

## **The Fix. 'How addiction is invading our lives and taking over your world'**

Damian Thompson. (2012). London: Collins.

What's your fix? Books, of course. Despite being a self-confessed book addict, I had to get over two major hurdles before reading this one. The first was the subtitle: 'How addiction is invading our lives and taking over your world'. The immediate and dramatic objectification of this powerful phenomenon called addiction was hard to swallow. The cover depicts a pile of items that one might associate with a quick fix: doughnuts, beer, cigarettes, pills, computers, cupcakes, etc. Uniformly painted white, they are rendered effectively indistinguishable – underlining their ultimate unsatisfactory emptiness when consumed to excess. The title itself is plastered in red bold font over this image, adding weight to the alarmist note struck by the subtitle. However, never judge a book by its cover, we're told. So, setting aside my quibbles about the title and cover, I come to the other major hurdle for me: the lack of an index. Whilst sympathetic to the impact on cost and the potential for a delay in publication, I find it hard to take seriously any non-fiction book that lacks one.

In *The Fix*, Thompson addresses the concept of addiction itself, emphasising the particular challenges inherent in living in contemporary western culture. He argues that the demarcation between consumption, habit and addiction is becoming increasingly blurred. His central thesis is an argument against the 'disease model' of addiction, in favour of a spectrum of behaviour on which individuals are increasingly replacing people with things. He argues that in part, through ever-greater accessibility, we are all at risk of letting available pleasures over-stretch the 'brain', leading to crippling addictive behaviours. Casual daily habits can quickly become obsessions that we struggle to control.

The book argues that this is no accident, and that manufacturers are becoming aware of how to make products inherently more addictive, and then marketing them to a needy audience who are substituting work and family bonds with addiction. Thompson argues that we are living in an environment that increasingly bombards us with rewards that our bodies don't need and that are not essential to our survival. However, these rewards provoke specific feelings of anticipation and pleasure in the 'brain' and we grab them anyway: in short, we reach for a fix.

Chapter 1 sets the context for concerns about addiction, using examples of cupcakes, iPhones and Vicodin (codeine and caffeine) to highlight our relationship with sugar, technology and pills. Chapter 2 questions the disease concept of addiction, countering it with arguments on availability and the importance of context to consumption. Chapter 3 focuses on the brain and what it can or cannot tell us about addiction. A fascinating hypothesis is

made that links the regulation of dopamine in the brain with the ‘wanting’ over the ‘liking’ that drives addictive behaviour. Chapter 4 outlines his concept of ‘the Fix’. Chapter 5 returns to cupcakes and our relationship with food. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on alcohol and prescription drugs respectively. Chapter 8 looks at gaming, while Chapter 9 discusses porn and the disturbing shifts in its delivery and widespread consumption. Chapter 10 explores the conscious manipulation of our ‘wanting’ and argues that the greater an awareness of this, the greater the ability to resist – if we want to of course!

There is a cleverness in linking a range of potential ‘fixes’ for the reader, as one or more is bound to grab our attention. I certainly could identify with my excesses in more than one of his categories. Subsequently, and at the time of writing I deactivated my Facebook account, restricted my Amazon book purchases to once a month, limited my 364 calorie Grande Café Mochas, and stopped Gaming. Whether I felt better for this drastic action is debatable, but it certainly helped me become aware of the power inherent in the ‘wanting’.

Thompson sets out his core arguments in Chapters 1-4. The remaining chapters repeat the arguments from the perspective of different potential fixes, and therefore felt a bit light – almost tagged on. It would have been more interesting if the core idea and arguments had been developed and expanded on more fully – though it would have made for a different book. It was around Chapter 5 that I started to become aware of the annoying use of ‘our’ and ‘we’ – a psychotherapy no-no if ever there was one.

The blend of personal anecdotes, pseudo-science and related interviews make for quite an entertaining read. Whilst *The Fix* certainly could not be described as an academic work (probably a compliment rather than a criticism), it certainly is absorbing in its provocativeness.

If the chains of habit are sometimes too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken, then *The Fix* certainly brings an awareness of how habits in the West are potentially formed. Assuming that one is not going to abstain from all pleasures that have the potential for habitual consumption, one needs to consider how to lick the honey from the razor’s edge safely. Thompson offers no answers. He does, however, argue that being more aware of how we are being manipulated to desire quick fixes can also be the start of supporting resistance. Ironically, I think this argument inadvertently leads back to the 12-Step model and its prizing of complete abstinence.

Written in a slick, breezy, journalistic style and drawing heavily from the author’s personal relationship with addiction, *The Fix* makes quite compelling arguments that fuse common-sense, personal experience and enough multimedia-sourced ‘science’ to make his arguments at least worth considering.

I would therefore recommend the book to a general audience as a purely entertaining and engaging read. I would also recommend it to any psychotherapist who wants to know more about addiction. It may not be the most comprehensive and detailed study of addiction, but it is thought-provoking enough to make

it highly useful. For those of you who do not resonate with any form of excess beyond your cognitive limits, then it is a must – if only to highlight the times in which we live and the mounting potential ‘fixes’ that surround us.

Sometimes the mere mention of the ‘brain’ can be enough to send an existential practitioner running frantically in search of some ‘uncertainty’ as an antidote. The book does discuss neuroscience (lite) as a core theme; however, if the ‘correlate’ concept of brain and behaviour is too much, the concept of ‘dopamine’ can, I believe, be viewed simply as a metaphor. I found this extremely useful when exploring my own responses to ‘fixes’, and this insight did make it much easier to abstain.

As psychiatric social worker and psychotherapist, I find the disease model of mental ill-health mostly unproductive. Whilst acknowledging the systematic support and encouragement provided by a wide range of 12-Steps groups, the book makes a strong case against the value of the disease concept of addiction. It proposes a re-evaluation of the binary or dualistic view of addict/non-addict, and suggests that the line is much more of a continuum than commonly proposed. The both/and concept seems quite apt here in addressing a once-expedient dualism. There is no denying the availability of fixes: one only has to play a few games of Angry Birds or note the ridiculously cheap offers (loss leaders) on vodka in Tesco to relate to some of the arguments in the book. Nonetheless, how the book views being in relation to consumption may be quite jarring for some existential purists: ‘In other words, we are sitting in front of the controls of a machine whose workings are basically a mystery to us. And someone has just handed us the ignition key.’ (p.32)

True, the appeal of this book is general, but if you are in any way interested in addiction, it’s worth the read. It certainly is thought-provoking, and as the availability of ‘fixes’ steadily increases, it captures the mounting challenge inherent in contemplating when licking honey from the razor’s edge.

**Michael R. Montgomery**

## **The Human Quest for Meaning. Theories, Research, and Applications, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

Paul T.P. Wong (ed) (2012) New York, London: Routledge.

*‘Is there a meaning of life?’* is probably one of the most pressing existential and persistent questions humans ask themselves. The question was long ago embedded in a strong metaphysical context and therefore criticized and finally dropped on the part of a positivistic orientated philosophy. Nowadays, the question of meaning has lost its dubious touch and has been eluted from its metaphysical background. It is no longer the question of an ultimate meaning of everything but a more modest and more subject-orientated question: ‘How can I live my life in a meaningful way? Do I

experience my life as meaningful?’ This different perspective of meaning can be seen as a condition for growing interest in Meaning-of-life research on the part of psychological research and its high degree of visibility and acceptance over the past four decades.

To understand the meaning of life in an existential, non-metaphysical way is the common ground in *The Human Quest for Meaning*. The book combines theoretical perspectives on meaning with a broad range of empirical studies and gives a wide-ranging overview of the research done in that field. It explores the connection with other important concepts in psychotherapy, especially the vital role for human well-being and resilience. Compared to the first edition, the second edition of *The Human Quest for Meaning* has 21 new chapters, reflecting the rapidly expanding field of research on the role of meaning in human flourishing. The result is a major publication on the empirical research of meaning in life as it is done in clinical and experimental psychology. To ensure that the readers obtain extensive and varied information on the topic, the authors address different perspectives, including positive psychology, self-determination, integrative, narrative and relational approaches.

First of all, the authors clarify some important concepts like meaning itself or the difference between subjective and objective meaning. The common denominator is that meaning is not given but derives from the individual decisions people make every day. Meaning is not metaphysical but something constructed, which individuals can experience in their everyday life. On the one hand meaning is subjective because individuals have to determine for themselves what kind of life is meaningful to them. On the other hand one needs to have an objective framework to avoid the conclusion that one can live a meaningful life by being, for example, a serial killer. This objective understanding of meaning is incorporated in all chapters and verified by empirical research. Another central assumption is that although personal meaning and subjective well-being are distinct these two concepts are highly interwoven. It is shown, for example, that both meaning and subjective well-being serve as major assets in people’s encounters with trauma.

Other studies connect meaning with different important concepts in psychology like strength of character, stability, psychological adaptation, resilience, health and dealing with age, disease and death or with setbacks in general. However, other authors describe various sources of meaning encompassing different levels of needs, from the basic biological to transcendental and spiritual needs, but also including personal relationships, creative work, meeting basics needs, personal achievements and religion. Once again, these suggestions embrace both an objective and a subjective perspective on meaning because each person will meet these sources of meaning in a different way and put different emphases on those general categories.

Apart from this more theoretical level of research demonstrating the central role for meaning in a human life, mental health practitioners will find meaning-

centred interventions, which can be applied to their work with clients. One comprehensive account is the Meaning-Centred Counseling, a holistic and integrative approach, which can be seen as a further development of Frankl's logotherapy. Meaning-Centred Counseling embraces different intervention strategies, such as the PURE (Purpose Understanding Responsibility Enjoyment) Strategy of Life Expansion, and the ABCDE (Acceptance Belief Commitment Discovering Evaluate) strategy. The PURE module provides the main sources of motivational, relational, and emotional resilience. The ABCDE strategy is the main tool in dealing with negative life experience.

Several authors favour a narrative approach and discuss the importance of restoring meaning through autobiographical methods. It is shown that the narrative approach enhances a sense of meaning and a purpose in life through transformation of thoughts, feelings and actions. It enables individuals to see their life in a bigger picture. By this means they can gain a broader understanding of themselves and of life.

From a philosophical point of view, the clarification of the fundamental concepts and their connection remain slightly unclear. For example, most of the articles refer to Frankl's work without mentioning Frankl's divergent understanding of meaning. For Frankl, meaning is embedded in a strong metaphysical theory. Meaning for him is something predetermined (ultimately by God), which is not constructed but has to be found. For Frankl, there is only one possible way for a subject to act or to behave in each situation, which is the right and meaningful answer to that special situation. I guess most of the authors of *The Human Quest for Meaning* would reject this kind of narrow understanding of meaning.

This ambiguity is true as well for the connection between happiness/subjective well-being and meaning. While Frankl would state that happiness/subjective well-being can (but must not) be a side effect of realising meaning, some articles do not draw a line between these two concepts but mix them somehow while other authors want to keep them as two separate concepts and focus on their reciprocal links. However, at the end the impression prevails that meaning is at least in part something instrumental for human well-being and not a goal in itself.

Another example is the different understanding of objective and subjective meaning. For a philosopher – and for Frankl as well – the objective side of meaning is that meaning and values are not constructed by the society or its individuals, but are given and embedded in an existing framework of value and sense. Most of the authors of this book take a very divergent metaphysical position, namely a constructivist one. In this sense meaning is not something that can and should be found in the world but read into it by an individual.

To mention this matters for different reasons. First, for a philosopher it is important to disclose and reflect on one's own metaphysical position and verify its soundness. At a philosophical level of reflection it is controversial

of how to understand the concept of meaning – is there something like meaning at all? – and if yes, how is meaning related to other concepts like values, subjective-well being or the concept of a person? If meaning, for example, would be encompassed by human well-being or by realising values, the question arises why one wants to focus on meaning at all. If meaning is tied up with the concept of a person has meaning something to do with realizing your authentic self? From a psychological point of view, is the authentic self itself a sound concept at all?

Second, to replace the metaphysical framework based on God or a Hegelian ‘World Spirit’ seems to be the precondition for the acceptance of the importance of meaning and the exploitation in the field of psychological/empirical research. If we take Frankl as a background again, he considered meaning and values as belonging to the noological dimension, which is strictly separated from the psychological dimension. This does not mean, of course, that meaning cannot be subject to psychological research but that meaning lies on another level than emotions or individual self-realization. The shift towards a psychological understanding of meaning is given little consideration within the book although it seems to be the common ground for the authors. It would have been interesting to learn more about their (probably) shared understanding of meaning especially in connection with anthropological questions and assumptions.

Third, although a strong metaphysical theory is difficult to justify, a constructivist position runs into troubles as well, like the exclusion of immoral sources of meaning, as Wong points out. If meaning is purely subjective one can live a meaningful life by harming others. Wong is aware of that problem and mentions the need for an objective principle of meaning without going into detail about it. Another way out would be to bite the bullet and accept the conclusion that a subjective account of meaning is not able to exclude immoral sources of meaning. One could accept that there might be a conflict between moral rules and subjective meaning.

From a psychological and/or psychotherapeutical point of view, I would recommend *The Human Quest for Meaning*. One gains a detailed picture on the psychological research done in the field of meaning and a deeper understanding of why meaning matters. It sharpens the perception of topics connected with meaning arising in the course of therapeutical work with clients and provides practioners with intervention methods.

**Claudia Reitingner**

## **The Myth of the Untroubled Therapist. Private life, professional practice**

Marie Adams. (2014). London: Routledge

The author of this important book, Marie Adams, who was trained in the