

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, 2nd 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