
A humanist discussion of... DRUGS

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use **reason**, **experience** and **respect for others** when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. Humanists believe that we should **make the best of the only life we have**, avoiding harm (to the individual or community) and **increasing welfare and happiness**. When deciding whether something is right or wrong, humanists consider the evidence and the probable effects of choices. Freedom and choice contribute to personal happiness and are important humanist values, as long as they do not interfere with anyone else's freedom, happiness or security.

Often humanist perspectives on moral issues are not very different from those of liberally-minded religious people. However, a humanist view is more explicitly based on **reason** and **observation**, rather than on tradition or deference to authority, which often influence religious views. Many traditional religious texts have little to say about drugs.

A rational discussion of "**recreational drugs**" needs to include **all substances taken for pleasure that alter mood**, some of which are legal and some of which are not, and to consider **three separate but interrelated questions**:



Is drug use inadvisable from a health point of view?

Should some or all drugs be illegal?

Is drug use a moral issue?

Current discussion tends to mix up these questions, and is often characterised by prejudice, hearsay and fear. Let us try to examine the subject coolly...

The health aspects of drug use – the effects on the user

All substances that alter mood - lawful medicinal drugs, alcohol, nicotine, some "natural" remedies sold in health food shops, and many everyday items such as coffee, tea and chocolate, as well as illegal recreational drugs - **can have powerful physical and psychological effects**. That is why people use them! They also have side-effects, good as well as bad, some well understood and predictable, others less so. Legal drugs and foods are better understood and regulated than illegal ones, which risk being impure. Some recreational drugs have unpredictable effects on individuals, or can do long term damage.

Illegal drugs that are smoked are probably at least as damaging to general fitness and lungs as ordinary cigarettes, which kill one in two long-term users, and injecting drugs carries serious risks of infection from shared or re-used needles. (Some, however, like cannabis, can have therapeutic effects, currently being researched.)



All drugs which alter mood have effects on the brain and senses, and **may lead to poor judgement and greater risk of accidents** - for example, it is as dangerous to drive under the influence of some drugs as under the influence of alcohol. There can also be **long-term psychological damage**: there is some evidence that ecstasy increases depression in frequent users, and other drugs such as cannabis can affect memory and concentration. Drunks and drug users can seem amazingly stupid and boring to non-users, and young people contemplating drug use should think hard about the effects on their minds, personalities, relationships, abilities and careers, especially if they are hoping to earn a living by using their brains. (Many employers treat drug abuse as a disciplinary offence.)

Some facts: Drugs and spending

In the UK...

- **£20bn** is spent annually on **alcohol**
- **£8bn** a year is spent on **cigarettes** and other tobacco products.
- More than 3 million people spend a total of over **£6.6bn** a year on **illegal drugs**, specifically -
 - Cannabis smokers spend an average of **£498** a year
 - Ecstasy users spend **£681** a year
 - Heroin users spend **£15,000** a year to feed a weekly habit.

(Source: Home Office)

Although some drugs, such as heroin, cocaine and nicotine, are highly addictive, there is little persuasive evidence that using soft drugs inevitably leads to addiction or to hard drugs. Addiction can, in theory, be compatible with leading an ordinary and reasonably satisfactory life, as long as the addict has access to pure and legal drugs. But the pleasure of taking drugs fades with long-term use, and drug dependency of any kind is unlikely to improve a life or make it more fulfilled. For most addicts it is a **terrible drain health and resources** – just consider the facts opposite. This money could buy a lot more pleasure and satisfaction if used in other ways.

The morality of drug use – the effects on the user and others

Few people have moral reservations about the use of drugs for medicinal or psychiatric purposes, though even therapeutic drugs can be addictive and are sometimes misused. The moral debate centres on "**recreational**" drugs and particularly on those which are illegal: "**soft drugs**" such as cannabis and ecstasy and "**hard drugs**" such as heroin and cocaine.

The **humanist** moral perspective, aimed at living a happy fulfilled life and helping others to do so, can lead to a range of opinions about recreational or illegal drugs. There is no doubt that taking drugs is pleasurable, at least in the short term, or people wouldn't do it. But there are real concerns about the consequences, short term and long term, for the individual and those close to him or her, and for the welfare of the community.

There is a case for saying that drug use and abuse are health issues rather than moral ones, and as such are a matter of personal choice. The great libertarian philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote,

"The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant."

But one's own good often overlaps with the common good - if I neglect my health or harm myself, this will affect my family and friends and the wider community (I could become a burden on the NHS or be unable to hold down a job), and **this harm to others makes drug abuse a moral issue**. It is also a moral matter if we take into account the energy and enterprise that is often wasted in the pursuit of drugs: the self-absorbed and selfish lives of many addicts and the time and effort and money that could be better spent on improving the world. Even the land used for the cultivation of drugs could be producing food for the hungry.



And some philosophers have thought that **even activities which only cause harm to oneself are wrong** because they destroy things that are very precious - **one's own freedom** or autonomy (addicts certainly have a reduced ability to choose freely or independently) and the **capacity to reason**, the highest human attribute. Addicts often lose control over their own lives - they may drift into unemployment, homelessness, crime or prostitution, which reinforce their need for drugs and make recovery more difficult. Risking that loss of autonomy could be seen as an immoral choice.

The law, society and drug use – the limits to freedom

The use of some drugs is illegal, and for some people breaking the law in a democratic society is itself an immoral act. But it certainly seems rational to ask, as many young people do, **why** their favourite recreational drugs are illegal when the preferred drug of older generations, alcohol, is not. Alcohol does at least as much harm as the "soft drugs" - it can be addictive, and can cause recklessness, violence and driving accidents, and damage health. One response is that if it were practicable to make this obviously harmful substance (and others, such as nicotine) illegal, we probably would. But the attempt of the USA to ban alcohol during Prohibition in the 1920s was



not successful - a black market in alcohol flourished and criminals made fortunes. States which attempt to control alcohol consumption through punitive taxation or strict licensing laws have more success, but still tend to suffer from binge drinking and its anti-social effects. And many people say that a genuinely harmless pleasure for most people should not be criminalised just because some people overindulge.

(You will have noticed that some of these arguments can also be applied to illegal drugs.) However, another response is that "**two wrongs don't make a right**" - the fact that we permit some harmful recreational drugs, such as nicotine and alcohol, is not in itself a good reason to permit even more. But this response does not answer the charge of inconsistency.

A high proportion of convicted criminals in our prisons are drug addicts, sentenced not only for drug offences but also for burglary, mugging and other forms of theft - crimes committed to fund drug habits, and so caused by drugs. These crimes interfere with other people's freedom, happiness or security, and **illegal drugs cost all of us an enormous amount** - as victims of crimes, in insurance against crimes often committed by drug addicts, and as tax payers funding the health, police and justice systems.

There is a huge social cost associated with drug (and alcohol) abuse, and it is clear from the experience of many states over the past century that as long as people want drugs they will be not eliminated, however many resources we devote to the purpose.

Some people consider that addiction is an illness requiring treatment rather than punishment, and that we need to radically rethink the way we treat drug offenders. Some people argue that if drugs

Some facts: Drugs and Offending

In the UK...

- **70%** of arrestees test positive for illegal drugs
- The average weekly drug spending by the offender is **£129**
- **£308** is spent on average on cocaine
- On average the offender has an illegal income of **£5,535**
- In 1998 a value of **£2.4bn** of drugs was seized.

(Source: Home Office)

were legal and therefore cheaper, they could be taxed, and much of the associated crime would disappear. Some crimes, such as dealing and possession, would not exist if drugs were legal. People also argue that if soft drugs were legalised, users would be less likely to come into contact with hard drugs and criminals, and less police time would be wasted on petty matters. These rational and humane approaches are favoured by many humanists. Even some police officers believe that cannabis should be decriminalised, as it does less harm than alcohol, but it is hard for politicians to raise the issue without being accused of being soft on drugs and crime. We do not live in an entirely rational society - the law is not always the same as justice or morality, or even common sense - and some people therefore argue that it is reasonable and right to break the law. But in a democracy where it is possible to campaign for changes when we think laws are unjust, the more responsible course of action is to **respect and obey the law**, while **working for change**.

Rational solutions would include changes in the law, better information about the real risks of drug abuse, education that prepared people for fulfilling lives in society, and a society that provided worthwhile opportunities for everyone and looked after its more vulnerable members properly. It should be possible to be happy, to have friends and support systems and a stake in society, so that there is little need for damaging forms of escapism.

Questions to think about

- o One question to consider is why people seek to escape reality through drug and alcohol abuse. How can we improve life so that people feel less desire to take mood-enhancing drugs?
- o If there were a harmless drug that could be put into the water supply which made everyone feel happier would this be a good thing? Should we distinguish between "real" happiness and drug-induced happiness?
- o Should everything that is bad for us or dangerous be illegal? Why are some things illegal and not others? (e.g. cannabis is illegal but tobacco is not.)
- o Should we interfere in people's lives for their own good? How can we decide what is good for other people?
- o Do humanist principles inevitably lead to liberal ideas on moral and social issues?
- o How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further reading

A more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers, can be found in *Humanist Perspectives 2* available to buy at www.humanism.org.uk

Also available from the BHA's website -

- o Other BHA briefings: *Thinking about ethics ; Nature ; Crime and Punishment*, etc.
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group, (2000), *For your own good?* (BHA)
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), *What is Humanism?* (BHA)
- o Barbara Smoker (1998), *Humanism* (BHA)

Issues - Illegal Drugs; Drugs in Sport; Smoking; Alcohol; (Independence Publishers)
Simon Blackburn, (2001), *Being Good* (Oxford)
Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy: the Basics* (Routledge)
Mary Warnock, (1998), *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics* (Duckworth)

Some useful websites

www.talktofrank.com – a website for teenagers and young adults providing information and advice about drug use, provided by the government’s national drug awareness campaign.

www.nida.nih.gov/MOM- the Mind over Matter website of the US National Institute on Drug Abuse / National Institute of Health - a simple guide to the effects of drugs on the brain and body aimed at year 5-9 students.

www.drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk – the Home Office’s website on tackling drug usage, providing statistics and information on strategies.

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