

Legalization of Drugs

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1. Which drugs, if any, should be legalized?

In modern society, nowadays, there is a large debate on whether the drugs should be legalized. Under this topic, each of us has a different value, so we may not come up with the same position, but people probably just consider the word ‘legalize’ and ignore the source of this debate. What are drugs? Why is it illicit to use drugs?

First of all, what do drugs exactly mean to people? This is fundamental to understand their potential abuse.

A psychoactive substance is something that people take to change the way they feel, think or behave. Some of these substances are called drugs, and others, like alcohol and tobacco, are considered dangerous but are not called drugs. Following the significant improvement of technology, today there are in total, more than 200 different kinds of drugs¹ in the world. These can be divided into two groups based on their origin – natural and synthetic drugs. In the past, most drugs were made from plants, such as the coca bush for cocaine, opium poppies for heroin and cannabis for marijuana. Now drugs such as ecstasy or phencyclidine are produced by synthesizing various chemicals. Drugs of abuse fall into three categories according to their effect on user's

¹ Data from the website <http://www.rxlist.com/top200.htm> 22/03/2004

central nervous system (CNS): depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens, and are either ingested, inhaled, smoked, injected or snorted.

Depressants, such as heroin and barbiturates, are sedatives that act on the nervous system. They provide artificial relaxation and relief from anxiety and mental stress but tend to produce psychological dependence; withdrawal from heavy use is severe. Stimulants are agents that activate, enhance, or increase activity of the CNS. They include amphetamines and synthetic appetite suppressants such as phenmetrazine. Stimulants can give rise to symptoms suggestive of intoxication, including tachycardia, pupillary dilation, elevated blood pressure and nausea or vomiting. They can also cause violent and aggressive behaviour, agitation and impaired judgement. A full-blown delusional psychosis may occur. Hallucinogens are chemically diverse and produce profound mental changes such as euphoria, anxiety, sensory distortion, vivid hallucinations, delusion, paranoia and depression. These include mescaline and marijuana.²

Drugs abuse can be harmful in a number of ways, both through immediate effects and through damage to health over time. Such as during pregnancy, the use of drugs can threaten the health of both the mother and her baby, and it is more likely to increase the infant mortality. Of course, the effects depend on the drug and on the amount,

² Information come from http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug_demand_abuse.html 22/03/2004

method and frequency of use. Some drugs are very addictive, like heroin, while others are less so. But the upshot is that regular drug abuse or sustained exposure to a drug - even for a short period of time - can cause physiological dependence, which means that when the person stops taking drugs, they experience physical withdrawal symptoms and a craving for the drug.

According to scientists different drugs can harm human body quite differently. For instance, hallucinogens, like phencyclidine, distort users' perceptions, alter heart-rate and blood pressure and, in the long term, cause neurological disorders, depressions, anxiety, visual hallucinations and flashbacks. Cocaine and amphetamines cause tremors, headaches, hypertension and increased heart-rate. Long-term effects include nausea, insomnia, loss of weight, convulsions and depression. Heroin use initially results in nausea, slow respiration, dry skin, itching, slow speech and reflexes. Over a long period of time there is a serious risk of developing physical and psychological dependence, which can result in acute overdose and even death due to respiratory depression. Although not regarded as illicit, inhalants are widely abused³, especially by disadvantaged youth. Some of these volatile substances, which present in many products such as glue, paint, petrol and cleaning fluids, are directly toxic to the liver, kidney or heart, and some produce progressive brain degeneration.

³ Data from the website <http://www.athealth.com/Consumer/disorders/InhalantAb.html> 22/03/2004

The major problem with psychoactive drugs is that when people take them, they focus on the desired mental and emotional effects and ignore the potentially damaging physical and mental side effects that can occur. No illicit drug can be considered "safe". In one way or another, the use of psychoactive substances alters the normal functioning of the human body, and in the long run they can cause serious damage. How free drug abusers are when they have no control over their actions or reactions is debatable. What is unarguable is that by giving in to bio-chemical processes that are deviant, a drug abuser loses what makes humans admirable and unique.

When take into account of all these negative physiological health effect drugs can cause to human body, it seems that none of them should be legalized. However, apart from these, every kind of drug has its positive medical usage which can also benefit people.

Cannabis, for example, is the most familiar drug which has been widely used for medical purpose. It can be used as anti-emetic substance against nausea and vomiting in cancer chemotherapy. It can also stimulate appetite, especially in AIDS patients to counter HIV related "wasting". In addition, cannabis plant is good at lower intraocular pressure associated with glaucoma and decrease muscle spasms, for instance, associated with generalized epilepsy. Moreover, cocaine is a good local anaesthetic, in particular in surgery of the ear, nose and throat. Opium and opiates are too widely used

in medicine as analgesic – it has been described as pain killer, cough suppressant and against diarrhoea.

Not only those natural drugs, even the synthetic ones, if use within the average dose, they are also useful medicines. Such as barbiturates were formerly widely used as hypnotics and sedatives, and fentanyl are mainly used as pain killers and as anaesthetic during surgery.

Therefore, it is clear that the usage of the term ‘illicit drug’ should be avoided, as it is the manufacture, distribution and use of a drug which is illicit, but not the substance itself. In addition, the question ‘should any drugs be legalized’ has also become even intractable to deal with, so basically there is an opportunity cost within the situation, the government should make a decision based on the amount of benefit that choice can possibly bring to people.

Today drugs are a big business in the underworld; the illicit drug-trade touches millions of lives in both developed and developing countries. There are a lot of problems associated with the drug world; drug-related problems include increased rates of crime and violence, susceptibility to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, demand for treatment and emergency room visits and a breakdown in social behaviour. According to these facts, the majority believe that to legalize any drugs could be seen as maniac.

Nevertheless, The Pragmatist in August 1988 provided an article with a list of around eleven reasons why drugs should be legalized. First of all, legalizing drugs would make our streets and homes safer. When law enforcement restricts the supply of drugs, the price of drugs rises, and this directly increase the assault and burglary rate. Conversely, if drugs are legalized, their price will collapse and so will the sundry drug-related motivations to commit crime. Second, end prison overcrowding. Prison overcrowding is a serious and persistent problem. According to the 1988 Statistical Abstract of the United States, between 1979 and 1985, of 31,346 sentenced prisoners in federal institutions, drug law violators were the largest single category, 9487. If we repealed the drug laws, we could eventually bring the prison population down comfortably below the prison's rated capacity, and also instead of building more prisons, we could pocket the savings and still be safer. Third, drug legalization would free up police resources to fight non-drug related crimes against people and property. Fourth, unclog the court system. There simply aren't enough judges to handle the skyrocketing caseload. Since drug legalization the legislation would remove thousands of cases from the court dockets across the continent, enabling the remaining cases to move sooner and faster. Prosecutors would have more time to handle each case; judges could return to real law and render more thoughtful and realistic opinions. Fifth, reduce corruption of officials. The astronomical profits from the illegal drug-trade are a powerful

inducement for law enforcement agents to illegally obtain a share of the huge profits⁴.

For example, seven current or former Philadelphia police officers were indicted May 31, 1988, on charges of falsifying records of money and drugs confiscated from dealers. During a house search, one suspect turned over \$20,000 he had made from marijuana sales, but the officers gave him a receipt for \$1870. Another dealer, reports The Philadelphia Inquirer, "told the grand jury he was charged with possession of five pounds of marijuana, although 11 pounds were found in his house." Legalizing drugs would eliminate the money incentive to corruption and enable police to clean up their image. Sixth, legalization would save tax money. If we add the cost of trying and incarcerating users, traffickers, and those who commit crime to pay for their drugs, the tab runs well above \$10 billion annually. And the government could use this money to benefit the society. Seventh, legalized drugs would cripple organized crime. Members of organized crime, particularly at the top, stand to lose the most from legalizing the drug trade. Eighth, legal drugs would be safer; legalization is a consumer protection issue. Because "controlled substances" are illegal, the drug-trade today lacks many of the consumer safety features common to other markets: instruction sheets, warning labels, product quality control and manufacturer accountability; forcing products underground makes those products, including drugs, more dangerous than if the products were manufactured by reputable firms. After legalization, pharmaceutical

⁴ Information provided on the website <http://www.bmstahoe.com/Drugs/legaldrugs.htm> 22/03/2004

companies could guard against liability suits with better information and more reliable products. As information is the best protection against the potential hazards of drugs or any other product, legalizing drugs would promote consumer health and safety. The ninth reason is that legalization would slow the spread of AIDS and other diseases. Because intravenous drug users inject heroin, for example, with hypodermic needles, access to needles is restricted. The shortage of needles causes users to share, if one has infected blood and some enters the needle as it is pulled out, the next user may shoot the infectious agent directly into his own bloodstream. So legal heroin would enable customer to get the same effect from more hygienic methods, it could then slowing the spread of AIDS. Tenth, legalization would halt the erosion of other civil liberties. Hundreds of government agencies and corporations have used the alleged cost of illegal drugs as an excuse to test their employees for drug usage. For example, tests urine for levels of sugar or caffeine as a requirement for employment or grounds for dismissal. And finally, legalization would stabilize foreign countries and make them safer for residents and travellers.

Even though these reasons sound quite reasonable, it still forgot to consider some points, such as children and the harms by drugs abuse. As most drugs like heroin are very addictive, when the user reaches a certain stage, he will not get satisfaction within the suggested dosage. But above the average dose can be very harmful to human body

especially to children. So how can we protect children from using drugs in the first place, how can we let them to say 'NO' to drugs? The facts are that kids are much more likely to say 'YES' to legal drugs and 'NO' to illegal drugs. Take an example of 'alcohol' which is harmful but legal, it will cause the intoxication of close to 40 percent of high school seniors as often as every two weeks, but illegal drugs are used by 25 percent of seniors. Despite problems with prohibition, the fact is that when alcohol was against the law in the USA, usage declined to a third or fourth of its former level. And it is no coincidence that incidence of cirrhosis of the liver fell by half. Laws and sanctions do have an effect on human behavior. In the decade before Prohibition went into effect in 1920, alcohol consumption in the United States averaged 2.6 gallons per person per year. It fell to 0.173 gallons during the Prohibition decade, doubled to 1.5 gallons in the decade after repeal and is back to 2.6 gallons. Refer to the failure at keeping alcohol from children, what the consequence going to be if cocaine becomes legal.

After considered all the factors above, I have made a conclusion – drugs can not be legalized wholly, drugs can not stay illegalized wholly either. So why not consider putting a restriction on both sides? According to the origin of different drugs, natural ones seem less harmful than the synthetic ones, so the synthetic drugs should definitely stay illegalized, but legalized the natural drugs. However, the situation can not be

changed just within a second, so the government could first try with cannabis. If this can help to reduce the crime rate and to show its merit is greater than demerit, then the government can possibly go on to the next step; if not, the legalization process must be stopped immediately. Furthermore, putting an age limitation is also a good idea, this at least at some point can restrict youths from purchasing drugs.

Drugs are products, like alcohol in the 1920s, that people want and will ignore the authorities to obtain. Nothing will stop the desire for any product that people want. Since lots of people have tried to prohibit drugs but unsuccessful, the only thing we can do now is try to find out a middle course to mitigate this problem. And this is my personal suggestion of the middle course.

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