

**LOVE, DRUGS, ART, RELIGION: THE PAINS AND CONSOLATIONS OF EXISTENCE** by Brian R. Clack, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2014, pp. xiii + 191, £19.99, pbk

William Paley had a benign and optimistic view of the world: 'It is a happy world after all', he wrote, but, asks the author of the wonderfully entitled *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion*, 'what if that view is wrong?' (pp. 2–3). Clack thinks such existential felicity is easily outweighed by the themes of the pessimistic tradition. In a sobering first chapter, he marshals an array of thinkers, including Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Hardy, and Freud, to remind us that suffering is here to stay, gains in happiness are frequently illusory, life is transient and insignificant, with but a short step from insignificance to purposelessness, and 'our desire for happiness is thwarted by the universe's cold indifference' (p. 4). Far from resting contentedly in the 'blissful harmony of existence' (p. 2), the reader is forced to confront 'the pain of existence, the blighted nature of the world, the insignificance of all human striving, the emptiness and release offered by death' (p. 24).

A bleak picture indeed, and, according to Clack, writing from a psychodynamic as well as religious studies background, it is Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents* who puts his finger on it. To cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we need, quoting Freud, 'powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it' (p. 25–26). The functions of such palliative measures or 'auxiliary constructions' are to provide temporary relief from the otherwise unendurable reality of our ontological misalignment. Life is tough and we had better get used to it, or find some temporary escape.

Hence this book's aim, which is to explore the role of such palliative measures to prevent existential collapse and despair. Intoxicants are the first lifeline. In a well-argued and sympathetic chapter, Clack points out that drugs and intoxicants can be used to alleviate boredom as well as to soothe physical and psychological pain: 'The cigarette is the weapon of choice in the nihilist's war on time' (p. 48). Supplementing Freud with Schopenhauer, he neatly rejects the simplistic Freudian view that intoxicants and drugs are (mere) compensations for lack of sexual satisfaction and claims instead that we are desiring (lacking) creatures; yet satisfying all desire leads to boredom. Hence, following a nuanced and balanced acknowledgement of the 'harms' of drugs, they have, we are told, 'a major role in humanity's battle against dissatisfaction' (p. 57). Art is treated in a similarly balanced and sophisticated way. True art, unlike kitsch, is a 'non-addictive palliative' but one that can assist us to experience and understand life vicariously. Extending Schopenhauer, art is not simply that which 'eliminates desire and quiets the will' (p. 106), but also that which allows us to attain a type of literacy in the

tragic. Love matters too; even if it is often overvalued. 'We are led to expect too much from romance' (p. 141), 'there are no safe loves . . . , [and] the painful aspects of love are undeniably real' (p. 142), still, its pleasures outweigh its pains, and it 'does indeed 'place a floor' under our well-being' (p. 143). Appropriately, Clack discusses the connection of adult love with childhood loves and attachments, though linking this with more recent work on attachment, attraction, and religion might have allowed a more sophisticated discussion of the role of *eros* in love both of other humans and of God. As it stands the limited focus on erotic romantic love, the somewhat faltering discussion of *agape*, and, the perhaps too rapid dismissal of self-completion and sexual fusion have an unbalanced feel.

The book pivots around its opening and its first and final chapters on religion however, and here for me were its major weaknesses. On the author's own admission largely unsympathetic to religion, chapter 3 develops the standard Freudian account of projection and wish fulfilment, leading to the 'strong presumption against the truth of religion [which] will arise if it can be shown that religious belief *lacks grounds other than wishes.*' (p. 73). Allowing Clack the benefit of 'proof' here, his argument follows only if we equate religion in typically modern fashion with the holding of a corpus of (erroneous) beliefs rather than appreciating religion's root in pre-reflexive doxology and the natural desire for the good. Moreover, Clack's simplistic equation of typical religion with belief in a supernatural *being*, a univocal 'after' life, and a providential 'order' creates a distinctly positivist and somewhat dated feel, especially when we are told that 'religious belief is a case of all wish and no evidence' (p. 77). This is compounded further when we are offered Wittgenstein of the end of the *Tractatus* as distinctly non-mystical, and told bluntly that truth simply 'is the relation between propositions and states of affairs' (p. 151).

Admittedly, Clack quickly dispenses with much that characterises the idolatrous supernaturalism of folk religion, and wishes in intellectual humility to extract 'something precious' at its core. In the final chapter he seeks a religion which supports us without 'denial of the reality of the world as we know it and which is not analysable purely in terms of wish-fulfilling fantasies' (p. 145). To find this he has to 'amputate the false and illusory aspects of religion' (p. 145). But this results in a religion without God, with the transcendent well and truly domesticated, and whose function is to leave us with a 'mitigated concept of the eternal' (p. 168). Having thus thrown away the religious baby with the univocal bath water, such mid-twentieth century, modernist, secular humanism stands up well neither to metaphysical nor deconstructionist critiques. Lacking theological, psychological and philosophical nuance, Clack's psychodynamic religious study rightly rejects the projected visible masquerading as invisible, but underplays the possibility of desire as grounded in seeking the Good, fails to appreciate fully the invisible

in the visible, the paradoxical intimate-transcendence of reality, eternity in the grain of sand. This is a pity as *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion* is well written and thought provoking. Read this book carefully, it is worth it, but draw your own conclusion. For me, the amputation was rather too radical, and the patient bled to death.

PETER HAMPSON