximate. In this way, they serve as helpful comparators to illuminate cases that approach them to some degree.

With that in mind, I want to take the following general lessons. It is possible to be disempowered through being constrained in the exercise of the ability to be oneself (fourth-level ability) through being blocked in the exercise of any particular ability-to-be (third-level ability), through the adoption of a social identity (a structured set of first- and second-level abilities adopted as part of self-consciously belonging to a social group), *if* that identity impedes the dynamic organisation of one's first- and second-level abilities, that is, the process of making sense of oneself in some way. Although it may be implausible to suppose that anyone ever experiences this form of disempowerment to the maximal degree, it is far more plausible to suppose that the experience of many people more or less approximates it. The workers' exhausting labour and the gamer's absorption are cases in point: having worked all day on actions that were not for the sake of any particular way of making sense of themselves, in which they were not pressing into any possibilities of questioning the meaning of commitments that mattered to them, their ability to engage in practices through which they could have exercised concern for the question of what it means for them to be such and such a person was hampered, such that they found their access to the third- and fourth-level temporal horizons curtailed.

IV

In this section my aim is to elaborate a hypothesis, namely, that paradigmatic cases of addiction typically involve a social identity that serves to impede the ability to be oneself, by impeding the exercise of third-level abilities through which the ability to be oneself could be put to work. In other words, I wish now to apply our discussion of Heidegger and Weil to the case of addiction. To elaborate this hypothesis, I shall

draw on a number of sources so as both to illustrate what the hypothesis amounts to as well as to provide some prima facie evidence in support of its plausibility.

The first element of the hypothesis that I wish to elaborate is that addictions typically involve the exercise of first- and second-level abilities. I will be brief in my statement of this aspect of the position I wish to articulate, since it is relatively uncontroversial and at any rate defended by authors such as Pickard whose work is foundational for my analysis.

Fridland and Wiers¹⁷ have argued that addictive behaviour is best understood on the model of a “sensorimotor hypothesis”, according to which the repeated practice of using addictive substances habituates the addict into a set of abilities that disclose the environment towards solicitations to act. In keeping with other first-level abilities that are not associated with addiction, they argue, the addict typically follows the solicitations of her environment without deliberation or explicit choice, rather as the sprinter simply sets off at the sound of the starting pistol. In addition, Holton and Berridge¹⁸ argue that ingestion of addictive substances establishes “dispositional desires”, such that the addict is motivated to consume if she comes across the substance or items associated with it. I do not wish to endorse any particular account, so much as to draw attention to the phenomenon on which they appear to converge, namely, that addicts are conditioned to be sensitive to cues within the environment that dispose them towards spontaneous action in pursuit of consumption. In other words, the pursuit of addiction involves the cultivation and exercise of first-level abilities.

To actively seek an addictive substance, however, typically requires the navigation of possibilities for action that are only present to those who are familiar with the norms of particular practices. In order to acquire heroine, you need to speak to your dealer, follow his rules, and so on. In order to use heroin, you need to be familiar with the norms of the practice of preparing the drug for consumption and regulating the amount you take. More prosaically, in pursuing a nicotine addiction, you need to know when the newsagent opens and to have mastered the basics of commodity exchange. In this way, the first-level abilities through which the addict is solicited towards seeking and use are informed by her understanding of the norms of practices. So addiction typically involves the exercise of first-level abilities informed by a cluster of second-level abilities that are available through self-consciously participating in a social group. Addictions, therefore, typically involve the adoption of the social identity “addict”, on the assumed definition of “social identity” introduced above.

The second aspect of the hypothesis I wish to elaborate is more controversial and will therefore require more time to make both intelligible and initially plausible. This is the claim that in paradigmatic cases of addiction, the social identity “addict”—that is, the cluster of second-level abilities to participate in the social practices that are

¹⁷ E. Friedland, and C. E. Wiers, “Addiction and Embodiment”, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 1 (2018).

¹⁸ R. Holton and K. Berridge, “Compulsion and Choice in Addiction”, in *Addiction and Choice: Rethinking the Relationship* eds. Heather and Segal (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2017).

characteristic of addiction—take such a form and place in the lives of agents that it impedes the exercise of third-level abilities to make sense of oneself in particular ways, and therefore impedes the exercise of the ability that we are, namely, the ability to be oneself. In other words, the social identity “addict” is similar to the social identity “worker” as described by Weil, or “casual gamer” as I sketched it above, in that it does not express on-going concern for making sense of what it means to be someone or other, but is a pattern of activity that both stymies the pursuit of that concern and disintegrates the articulation of a life that has been patterned in terms of it. Thus, despite providing purpose and structure to life in such a way as to disclose the ends of seeking and use as valuable to those who sustain it, the social identity “addict” does not necessarily (and paradigmatically does not) give space for the agent to make sense of herself over time.

To provide some initial plausibility to this claim as a description of paradigmatic cases of addiction, consider the following pieces of testimony taken from Gerda Reith’s study of the experience of time in heroin addiction:

Drugs became the only thing in my life that mattered. That was my life, there was nothing else, there was no job, no family. [. . .] Everything I concentrated on was “what will I do today?”¹⁹

Smack takes away all your worries an’ your thoughts about the future so all your small problems are gone. You don’t think what you’ve got to do today or where you’re going to get money, you take the drug and it robs you of that worry, takes away all that. . . . When I stopped I could think straight, I could think ahead, whereas before I just didn’t think about the next day; you spent your money one day and didn’t bother about where your money was for the next day. You’re not too bothered about the future; I used to do things for the moment rather than worry about the future.²⁰

My interest in life declined, goin’ from active to just sittin’ around not wantin’ to do anythin,’ losin’ interest in things . . . a sort of tunnelin’ of your vision. I just felt as if my life had a big full stop right at the end of it, fuckin’ closed, you know.²¹

Firstly, the addicts report a contraction of concern to the pursuit of practices that have achievable goals in time: the seeking and use of heroin. In terms of our Heideggerian analysis, their lives become structured principally by the concern for exercising second-level abilities. Secondly, and connectedly, the contraction of concern to such practices involves a loss of concern for such things as a job or a family, concerns that, as we have seen, are typical examples of third-level abilities. So the contraction of concern for second-level abilities involved a loss of concern for third-level abilities. This retraction of concern for third-level abilities alongside the dominating pursuit of second-level abilities also involved a restriction of temporal

¹⁹ Reith (1999, 104).

²⁰ Reith (1999, 105).

²¹ Reith (1999, 106).

experience to the daily pattern of exercise and rest, rather than extending to the open-ended horizons characteristic of third- and fourth-level abilities. Finally, this contraction of lived temporality to the horizon of repeatable days, and this retraction of concern to the ends of second-level abilities, was experienced as a loss of interest in things as a whole, and a sense of life as at an end. These features are consistent with the hypothesis that addictions paradigmatically involve the pursuit of the ends of second-level abilities *absent* the articulation of these second-level abilities into a pattern of life expressive of concern for being someone or other, such that pursuing the ends of these abilities becomes an extended interruption in the exercise of the ability to make sense of yourself and thus an extended period of disintegration of the articulation of yourself over time.

Let me add just one further piece of testimony to illustrate the hypothesis I am trying to elaborate. The following description is taken from Joaquin Trujillo's report into the phenomenology of addiction to crack cocaine. I quote at length:

We have this illusion, this grand illusion that it's not me. "Oh, I'm just a casual user". [. . .] He has the same illusion, until he starts missing work. He starts lying. He starts taking money out of the bank. He starts taking from home. He starts pawning. Then he stops working. And he stops making calls home telling his wife he won't be home. And as these things come to date, all along he says to himself, "I'll stop when I wanna. I'll stop when I wanna. I'll stop when I wanna". But you see, it doesn't get better. As he goes along from losing his job, his wife, and losing his car, that's nothing. You know he's not going up. He didn't gain another wife. He didn't gain two more cars. He didn't get the president's job at the company, that better job, the CEO position. He's lost all these things, but yet he's got to go use. He's lost the chairman of the board position. He's lost his home. He lost his wife. He lost his kids. Now he loses his car. [. . .] He's not going up. [. . .] Every step by step he's going down. [. . .] He sees it, but he doesn't feel it, okay. He doesn't feel it. Somehow he doesn't feel it. [. . .] He no longer values. [. . .] The hit's value becomes greater than anything else material he might hold. [. . .] "fuck the company, fuck the CEO position, fuck everything else. I'm gonna do this here, now".²²

At least at the beginning of the interviewee's addiction, he understood himself as a "casual user". I take this to indicate that he understood his use to be governed by a set of social norms that gave purpose and structure to his life. He is, of course, also indicating that this self-understanding was self-deceptive: a *casual* user does not have a problem, so the way in which he understood himself, and the social norms he took as governing his practice, enabled the continuation of the practice by disabling his qualms about it. Secondly, his pursuit of the social norms that structured his day came at the expense of pursuing other social norms connected with other practices connected to his job and his family. This means that his use of cocaine excluded the practice of other second-level abilities. But I suggest that it also excluded the exercise of any *third*-level abilities, inasmuch as it impeded the articulation of life

²² Quoted in Trujillo (2004, 185).

into a *dynamic pattern* of second-level abilities animated by the concern of being someone or other. Increasingly, the *dynamic patterning* of his life out of concern for making sense of himself was replaced by the monolithic block of pursuing the practices of seeking and use for the sake of nothing at all. This loss of a patterning of life in terms of concerns of third-level horizons is accompanied by a contraction of value to the goals of the practices that can be fulfilled in the restricted horizon of a day: “fuck the company, fuck the CEO position, fuck everything else. I’m gonna do this here, now”. So as with the heroine users above, the cocaine addict’s life became increasingly dominated by the exercise of a set of second-level abilities connected to the practice of seeking and use, to the expense of the articulation of life into a dynamic pattern of such abilities for the sake of making sense of oneself in some way. Both sets of testimony illustrate the hypothesis that paradigmatic cases of addiction involve social identities that impede the exercise of third-level abilities, and therefore impede the exercise of the ability to be oneself, such that the articulation of the self over time is interrupted.

Let me now summarise the hypothesis I have been elaborating. Addictions involve the exercise of first- and second-level abilities. In this sense, they sustain the social identity “addict”. In some paradigmatic cases, however, these first- and second-level abilities are not exercised for the sake of any third-level ability, that is, any particular way of dynamically organising one’s second-level abilities around the concern for making sense of oneself in some way. Moreover, these practices impede the exercise of third-level abilities. In this way, the practices of seeking and using in addiction paradigmatically cultivate a distinctive form of disempowerment, insofar as they actively impede the exercise of the ability to be oneself by placing obstacles along the only route through which this ability can be exercised, namely, the exercise of some number of third-level abilities. Although I hope to have made this hypothesis intelligible and initially plausible, I have not tried to demonstrate its truth. I leave it to further work to either vindicate or repudiate this hypothesis as an appropriate analysis of addiction. Before I conclude, let me pause briefly to address some immediate worries with the hypothesis.

V

Firstly, I am not claiming that practices of heavy consumption of what are typically thought of as addictive substances cannot be part of a broader concern for making sense of oneself in some way. I do not deny that the heavy consumption of, for instance, absinthe could be part and parcel of the concern with making sense of oneself as a bohemian. Nor do I deny that many addictions begin under the auspices of an active concern for making sense of oneself as part of a particular group, as when alcohol addiction forms as a result of the heaving drinking culture of a sports society, or when nicotine addiction develops among teenagers who are trying to fit in. I am also not denying that a life with addiction may involve the attempt to find ways of letting consumption matter for the sake of something beyond its own continuation, so as to rehabilitate that practice within some broader concern

for meaning. My point is just that it is possible to pursue normatively governed social practices of consumption in such a way that they come unmoored from the abilities to be that might once have harboured them or within which they might be rehabilitated, in such a way that this pursuit impedes the exercise of the abilities for the sake of which they might otherwise be performed. I do not claim that all such practices must float free in this way, just that addicts' testimony gives us reason to think that they can, and that in some paradigmatic cases that they do.²³

Finally, it might be objected that not all cases of addiction fit the profile I have been elaborating here. Consider, for example, being addicted to nicotine in the UK circa 1955. The nature of the effects of nicotine on the body, and the fact that smoking was widely regarded as an acceptable practice at this time, meant that the pursuit of a nicotine addiction need not have excluded the exercise of any other second-level ability, let alone the exercise of any third-level ability. For this reason, it seems that nicotine addiction need not be disempowering in the way I have articulated here, and therefore that addiction does not necessarily involve the form of disempowerment that I have been elaborating.

In response to this point, I should first reiterate that I have not been attempting to offer an account of the essence of addiction. I have been trying to elaborate a distinction between kinds of social identity, and to argue that paradigmatic cases of addiction involve social identities that impede, rather than exercise, the ability to be oneself. I have not made the case that such a structure of disempowerment is of the essence of addiction. That said, however, the fact that nicotine consumption is *compatible* with the exercise of third-level abilities does not entail that it is *expressive* of the exercise of those abilities. To see this point, we need only imagine that all forms of nicotine consumption were banned overnight by the UK Government on the 1st of January 1956. For the sake of argument, let us grant that Smith had regarded his nicotine consumption as valuable to him as part of the process of making sense of himself as a nuclear technician. Under the circumstances we are imagining, it would no longer be practically possible for him to make sense of himself as a nuclear technician in this way from New Years' Day onwards, since the latter now constitutively excludes pursuit of the former. But this does not entail that Smith will stop seeking and using nicotine, despite its disconnection from the way in which he had taken his consumption to be meaningful for him. If so, this suggests that despite its compatibility (under some social conditions) with the exercise of third-level abilities, nicotine addiction is paradigmatically *not for the sake of* those third-level abilities, inasmuch as its exclusion from the pursuit of the latter is not authoritative for the cessation of the former.

With these objections addressed, I now turn in conclusion to draw our discussion to bear on a final element of Pickard's analysis.

²³ For a related discussion, see Shinebourne and Smith (2009).

VI

Towards the end of her paper, Pickard discusses a commonly reported feature of addicts' experiences, namely, that they experience their "inner self" to be empty. Pickard offers her own explanation of this experience. On her account, you experience your "inner self" not to be empty just in case you have "an inner awareness that deep down you are OK—that your true self is indeed positive and morally good".²⁴ She argues that addicts seem to lack such a positive self-assessment of their "true self", such that they find that their "inner self" is only "a dark and empty void where that self [that is, the morally good self] should be".²⁵ She argues that part of the motivation of sustaining the social identity "addict"—that is, of continuing to abide to set of social practices that disclose the ends of seeking and use as valuable—is that it provides a defence mechanism against the perceived absence of a "true self".

Pickard's suggestion is intriguing. In conclusion, however, I want briefly to suggest that our Heideggerian analysis offers an alternative explanation of the experience of emptiness of self, which should give one more mark in its favour.

On the hypothesis I have elaborated, to adopt the social identity "addict" is to partake in an extended interruption of the activity of being oneself. Pursuing the ends of the second-level abilities that comprise that identity impedes the articulation of one's life into a dynamic pattern of abilities expressive of concern for making sense of oneself in some way. In other words, the social identity "addict" involves the active disintegration of the dynamic articulation of one's life around the concern for making sense of yourself, such that the pattern of one's life is progressively unpicked. This hypothesis predicts that addicts would experience a lack of self. To the extent that their lives are given over to the interruption of the process of making sense of who they are, to that degree they lack a concrete sense of who they are. I do not dispute Pickard's insight that, under these conditions, the rewards of succeeding at the practices constitutive of the social identity "addict" can be attractive at least in part because they offer a means of distracting oneself from the loss of oneself.²⁶

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²⁴ Pickard (2021, 751).

²⁵ Pickard (2021, 751).

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