

As the American President Jimmy Carter put it, “Penalties for possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself”. I infer that cannabis prohibition is morally unjustified.

# Philosophers stoned

WHAT PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS ARE RAISED BY CANNABIS? DALE JACQUETTE HAS THE STRAIGHT DOPE.

**T**he fact is surprising, when you think about it. Why have philosophers not had more to say about the phenomenology and social, political, legal, economic, and medical aspects of cannabis? Plato wrote his dialogue *Symposium* about an after-theatre drinking party in ancient Athens, where Socrates and his friends discourse about the nature of love. But no one in almost 2,500 years of Western philosophy has had much if anything to say about getting high. Philosophers, like approximately one out of three citizens in developed societies,

presumably have tried marijuana, and some of them must regularly smoke it, just as they might enjoy the occasional bottle of wine. Are such indulgences so shameful for intellectuals, either intrinsically, or perhaps because they are illegal, that virtually no one in the philosophical community has been moved to remark at length on the psychology, pharmacology and sociology of cannabis intoxication?

Sensing a gap in current discussions of applied popular philosophy, I recently edited a book on the subject. It appeared under what for my tastes is the excessively provocative title, *Cannabis – Philosophy for Everyone: What Were We Just Talking About?* This was not my title, which was morphed by the editorial hierarchy at the press from its original mellifluous (I thought) and more easily parsed

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*Cannabis & Philosophy: What Were We Just Talking About?* For the record, I do not imagine that either cannabis or philosophy is literally for everyone. Cannabis is certainly not for children, studies show, particularly under the age of 15, nor for the psychically challenged, and I certainly do not advocate a cannabis-philosophy (whatever that would be) for everyone (no less). *Philosophy for Everyone* is instead the title of the *series* in which the book appears, a title that has wandered its way uninvited into the *book* title, ostensibly for the sake of distinguishing this set of books from other philosophy and popular culture series. There have already come to light such companion volumes as *Porn – Philosophy for Everyone: How to Think With Kink*, and *Christmas – Philosophy for Everyone: Better Than a Lump of Coal*, even though one hopes it

is obvious once again that not everyone stands in need of either a Porn – or a Christmas – philosophy. Given the potential for misunderstanding my purposes inherent in the book’s bewildering title, I propose to air a few thoughts on the project and my motivations for editing a book on the relation between philosophy and, as I see it, the relatively innocent pleasures of hashish.

The gratification I speak of is already known to many from first-hand experience. The philosophical challenge is to try to put the experience into words in a descriptive psychology or phenomenology. What is it like to be high? How is the sensation of being high on cannabis different from normal straight consciousness? It is expedient but philosophically unhelpful to reply, “get high and



find out". There is a great difference between, on the one hand, *having an experience* and knowing firsthand what the words for such experiences attempt to name and describe, and on the other, *understanding* the internal structures and qualitative aspects of such experiences as phenomenology described by expert investigators. The phenomenology of getting high should be no different in this regard from that of pain or perception. We must nevertheless turn to poets like Baudelaire, Allen Ginsberg, and Paul Bowles for insights where philosophers have dared to say so little. One might conclude they have never actually heard of the stuff.

As for the social-economic-political-legal, medical, and other aspects of cannabis consumption, the whole topic would be altogether philosophically trivial and otherwise unworthy of philosophical attention, if it were not for the fact that cannabis is illegal. If I were prepared to say anything about the current state of cannabis worldwide, it would be that prohibition deprives us of the opportunity to develop mature attitudes and wise, scientifically-informed policies about recreational and other uses of mildly psychoactive hedonistic substances, as we have done in the case of many other things that are significantly less good for the user and society at large.

At the risk of being identified forever after in my philosophical career as some kind of a pothead, I undertook to edit the book because of two converging interests. And since this little project has managed to attract more attention in under eight weeks than almost three decades of what I consider to be solid work in

philosophical logic and analytic metaphysics, I feel compelled to say something about how the book came about and what my relation to the volume has been.

First, the topic in very general terms fits into a research sideline that I have cultivated over the last several years in applied ethics. Editing the cannabis collection is an episode in my efforts to make philosophy relevant to contemporary social concerns. The progression is this. I wrote a short paper on the abortion controversy, "Two Kinds of Potentiality: A Critique of McGinn on the Ethics of Abortion". The essay found its way into a packet of supporting documents presented before the UK House of Commons several years ago. I always wondered whether anyone there actually read it, and if so what they might have made of it, and whether it had any impact on the resolution or legislation they were considering – probably I will never know.

During the George W. Bush administration, while I was still living in the US, when the Congress, White House and Supreme Court all seemed to have an unhealthily impacted singleness of political perspective, I turned to the fourth estate and published a book on *Journalistic Ethics: Moral Responsibility in the Media*.

This was followed in my applied ethics spree by *Dialogues on the Ethics of Capital Punishment*, in which first two and eventually three characters discuss the best arguments for and against the death penalty. To me, it still seems that an edited book on cannabis and philosophy is the natural continuation of my explorations of what philosophy might usefully have to say about subjects outside my normal

comfort zone in the abstract realms of symbolic logic and conceptual analysis.

Second, I have not wholeheartedly embraced, but nor have I shunned or disparaged, recent interest in joining philosophy with specialised topics in popular culture. Some of these efforts are patently more successful than others, but the idea itself of offering philosophers an opportunity to say what they think about Woody Allen or Buffy the vampire slayer at the least does no harm, and such books may interest a few people in philosophy who would otherwise not think of the invisible thinkers among them in contemporary society, cloistered primarily in the ivy-covered walls of universities.

I wrote an essay on “Zombie Gladiators” for a collection on the undead and philosophy, one on “Satan Lord of Darkness in South Park Cosmology” for a South Park volume, another titled “Thirst for Authenticity: An Aesthetics of the Brewer’s Art” for a book exploring beer and philosophy, and, for a forthcoming edition, a pocket companion on Holden Caulfield’s feelings of disgust in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The beer essay got a bit of notice, and soon it came about that I was asked by the series editor in which that book appeared to consider editing a compilation of essays for a new sequel series. My choices at the time, as I recall, were *Coffee and Philosophy*, *Chocolate and Philosophy*, or *Cannabis and Philosophy*. Hmmm.

I went instinctively for the cannabis volume, again for a variety of reasons. I drink only a daily espresso and an occasional macchiato, and I’m no gourmand of coffee generally, so I could not get particularly excited about the first choice. The same for chocolate, much as I love the stuff, which I am trying more and more to avoid when I can possibly help it, and when my resolve is not overruled by my natural inclination toward runaway weakness of will. With the legal drugs, caffeine and anandamide, having gone by the board (the latter psychoactive substance found in chocolate, incidentally, and also manufactured by the brain as an endogenous cannabinoid), the process of elimination left only the fragrant cane, as social chronicler Martin Booth brilliantly refers to it in his admirable study, *Cannabis: A History*. I understood at once that if any of these three books was going to reach an audience for philosophy outside the lecture hall, and make a little money besides, it would undoubtedly be a book on dope.

I had to reach back to my college days of carefree toking, and make up a few things besides, to fill out my front-matter and my own contribution with a little colour. To be frank, invoking Bertrand Russell’s famous distinction, I know a good deal more about cannabis by description than acquaintance. These days, more’s the pity, I simply don’t have the time or opportunity for these kinds of synaptic holidays. Nor do I fancy the legal risks involved. ➤➤



Nevertheless, I had a marvellous time producing the collection, tongue in cheek, as usual, and allowing as many true words as possible to be spoken in jest. The book features a thoughtful Foreword by *High Times* magazine associate editor Rick Cusick, and essays by sixteen authors, philosophers, physicians,

## Cannabis prohibition is morally unjustified

pharmacologists, social theorists, and literary and religious scholars, in sections on “Cannabis Phenomenology”, “Marijuana and Spiritual Enlightenment”, “Creatively High”, “Psycho-Sociological Dimensions of Cannabis Culture”, and “Cannabis Ethics and Politics”. Buy several copies now.

Whatever entertainment value the resulting book might contain, I am as serious about what I have to say about cannabis as I am, for example, about identity conditions for nonexistent objects and the intensionality – extensionality conflict in contemporary philosophical logic and semantics. Or, say, as I am about the problems of abortion, freedom of the press, or capital punishment. Part of what I have learned by description about cannabis, and that I have tried to communicate in my contributions to the book, is that it has been around since long before recorded human history.

Ancient peoples knew of its effects in many cultures and cultivated the plant for its medicinal and psychoactive virtues. They must have been familiar with its vices too. Whether we acknowledge the fact or not, cannabis is

deeply ingrained in the human experience and in our very coevolutionary biology.

If we ask what cannabis can do for philosophy, on the contrary, I think that the disappointing answer is – not very much. It is a well-worn cliché that the halo of brilliance surrounding our thinking when we are high does not generally stand the test of critical evaluation in the sober aftermath. I do not personally believe that using cannabis can enhance philosophical creativity or produce insights or ideas, let alone good philosophical solutions to important philosophical problems that would not otherwise occur to a philosopher straight. Progress in philosophy requires clear memory, astute critical faculties, and the ability to draw fine-grained distinctions, together with the patience and discipline to work these things out with the necessary circumspection and care. As with most psychoactive substances, the drug gives and takes.

Some cannabis users speak of lethargy and a loss of ambition resulting from prolonged usage, which would obviously be incompatible over the long run with the serious pursuit of philosophy. Whether cannabis gives back more than it takes – whether its downside justifies philosophers getting high, or could potentially do so were it to become legalised and more widely available for responsible adults – is perhaps the main point of philosophical intrigue.

As a philosopher, I evaluate the good and bad in arguments for a living. In this professional vocation, just as I have yet to encounter a sound argument for daylight savings time, I can equally report that I have yet to encounter a sound argument for perpetuating *status quo* anti-cannabis legislation and enforcement. Where

scientific standoffs on social policy exist, and where, as the American President Jimmy Carter succinctly put the matter, in his Address to Congress 1977, “penalties for possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself”, I infer that cannabis prohibition, whether or not one personally has any interest in using the substance, is morally unjustified. Many thousands of lives have nevertheless been ruined by an outdated, scientifically uninformed and socially regressive policy, where, as I recently learned in conducting research for the book, in 2008, one person in the United States is apprehended on a marijuana possession or use charge every thirty-eight seconds. Country-western singer, songwriter, and marijuana advocate Willie Nelson just got busted in Texas in a high-profile arrest, but how many friends and relatives, people we may know lacking Willie’s access to competent legal counsel, are subject to the same inconvenience for the sake of copping a little high?

Activism in support of legalisation has nevertheless been sluggish and ineffective, and many myths and misunderstandings about cannabis persist. California voters had the opportunity on the 2 November 2010 election ballot to vote on the legalisation of cannabis, and they turned the measure down. So did Swiss voters in November 2008 on a nation-wide initiative referendum in my newly adopted expat homeland. None of this stops people wanting to smoke pot or enjoying the particular organically chemically altered state of consciousness that the drug affords. Any and every one in virtually every country in the world, the Netherlands and a handful of others notably

excepted, can in principle go to jail and have their property confiscated, depending on local laws, for infringing against anti-cannabis prohibition. The fact that cannabis is illegal is a very good reason not to smoke it, but what is a good reason for its being illegal?

What I would mostly like to see – after all the young people who have been recklessly jailed on cannabis possession for lightly experimenting with their consciousnesses are released from dangerous penal confinement and their criminal records expunged, with compensation for their losses in the worst cases – is for responsible, mature adults to try to see cannabis for what it is.

The most dangerous drug I have ever personally ingested, but that I am legally permitted to consume almost every day to whatever extent I choose, is alcohol. I would not dream of returning to the disastrous days of prohibition in the United States during the Roaring Twenties on a worldwide basis for the sake of avoiding alcohol’s addictive and negative behavioural consequences. What I would prefer is for thinking persons to lead the way in promoting the progress of a humane and mature scientific perspective on cannabis.

We should recognise that cannabis, compared with legal psychoactive substances like alcohol and tobacco, is a relatively harmless and potentially psychologically, medically and spiritually beneficial “soft” drug. Its use is widespread and well-regarded in our cultural history. It’s the substance of choice for increasing numbers of people who find getting high pleasurable and who are willing to defy the law almost everywhere in the world for something they consider their moral right to enjoy.