

# The Unbearable (Unsustainable) Dependence of Being

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This article proposes that addictions should be understood as forms of unsustainability.

Addictions have been approached by psychoanalysts from different angles. What do we understand by *addiction*? Very briefly, we can define it as an impulsive and unstoppable action, which can affect a great variety of objects and situations. It produces a state of slavery vis-à-vis the object (an inversion of the subject/object logic), a fetishized relationship with the latter, and reification – degradation of the object relation's quality. An addiction is a neo-necessity, since the addictive process transforms the object of desire into an object of necessity[2]. It is also a sort of impulsive neurosis – in which actions of pure and simple discharge predominate, as opposed to the expressive aspect of gestural action. In this sense, addictions are part of the clinic-pathologic field I call “collapse of dreaming,” while also holding similarities to the so-called “modern neuroses.” They are the clearest clinical manifestations of a “compulsion to repetition,” which raises a series of questions regarding their relations with many other forms of human behavior automatisms: habits, character traits, “crazes,” rituals, and each individual's particular manners. An addiction usually performs a defensive role for the Ego both through its euphorizing effect (manic defense) and through its potential to create a parallel, dissociated reality. It also represents a clear misroute in the maturing process of passage from the infantile states of dependence to the mature dependence of adult life. Within this clinic “unity,” it is fundamental to recognize addicts' diverse forms of psychic organization, which confronts us – in terms of diagnosis – with the paradox of unity within diversity[3].

The addiction carries in itself the enigma of human *pathos* (the passion) and, in this sense, “addictive relationships”[4] can be understood as its prototype. These relationships are characterized by the predominance of an idealized object in the context of a distinctly narcissist object choice – a sort of “toxic love” in which the excesses signpost a conflict with alterity. Here, there is a similarity both with perversion and with the see-saw passion/melancholia. It is a type of “vampire love,” in which the character traits described by Abraham – aggressive exigence of immediate satisfaction, intolerance, and incapability of being alone – are flagrant, and in which the sacred value of “The blood of others”[5] is neglected. We can observe, in this form of link, indiscrimination and confusion, as well as an explosive proximity between love and destruction – or else, between the pleasure and the terror of being with another. Within an addictive relationship, the other is held responsible for everything that occurs to the individual: they are the origin of all evils, while also being the only person capable of bringing relief and happiness. Now evil sorcerer, then protective wizard; it is from this almighty Other that emanates all “illness,” as well as the supposed “cure” through love.

This situation's etiology can be attributed to a failure in the experience of transitionality, producing a block in the processes of introjection. As suggested by McDougall (1982), in such cases, the transitional object has its function perverted, becoming a “transitory object.”[6] Such a failure is a result of relational dynamics in which, sometimes, the mother herself actively instills an addictive relationship, inhibiting the development of the child's own resources and, hence, their capability of being alone and soothing themselves – as well as their capability of taking care of themselves when an adult[7]. Thus, the mother and the different partners in addictive relationships become, according to the renowned jargon, “codependent.” Within addictions, due to the failure in the introjection, there

is a fixation to the object's *exteriority*, to which a chronic dependence is developed. Given the precarious state of objects all across the world, the external object needs to be constantly manipulated and used in a truly "extractivist" way. It is not possible, in this case, to build a "sustainable economy."

Here, it is interesting to notice the concept of "sustainability." This notion can be analyzed from many angles and it is a fundamental discussion today. It refers, first of all, to the concern surrounding the balance within our planet's ecological systems. However, it is also applicable to the socioeconomical dimension, since it deals with the search for forms of development that take into account both the environment's "health" – as opposed to careless extractivism – and, above all, fair and dignified living conditions for everyone ("The blood of others"). The search for sustainability is also a valid discussion for each individual, be it in terms of material subsistence, or in terms of the quality of their emotional and relational lives.

How can we understand sustainability from a psychoanalytical perspective? Freud emphasized the human being's state of helplessness and dependence at birth, as well as the arduous development from the pleasure principle towards the reality principle – in which the Oedipal crossing is a fundamental threshold. He also constantly warned us about the precariousness of this conquest and about the limitations of the Ego – which is very vulnerable to influences and mistakes, and very dependent on its masters (the Id, the Superego, and the external world). Winnicott greatly contributed to this discussion by approaching such a development under the focal lens of dependence. I believe it is a crossing whose starting point is a relation of *vertical and asymmetrical dependence*, and whose envisaged prospect is a relation of *horizontalized interdependence* in adult life. In other words, it is the project of building an emotional, relational, and psychosomatic sustainability. Could we speak of *auto-sustainability*? Perhaps yes; perhaps no – as long as we do not read in it a state of auto-sufficiency or "absolute independence," in complete disagreement with human reality. In fact, interdependence is characterized by a successful dialectic between the ability to "be alone" and the ability to "be with."

One of Winnicott's contributions that deserves to be recalled here is his notion of *holding*, which can be taken as the prototype for every relation of care. We see today a disseminated and wide use of such an idea every time someone refers to the importance of "sustaining a situation." If we consider the subject's development process, it is fundamental that it is *sustained* by other humans in order for a possibility of (auto)sustainability to emerge and be built at the appropriate time. Introjection is a *princeps* mechanism in this process; and it is not only the introjection of objects, but, above all, of *functions*– which, in turn, makes way for the acquisition of the ability of self-caring.

That which characterizes an addiction is precisely a seriously limited construction of such an (auto)sustainability. A remarkable trait of addicted patients that is emphasized by many authors is their incapability of having any selfcare – a characteristic element of the above-mentioned unsustainability. Why and how did a misroute take place? What produced such a "fixation on dependence" and interrupted the crossing from infantile dependence to adult interdependence? McDougall and other authors attempted to answer this question through the hypothesis of failures in transitionality. Based on the myth of the titan who stole fire from the gods to give it to humanity, Henry Krystal (1978) suggested a sort of "Prometheus Complex," analogue to and more archaic than the Oedipus Complex: to addicted patients as to many others, the access to potential appropriation of care functions was blocked; these were reserved for the "gods" (mother, father, doctors, therapists, etc.) – hence the chronic inability of selfcare. It is also possible to understand the situation in terms of a substitution of the introjection mechanism for the fantasy of incorporation. This is due, according to

Torok and Abraham, to “encrypted” secrets regarding lost primary objects. There are many etiologic hypotheses suggested by analysts, and they attest the richness and complexity of the field of research ahead of us.

The treatment of addictions has a lot to teach psychoanalysis.

The first aspect of addiction to be considered – following the redefinition of its psychoanalytical concept with which I started this article – is that it is a form of psychopathologic organization that must be studied in its correlation with other psychopathologies that are similar in terms of psychic functioning. Psychosomatic disorders and borderline cases are clear examples, as well as eating and sleeping disorders, impulsive neuroses, and the various forms of narcissist disorders[8]. A common aspect among these clinical cases is the precariousness of symbolization processes. I defined this psychic functioning as “the collapse of dreaming” (Gurfinkel, 2001).

Another fundamental contribution is related to the light that the treatment of addictions can offer to better understand a crucial dimension of human beings: dependence and its paradoxes. What is the process of construction of an individual’s sustainability towards a horizontalized interdependence? And why may such a process be limited or stopped? As we know, such a block leads to a state of chronic dependence that can evolve and crystalize into dramatic forms of object slavery, generating more and more reified relationships with objects – be these people or things.

Therefore, the question of dependence-independence can be studied through a polarity: on one side, the unsustainability of addictive dependence; on the other, the search for sustainability through a horizontalized dependence. Following our methodological and epistemological traditions, within this type of approach, we must be always attentive to carefully deal with the polarity pathologic-universal and avoid moralizing or norming deviations. After all, what are the limits of (auto)sustainability? And up to what point is dependence not a fundamental and ineluctable dimension of human *pathos* – an inherent “weight” and the price to be paid for existing?

The (un)sustainable dependence of Being concerns us all.

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[1]Translator's note: In Portuguese, Kundera's book was translated as "The unsustainable lightness of being," which led Gurfinkel to draw a parallel between the novel and his work on sustainability/unsustainability.

[2]For more on addiction as a neo-necessity and its relation to fetishism, see Gurfinkel (1996).

[3]I presented this definition of addiction in detail in 'O conceito psicanalítico de adicção' [The psychoanalytical concept of addiction] (in Gurfinkel, 2011); I also discussed the different clinic forms of toxicomania and the variations in the management required within therapeutic work in 'Formas de toxicomania e manejo clínico' [Forms of toxicomania and clinic management] (Gurfinkel, 2019).

[4]This expression was coined by Joyce McDougall (1982) and has been recently reworked by analysts (Gurfinkel, 2011; Humberg, 2016 e Cruz, 2016).

[5]This expression is the title of a novel by Simone de Beauvoir.

[6]For more on addictions as a pathology of transitionality, see Gurfinkel (2012).

[7]Here, it is possible to understand the relevance of approaching the phenomenon of addictions from an object-relations perspective to complement the pulsional point of view (cf. Gurfinkel, 2017).

[8]The correlation among these various clinical cases has been suggested by authors since the first decades of psychoanalysis' history (see, for example, the works of Abraham, Wulff, Radó, and Fenichel). It became more common in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Krystal and McDougall) and is today a widespread idea.

Translation by Gabriel Hirchhorn