

IMPULSIVE ACTION AND IMPULSIVE PERSONS: A DESCRIPTIVE AND PRAGMATIC FORMULATION

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ABSTRACT

In this report, an alternative account of impulsive actions and impulsive persons is presented. This account seems to me both to better fit many easily observable facts about such persons and acts, and to heuristically suggest more and better courses of psychotherapeutic action than do most of our prevailing views. The present account has as its core conception the simple notion that impulsive behavior is straightforwardly a special case of rational, intentional action which entails, like any other such action, an individual acting on that which he has stronger reason to act on. From this core notion, I proceed (a) to consider some of these stronger reasons to act, (b) to develop an extensive list of constraining reasons which impulsive individuals are often observed to lack, and (c) to develop an explanation of why impulsive persons act as they do in so precipitous a fashion.

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My purpose in this study is to present an alternative, Descriptive-Psychologically based account of impulsive behavior and persons. The aim here is to provide an account which, aside from meeting basic criteria such as intellectual rigor and empirical accuracy, helps the practicing clinician to better envision what can be done and what needs to be done for impulsive individuals.

The Diversity of Impulsive Persons. It is generally recognized (e.g., Shapiro, 1965; Wishnie, 1977) that impulsive individuals, to a far greater degree than, say, paranoid, obsessive, or hysterical individuals, show a wide variety of faces to the world, and are placed in all sorts of different locations on our nosological maps. Some exhibit a great deal of antisocial behavior, perhaps without obvious remorse, and are designated "sociopaths". Some abuse alcohol and other chemical substances, and are designated "alcoholics" and "addicts". Still others exhibit a recurrent and easy yielding to the desires of others, and are designated "dependent" or "passive" personalities. And more. This diversity is so broad that the topic of impulsive style or personality as such is rarely taken up (but, see Shapiro, 1965; Wishnie, 1977). Rather, the tendency has been to separate out the various clinical subtypes comprising the impulsive genus for individual consideration (e.g., Cleckley, 1982, and McCord and McCord, 1964, on the sociopath; Horney, 1945 and Millon, 1981, on the dependent personality; Ausubel, 1970 on alcoholic personalities, etc.).

For this reason, I shall not, as I have in previous studies, attempt to provide a paradigm case "portrait" of impulsive persons. I should have to do a gallery of portraits, not a single one. Rather, what I shall attempt is an explication of the central concept of an impulsive act. For it is an enduring proclivity to engage in this sort of act which constitutes the common thread running through the lives of these otherwise diverse individuals. Following this, I shall go on to articulate some of the most commonly encountered reasons why individuals of all these diverse sorts are prone to behave as they do.

A Note on Charity. A folk song from the 1960s, "Gunslinger", had it that "there's no such thing as a bad cowboy, only a sick one". The song lampooned the mental health establishment's historical attempts to evade the problem of evil by converting it into a value-free "illness" (see also Szasz, 1962). The upshot of this attempt, I believe, is that moral notions have crept back into our thinking, but in a disguised and thus more insidious form (cf. the "return of the repressed"). Thus it is that discussions of impulsive individuals (among others), despite an overt allegiance to the notion that these individuals are "ill", often convey a distinct aura of moral contempt and superiority. Allegations that these

persons manipulate, that they have no conscience, don't want to change, can't tolerate frustrations, and are invested only in their own satisfaction, are made, not with the dispassion of a physician discussing a case of tuberculosis, but with a thinly veiled moral contempt. And, since we treat people in keeping with how we appraise them, such contempt is a heuristic disaster for the psychotherapist working with impulsive individuals.

One of the things that is needed, then, in an account of impulsive persons, is charity. An account should, among other things, not hold the impulsive person in contempt; at the same time, of course, it should not condone or excuse away the actions of these persons (previous treatments by Fenichel in 1945 and Wishnie in 1977 have been most exemplary in this regard). An open acknowledgment that some of the things done by impulsive persons are morally wrong actions for which this person bears some responsibility seems, despite the apparent paradox, a good start in this direction.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF IMPULSIVE ACTION

In this section, I shall say some things both about what impulsive behavior is, and what it is not. I shall try to show that impulsive behavior does not represent some unique, formally different type of behavior, and that its existence does not require the postulation of an executive apparatus or ego which has evolved in a form radically different from the norm. On a more positive note, I shall try to show that impulsive behavior is a special case of rational (i.e., engaged-in-for-reasons) behavior, which differs from other behavior primarily in its being criticizable on ethical and prudential grounds, and on grounds that it ought to have been given due consideration prior to action, but was not.

Impulsive Behavior Not Formally Different. I should like to start by noting that, contrary to some authors (e.g., Shapiro, 1965), most human behavior has the same formal characteristics as impulsive behavior. It is swift in execution, engaged in with scant deliberation, and involves the immediate translation of inclinations into action. We do not ordinarily deliberate about whether or not to go to work each day, whether or not to feed our children dinner, whether or not to keep an important appointment, or what to say next in conversation. In fact, where persons do seem prone to stop and think about every little decision, *this* would ordinarily be considered an aberration from the norm ("indecisiveness", "obsessionalism").

In the same vein, there are certain types of persons—e.g., persons we term "spontaneous", "decisive", or "men of action",—whose general behavioral proclivities with respect to very important decisions are formally identical to those of impulsive persons. These persons, to a greater degree than most, swiftly, efficiently, and with little deliberation, translate inclinations into actions. Stock traders, chief executive officers of companies, military field generals, and others seem reasonably often to be persons of this sort. The chief difference between them and persons who come to be labelled "impulsive" lies, *not* in the formal characteristics of their behavior, but in the *ethical and prudential criticizability* of this behavior.

The conclusion from both of these considerations would seem to be that, while impulsive behavior is criticizable behavior, it is not formally different from the majority of normal, non-problematic human behavior.

Not a Radically Different Executive Apparatus. It is an easily observable fact that persons we call impulsive do not behave impulsively all or even most of the time. For example, in his interesting account of his six months spent with a New York mugger named "Jones", Willwerth (1974) reports that this individual would impulsively and without compunction assault and rob numerous people in the streets and parks of New York. However, in his relationship with his mother, Jones exhibited a tremendous amount of loyalty, support, devotion, and planful attention to her needs and wants. Further, a former client of mine, whom I shall call "Amy", was highly impulsive in her behavior towards men, yet in most other spheres of her life (e.g., her college coursework) was organized, thorough, meticulous, and planful to a fault (so much so that I one day jokingly told her she was "obsessive-impulsive"). Finally, Cleckley (1959) relates that psychopathic individuals *characteristically* have lengthy periods of success in socially acceptable endeavors, following which they "go out of their way to do something self-destructive" (p. 571).

Such facts would not seem to accord with the claim by certain authors that, in the impulsive person, we are confronted with an individual whose ego has evolved in a form different from that of the normal person. For example, in Shapiro's ego psychoanalytic account, (1965) the ego of the impulsive person is said to have evolved in a defective manner such that this individual is literally incapable of planning or abstracting or exercising prudent or ethical judgement. If this were so, it is hard to see how most impulsive persons are able to exhibit non-impulsive behavior most of the time.

Impulsive Behavior is Rational Behavior. To say that it is rational is to say that impulsive action, like any other human action, is engaged in for reasons. Rather than requiring the postulation of an unobservable, biologically conceived, impulse which erupts and causes it to occur, it suffices to say that it occurs because the actor had reasons to behave as he or she behaved. Thus, a proper reconstruction of an impulsive act, like any other act, is formally this: "P did A because he had reasons r_1, r_2, \dots, r_n to do so, and his reasons r_1, r_2, \dots, r_n for not doing so carried insufficient weight with him to refrain from doing A". From this point of view, to allege that a given instance of impulsive behavior is irrational is reflective of an observer/describer's ignorance of the actor's reasons (cf. Bursten, 1972, p. 219); it is not a correct attribution of a quality (or lack thereof) to that behavior.

Reasons Are Not Causes. There is a considerable philosophical literature bearing on this point (e.g., Donellan, 1967; Hospers, 1967; Toulmin, 1971) and a more recent psychological literature (e.g., Buss, 1978; Kruglanski, 1979; Locke and Pennington, 1982; Ossorio, 1969/81). This is not the place to delve into this matter in any detail. Suffice it to say that in the giving of reason accounts of behavior (e.g., "He drank heavily that night in order to allay his anxiety."), there is ample reason to conclude that the latter terms in such explanations (here, "in order to allay his anxiety") do not ordinarily meet the assertability conditions for being regarded as causes in the strictest sense of that term. They designate either (a) the purposes of an individual's action, or (b) the perceptions or beliefs he was acting upon in behaving as he did. Ordinarily, there is not sufficient reason to regard the set of all of a person's reasons as a set of conditions, positive or negative, which, being realized, some consequence will invariably and inevitably follow; i.e., as causal in the usual scientific sense of that term. This constitutes a fundamental difference between the present account and accounts in which biologically based or otherwise-conceived impulses cause behavior to occur.

What is Impulsive Behavior? To say that a given behavior is impulsive, then, is not to say that it belongs to some unique species of action. *It is to render a criticism of the action.* This criticism is to the effect that the behavior in question (a) *is imprudent and/or immoral, and (b) that given the nature and/or consequences of the action, it should have been given due consideration, but wasn't given such consideration.*

When on an everyday basis, we render criticisms of the behavior of others—that these behaviors are frivolous, or clever, or immoral, or considerate—we recognize clearly that these are criticisms of what

remain ordinary intentional actions. We are saying, to put the matter very generally, that the behavior was good or bad in some respect, but our intelligence is not bewitched into taking it that we are talking about a new and different *species* of action. The same consideration applies to the appellation "impulsive". If I seem to be belaboring this point a bit, it is because I have so often observed clinicians—in case discussions, in therapy sessions, and in their written work—treating impulsive behavior otherwise and bringing about pragmatic impasses where helping these persons is concerned. In talking about impulsive action, we continue to talk about rational, purposive action, and we know a great, great deal about how to deal with *that*.

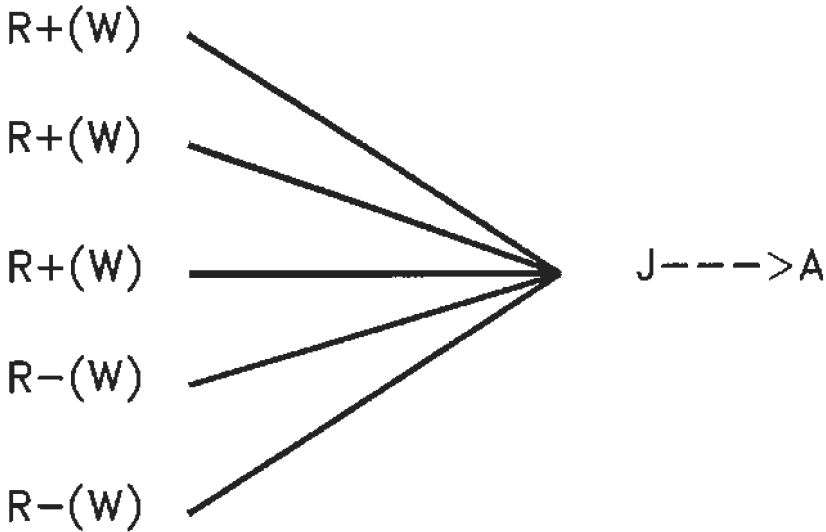
What is an Impulsive Person? If we simply apply the ordinary, conceptual requirements for the attribution of *traits* to persons (Ossorio, 1983), we generate the following definition: *An impulsive person is an individual who is prone on an enduring basis to engage in immoral and/or imprudent action of a consequential nature without giving such action the consideration due it; and this with a frequency in excess of that which is normally expectable within that individual's culture.*

The "Calculus" of Intentional Action. "If a person has a reason to do something, he will do it, unless he has at that time a stronger reason to do something else". This maxim was formulated by Ossorio (1967/81) as a pre-empirical requirement for any behavior description if that description is to qualify as a legitimate description of human action. A detailed discussion of this point may be found in the article cited, but is outside the scope and purposes of this study. Suffice it to say that, if an individual violates this requirement in giving an account of another person's actions, his account will be regarded as inadequate and defective by any competent listener. For example, should a prosecuting attorney say to a judge, "Your Honor, I submit, and I will demonstrate to the jury, that Mr. Jones killed his wife; I will also show that he did so despite the fact that he clearly took it that he had better reason not to kill her"; this lawyer would be counted by all competent parties present as having rendered a defective account (or else suspected of colluding with the defense to cop an insanity plea).

An adequate reconstruction or explanation of *any* human action, including an impulsive action, could be diagrammatically represented in the following manner:

"R+" here designates a reason for, and "R-" designates a reason against acting in some manner; "w" designates the weight or importance assigned to that reason by that person at that time. "J" designates a judgement or decision about what is to be done, and "A" the carrying

Figure 1. Judgement Diagram



out of that decision in action. This is simply a diagrammatic way of representing the proposition that: "Any action is reflective of a person's judgement that this is the thing to do; and this in turn is reflective of this individual taking it that he has reasons for acting this way, which reasons carry more weight for him than his reasons against acting in this manner."

In this common sensical and philosophically respectable (e.g., Peters, 1958) analysis of human action lies the answer to our key assessment question with respect to understanding impulsive action: "Why did doing this action, which is to an observer so obviously problematic, count for so much to my client; and why did refraining from this action, which is to an observer so obviously advantageous, not count for enough?" It is the ascertainment of the person's reasons for acting as he did, and of the weight or importance assigned to these reasons, as well as his lack of reasons for behaving otherwise, that reveal to us why he behaved as he did. These reasons pro and con, of course, will be reflective of his circumstances as he conceives them, and of his views of himself and his world. The latter in turn will reflect the conclusions that he has drawn on the basis of his personal history.

SOME COMMON REASONS FOR IMPULSIVE ACTION

If my analysis is correct, the impulsive person is one who suffers more than anything else from a preponderance of abiding reasons *to* engage in imprudent and immoral actions, and a lack of abiding reasons to refrain, or even to give much consideration to refraining, from such action. With this analysis in mind, I shall divide this section into three parts, each designed to answer a pertinent question. (a) What are the impulsive person's positive reasons *for* behaving immorally, and/or imprudently? (b) How is it that some of the reasons not to behave thus, some of the drawbacks which seem so obvious to an observer, seem not to count for enough to deter the impulsive individual? (c) What are some of the reasons *why*, given these drawbacks, impulsive individuals tend to act so precipitously; why do they not even stop and think?

Reasons for Immoral or Imprudent Action

The question here pertains to the individual's positive reasons for doing as he or she is doing. What were his or her *positive reasons* for going on the binge? shooting up? stealing the car? making the foolish administrative decision? reacting so violently to what seemed a minor insult? And so forth. We are speaking here about a virtual infinity of possible impulsive acts performed by a tremendous variety of different persons with a tremendous variety of different reasons and circumstances. How can we hope to achieve any uniformity or economy here?

The answer is that in good measure we can't achieve such economy here—that we *are* dealing with tremendous variety. However, what should be stressed here is that in each case it is up to the clinician to assess the key positive reasons why *this* impulsive client is doing as he or she is doing. What does this client want? What is this client trying to accomplish by doing that? In some quarters (I am thinking here especially of many, but not all, alcohol and drug programs), the impulsive behavior in question (e.g., the drinking or drug usage or antisocial act) is labeled "impulsive", "self-destructive", "psychopathic", "antisocial", etc. with scant attention paid to the fact that we are talking about a person with good reasons to do as he or she is doing. The behavior is categorized, not accounted for. And since, as clinicians, we would do well to assess and to appeal to what our clients want, to what matters to them in our therapeutic endeavors (Driscoll, 1984; Ossorio, 1976), we ignore the assessment of such positive reasons at enormous pragmatic cost.

For example, let us examine what some of the reasons behind an individual's drinking behavior might be. In the single act of drinking, an individual might simultaneously satisfy all of the following motivations, and more. (a) He might effectively anesthetize some personal pain he is experiencing (e.g., powerful anxiety or depression). (b) He might enter into a euphoric state in which, in contrast to his ordinary low opinion of himself, he experiences a sense of personal esteem (cf. an old drinking slogan that offers the following encouragement: "Let's get drunk and be somebody."). (c) He might, through drinking and a consequent lowering of inhibitions, become able to feel and to do things that he finds himself unable to do in a non-intoxicated state (e.g., to feel and to express love or anger). (d) He might, in the act of drinking, demonstrate to his spouse or his parents that they cannot control him, a demonstration of considerable personal importance to him. (e) He might by drinking achieve an otherwise rare state of solidarity and community with others—again, this may be something which he is substantially unable to do in a non-intoxicated state. And more. All of these, for a given individual, might constitute a set of powerful reasons that he can satisfy simultaneously by the single act of drinking. If, to anticipate a bit, there is on the other side of the ledger little perceived reason *not* to drink, the experience of this individual will be on balance one of powerful temptation to drink, and little resistance to that temptation.

This example illustrates another point, and this is the fact that with some frequency behavior which is deemed impulsive or otherwise psychopathological is engaged in for reasons which most observers can not only understand, but *affirm*. Reasons such as pain relief, esteem elevation, the experiencing and expression of love and anger, and needs for solidarity and community with others, are understandable and *affirmable* reasons. Indeed, one could and should build therapy around trying to help an individual to achieve these same purposes without the costs inherent in alcohol consumption (cf. Chafetz, Hertzman, & Berenson, 1974). People drink, as they do everything else, to expand their personal behavior potential, to expand the range of things they can feel and do. A therapy which acknowledges this and skillfully sets about to help people accomplish their purposes in non-problematic ways, will be a powerful therapy. This point, in my experience, is overlooked by alcohol programs and workers a great deal of the time.

Let me cite a second example, this one taken from the excellent work of Wishnie (1977). A young man named Elton committed what on the surface appeared to be a series of "stupid" illegal acts, and was apprehended and jailed. Wishnie (p. 35) relates that, for Elton, who was an ex-convict, it was a terrible struggle to survive outside of prison. For him, jail represented release from this painful struggle, food, shelter, a

job, structure, a focal point for his rage (the prison system), and confirmation of a (negative) identity all wrapped up in one neat package. He thus had powerful positive reasons to return to jail and, as it happened, little reason to remain outside of prison. And he acted accordingly.

I select this example to illustrate a common mistake to which we as mental health professionals are sometimes prone. This is the mistake of counting as reasons *against* factors which, for the impulsive person, are reasons *for* acting in some fashion (cf. Bursten, 1972, p. 219). In Elton's case, if we blithely assume that getting jailed is a "negative consequence which he doesn't stop and think about", it becomes easy to criticize his behavior as "stupid", "impulsive", "showing bad judgement and an inability to learn from experience", and so forth. When, however, we realize, as Wishnie does, that returning to jail is a highly prized goal for Elton and that he had abundant reasons to strive *for* this goal, we realize that his behavior very *skillfully* accomplished *his* objectives.

There is not always, as in the examples above, a confluence of multiple reasons upon which an individual acts impulsively. At times, there is a *single* inordinately powerful reason, a reason of such centrality to the individual that, for him, it overrides all other reasons to refrain from ill-considered actions. Such a single, superordinate reason is often the case in what are called "crimes of passion". The classical example of this is of course that of the man who, upon arriving home, finds his wife in bed with a lover and, in a fit of passionate rage, kills them both. In this scenario, the provocation inherent in such a basic violation of such a basic trust counts for more than anything else (e.g., his own future, the future of his young children, the possibility of future happiness with his wife, etc.), and he acts on this preeminent motive. A less classical and dramatic, but far more common case, is one in which one individual, often an individual with a very marginal esteem, is attacked and threatened with degradation by another in an area of enormous personal sensitivity (e.g., a man who is both very insecure and very sensitive about his masculinity is called a "fag" by another individual). In such situations, issues of face—of not accepting what for them is a devastating degradation—may be of such paramount importance that all other considerations (e.g., getting beaten up, going to jail, losing one's family life, etc.) are overridden, and the man physically assaults his abuser.

In closing this section, it should be kept in mind that, for a person to act impulsively, there need not be either single or multiple *powerful* reasons to act. In the relative absence of *sufficient reasons to refrain*, it need only be the case that the individual's reasons *for* acting in some fashion be sufficient to outweigh his reasons *against*; they need not be the very powerful and compelling sorts of reasons that I have been

describing in this section. This consideration leads us naturally to the next section of this paper.

Why Doesn't the Impulsive Individual Refrain?

Impulsive persons suffer very importantly from a *lack of abiding reasons to refrain* from problematic action. This lack is a *perceived* lack, and it may accurately reflect reality, or it may not, in any given case. In either event, obviously, if a person *does not take it* that he has sufficient reason to refrain, he will not refrain.

Thus it is that an understanding of any given individual's lack of reasons to refrain will shed light on why he behaves as he does. It will also illuminate some of the matters which we as psychotherapists can address in order to help the impulsive individual to become better able to resist problematic temptations. With this in mind, let us take a look at some of the most common of these factors.

1. *The individual does not take it that he has a future.* An old saying has it that we should "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die". The common sense encouragement here is to grab for all the here and now satisfactions that you can, because (a) you have no future in which all of the negative consequences attendant upon such behavior will be incurred, and (b) since you have no future, you may as well grab for those satisfactions left to you.

Restraint, quite simply, makes less sense if one takes it that one has no future, and it is a traditional observation that many persons prone to impulsive acts "lack a future perspective" (e.g., Cleckley, 1959, 1982; Wishnie, 1977). This has taken the extreme form for a few of my clients that somehow they will literally die. More commonly, their sense has been that there was no meaningful, rewarding future ahead of them, that their lives were on a downhill course such that what lay ahead was bleak, empty, meaningless, and painful (cf. Wishnie, 1977). The future rewards for which an ordinary person might resist a problematic temptation will seem to such a person like an idiot's fantasy, not a legitimate reason why he should resist a current real, tangible possibility for satisfaction.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how might I introduce him into a world where he has a future, and that a future worth having?

2. *The individual takes it that the negative consequences attendant upon some act will not accrue to him.* An individual may have had a history in which he has repeatedly evaded negative consequences of his behavior, by whatever means. He may, for example, have had parents who for their own reasons could not bear to see him incur pain or frustration, and thus did not meaningfully punish or limit him (Maher, 1966, pp. 212-223). He may have been deferred to, treated as special and as "above the

law", and thus not subject to the rules or sanctions which apply to "ordinary people" (see, e.g., Raimy, 1975, on the developmental histories of "special persons"). Or he may have developed very extraordinary abilities to evade the consequences of his actions, to "beat the rap" (Cleckley, 1959, 1982). In any event, what an *observer* might count as "negative consequences", as "powerful reasons why he should refrain from acting", the impulsive *actor* will (understandably and perhaps correctly) count as "complications which either won't occur or which I can easily evade if they do occur".

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how can I wean him from this "fool's paradise" world, and introduce him into a world where he cannot possibly continue to evade powerful negative consequences of his behavior? (Impulsive persons who come to us for therapy have already as a rule encountered such consequences; however, this has not as yet caused them to change their minds about how the world is.)

3. *The individual takes it that he is not related to others in such a way that these relationships provide reason against acting problematically.* For most people, some of the most powerful sorts of reasons to refrain from problematic action have to do with their relationships to other people. To put the matter very generally, if these relationships are on balance reasonably meaningful and rewarding, they provide individuals with all sorts of reasons not to act in self-destructive or other-destructive ways. They have powerful reasons not to do anything which would jeopardize these relationships; not to hurt these individuals, not to bring shame on these individuals, not to reduce their own ability to maintain the relationships, and so forth. In contrast, where one has nothing to lose relationally speaking, or where one is involved in relationships which are of such a nature that one actually wishes to shame, injure, or lose the other, these constraints against destructive acts are missing.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how can I help this individual to change his relationships to others in such fashion that they provide reasons to refrain from destructive action; or to help him to see that he already has relationships which provide reason against, but has not taken it that he has such relationships?

4. *The individual has no personal goals that a given impulsive act would jeopardize.* An obvious constraint on destructive actions for many persons is the fact that they have personal goals, the fulfillment of which would be jeopardized if they acted on a problematic temptation. Thus, for example, a woman with important career aspirations, if tempted to quit her job on a frustrating day or to lash out at her boss in an unrestrained way, would have powerful reasons not to act so rashly on these temptations.

Many impulsive persons have few or no such personal goals (Shapiro, 1965; Wishnie, 1977). In fact, as I have already noted, they may not even take it that they have a future, an obvious precondition if one is to formulate goals, which by definition have a future reference. Or, they may not take it that *they* are persons who could conceivably persist and succeed at any long-term personal endeavor. This, simply, is not and maybe never has been a part of their conception of themselves. For these or other reasons, then, these constraining factors (and positive sources of meaning and satisfaction) which are long-term goals are simply missing from their lives.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, why is it that he as an individual has no personal goals, and how then might I introduce him to a conception of self and world in which it makes sense to adopt such goals?

5. *For the individual, moral reasons do not constitute compelling reasons to refrain from problematic acts.* Yet another reason why people refrain from acting on certain temptations is simply that they take it that such actions would be morally wrong. Tempted to steal funds from their company, or to vandalize another's property, or to take a potentially harmful drug, they refrain (among other reasons) because they believe that to treat others or themselves in such fashion would be morally wrong.

When one examines them, moral codes (e.g., the ten commandments), moral principles (e.g., the golden rule, the categorical imperative), and moral concepts (e.g., justice) have to do primarily with how one ought to treat others and, to a lesser extent, oneself. They have to do with refraining from the doing of insufficiently justified or gratuitous harm to others or oneself. They have to do with how, in relation to others, it is permissible and impermissible to achieve one's personal ends (e.g., one may work, but not steal, to obtain money).

It makes sense that allegiance to moral precepts will ordinarily *make sense*, in the sense of constituting *compelling grounds for action*, only to a person who has certain relations to, and certain conceptions of, himself and others. Consider for a moment the hypothetical example of a young man whose primary experience with animals as he grows up is that they snarl at him, chase him, bite him, and generally terrorize his existence. At the same time, however, he repeatedly hears a moral precept from his parents: "Be kind to animals". The young man grows up able to verbally articulate and intellectually comprehend this principle, but *it makes no sense to him* as a way to treat *that* sort of creature. It does not constitute a compelling ground for personal action.

A young person might grow up in a world where he is repeatedly the object of capricious and abusive treatment: kindness is likely to make

little sense to him. A young person might grow up in a world where he is the object of what seem unjustified, gratuitous deprivation and neglect: altruism is likely to make little sense to him. A young person might grow up in a world presented to him as a "jungle" composed of only two types of people, "cons" and "suckers" (Wishnie, 1977): honesty is likely to make little sense to him. A young person might grow up in a world with very little expression of vulnerable emotion and very little intimate disclosure, a world in which others appear like cardboard cut-out stereotypes with no inner life: compassion and empathy are likely to make little sense to him (indeed, they will be relatively impossible). And more.

I have been speaking thus far about entire developmental histories inimical to the development of moral perspectives. To refine this picture, two further possibilities should be briefly noted. First, an individual might grow up in a world conducive to a moral sense, but later enter a new world which effectively annihilates for him this earlier experience. "Worlds" such as concentration camps, prisons, and war have historically proven very effective annihilators of earlier developmentally acquired senses. In such worlds, many persons become utterly disillusioned; they find out "what sort of world this really is", and the sort of world it really is, like the world of the young boy terrorized by dogs, is one which is inimical to morality.

Secondly, it is an observational commonplace that many individuals do not operate with a *blanket* moral sense. Rather, within their worlds, they have relations to, and conceptions of, certain persons such that they treat these persons by and large in an ethical manner. On the other hand, they have relations to and conceptions of other persons such that they treat these others in a thoroughly unethical manner. An example of this is the mugger, "Jones", mentioned previously, whose treatment of his mother was morally impeccable, while his treatment of most others was quite the opposite. It has been my experience in clinical conferences that we as clinicians are sometimes too quick to pass the indictment "no superego" on persons who, on closer inspection, clearly operate morally in some of their relations. Considerations of fairness to the client aside, it is far easier pragmatically to *extend* a moral sense to new domains than it is to create a moral sense anew. My own experience with impulsive individuals, and the very ample experience working in a prison setting of Wishnie (1977), suggest that there are very few *totally* conscienceless, remorseless "monsters" about. We are rarely in the position, like the God of creation, of having to make something out of nothing.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how might I help him to alter his conception of others and self, and his relatedness

to same, in such fashion that it would make sense to him to restrain himself on moral grounds? (Note that the tactics suggested by this question would ordinarily not entail any explicit moral appeal. The direction is more: "Help him to live in a world where morality would make sense.")

6. *The individual takes it that he has no options, aside from destructive and costly ones, to deal with important life predicaments.* If, confronted with a temptation to solve a pressing life problem in a very costly manner, an individual perceives that he has a less costly but effective option, he has clear reason to refrain from the more costly solution. Lacking such alternative solutions, obviously, he has less reason to refrain.

Thus, if an individual's only perceived option for dealing with intolerable psychic pain is to drink, or to "shoot up", or to distract himself with dangerous excitements, this individual has less reason to refrain than does an individual with alternative solutions. If another individual's only perceived option for dealing with serious threats to face is to lash out violently, this individual too has less reason to refrain. Or, to pursue a final example, should an individual's only perceived option for dealing with loneliness and discreditation be to offer herself sexually to others, this individual also will have less reason to refrain than another who sees an alternative solution.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, precisely what problems is he trying to solve with his destructive actions, and how might I aid him in finding alternative solutions to these problems?

7. *The individual does not take it that many life pursuits require careful, painstaking, and perhaps longstanding effort in order to succeed.* If one has a soher realization that "real things take real time" (Ossorio, personal communication, 1981), that often there are no shortcuts if something is to be done well, that life endeavors of any meaningfulness often entail setbacks and frustrations, and other such "things-are-tough-all-over" realities (Ellis and Harper, 1961, pp. 144-153), then one may act in a fashion which accommodates these realities. For example, confronted with an exacting, painstaking task, one might act with the soher realization that "this is going to take time and care, and there's no way around it if I am to do a quality job."

If, however, one fails at such realization, the temptation in the face of pain, obstacles, and setbacks will be to abandon the attempt or to devise shortcuts which result in inferior outcomes and later problems. For example, an administrator of my acquaintance, in the face of management decisions requiring considerable thought, research, and examination of multiple factors, routinely failed to acknowledge this and rendered "shoot-from-the-hip" decisions which proved very ill-advised.

Ultimately, he was fired for one of these decisions. Another individual whom I saw reported that in his work as a carpenter, he many times could not face certain painstaking, slow tasks, and would resort to shortcuts. Frequently, these shortcuts would result in inferior products, having to do certain tasks over again, and considerable self-censure over his own sloppiness and lack of discipline.

It is widely alleged in the literature on impulsive individuals that they *lack the ability*, that they *cannot* "tolerate frustration", and it should be clear that I am here touching upon this ground. I think we would do well to recall Victor Frankl's (1963) notion that, if pain and frustration are to be endured, it is essential that an individual *see some point or purpose in it*. Lacking this, it is perfectly sensible to conclude: "Well, why should I put up with pain and frustration if there is no point or purpose in them? Certainly, they are not goals in themselves." Sometimes, it is not that the impulsive individual *can't* tolerate frustration, it is that he *can't see the point of tolerating it*.

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how may I (a) help him to realize and to come to terms with the reality that many life undertakings inevitably entail frustrations, painstaking effort, time, and painful setback; and (b) help him to realize that there is a point and a purpose to persevering in those endeavors which are personally meaningful to him?

8. *The individual takes it that he is a "victim of impulse"*. Many individuals, like many psychological theories, conceive of the relationship between impulse and action as a causal relationship. They take it that they are visited by impulses over which they have no control, and that these impulses *make* behavior occur. It makes little sense, if this is one's view, to try to restrain oneself. Such efforts would fall into the same category as trying to prevent a tide or a weather front from coming in—one is attempting to prevent what amount to natural inevitabilities. The only rational thing to do in this view is to "go with" the impulse, not fight it. The very best that one might hope for is that one might "rechannel" the impulse in some nonproblematic direction.

When one experiences a temptation in the absence of certain kinds of abiding relationships to the world—important, rewarding relationships to other persons; abiding personal goals, interests, and values; a sense that one has a meaningful and rewarding future before one, and so forth—in short, a whole set of relations which give a person reason at times to modulate or restrain himself, this person will be prone enduringly to "go on a whim". And his phenomenological sense will often be, not that he exercises deliberate planful choice, but that in him temptations are repeatedly, and without his having much say in the matter, translated into action. In sum, the sense will be created that he

is not an *agent*, not one who is capable to any really significant degree of exercising choice in the face of temptation; rather, he is a passive vessel in which behavior is *caused* to happen. (Shapiro, 1965, makes essentially this same point; however, he makes it in the context of a conception of persons and action in which there are in fact no agents, and choice is an illusion. The pragmatic upshot of his view is that, should a psychotherapist wish to help his clients to a sense of personal agency and choice, he would need to do so without personal conviction and with a sense that he was attempting to promote an *illusory* sense in his client.)

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how may I help him to reappraise himself as an agent; as one who chooses and decides and, in the face of temptation, has the power to exercise choice?

9. *The individual suddenly loses a status.* There are numerous statuses the preservation of which give individuals reason for personal restraint, and the loss of which may bring about the corresponding loss of such reasons and of a sense of personal control. Statuses such as "on the wagon" (i.e., alcoholic who has totally forsworn alcohol), "virgin", "dieter", and "decent moral person" all come readily to mind here. For some persons holding such conceptions of themselves, one transgression may result for them in a loss of the relevant status, may be a "fall" (see Camus' excellent and pertinent novel by this title) of sometimes drastic degrading implications. Subsequent to this fall, the status, which previously served as an important reason to refrain, is lost, and the person may abandon himself to the formerly proscribed behavior and feel like he has lost all personal control in this respect. For example, a virgin, whose previous sacredly-held intent had been to reserve sexual relations for marriage might, subsequent to being raped, take it that she is a new and drastically degraded type of person, and abandon herself to numerous, casual sexual encounters.

It is often alleged that the "disease" of alcoholism "causes" people to "lose control" after the first drink. In effect, this view has it, the person is no more a chooser of his actions than is an individual with a neural disease a chooser of his tremors. From the present point of view, the loss of control in question is of a quite different sort. The first point in this analysis is that the individual who regards himself as both an "alcoholic" and "on the wagon" (in the Alcoholics Anonymous senses of these terms) ordinarily makes his decision *prior to the first drink*. It is not that he literally *can't* stop after the first drink, that he is at that point "taken over by the disease". It is that he *doesn't* stop because, like the person who has made the first move in a board game, he has at that point *already decided upon a course of action*. The second point is that, with the taking of the first drink, indeed the first sip, he has often in his

own view already lost one status and gained a new one. Where he was "on the wagon", he has now "lapsed". Where he was "in control" he is now "out of control". Where he was "successful", he is now a "failure". People who struggle with weight problems, who tend on the whole to be more articulate about their problem than those who struggle with alcohol, frequently report a devastating sense of "I'm a failure" after one dietary lapse, and subsequently abandon themselves to overeating.

Therapeutic question: An old slogan has it that "one swallow doth not a summer make". If my client is struggling with status loss problems, how may I help him to see that "one transgression doth not a 'failure', or a 'slut', or an 'evil person', make?" And how might I help him or her to a saner, more constructive, more responsible reaction to his (ordinarily inevitable) failures?

10. *The individual takes it that he is unchangeable.* Wishnie (1977) quotes one of his clients as saying to him, "Once a junkie, always a junkie", and goes on to note how this sort of conviction of unchangeability is highly characteristic of impulsive individuals. The thinking here is again a species of victim thinking. What one *is* is fixed—it is one's "nature", one's "character"—and there is little point in trying to change oneself. Even if one is able to manage a period of non-problematic behavior, one's self-concept does not change. The thinking, rather, is that "I *am* alcoholic, but I am not drinking right now", or "I am a loser, but I seem to be on a run of luck", or "I am a slut, but I've been on my good behavior lately". With this sort of thinking comes a corresponding lack of reason to constrain oneself in the face of temptation: "After all, sooner or later, I'll revert to type, so why should I pass up this opportunity?"

Therapeutic question: If this be the case for my client, how might I go about undermining the negative identity concepts which my client entertains? Can I marshal evidence to realistically make a case to him that "You never were that sort of person"? If this is not possible, can I make a realistic case that, "You once may have been that sort of person, but you have already ceased to be that and have become a different sort of person"? If these are both not possible, how might I introduce him to the notion that "Because you once behaved (here we have reason to shift from character language to behavior language) a certain way, it does not follow that you are in some mysterious way doomed to continue to behave that way"?

Some Final Reminders About Reasons

In concluding this section, it is important to keep two further things in mind. The first of these is that *reasons are not constant states of*

nature. A man whose relationship with his wife is such one day that he has reason to drink (e.g., she has declared that she is leaving him), may find the next day that this relationship has changed in such fashion that he has reason not to drink (e.g., she promises to stay if he will stop drinking and go to marital counseling with her). Reasons, with their groundedness in personal circumstances and personal history, are changeable.

The second point which merits a reminder here is that many individuals, with respect to their problematic temptations, have a *balance of reasons* pro and con. That is, these individuals have some reasons to engage in the action, and some reasons to refrain. If they act on the temptation, it reflects the fact that reasons for outweigh reasons against. The pragmatic upshot of this reminder is that in therapy, we are often not starting from "ground zero" with a client; i.e., we are not dealing with a person who has *no motivation* to behave otherwise. Rather, we are often engaged in the business of helping individuals to *tip the balance* in a favorable direction. This fact is grounds for conceiving our prospects for success more optimistically than if we entertain the characterization of impulsive persons as "unmotivated" in some blanket sense of this term.

But Why Doesn't the Impulsive Individual Even Stop and Think?

To this point, what has been dealt with explicitly is why it is that certain persons would be disposed, enduringly or temporarily, to engage in acts destructive to themselves and others. What has not been dealt with explicitly is the question of why they would do so in so precipitous a fashion. Given the consequentiality of their actions, why wouldn't they at least stop and think?

For starters here, let us reflect on the following. Contrary to what some of our recognized experts on the topic allege (e.g., Janis and Mann, 1977), the most casual observation reveals that most decision-making is very speedy and quick in execution. There is very little in the way of reflection and the giving of consideration to alternatives. We do not, as I noted earlier, deliberate very much about whether or not to go to work each day, whether or not we shall keep our daily appointments and commitments, and so forth. In fact, as I also noted, where an individual does seem prone to stop and think about every decision, the public at large and the mental health community tend to see this as an aberration—indecisiveness.

Casual observation and thought reveals something further. The situations in which we do ordinarily stop and think are ones in which *there are alternative possibilities of roughly equal weighting*. And the situations in which we do not ordinarily stop and think are ones in

which, for us, *one possibility clearly outweighs another*, and the fact that we do not ordinarily stop and think is therefore reflective of the fact that most of us ordinarily know what we want most, and are quick to recognize and act on opportunities to get that something. A man who loves jelly beans above all else will deliberate far less at the candy counter than the man who loves equally all sorts of different candies. From this standpoint, *it is expectable, and not surprising*, that a person whose reasons *for* acting in some problematic fashion clearly outweigh his reasons *against*, will ordinarily act with relatively little deliberation.

Still, however, a critic of his behavior might reply: "But look, this impulsive person is engaging in a very consequential act, with very serious drawbacks. The act is patently immoral. And he could lose his job, his marriage, his health, his future, and even his life if he continues in this fashion. I see what you are saying about how, for him, given his view of things, his reasons for clearly outweigh his reasons against, and so it is *unsurprising* that he acts precipitously. But still, in reality, there *are* serious drawbacks to his behavior. Apart from what is expectable, there remains a question as to why an individual would not even give pause and *look at* such drawbacks, as most persons would."

For some impulsive individuals, the response to this criticism is: "Stop and look at *what*?" If one examines their lives and circumstances, there is *in fact* little to consider were they to stop and think. They have very little in the way of relationships, job, possessions, community standing, and believable possibilities that constitute "something to lose". They have few or no personal goals that destructive actions would interfere with. They may factually live in an "eat or be eaten" world where altruism, justice, and planning a future would strike the most unjaded of observers as questionable life tactics. For some in fact, life itself will seem little to lose. In short, were they to stop and look, there would be very, very little to look *at*.

For example, one very impulsive young man whom I saw a number of years ago—I shall call him "Tony"—came to the crisis unit where I worked in Boulder, Colorado shortly after arriving in town. He had come to Boulder from the barrio of Los Angeles, where in the course of growing up he had lost his mother, been physically abused by his alcoholic father, and spent a number of nights as a child sleeping in the gutter under the family car in order to avoid his father's rage. He had left Los Angeles after an incident in which he and his best friend had been chased by members of a youth gang. Tony escaped. His friend was caught and knifed to death. Upon his arrival in Boulder, Tony had almost nothing of value to go back home to; and nothing in Boulder—no job, no relationships, no particular salable skills, no

community standing. He was at that point mostly a badly frightened young man in a strange (and to him, likely malevolent) new town.

Persons such as Tony certainly do need to stop and think, to be more critical of their actions before engaging in them. They certainly could benefit from therapies such as Meichenbaum's (1977) self-instruction therapy, where there is an explicit attempt to get persons to stop and think when problematically tempted. But what they need much more fundamentally is to create or discover a new world to live in. If stopping and thinking is to make any difference at all in their behavior, they must be embedded in a world—a network of relations to other persons, to future possibilities, and to self—which does constitute "something to lose". The leverage afforded by the therapy hour to help such persons achieve this is, I believe, precious small but real.

Going back to my reply to the criticism above, for other impulsive persons, there is indeed much that they could look at should they stop and think more. They have a great deal to lose in the way of relationship, job, community standing, and future possibilities, and one can see that they care deeply about all of these. The question, "Why don't they stop and *at least really consider* these before acting?" becomes a more meaningful question for these persons. Why doesn't the impulsive administrator stop and give due consideration before making a crucial managerial decision? Why doesn't the respected wife and mother stop and give due consideration before engaging in an act of shoplifting? Why doesn't the employed husband and father whose job is on the line stop and give due consideration before going on a binge? All of these, the detached observer would say, would find that they have a great deal to lose if only they stopped and gave the matter serious scrutiny. Why don't they?

The general answer to this question is, I believe, simply that *at that moment, something else counts for more*. This represents an extension of the general logic of this paper: A person's reasons for doing something might outweigh not only his reasons for refraining, but also his reasons for even stopping and thinking about refraining.

Let me cite an example. Jane (pseudonym), a 45 year old psychiatric social worker, was frequently impulsive in her behavior. She had, with considerable personal pain and difficulty, managed to leave an unsatisfactory marriage, secure a professional graduate degree, and obtain a much-desired position in a reputable community mental health agency. At one point, she reported having strong sexual temptations in relation to her boss. She wished to approach him, and came extremely close to doing so on several occasions, but just barely managed to refrain from doing so.

Exploring these temptations, it was clear that Jane had a great deal to lose should she act on this temptation and she knew it. She would in all probability lose her valued job, find it impossible to secure other mental health employment locally, lose virtually all of her income and her apartment, incur disgrace among her colleagues, and react to herself with hatred. An unusually articulate woman, Jane related that at these times when she nearly approached her boss, her reasons to do so loomed very large and her reasons not to very small. She reported that she craved sexual and affectionate contact and accreditation from this rather attractive man; that she was finding the day-to-day sexual tension between them unbearable and just wanted "to get it over with"; that she was experiencing a great deal of tension and friction with her coworkers which could no doubt be eliminated through the probable loss of her job; and more. In the face of any realistic opportunity and any encouragement from this man, she said that she in fact would probably go to bed with him. At bottom, the picture which emerged was that she wanted something with this man so badly, something that she knew would not even be lasting—that she would not hesitate, would not even stop and think, if confronted with a realistic opportunity.

In my experience, the more behavioral, stop-and-think therapies such as Meichenbaum's are much more beneficial with the kind of clients I am now discussing. After all, if these persons can make themselves stop and think about the consequences, there are here real and important consequences they will discern. However, it is also important in such cases to carefully assess and to deal with therapeutically, the powerful reasons which the person has to behave problematically. Otherwise, even if one stops, thinks, and forebears, the sources of one's temptations ordinarily remain untouched.

SUMMARY

In the foregoing account, I have attempted to provide an alternative view of impulsive actions and persons which seems to me both to better fit the facts and to heuristically suggest more and better psychotherapeutic courses of action than do our prevailing views. This view has as its core conception the simple notion that impulsive behavior is straightforwardly a special case of rational, intentional action which entails, like any other such action, an individual acting on that which he has stronger reason to act on. From this core notion, I then proceeded (a) to consider some of these stronger reasons to act, (b) to develop an extensive list of constraining reasons which impulsive individuals are often observed to lack, and (c) to develop an explanation of why impulsive individuals act as they do in so precipitous a fashion.

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