

David Papineau (KCL) & Patrick Butlin (KCL) “Normal and Addictive Desires”

Good accounts of drug addiction must explain both what it is about drugs of abuse that makes them addictive, and the apparent fact that some addicts remain powerfully motivated to take drugs even though they do not find it pleasurable, judge that it would be much better for them to quit, are also motivated to quit, and form resolutions to do so. Given that drugs do not radically reform our cognitive architectures, such an account must also have strong implications for the theory of normal motivation and action control. In this paper, we first outline an account of the nature of normal desires, their roles in action control, their relations to other states involved in motivation, and the processes by which they are formed and updated, and then draw on this work to give a simple theory of drug addiction.

According to the theory, addictive drugs all artificially boost dopamine signals, which have the function of updating standing desires, and this artificial boost means that standing desires for drugs can become exceptionally strong. So although addicts strongly desire drugs, addictive behaviour is not just ordinary choice, because of the abnormal etiology of addictive desires. Addicts' motivation to take drugs remains contingent on their contact with drug cues because in general standing desires motivate us only when something causes them to become occurrent. The conflicting motivations of addicts can be explained because there is little to stop the formation of contrary desires, let alone value judgements and intentions that conflict with desires.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to this view comes from the fact that the function of dopamine signals remains a contentious issue among neuroscientists, and it is possible to argue on both computational and empirical grounds that dopamine does not update desires. However, these arguments are not conclusive, and in our view the hypothesis that addiction is caused by hijacked desires remains promising. We conclude with a discussion of how and why resolutions to abstain succeed and fail.