

Changing Views of Drugs and Consciousness

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In the beginning of this semester, especially after the first class¹, I completely bought into the idea of there being no such thing as addiction; that addiction is a behavior and a behavior cannot be a disease. I also began to believe that there was no such thing as mental illness; that it too was a behavior and not a disease. However, as the semester progressed and I tried to reconcile the ideas as they apply to my life, I could not bring myself to believe that there was no such thing as mental illness. And although I do not believe that mental illness is a disease, per se, there is definitely something mentally wrong with certain people. Perhaps the reason that mental illness and disease are associated by health care professionals is because both appear to be involuntary. However, whereas behavior due to mental illness can be changed by identifying the problem and addressing it, disease cannot be so easily dismissed. Not that I am implying that mental problems are easy to change, but I believe that they are changeable.

Being raised the way I was, by my mother who has struggled with mental illness for her entire life, and seeing how difficult it was and is for her to change her mindset and her behavior, which is a hard thing for most people to do, I have to believe that either there is such a thing as mental illness, or there must be some subconscious block that a person cannot seem to bypass in order to change their behavior, which I believe would also qualify as mental illness. Obviously,

¹ Drugs, Consciousness and Human Fulfillment

something is very wrong with the way certain people process environmental signals and it is clear that they need some type of help.

Although I no longer believe that psychologists are the primary answer for such help, as I now know that religion, meditation, exercise, and various other activities are helpful in at least aiding depression; I see psychology as a viable alternative for gaining introspection into one's life. I strongly believe that although psychology may not help everyone, it does help some people, and those people cannot go unaccounted for when determining the usefulness of psychological alternatives such as counseling, psychotherapy, and the like. However, the part of psychology that I disagree with most is that it seems that whenever anyone goes into therapy (from both my mother's and my own experience), psychologists have a way of implying that the reason for a given problem is based on an experience one has had and the person responsible for the experience is to blame. Thus, it seems that as a way of dealing with one's problems, people are taught to simply blame someone else for it, take no responsibility for their own actions or reactions, and "learn" to "forgive" that person in order to move on. It is still unclear to me how that is all supposed to work. Personally, I think people should take responsibility for their own behavior, stop blaming everyone else, realize that they have a problem, deal with it and move on.

However, part of the reason I believe that there must be such a thing as mental illness or the like is because unlike self inflicted behaviors, such as smoking, using drugs, or drinking alcohol, a person has little control over how they respond to things, such as a traumatic experience. This is especially true when the person is unaware of their behavior, which many people are. It is also difficult to point out a person's self destructive or abnormal behavior to them. They usually deny that there is a problem, deny that they have control over it and that it's just the way they are, or go the other direction and claim that they have it under control.

The one thing that has changed since the beginning of the semester is my views on alcohol, drugs, smoking and other “bad” or illegal habits in relation to addiction. After the in class discussion on the classifications of addictions and behaviors, my entire point of view changed. Beginning in fifth grade, educators teach children that drugs are addictive; if you drink too much, it is called alcoholism; if you try smoking cigarettes, you will get hooked and become addicted; and that if you try drugs, you will not only become addicted, but most likely die because of it. Facilitation of this type of thinking is promulgated until graduation and usually beyond. Just last semester, I had a class with Professor Lucas who instructed us on the differences between drug use, abuse and addiction; the primary difference being its effects on one’s life and the ability of the person to function productively in society. This came as a surprise because I thought there was some proven physiological difference between the three. For example, legally, the difference between use and abuse is as simple as being arrested.

Another thing that facilitated the belief in this ideology was that I completely believed that the reason why I smoke is because I cannot help it, because I am addicted, and because I was “hooked” since my first puff. However, that simply cannot be true. It is I that buys the cigarettes. It is I that opens the pack. And it is I that lights up. Before smoking, my body had no need of cigarettes, so it is difficult to believe that a person can develop a dependency on something their body does not need. It was simply easier to blame my friend who left her cigarettes at my house all those years ago, as well as the retailers, and manufacturers for developing a product designed to get you “addicted” and take your money. I now realize that I chose to smoke and the only way to quit is to choose not to smoke. Not only did I realize that I chose to smoke, but that I smoke because I like it, not because I am addicted.

In addition to the changes of view this class has had on my views of addiction, it has also expanded my knowledge of consciousness. It has occurred to me that people generally do not think about how experiences affect them; how people build defenses in response to experiences as they get older. And after speaking to a few people about their religions (Catholicism, Buddhism, Christianity, etc.), I realized that many people blindly believe in their chosen religions, especially the ones that went to religious schools. They are taught to believe in certain tenets and to follow those tenets so that they will either have a happier after-life, or so that they will reach enlightenment and not have to be reborn.

I completely agree that the primary connection all religions have in common is the search for happiness, however, I fail to see how all religions are targeted at searching for truth. If the search for truth is the target of religion in order to facilitate happiness, then I cannot understand how people would believe in any one religion at all. This is primarily because no one knows which religion is the “right” religion; and there is no way of knowing which religion preaches the truth about how man came to be (evolution theory v. Garden of Eden theology). If one does not know the truth of how man came to be, and there is no way to know, then blindly following a certain religion seems like an act of self defeat if the purpose is finding truth. I believe that if happiness is sought by way of truth, people should simply believe in truth, not religion. The difference is that although no one knows what the truth is, no one knows which religion is the “true” religion, if there is such a thing; thus, believing in the truth would set a person further along the road to happiness. One thing I have learned in this class is that there is a difference between believing in truth and knowing the truth. For me, knowing the truth is not as important as believing that there is truth. Perhaps that is why most people are unhappy with their religions.

Perhaps people are so preoccupied with knowing what specific truths are that they miss the big picture.

In addition to expanding my view of religion, I found the readings, “The Denial of Death” and “The Happiness Project,” enlightening. For the first time, I felt that someone somewhere understood me. We are all dying, nothing is permanent, and everything is transitory. We are all suffering and we are all alone. However, in “The Denial of Death,” it implies that in order to be happy, one must face the truth about life and about themselves. However, it also implies that the truth may be something that the person does not like and could cause them more suffering. Personally, I found much of the reasoning to be circular, although it did give me some tools to better understand myself.

For me, I think this class came along at a time when I needed it most. I think the ideas require a certain maturity that is only attained with age. If anyone had attempted to teach me any of the concepts in this class any earlier, I do not believe I would have been receptive to the alternative point of views set forth. It has made me realize, even more now, that every thing is multifaceted; that every point of view is simply one amongst many. The way things are presented to children in an overly simplified fashion, may be an attempt at protecting them, however, from what, I do not know. I have realized that everything in grade school, for me at least, was presented in such a way to impede thought. One side is presented and we are taught to believe it simply because others believe it, because the teacher says so. We are taught to be peripheral route processors, so it comes as no surprise that there are many people out there who believe things that lack evidence, especially when it comes to religion.

Finally, this class has made me realize just how un-free we really are, even over our own bodies. Because of globalization and the far reach of the US, it no longer matters what country

one lives in, we all seem to be subject to the same law, someone else's. I had always believed that people had control over their body, their minds, and their possessions. I no longer believe that is so. I now see drug regulation and the classification of certain characteristics as mental illness, simply as another way for government to intrude upon a person's free will. Specifically in relation to drug regulation, I fully understand that much of was enacted in response to the idea of protecting citizens and partially because many people that used drugs sought the government's aid when they got sick, which cost the government a lot of money. However, the drug war probably costs even more, with the cost of an individual's liberty and choice over how they treat their bodies being the highest cost of all. Although I can understand legislation enacting laws to protect us from each other, but to protect us from ourselves is certainly crossing the line. I realize now that most people are unaware, as I once was, of the extent to which we are all controlled by the law and how entrapped are minds are by societal beliefs and norms.

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