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Experience and Truth-telling: Intoxicated Autobiography and Ethical Subjectivity

Summary

This is a Foucault-inspired, postmodern study of ethical subjectivity. Technologies of life, personal truths and relations between truth telling and intoxication are highlighted in drug autobiographies and in materials from a study of Alcoholics Anonymous. Here other notions of the self are at play than the concept of the unified, autonomous, authentic self. These materials also offer an understanding of addiction as a dysfunction or disorganisation of temporality in everyday life.

Inspired by some of Foucault's work, this paper takes a seemingly untheoretical set of low-status texts mostly written by those on the front lines, and considers the possibility that such texts may provide an opportunity to contribute to debates in social theory about ethical subjectivity. Also in line with Foucault's later work, 'ethics' here is differentiated from the absolute moral codes of both religious and secular deontological traditions. Ethics is more about governing oneself and one's relations with others in a situated, pragmatic and open-ended fashion than about making general pronouncements about universal values.

Terms such as 'situated' and 'pragmatic' are not, I hasten to add, synonyms for 'relativism'. As Nietzsche pointed out a long time ago, relativism – ethical or epistemological –

is simply the Other, the constitutive Other, of the traditional codes of absolute Truth and Goodness. Nietzsche observed that the nihilists of his day, who saw nothing but chaos and meaninglessness everywhere, were obviously still in the grip of the old idea that knowledge means absolute knowledge, and that if we are to judge that a statement is a lie we must somehow have access to the Truth. These are mistaken beliefs, he said, rooted in the old idea that truth needs to take an absolute form. Nihilists are portrayed by Nietzsche as still sitting in the church of Absolute Truth even as they complain, like an audience that thinks it's been cheated, that there is no Truth to be seen.¹ Nietzsche was not a nihilist, and neither was Foucault, because both of them sought to get us out of

¹ The church analogy is not actually made by Nietzsche, but I hope it is in his spirit. Cf aphorism #36 in *The will to power*: "The philosophical nihilist is convinced that all that happens is meaningless and in vain; and that there ought not to be anything meaningless and in vain. But whence this: there ought not to be? From where does not get this 'meaning', *this* standard?" And in Aphorism #12: "Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached first, when we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged... Nihilism as a psychological state is reached, secondly, when one has posited a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events... but behold, there is no such universal!" (1967, p. 23 and 12)

church altogether, to help us to stop arguing about whether one should cry or laugh about the loss of universal meaning and try instead to develop post-absolutist, post-universal opportunities for exploring both knowledge and conduct.

If grand narratives have become hollow, if grand Truth is nowhere to be found, there is more to do than simply argue about whether we should be happy about this or mournful. By paying attention instead to the small truths, the situated insights, that arise in particular situations, a different form for truth seeking may begin to appear on the horizon. Nietzsche has been dead for a century now: for us today, the challenge is, in my view, to go beyond the dichotomies of the late nineteenth century – Truth vs. relativism, God vs. moral chaos – and begin to explore ways of caring for one's integrity while fostering solidarity and responsibility that do not begin by presupposing that any of us has a privileged position above the fray from which we can make either negative or positive universal judgements (including universal judgements about procedure).

Foucault sought inspiration for his situated ethical reflections and experiments in Greco-Roman practices of the self, including writing practices such as the nightly examination of one's day fostered by the Stoics. He looked to the Romans and Greeks, I think, because he wanted to explore ethical practices that were neither moralistic nor psychological. In the work of Seneca, Galen, Plutarch, and a host of lesser known writers Foucault discerned some possibilities relevant to those of us who are no longer Christian, who are suspicious of neo-kantian legalistic normative codes à la Habermas, but who are equally suspicious of modern psychology's quest for an inner 'authentic' truth of the self.

The methodological decision to look at previously neglected low-status texts is of

course not unique to Foucault. But, for the most part, those who have argued that we should learn from this or that 'minor practice'² have usually claimed that X or Y should be counted either as "literature" or as "philosophy" – as when feminist thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s argued that a lot of 18th and 19th century women's writing had been unjustly excluded from the canon because of masculinist prejudices about what counts as Serious Writing. Foucault invites us to participate in the task of critiquing the canon in a different, more radical manner. Rather than claiming that a particular text or set of texts (autobiographical tales of intoxication, addiction, and recovery, in this case) should be regarded as Literary or Philosophical, he exposes the ways in which the work done on the front lines by those inventing, evaluating and trying out 'minor practices' has left a rich archive documenting, and often critically analysing, the main techniques of governance characterising advanced capitalist societies. The writings of those involved in inventing and building municipal sewers; the plans drawn by the pioneers of institutional architecture in the 19th century; the self-examination practices developed in texts by minor Greco-Roman writers – these are some of the low-status texts, ignored by conventional intellectuals, that are explored and analysed in Foucault's numerous genealogies of modern governance.

From De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* in the 1820s, through the writings of William Burroughs and Timothy Leary in the 1960s, to today's mass-market American recovery autobiographies, there is a large and diverse archive of texts describing and analysing experiences with sub-

2 In ways that are consistent with Foucault's later work, Michel de Certeau (1984) has also explored how everyday minor practices can be mined for philosophical developments.

stances and with activities associated with drugs, alcohol, and what is described as 'addiction'. It is my contention that examining different strategies used by writers of what I shall call "intoxicated lives"³ can shed some new light on the philosophical question of what has been called personal truth, as distinct from objective scientific truth. This question of personal ethical truth is as old as Socrates; but it is being asked and answered in different ways in our own day – in low-status cultural sites as much as in academic theory. Academic philosophy is increasingly irrelevant even to the educated elite: the pursuit of life's "big questions" has been largely relegated to the self-help shelf, the popular women's magazine, the peer support group, the TV talk show – and the paperback autobiography.

Those of us with training in postmodern thought have generally ignored the kind of texts that I have been reading lately. And when their ubiquitous presence on bestseller lists has forced us to pay attention to them, our reading of personal stories of intoxication, addiction, and recovery has been one dimensional and snobbish. Highbrow culture has always expressed contempt for popular, lowbrow culture in a knee-jerk reflex manner: But the snobbish dismissal of popular genres by the academy that goes back to Plato's nasty comments about both poetry and sophistry has acquired new force today by being articulated with a specifically postmodern theory that dismisses the texts considered here, a priori, as 'confessional narratives'.

For those of you not familiar with postmodern theory, let me say a word about how the flag of theoretical sophistication is waved

³ Addiction autobiography is a smaller subset within the larger genre of intoxicated autobiography. Psychedelic literature, for example, is about intoxication but often eschews the categories and narratives of addiction, recovery, and sobriety.

so as to dismiss all popular autobiography. Postmodern theorists differ greatly in their analytical tools and strategies of interpretation; but one thing they share is a great suspicion of two terms routinely taken for granted in most popular autobiography: 'the self' and 'experience'. Borrowing from Foucault's genealogy of the invention of 'man' in the 18th century, from Derrida's deconstruction of the purposeful author, and more generally from Nietzsche's demolition of 'the subject' and his delusions of grandeur, postmodern thought constructs itself as sophisticated precisely by ridiculing the belief in the existence and importance of 'the true self' that is the basic presupposition of much autobiography. Theorists reason as follows: If the self is just a grammatical effect, as Nietzsche taught us, then isn't it a delusion to devote years to practices of self-discovery, whether these involve 'exotic' travel, transcendental meditation, romantic adventures, or experimentation with drugs? And if 'the self' is but a grammatical effect and/or a western myth, then how can there be such a thing as 'authentic' experience? Isn't experience always culturally constructed, in the same way and with the same codes that construct 'the self' of that authentic experience? Don't truth-telling practices featuring the 'real' self in fact construct the very selves that autobiography claims to reveal or disclose? From Foucault to Derrida to Lacan to Slavoj Zizek, a vast body of academic theoretical work suggests that those who go to twelve-step groups or listen to the advice given in TV talk shows are hopelessly caught up in the passé humanist myth of the self-identical, coherent, free, autonomous subject. Those who use words like 'authenticity' and 'self' unselfconsciously are wallowing in the deepest shadows of the humanist cave. They could learn from us philosophers if they tried hard, but there is nothing we can learn from them.

As part of a book on alcoholism and its management, I undertook a small ethnographic work among Alcoholics Anonymous (Valverde, 1998; Valverde and White-Mair, 1999). Through this for me novel research, I was surprised to learn that, whatever the explicit theory, the practices of AA groups in the Toronto area did not necessarily uphold the standard modernist unified theory of 'the self'⁴. A brief example will suffice to give some sense of my project. While attending AA group meetings, I realised that the telling of one's whole story was only one of the speech modes used at meetings, and in many meetings this was limited to the initial speaker. Other participants did not generate a coherent narrative of excess and eventual recovery, or of sin followed by salvation, preferring to use their time to discuss, in a low-key, often self-deprecating manner, how a particular slogan or step might be useful to them, pragmatically, to deal with a particular situation. At many meetings, much more time was spent discussing what the semantically vacuous injunctions "Easy does it" or "One day at a time" might mean in a particular person's practice than telling confessional tales. Through discussions of tactics for remaining sober or getting sober again after 'a slip', AA members developed an ad hoc, usually implicit, theory of the self as a contingent aggregate or vector sum of diverse practices of self – a low-level theory promoting not what Adorno called "the jargon of authenticity", but on the contrary, the empiricist and pragmatist tradition that goes from David Hume to Gilles Deleuze, the tradition that sees 'the self' as a mere label for "a bundle of perceptions", habits, and forces (see Deleuze, 1991).

⁴ An influential book arguing that support groups in the AA tradition presuppose and promote the unified 'self' critiqued by Foucault and other contemporary theorists is Plummer (1995).

To follow this up beyond Alcoholics Anonymous, and beyond alcoholism, I decided to explore the world of popular ethical practices of self through published written accounts, rather than through more ethnography. I have only sampled the vast literature on experiences of drugs and alcohol, so my comments here are preliminary; but I have read enough to be able to tell you that there is more than one theory of 'the self' that emerges from this literature. Some autobiographical tales of drugs and alcohol do fit the classic Foucaultian 'confession' – that is, the set of techniques of self by which individuals are enjoined to 'find' and to describe their true selves and to then engage in self-normalisation, thus 'making up' the very self that is supposedly revealed through confessional narratives. But other first-person tales do not fit the 'confessional' model at all, employing different theories and practices of the self, often in an ad hoc, unsystematic manner.

Truth telling and ethical inventiveness

In looking for analytical tools to help me to understand those dimensions of addiction and intoxication autobiographies that go beyond or even challenge the confessional relation and the utopia of personal authenticity, the text I have found most illuminating is a set of lectures given by Foucault at the end of his life at Berkeley, under the general title of "Parrhesia" – a Greek term that has a rich set of political meanings, but which for my purposes I will translate narrowly as 'truth-telling', since I am interested only in the ethical dimension of this concept.

Foucault, who as a Parisian intellectual would never have dreamed of exploring the ethical resources of pop culture and self-help books, chose to undertake an exploration of

Greek and Roman ethics to see whether, in our own present, it is possible to think about ethics without presupposing or constructing a deep self. The literature he explored included some bits of Aristotle and other major philosophers; but the bits of interest were not the *Metaphysics* but rather the (to philosophers) incidental comments on such things as dietary practices or tips on how to change one's sleeping habits.

With the rise of Christianity, a term arose that came to retrospectively gather some of the techniques of life (*techné tou biou*) developed in advice books, diaries, scrapbooks of quotes collected from other authors, ethical reflections, and a host of other 'minor', non-philosophical textual practices: this term was "spiritual exercises". Foucault's friend and colleague Pierre Hadot helped his non-classically trained friend to consider the significance and usefulness, for our particular present, not so much of specific Greco-Roman philosophies but rather of certain practices and techniques that were widely shared across competing philosophies, and which provided the pragmatic basis for their development. Hadot's own work (1995) suggests that the most important thing that we should learn from studying these ancient sources is not this or that idea but rather the more general lesson that philosophy was then "a way of life", a set of skills for living reflectively, for leading the examined life.

In keeping with Hadot's reconstruction of the ethical, practical basis of Greco-Roman philosophies, this is how Foucault (1983) formulated his interest in these diverse, non-systematic texts: "In all of these different [spiritual] exercises, what is at stake is *not* the disclosure of a secret which has to be excavated from out of the depths of the soul. What is at stake is the relation of the self to truth or to some rational principles."

Here, 'truth' does not mean either scientific truth or absolute moral truth: it is an al-

ways embodied and always relational, uniquely human truth – the truth invoked in the old phrase "truth-telling". The truth teller is of course an old dramatic standard character: the person, often a mysterious stranger, who appears in order to make the audience see how the other characters are deluding themselves. This truth teller isn't necessarily someone who has some Superman vision or expert knowledge. Greek tragedies had their oracles, and Shakespearean theatre has its witches, and these of course had supernatural knowledge. But the form of truth-telling I find most relevant to the writing of intoxicated lives is that which does not require an oracle or expert, that which is purely relational. An ordinary person can function as a truth teller without having prophetic qualities, but rather through participating in a particular triangular relationship linking him or her, the characters, and the audience. Sometimes the truth teller addresses the characters, enjoining them to look deeper into themselves, usually unsuccessfully. At other times, however, the truth teller is ignored or dismissed by the characters, who go on perpetuating their delusions while the audience becomes wiser. The various forms of truth telling are thus varieties of the dialogical relationship, if you like to use Bakhtinian terms, or situated three-way interactive social relations, if you prefer sociological language.

Drug autobiographies routinely deploy the dramatic device of truth telling. Sometimes the drug user is presented as someone who, when under the influence, becomes free to tell truths (about the world or about the self, or both) that he/she would normally keep unvoiced or even unthought. At other times, there is less emphasis on the subjectivity of the user. It is the drug itself that is said to more or less automatically 'open the doors of perception' – as William Blake famously put it, in a phrase reiterated in the

name of the rock band The Doors and in Aldous Huxley's 1954 book with that same title.⁵ The 'doors of perception' genre uses drug taking experiences as a hammer to beat up on social conventions, conventions which are regarded in Romantic fashion as deceptive, tradition-bound, superficial, and fundamentally untrue. Huxley, typically, warned that "we must discover, and discover very soon, new energy sources for overcoming our society's psychological inertia, better solvents for liquefying the sludgy stickiness of an anachronistic state of mind."⁶

In contrast to the 'doors of perception' trope, in which certain substances act as magic keys to a higher level of reality, much of the first-person literature on drug use being written today invokes the opposite view, namely that taking certain substances impairs our vision and leads inevitably into lies and self-deception.⁷ This is the 'sobriety as truth' perspective promoted not only by Alcoholics Anonymous but also by today's health-conscious middle-classes, who drink far less hard liquor and beer than the previous generation, smoke a great deal less than their parents and their working-class neighbours, and whose quest for excitement and mind-blowing experiences is more likely to take the form of 'extreme sports' than drug experimentation (Simon, 2001).

The psychedelic, doors-of-perception trope and the sobriety/health model of the self function as cultural opposites, as either/or al-

ternatives; but they share a fundamental assumption. In both paradigms, drugs are presented as having a privileged role in the process of truth telling. Given the crucial importance of all types of truth seeking in our society, it is thus perhaps not surprising that tales of intoxication and addiction, which in our culture are inextricably bound with either gaining the truth (in the Romantic/psychedelic model) or with losing it (in the sobriety paradigm) have had and continue to have a popularity that is not necessarily related to the popularity of the substances themselves. Either positively or negatively, a privileged connection is established in these texts between drug taking and truth-telling.

"Truth-telling" is an open-ended activity that is part of specific social interactions. Unlike the scientific method, it is not a formally defined means to a static end. It is a process whose value is intrinsic. Unlike the philosophy of science, 'truth-telling' asks *not* how people have determined whether statement X is true or not but raises rather the following questions: "what are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth? What are the consequences of telling the truth?"

In the lectures given at Berkeley in 1983, from whose conclusion the above quotes are taken, Foucault tells us that 'parrhesia' was important to the Greeks because different kinds of human relationships were governed through truth telling. Of key importance to Athenians was the political meaning of parrhesia as 'free speech'. Free speech was seen as the essence of democracy; but just as often, or perhaps even more often, it was associated with demagogues seizing control of the polis by verbally seducing the crowd, and thus provoking crises in democratic institutions. But the term parrhesia also had

5 A good selection of 'doors of perception' accounts is found in Jay (1999).

6 A Huxley, 'Culture and the individual', excerpted in Jay (op. cit., 322-23).

7 The recent movie *Traffic* promotes this general view: but interestingly, on the south side of the US-Mexico border the corrupting effects of drugs are presented sociologically – as political corruption – whereas on the northern side the effects are confined to the individuals and neighborhoods involved in drugs. In the US, the drug users lie, but the political system is (largely) uncorrupted; in Mexico, however, it is the system that is deceptive, not individuals.

(and has) a less political, more ethical meaning, and this is the one that concerns me here. A question asked by the Greco-Roman writers read by Foucault, and which many drug autobiographies also ask, is the following: how do we know that we are telling ourselves the truth about ourselves? When we look inward and engage in the practices of self-examination that began with the Greeks, were modified in a more judgmental direction by both Catholic and Protestant religious practices, and continue today in self-help manuals and support groups, we seek a certain truth that is not scientific. We seek a personal, ethical truth that is true in respect to our particular circumstances and biography rather than absolutely true. But the problem that haunts all autobiography is that even with the best intentions, with complete sincerity, we cannot always be sure that we are telling the truth. Freud of course gave us a whole theory to explain the absence or the difficulty of truth-telling; but Foucault, as part of his long quest to open up a post-psychoanalytic and more generally a post-psychological future, ignores this potential resource and concentrates instead on the less 'deep', more pragmatic and practical techniques of self of Greco-Roman writers, particularly the Stoics.

Friendship and mentoring as techniques for truth telling

One technique of truth-telling, or more precisely a technique for monitoring and as it were 'auditing' the truth telling process, is that advocated by Plutarch. Plutarch emphasises that self-love implies self-flattery (what Alcoholics Anonymous calls 'grandiosity'), and thus leads us away from truth even when we are fully sincere and authentic. "It is because of this self-love that everybody is himself his own foremost and greatest flatterer"

(Plutarch quoted by Foucault). The remedy for self-flattery is to be found in a good friend, a true friend who is constant, who is not moved by his own self-flattery or his own self-interest, and who can thus be trusted not to give advice but to be what in English is called "a sounding board" – someone to whom we can talk, who will mostly listen quietly, and who will only stop us when we go off into self-flattering untruths.

This theme of friendship as the key technology for the truth-telling necessary for an ethical life is of course extremely well developed in both high culture (from Aristotle to Montaigne) and in popular culture, from the detective story to Hollywood 'buddy' films. But perhaps more relevant to the study of twelve step groups and recovery generally is the fact mentioned by Foucault in this same text, namely that some Greco-Roman writers advocate finding a person who is a good sounding board precisely because he is *not* a friend in real life.

In Plutarch, Seneca, and the tradition which derives from Socrates, the parrhesiastes always needs to be a friend. And this friend relation was always at the root of the parrhesiastic game. As far as I know, for the first time with Galen, the parrhesiastes no longer needs to be a friend. Indeed, it is much better, Galen tells us, that the parrhesiastes be someone whom you do not know in order for him to be completely neutral. A good truth-teller who gives you honest counsel about yourself does not hate you, but he does not love you either. A good parrhesiastes is someone with whom you have previously had no particular relationship. But of course you cannot choose him at random. You must check some criteria...

This will remind those of you familiar with AA of that key institution, 'the sponsor': someone who acts as a sounding board and who helps you to find your own truth without preaching – and who is neither a professional therapist nor a good friend in the rest of your life. A technique developed in the

context of 'recovery' would thus appear to invoke or re-enact some rather venerable ethical practices, namely, the relation between oneself and one's personal truth-teller described in Greco-Roman ethical writings.

It would be possible to go on from here to investigate other ethical practices that facilitate the work of narrating one's intoxicated life and one's reflections upon this life, considering their possible or actual antecedents in various ethical practices for everyday life from the Greeks onward. But the example of the 'sounding board' or sponsor will perhaps suffice to indicate how such an investigation might proceed.

'The king of liars and the frankest truth-sayer': the paradoxes of intoxicated truth telling

Whatever the specific techniques used for promoting truth telling – therapy sessions, talking with friends, phoning a less personally invested sponsor – there are a number of recurring epistemological moves commonly made in autobiographical accounts of drug and alcohol use. Putting the question of specific techniques of truth telling aside, let us now consider the various relations between truth and intoxication constructed in this literature.

Two insights have emerged from what I have read thus far. The first challenges the vulgar-Foucaultian postmodern belief that all popular autobiography reiterates the modernist myth of the unified self. What I have found is that narratives of intoxication simultaneously uphold and undermine the conventional modern narrative of the deep, essential, psychological self.⁸ Admittedly,

8 An erudite account of the philosophical antecedents and context of the 'deep', authentic modern self is found in Charles Taylor (1989).

the dominant theme of addiction memoirs – though not of all intoxication writing – is that we must find our own true self first, and that only then we will become sober, regain self control – and 'therefore', the story goes, get rid of illusion. This is the standard North American jargon of authenticity.⁹ A recent example, unusual in invoking 'sex addiction' as a psychological fact, is Sue Silverman's memoir *Love sick* (2001).¹⁰ Its fundamental assumption is that the cure for the condition of sex addiction involves dealing with the adult consequences of childhood traumas by uncovering the 'true' inner self that has been buried under the false self that the author calls "addictgirl". This is done in order to 'freely' take up the traditional wife role rather than sleeping around with unknown, risky men.¹¹ In this book and countless similar others, we see the familiar North American narrative of the 1990s female self. The deepest truth about the female self is sexual abuse; hence, disclosing this truth is the necessary precondition of curing eating disorders, drug addiction, self-destructive behaviours, and all other forms of unhappiness and untruth. Domesticity – in *Love sick* graphically depicted in the first impossible and later joyful task of preparing a good hot dinner for one's husband – then appears not only as 'safe' and sensible but also as truthful.

Despite the great cultural power of 'sobriety' tales in which personal truth ends up coinciding with social norm, many addiction

9 Theodor Adorno (1973) invented the phrase 'jargon of authenticity' to critique Jaspers and existentialist ethics generally, but today the phrase is of obvious relevance to twelve-step narratives of addiction and recovery.

10 See also the web site of "Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA)"

11 Not all self-diagnosed sex addicts prescribe traditional marriage as their cure; there is some admixture of feminist discourses on sexual autonomy in some of the discussions of 'sex addiction' found in women's magazines (e.g. a feature article in *Jane*, Nov. 2001) and on the SLAA web site.

autobiographies, even those written by authors who have consciously taken up the 'addict identity', effectively undermine the unified, purposeful, rational-choice but somehow also spiritual self of recovery/sobriety narratives. Those who are good writers – like Sue Silverman – cannot help but describe the 'unsafe' excesses of the past so evocatively as to create a distinct pleasure and frisson in the reader. This is a paradoxical effect that I previously documented in the AA ethnography, in what women members saw as the tendency of some men's first-person "drunkalogues" to unwittingly romanticise drinking. Aside from the effects of this familiar problem of peer support groups – that is, the unconscious glorification of the dangerous but exciting times of the addicted past – some autobiographical texts explicitly abandon the moralism of the recovery narrative altogether, promoting instead the view that there is no true self anyway, that the world is indeed chaotic, that life is unjust and there are no real truths. The portrayal of the Scottish drug world in *Trainspotting* is a well-known example of this antitruith discourse, and its popularity shows that the anarchic meaningless lives described by William Burroughs were not confined to the sixties – although today normlessness is more likely to be deplored and associated with crime rather than celebrated and associated with art.

While in its more extreme form this genre is uncommon today, traditional values and norms are often deconstructed even in texts that set out to document the road from perdition to safety and normalcy. Sometimes writers clearly intend to show the reader how degraded they or their friends were when they were in the grip of addiction, but, perhaps because it is difficult to portray oneself or close friends completely unsympathetically, the characters' tendency to tell lies, steal drugs, neglect their responsibilities, and so

on, do not always come across as unambiguously bad.

At other times, the point is made that habits of order and self-discipline are paradoxically necessary for engaging in a life of excess and abandon, since it takes a great deal of forethought and organisation to get and consume illegal drugs without being caught¹². Reflecting on the coexistence of psychic abandon and rational planning in the illicit drug user can lead to the larger philosophical point that the same person can have several selves, or a variety of 'flows' and 'folds', as Deleuze would say, without any one of them emerging as the authentic one.

We see, therefore, that 'the self' that is so eulogised and sought after in 'recovery' narratives is more precarious than it seems, particularly if we look at the actual effects of autobiographical writing practices rather than at whatever theory the author formally espouses. Let us then continue the inquiry into truth-telling in intoxication narratives, but focussing now not so much on the self but rather on the relation between the substance in question and truth. Here, we again see a paradox, a contradictory relation. The paradox that emerges from looking at different accounts of the relation between drug use and 'truth telling' is that consuming such substances as alcohol or Ecstasy is *both* a means to get at the real personal truth *and* a way of hiding from oneself, continuing the deception – as they often say, "living a lie".

Sometimes these two poles are presented as temporally separated. The addict, presented as existing in the past, used to believe that drug use leads to truth, but the person in recovery, in the last chapter of the book, has la-

12 In her heroin memoir Ann Marlowe states: "what is a [drug] habit but self-discipline? Most people don't have the capacity for it" (1999, p 159). Other writers do not draw this conclusion, but their descriptions of the complicated purposeful activity of seeking out drugs, especially illegal ones, confirm Marlowe's point.

boriously learned that alcohol/drugs casts a veil of deception and is based on continual lying, and that sobriety is the necessary condition of personal truth. This is the convention used by AA members to tell their stories, of course, and it is common in cocaine and heroin narratives. But some accounts perceptively note that the substance in question can be seen *simultaneously* as a truth serum and a Great Liar.

Some 19th century opiate literature developed this paradoxical view of what Coleridge famously called “the milk of paradise”. But my favourite account of the paradoxical relationship of truth to drugs comes from a text written in the US several decades before the emergence of AA by the American working-class hero and journalist Jack London. The title is *John Barleycorn*, which during temperance times was a nickname for alcohol, whisky especially. This is how London, himself a great practitioner of working-class liquid male bonding, describes the dialectic of truth and falsehood in drinking: “He [Barleycorn] is the king of liars. He is the frankest truth-sayer. He is the august companion with whom one walks with the gods. He is also in league with the Noseless One. His way leads to truth naked, and to death. He gives clear vision, and muddy dreams. He is the enemy of life, and the teacher of wisdom beyond life’s vision.” (1913, 4-5).

The first part of the dialectic is re-enacted every time that we choose to take someone out for a hard drink so they’ll spill the beans, tell us the ‘real’ truth. And this truth-telling dimension of drugs/alcohol has of course a great literary support in the ‘doors of perception’ narrative mentioned above. This narrative – which usually forms part of a larger Romantic or neoromantic account of life and truth – holds that everyday life is an impoverished version of reality; that normal perception filters out a large part of the experiential, emotional, psychological, and

epistemological spectrum, and that while it is necessary to live in this half-aware, half-asleep state to go to work and get on with one’s life, it is imperative for those special people who seek the whole truth to go beyond everyday routine to seek a higher, more cosmic, truth – whether by smoking opium or having a whisky with a friend or taking an ecstasy pill at a party. A good example of this genre is found in a quote from Terence McKenna, a proponent of psychedelic truth:

For the shaman, the cosmos is a tale that becomes true as it is told and as it tells itself... This is why the shaman is the remote ancestor of the poet and artist... The ultimate wellsprings of this creativity as hidden in the mystery of language... Only by gaining access to the transcendent Other can those patterns of time and space and our role in them be glimpsed.¹³

This narrative assumes that truth exists objectively, out there, in the cosmos and/or in the deepest recesses of the souls of the enlightened few. Psychoactive substances reveal it, by dissolving the layers of convention, inhibition, and custom. Humans seek truth, in the universe, in their own soul, and in a grain of sand – but they are not presented as actively, historically, constructing truth.¹⁴

A recent genre promoting this Romantic view of a pre-given, static, beautiful truth about humanity is Ecstasy narratives. Although some accounts treat Ecstasy as just another dreadful drug of addiction and brain dysfunction, other accounts emphasise that this drug stimulates perception and sensation without causing hallucinations. You see the world as it really is: you just feel better about being in it. It is also said that the drug (by

13 McKenna quoted in David Lenson (1995). The chapter in which this quote is found, ‘Acid metaphysics’, is a good account of this genre.

14 See Charles Taylor (1989), chapter 21, ‘The expressive turn’.

contrast to cocaine) does not lead to wild sex, but rather to a cosmic feeling of oneness with one's fellow partiers. In some leftwing accounts, this is loosely connected to anti-globalization movements. Ecstasy is presented as the opposite of the sovereign individual of capitalism by praising the fact that when under its influence you love everyone but don't want to own anyone sexually. Through its supposed non-distorting enhancement of both perception and sociability, Ecstasy fits the role of the (ethical) truth teller better than LSD or mescaline, which have been touted as truth telling substances but without widespread success.¹⁵

The consistent advocacy of psychedelic truth is nevertheless rare these days. In North America particularly, the War on Drugs propaganda has few open opponents. The hegemony of the model of self that one could call 'rational-choice sobriety' is sometimes attributed to the machinations of the US government. While the huge sums of money poured into drug "education" by antidrug federal programs are of course not without effect, if we want to go beyond the conspiracy theories popular among proponents of the 'social construction of social problems' school, it may be useful to concentrate not so much on the more extreme claims about instant brain damage and about 'gateway drugs' that can so easily be ridiculed, and focus instead on the ways in which the less extreme antidrug claims of both scientific and educational authorities converge or resonate with cultural trends and ethical practices and ideals that are widely shared by those who are progressive and young as well as those who are older and conservative. The fear of 'losing the self' and losing access to personal truth is hardly a neoconservative monopoly.

15 A number of books now exist documenting 'raves' in Europe and North America, and these often contain perceptive accounts of the popularity of Ecstasy. See also Bruce Eisner (1994).

According to the very well publicised views of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, whose gigantic, extremely sophisticated web site is replete with appealing color pictures of brains under the influence of various drugs, the consumption of illicit drugs – tranquillisers and other legal psychotropic drugs are rarely mentioned – directly causes deception, misperception, changes in the structure of the brain, and hence, a loss of 'the real self'. The same broadly Puritan theory of the relation between 'luxury' consumption and personal truth is also found, however, in texts that are much less fear-mongering, texts that promote a moderate sociological explanation. In these texts – many of which are not produced by government and hence have greater claims to objectivity – alcohol and/ or drugs are presented not as monocausally involved in loss of self but as associated with the general alienation of today's modern society. Alcohol and drug consumption are read as symptoms of deeper cultural and social problems. Ron Dunselman's Dutch study of drug and alcohol use, *In place of the self*, conveys this soft version of the drug-as-liar trope in its very title. Dunselman, like many drug users who are uneasy about their drug use, believes that in modern times, "the core of our personality, the Self, is increasingly deactivated, and that the drugs – rather than the self – start to determine the interrelationship and cohesion between thinking, feeling, and the will." (1995, 33)¹⁶

While this anxiety about modernity as loss of self is widely echoed in drug autobiographies, first-person accounts are less likely than either official discourses or academic studies to make generalizations about all drugs and all drug users. In the accounts I've read thus far, the claim that most clearly

16 See also Gregory Bateson's (1973) influential study of 'The cybernetics of the self'.

distinguishes first-person from 'objectivist' accounts is the distinction made between 'good' and 'bad' uses of psychotropic substances. Authors claim, often by reference to the experiences of themselves and their friends, that in moderate quantities, at the right time, and/or for the right motives, consuming this or that drug can further truth telling, but that this (often, the kind of use practised by the author) is not at all the same as the indiscriminate, purely hedonistic use of drugs by less enlightened others. When taken in excess, or for what the author deems the wrong reasons, drug use becomes the way to loss of truth as well as loss of self.

By allowing that some use of some drugs can further truth telling, these writers distance themselves from the War on Drugs, but they still perpetuate the view that pleasure seeking leads away from truth. Authors are thus able to hold on to both of the extremes of the Barleycorn dialectic. We are told that in moderation, at the right time, drugs – or more often, just certain, healthier drugs – do reveal the real self that is hidden by social convention, by shyness, and by capitalist work habits. On the other hand, if you become a regular/excessive user, or if you abandon marijuana for cocaine (or, in De Quincey's idiosyncratic account, if you start to drink wine rather than eat opium), then the true self will disappear. This popular drug users' game, through which 'good' substances are constructed as truth tellers by contrast to nasty substances that have similar chemical properties but that are said (usually arbitrarily) to lead into falsehood rather than truth was pioneered by the grandfather of intoxicated autobiography, Thomas de Quincey:

17 T De Quincey, 'Confessions of an opium eater', quoted in M Jay (1999, 12). The Confessions, incidentally, don't live up to their name or reputation, since most of the text is concerned with de Quincey's search for literary

Wine robs a man of his self-possession: opium greatly invigorates it... Wine constantly leads a man to the brink of absurdity and extravagance; and, beyond a certain point, it is sure to volatilise and to disperse the intellectual energies; whereas opium always seems to compose what has been agitated, and to concentrate what had been distracted.¹⁷

Problem substances thus pose a permanent risk to the truth of the self, a risk which can only be managed by certain enlightened, self-governing users – those who will carefully distinguish good from bad drugs, good from bad contexts, and/or motives for taking drugs, thus accomplishing the separation of intellect-enhancing drug use from what is often dismissively called "hedonism".

For example, David Lenson, who has written a very thoughtful phenomenology of drug use that tries hard to not be moralistic, nevertheless makes a sharp distinction between 'drugs of pleasure' and 'drugs of desire'. The implication is that some drugs are taken out of psychic compulsion, out of an internalised capitalist relentless pressure to consume more, rather than being carefully selected for occasional civilised pleasure. This way of 'drawing the line' is of course ubiquitous in discourses about alcohol: wine is constructed as a civilised drink of pleasure by contrast to vodka or gin, which are assumed to be drugs of compulsion, 'inner slavery', and hence eventual loss of self. This contrast was drawn in an influential representation by Hogarth in the late 18th century, in his famous two pictures featuring a healthy 'Beer Street' of prosperity and domesticity versus the vice-ridden 'Gin Lane'.

By separating out different modes of consumption in what are usually arbitrary ways

fame, and is neither classically confessional nor primarily about opium taking. But the title has made subsequent generations of drug users imagine the text as an inspiration for their own writings.

– often through the deployment of existing prejudices about class and through triggering current ideas about the ‘character’ of the drugs themselves – a wide range of non-American, non-abstentionist discourses are able to maintain the Barleycorn dialectic alive and well.¹⁸

The variety of relations between the self, truth, and problematic consumption constructed in drug autobiography may help to explain the popularity of this genre. We are all fascinated by dramatic re-enactments of the basic modern story about the loss (or near loss) of self – a loss always associated with the loss of truth – and the always precarious and often heroic recovery of true self. Dynastic tales of murder and incest helped the Greeks to re-enact and overcome the trauma that Walter Benjamin (1970) called the “founding” violence at the heart of the law of the police. Today, by contrast, we are less likely to work on our selves by recourse to tales of family, lineage, or nation. We are more likely to look for tales about a classless and stateless ‘deep’ self. These tales are fascinating because of the longevity of the minority view that ‘the milk of paradise’ can act as a truth serum, as opening doors of perception that are usually closed. Perhaps more radically, the genre also raises the frightening possibility (a possibility that is usually raised only to be quickly buried) that the quest for true self is pointless because there is no self, just a bundle of perceptions and more or less random choices.

¹⁸ I owe some of these insights to conversations about representations of alcohol with Pat O’Malley and with Daniel Robinson.

Addiction as a disease of temporality

If on occasion drug autobiography challenges the ‘True Self’ paradigm by negating it, the genre sometimes goes beyond simple anarchistic negation, providing instead an alternative to the hallowed western narrative of ‘the self, the will, and the truth’ that people like Ron Dunselman take so much for granted. One such alternative will be considered here by way of concluding this talk, with the proviso that there are probably a variety of other alternative constructions of self and truth that have yet to be identified and analysed.

As against the traditional view that addiction is a disease not only of the self but of the will more specifically, some narratives suggest that what is experienced as ‘addiction’ is not so much a fragmentation or dysfunction of the self and the will but rather a less personal, non-psychological dysfunction or disorganisation of temporality. Addiction can be felt, in other words, as a disease of time. Although some accounts, for example David Lenson’s, subsume the perceived problem in temporality under an assumed psychological condition suffered only by addicts,¹⁹ other accounts suggest that the indeterminacies of modern temporality are more cultural than psychological. My favourite reflection on ‘addiction’ as a useful way of managing the task of organising one’s time is the antipuritan text of Richard Klein’s book on smoking, *Cigarettes are sublime* (1993). Klein points out that smoking may now be experienced as an inner slavery or subservience to nicotine, but it was experienced in the 1940s-1960s as

¹⁹ “Addiction can be defined as the chronic atomization of consciousness by drugs or by some other time-splitting obsession.” Addiction is “a condition that resists change... Under such repetition, cognition is dulled and ethics frayed...” (Lenson, 1995, p. 35 and p. 47).

a way of punctuating the day and the evening through a pleasurable and aesthetic activity that, more than anything, served to mark and specify time in an elegant manner. Humphrey Bogart may look to us as if he was enacting on camera his addiction to the drug that would kill him. But that is not how either he or other smokers of the 1940s defined their relationship to the concrete object 'the cigarette', a non-functional, purely pleasurable object which they would never have subsumed under pharmacocentric abstractions like 'nicotine' or 'tobacco'.

An interesting source of ideas about how drug use is a way of marking time non-industrially, and thus a useful technique for organising life in a post-industrial world without recourse to the factory clock, is Ann Marlowe's heroin memoir. "Nonusers wonder why junkies with serious habits don't see the absurdity of arranging their whole day around their need for heroin, but they've got it the wrong way around. One reason people become junkies is to find some compelling way of arranging their lives on an hour to hour basis. Addiction responds to ruptures in traditional chronology..." (1999, p. 57).

While she participates to some extent in the American view that addicts have or are a particular kind of self, she simultaneously offers the view that it is cultural and historical factors that lead to the generalised feeling of structurelessness felt particularly poignantly by those who are young and have few responsibilities. This feeling can be addressed and managed by the practices of drug buying and consuming and by the adoption of a certain cycle of highs and lows. This is presented non-judgementally as a way of marking time qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

If we consider this experience of drug use as facilitating the management of time in a way that connotes pleasure and elegance rather than alienated labour – and in particu-

lar if we detach it from the 'addictive personality' theory to which it's often tethered – we can see that there are ways of understanding drug and alcohol use that go beyond the categories of truth and falsehood, authenticity and deception. The person who is adrift temporally may not need to go into psychoanalysis to regain the lost self. That person simply needs a satisfying way of organising time – something which is implicitly acknowledged in the military insistence on rigid schedules in residential treatment programs. Is getting up early every day perhaps more important for 'treatment' than the chemical qualities of the methadone or the therapeutic skills of the counsellors?

The dilemmas of temporality in industrial and post-industrial lives are also crucial in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. What is probably the most often verbalised slogan of AA, "One day at a time", does not involve making up a rigid, military, disciplined self that is coherent across different days: it is often used by AA members in a pragmatist/empiricist manner to do whatever it takes to remain sober that day and that day only, which means one is a different person from day to day. The alcoholic of AA of course sees him- or herself as an alcoholic all the time, forever. But it is interesting that despite that theory of the self, the practice of repeating and giving meaning to very flexible slogans like 'One day at a time' enables people to construct an ad hoc, temporary, situated self that need not survive into the future. While many treatment programs officially believe that in reorganising time people are rebuilding their unified true self, the actual practices sometimes indicate that more flexible, less 'deep' and permanent, and more situational selves are being built and discarded and modified with amazing rapidity. And if restructuring temporality does not have to involve shoring up the humanist bourgeois self, truth telling may be

more than the production of a confessional narrative of the deep, essential self. It may also work as a strategy with no fixed endpoint, a technique for promoting provisional, relational truths about people, their desires, and their habits.

Conclusion: Addiction and postmodern ethical practices

The thoughtful two-volume study of Alcoholics Anonymous undertaken by N.K. Denzin suggests that what Jack London describes as the experience of being driven to drink past the point of pleasure, what he sometimes calls “the white logic” of John Barleycorn, is “a disease of time.” (1987, vol. 2, p. 20). But Denzin incorporates and subordinates this insight to the ‘recovery’ paradigm, which he accepts uncritically. For him, then, sobriety is all about restoring natural cycles – the natural temporality of the true self.

For those drinkers or drug users who have stopped believing in anything like a natural temporality or a natural healthy self, however, some of the experiences that go under the name of ‘addiction’ may be usefully described as related to dysfunctions or breaks in temporality, but not in such a way as to suggest that there is any natural temporality to which one can somehow return. Instead, writers like Ann Marlowe suggest that sobriety is the hard work of actively constructing a cycle, a temporality, a schedule, from scratch – building a world for a not particularly natural and not particularly coherent self.

There is a very rich variety of practices of the self and ideas about the self, about consuming problem substances, and about temporality and subjectivity, in the archive of first-person accounts of drug and alcohol use. Each of the ethical practices developed

by these writers – the practices of drinking and drug consumption as much as the practices of sobriety – are ways of working upon the self, partly by inward reflection and examination and partly through intersubjective techniques such as talking with friends or ‘sponsors’. And all of these ethical practices are also practices of truth. Lumping them all together under the dismissive label ‘confessional’ prevents us from understanding the very different ways in which ‘the self’ and ‘truth telling’ work in popular accounts of drug and alcohol use and addiction. It is time for postmodern theory to take a more humble attitude toward first-person narratives in general and intoxicated autobiographies in particular. If we are different from Plato in part because we do not accept that some select few, the philosophers, have a privileged access to the world of Ideas – if we are all in the cave of shadows together – then it makes sense to look around and learn from everyone who is in the cave with us, seeing how they, and we, are trying to cope with the fact that nowadays most of us do know that truth telling can only happen from a specific place within the cave.

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