

Rem B. Edwards, "Why We Should Not Use Some Drugs for Pleasure," in Steven Luper-Foy and Curtis Brown, eds., *Drugs, Morality and the Law*, New York, Garland Press, 1994, pp 183-196.

Why We Should Not Use Some Drugs for Pleasure

Rem B. Edwards

By "pleasure" I will mean "any quality of feeling that we normally wish to cultivate or sustain in experience for its own sake," and by "pain" I will mean "any quality of feeling that we normally wish to avoid or eliminate from experience for its own sake." Mill was right; there are many qualities of pleasure; and this definition of pleasure allows for all kinds. I will defend the view that there are *some* drugs that we should not use for pleasure, which leaves open the possibility that there are others that we may use for pleasure.

In developing and defending the view that we should not get our pleasures from some drugs, I want to steer a middle course between the extremes of what Gerald L. Klerman called "psychotropic hedonism" and "pharmacological calvinism."¹ The former is the view that any source of pleasure is admissible, that if it feels good, we may do it. The latter is the view that if anything is pleasant, it is bad for us and morally wrong to use it.

On a theoretical level, my views are much closer to psychotropic hedonism than to pharmacological calvinism. However, with respect to the actual use of drugs for pleasure, I think that the latter has the edge because many if not most "recreational" drugs are in fact very bad for us, especially when used to excess. We have not yet discovered the "perfect drug" like the soma of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which had "All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects."²

I unequivocally reject the view that pleasure is a bad thing in itself or that enjoyment is inherently wrong, sinful, degenerate, or effete, so I am not for these reasons practically inclined toward pharmacological calvinism. Unlike Cleanthes the Stoic, who believed that to experience pleasure is the worst thing that can happen to a person, I am convinced that it is one of the best. I think that Nietzsche was just being obtuse and chauvinistic when he suggested that only effete Englishmen desire pleasure, not real men.³ Happiness consists of pleasures of many varieties sustained over periods of time; and happiness is a very good thing.

Nevertheless, we should choose our sources and qualities of pleasure carefully. Life affords us myriads of "innocent" (i.e. harmless) pleasures, some of them chemically induced, e.g. from a caffeinated soft drink or a good cup of tea or coffee; but many chemically caused enjoyments are not innocent. Some, like cocaine, heroin, marijuana, alcohol, peyote, LSD, amphetamines, barbiturates, and tobacco are very likely to result in a clear preponderance of pain over pleasure in the long run for users and/or for others whose lives are affected profoundly by users. These same drugs are also very likely to destroy other important human goods that it is rational to want and to choose—like health or rationality itself and the ability to choose for oneself. Other persons are likely to be affected extremely adversely by one's irrational and irresponsible drug-induced behaviors. It is neither prudent nor moral to use such drugs, except perhaps in great moderation. Since they are addictive, moderation is extremely difficult; and for many persons it is impossible. Moderation is much easier said than achieved.

I am convinced that some drugs, like the modest quantities of caffeine found in cola drinks, tea, coffee, and the theobromine found in chocolate bars, are quite acceptable as sources of pleasure, though even these can be overdone. The third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (hereafter *DSM-III*) of the American Psychiatric Association recognizes "Caffeine intoxication" as a mental disorder and makes a convincing case that excess caffeine consumption can be quite troublesome.⁴ Other drugs like cocaine, heroin, marijuana, nicotine, and alcohol—minus moderation, are clearly unsatisfactory.

Criteria for Identifying Unacceptable Hedonic Drugs

Responsible persons will draw the line somewhere between acceptable and unacceptable uses of hedonic drugs, though not necessarily where I would draw it. Rational line drawing requires criteria for distinguishing acceptable hedonic uses of drugs for pleasure from unacceptable hedonic uses. I propose the following criteria, each of which is a presumptive reason against hedonic drug use, though they vary in significance or strength. In *unacceptable* hedonic uses one or more (usually more) of the following conditions are fulfilled.

(1) The resulting pain outweighs the pleasure over the long run for the user.

Rational prudence requires that one's choices be likely to result in more pleasure than pain over the long run, and it forbids choosing the pleasures of the moment and ignoring the ensuing pains. There are many reasons why some hedonic uses of drugs result in the long run in the preponderance of pain over pleasure. Some hedonic drugs result very quickly in "bad trips," i.e. in horrifying hallucinations, thoughts, and perceptual distortions; prolonged use of alcohol to excess results in the terrors of delirium tremens. Some hedonic drugs produce considerable bodily pain in a relatively short time span associated with hangovers, nausea, vomiting, headache, gastric disorders, elevated blood pressure, sweating, shock, depressed respiration, convulsions, comas, etc., depending on levels of tolerance and quantities consumed. Most available hedonic drugs result rather quickly in a dull or confused state of mind and may eventually produce the psychological pains involved in agitation, restlessness, irritability, delusions, depression, and paranoia. Some cause grave and frustrating social alienation and social withdrawal. Some result rather quickly in delayed reaction time and reduction of motor control, and this can have serious adverse consequences when driving or operating machinery. Some, after lengthy use, cause painful diseases and frustrating psychical and physical debilities. Some kill. Some do many or all of these

things at once. All things considered, their pleasures are not worth their price of suffering.

Hedonic drugs like alcohol or crack are often used, not so much for pleasure, but primarily to relieve pain, e.g., the pains of low self-esteem, loneliness, jealousy, hopelessness, anxiety, or depression, all of which may result from a great variety of social, psychological, and physical causes. However, hedonic drugs are grossly inefficient means of alleviating these pains and are more than likely to compound the suffering over the long run. Certainly, they do nothing to remove the real causes of such pains of soul, which must be corrected if a war on drugs is to be won. Those who really want to win a war on drugs must attack the real causes of despair in our society.

(2) The pleasure drug is destructive of the user's rationality, either temporarily or more permanently.

Many pleasure drugs stupefy and seriously interfere with a variety of cognitive abilities such as the ability to perceive without distortion, to think clearly, to remember, to pay attention, to concentrate on the task at hand, and to be creative. Other persons can see this easily, though intoxicated persons often cannot. When they sober up or dry out, they can see what fools they have been; but by then it is too late. The damage has been done. Many intoxicated persons mistakenly believe themselves to be brilliant conversationalists, but sober persons listening in know better. Under the influence of drugs, many people have a powerful but false sense of intellectual achievement and immense creativity; but when they return to reality, the marvelous results just are not there. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in "The Poet" that the quest for "extraordinary powers" is "the reason why bards love wine, mead, narcotics, coffee, tea, opium, the fumes of sandalwood and tobacco, or whatever other procurers of animal exhilaration." He warned, however, against "quasi-mechanical substitutes for the true nectar."⁵

But never can any advantage be taken of nature by a trick. The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the Creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body. That is not an inspiration,

which we owe to narcotics, but some counterfeit excitement and fury.⁶

Emerson's extreme condemnation may be a bit exaggerated, but it is not far removed from the truth. I have found that moderate coffee drinking does enhance both creativity and intelligence and results in better philosophy through chemistry. Other drugs do more harm than good, however, in my limited experience.

When I ask myself why I indulge so little in hedonic drugs, I find that drug-induced stupidity, even if relatively temporary, is inconsistent with the great value that I attach to my own intelligence, the extensive time and intense effort that I have devoted to its development, the serious commitment that I have to making informed choices, and the lifetime of effort that I have expended as an educator to make these qualities available to others. This does not mean that I think that all of life should be spent in intellectual pursuits—only that rationality should be available for use, when needed, in all of life. When one is sufficiently intoxicated, rationality simply is not available; judgment is severely impaired.

(3) The pleasure drug is destructive of the user's autonomy (ability to choose), either temporarily or more permanently.

Drug-induced obtuseness is inconsistent not only with the rational part of rational choice, but with the choice or self-control part of it as well. Hedonic drugs give pleasure at the price of autonomy, self-control and will power; and under their influence we cannot and do not make the self-interested or the other-regarding choices that we otherwise could and should make. Under their influence, we may do terrible things to ourselves or to others, are often dangerous to self or others, for we lack the capacity to make prudent and moral choices. Not only weakness of will, but ill will, aggressiveness, and the worst in us easily prevail under the influence of hedonic drugs.

Vulnerability to control by others is the other side of the coin of lack of or loss of rational choice by self. Peer pressure, social and political manipulation, and sexual exploitation easily dominate persons who are spaced out on hedonic drugs. Aldous Huxley recognized the political vulnerability of persons on

drugs when he later commented on the fictional "soma" that dominated the lives of the citizens of *Brave New World*. According to Huxley, soma was:

... one of the most powerful instruments of rule in the dictator's armory. The systematic drugging of individuals for the benefit of the state (and incidentally, of course, for their own delight) was a main plank in the policy of the World Controllers. The daily soma ration was an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas.⁷

In our society, systematic political drugging has not reached the proportions that it had in *Brave New World*. On a lesser social scale, however, we easily recognize that persons who cannot control themselves are easily dominated and exploited by unscrupulous others. After sobering up, they realize that this is no fun.

(4) The pleasure drug is destructive of the user's self-knowledge, self-respect, and positive self-valuation, either temporarily or more permanently.

In pluralistic value theories, there are other intrinsically good things besides pleasure, and their worth may outweigh that of some or all kinds of pleasures, especially soporific, drug-induced ones. Prudence tells us: "Know thyself; respect thyself; cherish thyself." Excessive drug users sacrifice self-knowledge, self-respect, and the intrinsic value of themselves as unique conscious centers of experience and self-initiated activity for the sake of what, in Biblical terms, might be called "a mess of pottage," pun intended. Hedonic drugs that are presently available may give pleasure, of sorts, or at least some temporary release from pain. Unfortunately, they also extinguish the intensely personal goods of self-knowledge, self-respect, and self appreciation at the same time. The small pleasure is really not worth the price.

(5) The pleasure drug is likely to have irreversible or not easily reversible harmful physical, psychological, or social effects on the user.

Many of the harmful psychological and social effects of hedonic drugs are covered above or below. These effects can be difficult if not impossible to reverse.

Let us concentrate for the moment on the fact that prolonged use of different hedonic drugs have enduring and not easily reversed physical effects that are quite harmful to the user. Addiction to any drug is itself a serious physical effect, not easily undone. Specific effects may differ from drug to drug, though many have common drawbacks. Tobacco is the number one cause of emphysema and lung cancer and is a major factor in coronary diseases and heart attacks. Cocaine has recently been linked to many coronary hemorrhages and strokes. Most other hedonic drugs will cause cardiac arrhythmias and arrests and respiratory paralysis and failure when ingested in sufficient quantities. Under their influence, judgment about "when to say when" is severely impaired. They also cause neurological damage, and mental hospitals are now flooded with patients with severe drug-induced psychoses involving brain damage. Prolonged consumption of alcohol causes cirrhosis of the liver, peptic ulcers, chronic gastritis, and turns the brain to mush in Korsakoff's syndrome. Consumption of relatively small quantities of alcohol destroys millions of brain cells and/or synaptic connections. Who can afford to lose them?

(6) The pleasure drug is expensive, in large part because buying, selling, and/or possessing the pleasure drug is illegal. Obtaining it consumes an inordinate share of the user's and/or society's financial resources and is likely to involve criminal behavior.

Unfortunately, many pleasure drugs that are currently available fit the above description. Though alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco are legally available, many pleasure drugs are illegal controlled substances. The law and its penalties must enter into any hedonistic calculus; and as long as laws against the sale or use of controlled substances are on the books, the consequences of doing so must be taken into account. However, millions of persons are apparently willing to run the risks and sell and consume illegal controlled substances. For many inner-city residents, the drug economy offers the only jobs available, the only way to enjoy middle-class material and social amenities, the only

way to get rich, the only way to gain social power, status and respect. This is a sad commentary on our present social order and its lack of opportunities for the poor and powerless. A really successful attack on drugs must be a war on poverty, prejudice, ignorance, and unemployment.

Whether the law and its penalties should be considered in deciding upon a course of action is one thing. Whether the law is a good law is quite another. The drug trade is so lucrative precisely because so many hedonic drugs are illegal. Drug users zealously make converts both for their social support and camaraderie and because they can sell drugs to converts to support their own incredibly expensive drug-use habits. Many women are driven to prostitution to pay for costly drug consumption.

Anyone who buys illegal drugs contributes to the enrichment of the international drug lords and street gangs and to gang wars, murders, violence, theft, prostitution, and exploitation. Middle-class individuals who use drugs in great moderation are the very ones who collectively are making the drug lords rich. Though each makes only small purchases, there are so many of them that they are the primary source of wealth from drugs.

In my opinion, the most effective way to end the drug trade is to take the money out of it. The most effective way available to significantly reduce drug consumption is to legalize drugs and make them available in government-owned or regulated stores at prices with which the drug lords cannot compete. Monies so derived, together with monies now being squandered on our current ineffective War on Drugs, should then be spent on education, treatment, and rehabilitation.

After legalization, many drug users will remain, just as many abusers of alcohol persist after the repeal of prohibition. However, the powerful incentives of extreme wealth and exalted social status in the drug subculture would be removed. Only the intrinsic hedonic appeal of the drugs themselves would remain—to be balanced against their liabilities. Legalization would be risky, no doubt. Many persons would be lost to drugs, just as many are already lost both to illegal drugs and to legal drugs like alcohol and tobacco. However, incentives to make converts to support drug habits would disappear; and risks to the rest of

us of auto and property theft, mugging, and organized criminality to support drug habits would be eliminated. Let's face it: No society can prevent some of its members from being fools and destroying themselves. If some people will not respond to the best that can be offered in education, counseling, and rehabilitation services, then they will just have to suffer the consequences. There is no need for the rest of us to be destroyed along with them, however, especially if we really have done our very best to provide them with alternatives.

It is entirely possible that cheap and legal hedonic drugs would prove to be so appealing that massive numbers of persons would succumb to them and become pawns in the hands of unscrupulous manipulators. Aldous Huxley asked how a dictator could "get his subjects to take the pills that will make them think, feel and behave in the way he finds desirable," and he answered:

In all probability it will be enough merely to make the pills available. Today alcohol and tobacco are available, and people spend considerably more on these very unsatisfactory euphorics, pseudo-stimulants and sedatives than they are ready to spend on the education of their children.⁸

For his schemes to succeed, a tyrant would have to deny his subjects the educational and rehabilitational services that I envision. Where these services are available, some would doubtless capitulate anyway. If most members of a society actually succumb, I suppose that they would get what they deserve; but I have more faith in people than that, especially if they have a fair chance in life.

(7) Persons under the influence of pleasure drugs are likely to do things that are very harmful to other persons, especially those close to them, which they would not do in their "right state of mind," and which they would and should regret when they return to their right state. The resulting pains and other harms outweigh the resulting pleasure over the long run for other persons affected by the user's drug-related behaviors.

Morality requires that we consider the effects of our actions, including our pleasure-seeking behaviors, on other people.

It is really very difficult to find self-regarding activities that do not also affect others quite significantly. Some of our hedonic uses of drugs do affect others adversely, at times quite momentarily. Persons "under the influence" frequently have accidents at home and at work that injure others as well as themselves. Intoxicated drivers maim and kill thousands of persons on our highways every year, devastating their lives and the lives of those who love them, and causing immense physical and mental pains. Families and friendships are destroyed. Social withdrawal and estrangement are commonplace. Jobs are lost. Fortunes are squandered. Dependents, especially children, are denied the economic resources that would lift them from distressing and oppressive poverty and ignorance. Degrading and criminal behaviors like prostitution, theft, and mugging are frequently necessary to support drug habits. Criminal behaviors like assaults, murders, rapes, spouse beatings, and child abuse occur frequently under intoxication, as do many other grave moral and social indiscretions. As *DSM-III* tells us,

Highway accidents are a major complication of Alcohol Intoxication. At least half of all highway fatalities involve either a driver or a pedestrian who has been drinking. Intoxication also results in falls and numerous household and industrial accidents. Moreover, it is frequently associated with the commission of criminal acts. More than one half of all murderers and their victims are believed to be intoxicated at the time of the act. One study indicates that about one-fourth of all suicides occur while the individual is drinking alcohol.⁹

Physical injury to others results from drug consumption in many ways. Drugs ingested by pregnant women do permanent damage to their developing fetuses. Thousands of infants are born every year with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Thousands are addicted to alcohol and other drugs even before they have drawn their first breath. Thousands still in the womb are permanently stunted both physically and mentally by mothers who smoke, drink, and do drugs. After birth, children suffer the same effects from "secondary" inhalation from their parents' smoke. People who inflict comparable harms on children in other ways would be prosecuted for heinous crimes, but this sanction would

be ineffective for drug users. What they really need is greater moral sensitivity, moral education, counseling, job training, and economic opportunity.

Under the influence of hedonic drugs, not only do users harm innocent others, but they also fail to contribute positively and creatively to the well being of others. Time and energy are consumed that could be better spent. Drugs easily become an all-consuming religion to which devotees give all their hearts and souls and minds and strengths—with nothing left over for others. Interestingly, one of the principle objections that Sigmund Freud had to alcoholism was that it “wastes a large quota of energy which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot.”¹⁰

Of course, it can be said that any pleasurable diversion takes time and energy away from helping others. All of us really are entitled to the pursuit of happiness, and that includes pleasurable diversions. It is unreasonable and pointless to moralize the whole of life and require that every moment of our existence be devoted to promoting the greatest good of the greatest number, often to the neglect of self. It is reasonable to expect, however, that happiness be pursued through means that do not inflict significant injury on self and/or others in the long run.

In conclusion, the case against hedonic drugs is very strong. The disadvantages of drug use for hedonic purposes are too great, especially when, with the slightest bit of education, imagination, and a little bit of luck, we can find innumerable alternative sources and varieties of enjoyment that are harmless and innocent. Without drugs, life can be a “natural high” if we give it a chance.

A Response to Sheridan Hough

After reading Dr. Hough's defense of drug use, I was struck by how little we really disagree. Our differences are largely those of emphasis. She defends the moderate use of drugs, and I attack the immoderate use of drugs. I largely agree that the moderate and responsible use of drugs is acceptable, and she agrees that the immoderate and irresponsible use of drugs is

unacceptable. I find many of her comments to be exceptionally illuminating. The line between what counts as moderate and immoderate use really is fuzzy and culturally variable. We agree that pleasure is a good thing. She skillfully develops the ideas that pleasures are bound to activities and colored by expectations and by the social and physical situation in which they are generated. I too have serious doubts that alcoholism is a disease. I try to be very explicit about criteria for drawing the line between responsible and irresponsible uses of drugs, and she actually appeals to most of my criteria in the course of her discussion. I had expected a more radical defense of drug use, but her defense is so qualified and temperate that it is difficult to disagree with her.

There are some minor differences between us, however, though these seem to be mainly differences of emphasis, or differences in judgment calls in marginal situations.

First, I think that we do not really get to the heart of the matter by focusing on ambiguities in the concept of moderation, or on whether alcoholism and drug use are diseases. No matter what our conventions are with respect to concepts of "moderation" and "disease," the crucial thing is that at some point, uses of drugs become harmful to self and/or others in the many ways I have detailed in the preceding discussion. The focus needs to be directly on these harms. The harms are real, no matter what our social conventions are with respect to moderation and disease. A rational theory of moderation would focus directly on the harms, but often there is little rationality in our social conventions.

Next, Dr. Hough stresses that moderate drug use can make a positive contribution to constructive social intercourse and to knowing and appreciating self and others; but my emphasis has been on the large extent to which drug use destroys desirable social relations and is incompatible with knowing and appreciating self and others. The difference is primarily one of emphasis, but on the whole I judge that the harms involved in these matters far outweigh the benefits.

Next, Dr. Hough correctly emphasizes that we frequently indulge immoderately, i.e. harmfully, in other kinds of pleasure-seeking activities. I certainly agree that we can indulge harmfully

and excessively in such things as skiing, scuba diving, roller-coaster riding, bungee jumping, studying French literature, or doing mathematics. It does not follow, however, that drug use is any less harmful just because other things are also harmful. Also, it does not follow that illegal drugs are any less harmful simply because legal drugs are just as harmful.

Finally, my judgment call is that drug use is much riskier than Dr. Hough seems to think. She seems to presuppose that moderate and responsible drug use is easy to sustain, but it seems to me that it is extremely difficult to use pleasure drugs so minimally that significant harm does not result from their use. In her opinion, the risk is worth running that harmless alcohol consumption will not spill over into harmful uses; but I have serious doubts. Too many people who have believed that have been seriously mistaken. I do think that the sale and use of alcohol and drugs currently classified as controlled substances should not be illegal; nevertheless, the use of most drugs for hedonic purposes is ill advised for both prudential and moral reasons.

NOTES

1. Gerald L. Klerman, "Psychotropic Drugs as Therapeutic Agents" (*Hastings Center Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1974), p. 91.
2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 42.
3. Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 468.
4. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1980), pp. 160f.
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903), Vol. III, p. 27.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

7. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 56.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
9. American Psychiatric Association, pp. 130, 131.
10. Quoted by Ernest Wallwork in *Psychoanalysis and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 247-8.