

John Rhead

## Compulsive Gambling and the Meaning of Life



I was born in Utah, raised in Colorado and later in New Hampshire, bought my first motorcycle in California, and was excommunicated from the Mormon Church in Maryland. I am an electrical/mechanical tinkerer and regret having given away my Lionel trains when I was 18. The most important thing in my life is the pursuit of the peace of God, and my greatest blessing is having a wife/partner who shares that pursuit with me.

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### *Background*

Let's begin with definitions. By "compulsive" I mean repetitive behaviors that are unconsciously motivated. By "gambling" I refer to the act of intentionally placing oneself in a situation in which the outcome is presumed to be in large measure beyond one's control and potentially negative.<sup>1</sup> "Compulsive gambling" combines the qualities of both these definitions and is often represented by behaviors such as betting money on events which seem relatively random (e.g. rolling dice); fire walking; driving while drunk; prayer involving non-trivial requests; sexual activity likely to lead to unwanted pregnancy, marital discord, and/or disease; voluntarily exposing unfamiliar parts of one's personality to others (e.g., in an encounter group or in psychotherapy); smoking; and investing heavily in highly speculative businesses.

### *The Theory*

At the risk of being accused of oversimplifying a complex piece of human behavior, I would suggest that any behavior which meets the above criteria (repetitive, unconsciously motivated, and risky) can be considered compulsive gambling. Further, I propose that in most cases (probably all) the unconscious motivation is derived from the same root and that the persistent repetition of the behavior is a function of the operation of a basic and well-accepted behavioral principle. Although the motivational aspects of compulsive gambling can be described in a number of ways, I find a spiritual vocabulary and conceptualization most interesting and helpful and will therefore use these. The validity of the

<sup>1</sup> Although many instances of gambling also offer the possibility of a strongly positive outcome (e.g. winning large sums of money) the possibility of a negative outcome is sufficient to meet the current definition.

theory does not depend on the vocabulary used to describe the process.

I propose that the motivation of a compulsive gambler derives in one way or another from a desire to experience oneself as being loved ("favored," "chosen," "graced," etc.) by God. Each time one wins (or at least avoids disaster) after placing oneself in a risky situation, there is a tendency to attribute that outcome to some force or entity. Although this force or entity may be called "chance," "Lady Luck," "fate," or the like, the generic version of this concept is what I am referring to as "God."

The affirmation of self-worth provided by the experience of being favored or loved by such an entity is understandably potent, and hence a powerful reinforcer in behavioral terms. However, the fact that this reinforcer is given on an intermittent basis ("you can't win 'em all") would lead a behavioral psychologist to predict that it would produce a behavior that is very stable and resistant to extinction.

### *Possible Objections to the Theory*

I anticipate at least two major objections to this theory.

First, some compulsive gambling appears to be motivated by unconscious (or perhaps even conscious) desires other than the desire to experience oneself as loved by God. Suicide attempts and certain vengeful passive-aggressive acts (e.g., losing all the family's financial assets through imprudent wagers as a way of punishing other family members) appear to be examples of such exceptions to the rule. However, a closer examination of such apparent exceptions usually leads (me, at least) back to some form or other of the desire to experience God's love.

Let's look at suicide attempts first. If one makes a reasonable sincere attempt to end one's life and this attempt is thwarted by some unexpected event, such an event can easily be experienced (and indeed is often described) as "miraculous" and as evidence that "somebody up there must be looking out for me." More drawn-out suicide attempts, such as repeatedly injecting into one's veins chemicals of unknown purity and potency, provide the opportunity to repeatedly experience the seemingly miraculous presence of one's "guardian angel."

Similarly, compulsive gambling that leads to financial disaster for persons other than the gambler and therefore seems to be the result of passive-aggressive impulses also can be traced to the generic root herein proposed. To punish someone through passive-aggressive behavior is a way of seeking revenge, and as such reflects a desire to establish justice. The common conception of justice would suggest that justice has been established when someone whom I perceive to have caused me harm or pain is subjected to a comparable experience. (Actually my personal preference is that their experience be just a touch more intense than mine, but we'll use the theoretical ideal of a comparable intensity of suffering

for the sake of conceptual tidiness.) Hence if someone who has wronged me meets financial pain as the result of seemingly random factors (a roll of the dice) which happen to interact with my behavior (betting) in some incidental way, then justice has been established. However, I can attribute the financial pain inflicted to the random factors (rotten luck) rather than my gambling. Hence these seemingly random factors are responsible for creating a sense of justice in my world. By translating the words "seemingly random factors" into the spiritual vocabulary being used in this paper, it becomes "God's will" that the injured party undergo this financial pain, and the fact that I had a personal score to settle with him or her makes me feel that in some way justice has been done. Since justice has been established *by* God but according to *my* standards/wishes, He/She must truly love me.

The second major objection I anticipate being raised to this theory about compulsive gambling is the inconsistent way in which it seems to treat the issue of God's will versus personal control over one's destiny. On the one hand I use the term "God" in a way that implies the usual connotations of omnipotence and omnipresence. On the other hand, I define gambling as some sort of risky business in which personal control is relatively lacking, as if to imply that there are other things one can do which are not gambling because one has complete control over the outcome. I anticipate the objection that I can't have it both ways; either God controls everything or She/He doesn't. I agree. I can't. God (as I am using the term) does control everything. The definition I am using is based on the *perception* (illusion) of relative degrees of personal control in various situations. Hence if I perceive myself to be able to control a particular outcome, I do not feel I am gambling in that situation. Conversely, if I perceive myself as unable to control the outcome, and enter into the situation anyway, I perceive myself as gambling. However, if one assumes that God controls everything, it is not possible to gamble (or it is not possible to abstain from gambling, if one's image of God includes a sadistic element). This assumption leads directly to the treatment strategies presented in the next section.

### *The Cure*

If compulsive gambling is based on the unconscious assumption that one can bolster one's self-esteem and sense of meaning in life through casting one's fate to the wind, the first piece of therapeutic work involves bringing this assumption into consciousness. Assuming this goal can be achieved, then the validity of the assumption needs to be challenged. If the assumption is found to be as faulty as the theory presented above would imply, then one can go about finding more satisfactory and realistic ways of experiencing one's value and meaning, as is often the agenda of

therapy anyway, no matter what the presenting complaint. I strongly favor suggesting to the client the consideration of the possibility of intrinsic value and meaning in each person's life, with the therapy oriented toward noticing/discovering these elements in the client's life, rather than trying to create them. However, to each his or her own. Clinical strategies must be consistent with the world view of the therapist.

### *A Clinical Example*

Somewhere in the writing of this article I noticed I was doing it. I am submitting a piece to *VOICES* that may make me appear to be a God-squadding blissnunny/airhead in the eyes of members of the American Academy of Psychotherapists—people whose respect I value. On the other hand, maybe some will think I'm an astute theoretician/clinician who is able to integrate spiritual dynamics with psychodynamics in a profound way, and will even grant me subclinical guru status. On the *other* hand, maybe my friends will still love me, my enemies will still hate me, and nobody else will bother to read the article. Heaven only knows.