

A humanist discussion of... smoking

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. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. Humanists have a rational ethical perspective, based on avoiding harm (to the individual or community) and increasing welfare and happiness. Humanists value personal freedom and choice because they contribute to personal happiness, but only as long as they do not interfere with anyone else's freedom, happiness, or security. When deciding whether something is right or wrong, humanists consider the evidence and the effects of choices on the people concerned and the wider community. Often humanist perspectives on moral issues are not very different from those of liberally-minded religious people, but many traditional religious texts have little to say about drugs of any kind, including cigarettes.

Many humanists consider smoking to be a health issue rather than a moral issue. Though there are some moral issues connected with smoking and health, most humanists see little moral difference between smoking tobacco and other drug use.

The health aspects of smoking - 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 such as nicotine and alcohol are better understood than illegal ones, but even so ordinary cigarettes kill one in two long-term users and they will die on average 15 years earlier than non-smokers.

Some drugs, including nicotine, are highly addictive. Addiction is compatible with leading an ordinary and reasonably satisfactory life, as long as the addict can afford the habit, and lives and eats sensibly. But there are risks to health associated with dependence on any drug, especially one as dangerous and contaminated as nicotine. The pleasure of taking most drugs fades with long-term use, and nicotine dependency is unlikely to improve a life or make it more fulfilled. For most smokers it is a terrible drain on health and resources - and the money required could buy a lot more pleasure and satisfaction if used in other ways.

The morality of smoking - the effects on the user and others

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 drugs such as nicotine. For example, the short-term pleasurable effects of smoking may be cancelled out by long-term bad consequences for the individual and those close to him or her, and the wider community. But there is also a case for saying that all drug use is a health issue rather than a moral one, and as such is a matter of personal choice.

The great Utilitarian 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 be unable to hold down a job or support my family, and become a burden on the NHS). The effects of passive smoking on others must also be taken into account. The potential to harm others, and the waste of resources involved in growing and processing tobacco, make smoking a moral issue.

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. Nicotine addicts certainly have a reduced ability to choose freely or independently - many can no longer choose not to smoke. You certainly ought to consider the consequences before embarking on smoking, as turning back is likely to be difficult.

Questions to think about

- How important is autonomy - being in charge of your own life - to you? (Many smokers hate the fact that they cannot control or kick their habit.)
 - Are you prepared to risk future suffering for the sake of pleasure now? (You should consider the health risks and the effects of your poor health or premature death on your family and friends.)
 - How much are you prepared to harm others? (When you smoke there are risks to others - passive smoking can make others seriously ill, and women who smoke while pregnant harm their babies.)
 - 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.)
 - Should we interfere in people's lives for their own good? How can we decide what is good for other people?
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- Do humanist principles inevitably lead to liberal ideas on moral and social issues?

How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers? How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?
