Comments welcome. Not for citation.
This is a conference-length paper that I plan on expanding, so it isn’t as comprehensive as I want it to be.

Why Recreational Drug Use is Immoral

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the recreational use of mind-altering substances is immoral. By “recreational drug use,” I refer to activities in which a person uses some psychoactive substance to impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the functioning of his cognitive faculties for the sake of pleasure or enjoyment. Actions of this sort are immoral because they attack the very thing that gives us value and dignity as moral beings: our ability to reason. After establishing the immorality of recreational drug use, I will then argue on similar grounds that the state has a prima facie public policy interest in enacting legal restrictions on recreational drug use.

"The principle of freedom cannot require that [one] should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom." — John Stuart Mill

"It is absurd to say that a man shows his liberality in denying his liberty." — G. K. Chesterton

This paper argues that the recreational use of mind-altering substances is immoral. By “recreational drug use,” I refer to activities in which a person uses some psychoactive substance to impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the functioning of his cognitive faculties for the sake of pleasure or enjoyment. Actions of this sort are immoral because they attack the very thing that makes the moral life possible and that gives us our value and dignity: our ability to reason.

After establishing the immorality of recreational drug use, I will then argue on similar grounds that the state has a prima facie public policy interest in legally restricting drug use. This is because drug use stifles the very thing that enables our participation in political society, namely our ability to autonomously pursue the good life. The main reason justifying a legal presumption against recreational drug use, therefore, has to do with the fact that it is contrary to the very idea of a free society, and not because of any addictions or further social problems that it may generate.

1 The arguments that I will advance apply not just to what we commonly picture in our mind when we think of drugs (e.g. heroin, cocaine, LSD, methamphetamine, and marijuana), but to any substance with mind-altering effects, including alcohol.
2 Hereafter I will use “recreational drug use” and “drug use” synonymously, unless otherwise specified.
3 Though these negative effects do work to strengthen the case against recreational drug use.
In making this second argument, my claim is only that the state has an interest in restricting or discouraging drug use for the reasons specified. The extent or scope of this interest as it pertains to certain regulations or policies is not something that I can cover in this paper. Hence, this paper should not be read as advocating for a policy of banning or criminalizing some specific activity or substance. Rather, the point is simply that from an ideological or theoretical point of view, the state’s default attitude should be to discourage and prevent drug use.

This paper, then, offers two distinct arguments: one for the immorality of recreational drug use, and another for a legal presumption against recreational drug use. While they make use of similar conceptual foundations, both of these arguments are independent from each other and so the failure of one does not by itself show the failure of the other.

Of course, mind-altering drugs are used for other purposes besides just getting high. While the morality of these other purposes certainly merits discussion, they are not the subject of this present paper. My focus will strictly be on the morality of recreational drug use, to which I shall now turn.

Morality, Rationality, and the Good Life

Let me begin with an observation that I think is obvious: boiled down to its essentials, morality is fundamentally about pursuing what is good and avoiding what is evil.

That seems simple enough. What this means is that morality is an essentially rational enterprise. Pursuing good (or avoiding evil) requires knowledge that is meant to be applied, namely knowledge of what is good (or evil) and how it is to be pursued (or avoided). Knowledge of this kind is acquired through the intellect’s ability to reason about how the world is ordered. The whole point of morality and moral theorizing is so that we may use this knowledge to be moral—that is, so that we may determine the truth about the good life so that it may be pursued through activity. And whether this consists of fulfilling duties, maximizing utility, or developing certain character dispositions, morality in this sense is something that can only be articulated, understood, and practiced by rational agents.

So the ability to reason has intrinsic moral significance, since it is what enables us to participate in the moral life. But we can go further than that and say that we have an obligation to reason well, since that is essential to doing what morality requires of us. The most basic moral duty we have is that the good should be done and evil should be avoided. We can’t do this without knowledge of what is good and evil, which reason works to provide us with. Indeed, to do good and to avoid evil is just to do what is rational—to follow what ancient Greek

4 Although such policies would certainly be consistent with—and perhaps even entailed by—what I’m arguing.
5 It seems to me, however, that much of the contemporary push for “medical” marijuana is really just a smokescreen to gradually legitimize its recreational use. This trend can be seen in states such as Colorado and California.
6 As I am using it, reason is more than just instrumental: it also works to uncover the real nature of things.
philosophers called the dictates of “right reason.”⁷ Rational activity and moral activity are therefore one and the same. We have an obligation to reason well because we have an obligation to be moral.

There is yet another argument for this claim, which is that we ought to reason well because we are built for that purpose. In other words, we should reason well because that is part of how we ought to function.⁸ Just like how a good orange tree is one that bears healthy fruit and a good clock is one that properly keeps the time, a good human being is one who fulfills his essential functions excellently. Not only that, but human beings ought to function properly in the same way that a heart ought to pump blood, for this is just what it means to say that something has a purpose or function.

Now as humans, our chief function is the ability to reason, for its influence lies behind every voluntary action we perform. Our intellect thus functions as what Pruss (2013: 98) calls a “ruling part”—it works so as to guide and direct the activities of other functions whenever we act freely. Without the guiding power of reason, there would be no such thing as genuine freedom of choice, which would in turn undermine moral responsibility.⁹ This, combined with the fact that reason provides us with knowledge of what is good for us, means that the activity of reasoning well is integral to our whole well-being as human beings. Hence, we ought to reason well both because this is one of our essential human functions and because it is essential in a way that bears crucially on our whole flourishing as moral beings. This sense of “ought”, moreover, is a moral ought insofar as morality is an essentially rational enterprise.

Clearly, then, reason plays a preeminent role in the moral life. Because we have an obligation to reason well that is derived from our fundamental duty to be moral, it would be wrong for us to deliberately impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the proper operation of our cognitive faculties without an overriding reason. The claim is not that we should always be actively reasoning at every moment in our lives, but that when we do engage the power of reasoning (i.e. when we act autonomously), we should do so in a way that respects what reason is for—namely, the pursuit of truth and the rejection of error. This of course requires that we keep our cognitive faculties functioning in a veridical or truth-apt state. Attempts to disrupt the proper function of these faculties therefore constitute not only an attack on our good, but the good of truth itself. As we will see later on, it would be bizarre (to say the least) to claim that individuals have a moral right to undermine the very thing that enables moral action to begin with, or that one’s right to autonomy guarantees the right to render oneself non-autonomous. Moral rights are supposed to protect us as we go about pursuing our good, so the idea that we could have a moral right to undermine our own good is sheer nonsense.

⁷ See, for example, Cicero’s observation in De Republica that “True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions.”


Now I am not claiming that it is never permissible to interfere with or modify our cognitive capacities. These capacities exist for the sake of ordering our lives around what is true, good, and genuinely fulfilling of us, and as such intervention is permitted—and even required—when their operation deviates from this goal, such as in the case of depression, anxiety disorders, and obsessive compulsive disorder. Indeed, interventions to restore our thinking to its normal function would be good for us. They would be no different from taking medication to restore a malfunctioning organ to a healthy state. Similarly, taking analgesics, sleeping medication, and undergoing anesthesia is also permitted, for these things all work to remedy aspects of our cognition that are overstimulated, understimulated, or which are interfering with some other part of our overall well-being. Our cognitive faculties, like all of our powers, capacities, and functions, are hierarchically ordered towards our well-being as a whole. Just like how we may disobey a lower authority when it contradicts a higher authority, we may interfere with the functioning of some part if its operation conflicts with the health of a higher part or of the whole person.\footnote{This example comes from Augros and Oleson (2013).} Again, interventions of this sort would be good for us in that we seeking to restore a malfunctioning part back to the proper role it should play within our overall well-being. The very concept of mental health—and indeed, health in general—rests on this understanding of the proper role of our faculties and the relationship they have with other parts of our body (Ashley 2013; Kass 1975).

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However, it would not be permissible to suppress one’s cognitive faculties for the sake of a reason not related to one’s integral functioning. This includes recreation, for recreation refers to activities done for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment and that are therefore are not essential to one’s health or well-being in a way that medicine is.\footnote{On this point, Lee and George (2008: 115-117) define recreation in broad terms so as to encompass social and therapeutic activities that do not involve the negative impairment of one’s cognition. On this conception of recreation, not all recreational drug use is immoral. While my argument can be easily tailored to this understanding of recreation (by focusing on a specific subset of recreational drug use, namely what they refer to as hedonistic drug use), this is not what is usually meant when individuals refer to recreational drug use. Typically, when we speak of recreation in the context of drugs, we mean drug use for the sake of getting high—not as a part of some more basic activity. Lee and George themselves acknowledge as much when they say that “[u]sually, by ‘recreational drug use’ is meant taking a drug simply for pleasure, rather than to enable or enhance other activities, or to remedy health problems.”} Morality demands of us that we act rationality so as to pursue what is good and reject what is evil, so to suppress our cognition for the sake of attaining a pleasurable high is repugnant to our most basic moral obligation—and, indeed, to our very well-being as creatures built to reason.\footnote{This isn’t to say that pleasure isn’t good, only that pleasure is not good-in-itself. If some pleasurable act is good, it is only good on account of the fact that the pleasure is an aspect of a real perfection. See Lee and George (2008).}
One might object that temporarily suppressing one’s cognitive abilities for recreation is not incompatible with this goal. So long as it is only temporary or occasional, we still retain the ability to do what morality requires of us. But this objection misses the point of what I have been arguing for. Our obligation to be moral is unconditional and therefore not something that we may choose suspend at our convenience. Morality is about living well in all areas of our lives and at every moment in our lives, without exception. It is not a “game” that we can enter or exit at our whim. Anything that bears on our well-being as persons—including those activities we do for recreation—falls within the scope of our moral obligation to pursue what is good and reject what is evil.

Now when it comes to drugs, there are two ways in which recreational drug use negatively affects our cognitive functioning (and, by extension, our rationality). First, there are the immediate effects of consuming certain drugs. For example, the immediate effects of hallucinogens such as LSD and PCP include rapid mood swings, delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, and a distorted sense of time and self. Heroin, which is synthesized from morphine, produces euphoria followed by nausea and clouded mental functioning. The immediate effects of marijuana include anxiety, dysphoria and paranoia, altered judgement, cognitive impairment, and psychomotor impairment. Indeed, any drug with psychoactive power can work to impair one’s ability to reason and make informed judgements. Thus, even drugs that are sometimes thought to be relatively “safe,” such as alcohol, can impair mental functioning when consumed in sufficient quantities.

Second, there are the long-term effects of drug use. Many drugs have addictive effects that impair the autonomy of drug users by exerting a powerful influence over their future actions. Drug addicts who become physically and psychologically dependent on drugs have their sense of self-control diminished or even destroyed. These addictive effects can bleed into other areas of an addict’s life, affecting his ability to work, learn, care for himself, interact with others, form relationships, and may impel him to act destructively in order to fuel his addiction, thereby potentially affecting the autonomy of others besides himself. The decision to quit is often incredibly hard, for many drugs have powerful withdrawal symptoms that creates a strong temptation to relapse.

Now while there is some uncertainty over the exact long-term effects of certain drugs, the etiology and diagnosis of addiction, and the extent to which drug addicts are rendered non-rational and non-autonomous, we need our concern ourselves with such questions here. The immediate cognition-impairing effects of drug use are enough to show that recreational drug use

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14 National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014b)
15 Hall et al. (2016), Hall (2015), Volkow et al. (2014), Crane et al. (2012).
is immoral.\textsuperscript{16} Any additional long-term effects would just constitute further reasons for which to restrict drug use.

To sum up the argument: we ought to use our rational capacities to pursue good and avoid evil. Since recreational drug undermines our ability to discharge this obligation for reasons that are irrelevant to our integral well-being, I conclude that the recreational use of drugs is immoral.\textsuperscript{17}

**Justifying Legal Restrictions on Recreational Drug Use**

The same type of argument that I have given for the immorality of recreational drug use can also used to justify legal presumptions against it. Thus, we may reason as follows:

1. If the state has a core interest in promoting autonomy, then it has a core interest in restricting activities that impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the exercise of autonomy.
2. If the state has a core interest in restricting activities that impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the exercise of autonomy, then it has an interest in restricting recreational drug use.
3. The state has a core interest in promoting autonomy.
4. Therefore, the state has a core interest in restricting recreational drug use.

Premises (1) and (3) should be relatively uncontroversial. Despite the vast differences amongst those of various political persuasions, there seems to be agreement across a wide spectrum that one of the essential functions of the state is to create and sustain a society that is conducive to promoting the autonomy of its citizens.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Against this, Lovering (2015: 98) has argued that recreational drug use can actually help spark creativity and enable certain individuals to achieve things that they would not otherwise have been capable of doing. This objection fails. What is relevant is not the mere fact that individuals can achieve certain things, but how it is done. Suppose I use a Magic 8-Ball to solve an problem, and the solution provided to me via the 8-Ball turns out to be pretty good. The fact that the outcome was good does not also imply that the way it was produced was also good. In fact, it would have not been good to use the 8-Ball, as it a not truth-apt decision-making tool. This same point applies to drugs. While some may have achieved noteworthy accomplishments while high (and, I should note, people can also do some pretty stupid things while under the influence of drugs), this does not at all imply that recreational drug use promotes cognition. Bad thinking can sometimes lead to good results, and what matters as far as rationality is concerned is whether drugs promote good thinking as opposed to good results. It is clear based on their cognition-inhibiting effects that they do not.

\textsuperscript{17} This conclusion, I should note, extends to more than than just illegal drugs (which most people typically think of when they hear the word “drug”), but to any psychoactive substance, including alcohol.

\textsuperscript{18} This does not preclude the existence of prisons and other punitive institutions that work by restricting individual autonomy, for those who are guilty of wrongdoing have forfeited some of their right to live autonomously (usually by interfering with the autonomy of others). As such their autonomy is not violated when the state enacts punitive measures against them.
Premise (2) claims that recreational drug use is contrary to the state’s interest in promoting autonomy. At first blush this might seem to be a strange claim. After all, don’t many defenders of drug legalization appeal to autonomy as an argument for their position?

To see the reasoning behind this premise, we should begin by recognizing that there are a certain set of conditions that need to be met in order for persons to meaningfully use their autonomy to realize their nature or to pursue any conception of the good life — whether it be their own or one that is imposed by the state. These conditions denote structural and procedural requirements that the state needs to protect if it is to perform its basic function of respecting autonomy, whether it be via direct intervention or nonintervention. Here it might be useful to consider an analogy with free markets: If a state wants to recognize and promote free markets, then it must have an interest in safeguarding the conditions that make this institution possible. These conditions include the protection of life, freedom of exchange, contracts, and private property. Without these structural requirements in place, it would be practically impossible for a free market to flourish.

Likewise, autonomy cannot flourish if certain structural requirements are not met. One such requirement is that our exercise of autonomy flow from our rationality. Autonomous decisions can only be autonomous if they are made by an agent whose cognitive faculties are working in a certain way. Reason confers upon our actions a certain order and intelligibility that makes them explicable and coherent. It is what makes our actions ours, such that we are responsible for them. Thus, one’s ability to act autonomously is diminished or destroyed if he is unable to think coherently, deliberate, or if he is subject to overwhelming coercive forces. Indeed, actions that are not guided by reason are not, strictly speaking, actions at all, but involuntary “doings” or “happenings” that originate from something outside of one’s will. This framework of autonomy is pivotal in making sense of the legal concepts of consent and competence. Young children are unable to enter into legally binding contracts because their cognitive capacities are not developed to the point at which they are able to understand what they are entering into. Likewise, insanity defenses and the concept of being unfit to stand trial are based on the recognition that cognitively disabled or insane persons cannot be held criminally liable for their actions.

Since the state has an interest promoting and protecting the exercise of autonomy, it also has an interest in making sure that its citizens’ exercise of autonomy is unimpaired. Since proper cognitive functioning is necessary for the unimpaired exercise of autonomy, it follows that the state has an interest in promoting the proper cognitive functioning of its citizens. And since recreational drug use runs interferes with proper cognitive functioning (for reasons considered earlier), the state therefore has an interest in restricting it.

It is important to understand that the argument is not that recreational drug use should be restricted because it is unhealthy, immoral, or leads to crime. Rather it is that recreational drug use should be legally restricted because the very activity itself is incompatible with the vision of an autonomy-respecting liberal state.
A critic might object that restrictions on recreational drug use are themselves a violation of autonomy rights. Thus, Michael Huemer has argued that there is a moral right to use drugs, a right that he derives from our right of self-ownership. According to Huemer (2004: 140):

[D]rug use seems to be a paradigm case of a legitimate exercise of the right to control one’s own body. Drug consumption takes place in and immediately around the user’s own body; the salient effects occur inside the user’s body. If we consider drug use merely as altering the user’s own body and mind, it is hard to see how anyone who believes in rights at all could deny that it is protected by a right, for: (a) it is hard to see how anyone who believes in rights could deny that individuals have rights over their own bodies and minds, and (b) it is hard to see how anyone who believes in such rights could deny that drug use, considered merely as altering the user’s body and mind, is an example of the exercise of one’s rights over one’s own body and mind.

Contra Huemer, there are reasons to doubt that a moral right to use drugs can be derived from the concept of self-ownership.

First, the concept of a right is that of a claim or entitlement to some good or service. Rights exist as a “moral shield” that protects an individual as he goes about pursuing the good life, whether this be through obligating others to provide him with a good or by obligating them to mind their own business. Since the point of a right is to ensure that its bearer flourishes in his pursuit of the good, a right cannot extend to an activity that undermines his pursuit of his good. A right that performed such a function would be self-defeating. Since recreational drug does exactly that, there thus cannot be a moral right to recreational drug use. Such an activity would be self-defeating in the same way that drinking seawater to remedy thirst is counterproductive to its own goal.

Indeed, any decision to act against one’s own nature as an autonomous being for the sake of sheer enjoyment cannot be considered rational under any plausible conception of the good life. Even on an instrumentalist view of rationality, it is very bizarre to think that the state’s goal of promoting autonomy is served by allowing its citizens to render themselves non-autonomous, even if they sincerely think that doing so promotes their vision of the good life. One cannot realize his autonomy by suppressing it, any more than one can become healthy by becoming ill.

Second, assuming that the idea of self-ownership is coherent, it does not follow from the fact that one owns himself that his rights over his own body are absolute and unlimited. Many philosophical traditions have held that one has duties of self-respect to himself, such as duties to preserve one’s own health, personal integrity, and to develop one’s talents. If there are such duties—and I have argued that there are—then that would seem to count against a moral entitlement to debase one’s mental functioning. Huemer’s conception of self-ownership rests on
a controversial philosophical anthropology that needs to be justified, and he does not give us any reason why we should accept it.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that for two claims in this paper. First, that recreational drug use is immoral because it negatively interferes with our cognitive faculties, thereby interfering with our ability to discharge our most fundamental moral obligation. Second, that for these reasons, recreational drug use is incompatible with the vision of an autonomy-restricting state, and that therefore there should be a prima facie presumption in favor of legal restricting it. Nevertheless, a host of lingering questions remain. It is not my intention to evaluate the merits of our current drug laws in such a short paper, but what I have said here will be useful in framing further debate.

**References**


