

Morality and Smoking

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Introduction

In this discussion I plan to focus on whether smoking can be morally unobjectionable, something some persons morally may do or ought to refrain from. The issue of whether what is morally objectionable ought also be banned by law is one of political theory, not of ethics per se.¹

As to whether smoking is morally unobjectionable views have varied from one extreme to the opposite. Ayn Rand, in her best selling and influential novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, praised the symbolic significance of smoking cigarettes. It is supposed to signify the power human beings have over nature. One character says, "I like to think of fire held in a man's hand. Fire, a dangerous force, tamed at his fingertips. . . I wonder what great things have come from such hours. When a man thinks, there is a spot of fire alive in his mind--and it is proper that he should have the burning point of a cigarette as his one expression."²

On the other hand there are those who not only object to smoking cigarettes and consider it morally wrong to light up but believe that the government ought to prohibit smoking. As a posting on one anti-smoking web site states, "We think smoking is too wide spread vice and too little things have been told about danger and harm of smoking."³ Teens these days are given tickets in certain states for smoking cigarettes on public sidewalks and adults are prohibited from smoking in private restaurants, bowling alleys and other commercial places! But more importantly, many consider smoking morally wrong and they ostracize smokers not only because they may find the activity nauseating, with dangerous side effects, but because they deem it a private vice.

The gist of what I will defend is this: Adult human beings are not bound by any categorical imperative to refrain from smoking despite the evident health hazards of the practice because health, though vital, is by no means most important in human living. Flourishing as a human individual is most important.

Moral Objectivism and Pluralism

Most of us often make ethical, political, and aesthetic claims,⁴ yet many doubt that such claims can be true. Instead, such claims are said--by some of the most prominent figures in the social sciences and philosophy--to be "subjective" or "relative" or even beyond the pale of reason. Political economist Milton Friedman, for example, states that "of course, 'bad' and

‘good’ people may be the same people, depending on who is judging them,”⁵ and philosopher Richard Rorty tells us that concerning political principles, “we cannot say that democratic institutions reflect a moral reality and that tyrannical regimes do not reflect one, that tyrannies get something wrong that democratic societies get right.”⁶

This view of subjective truth is widespread,⁷ even as nearly universal agreement can be found regarding some norms. People in different cultures and at different periods of history clearly treat some of them as “objective”; that is, they think that the truth of such claims could be known.⁸ For example, it is nearly universally agreed that parents ought to rear their children so as to ready them for adulthood; that life-preserving actions are superior to life-destroying ones, at least in nonextraordinary circumstances; and even that one ought to stay out of the way of angry beasts and powerful, angry persons.⁹ I say “nearly” only to make room for cases where someone refuses to ascent to the truth of such claims because, for example, he or she wishes to disguise a failing or is airing a wholly contrarian philosophical position.¹⁰ In the main, however, such claims, as well as many others, are treated as if they were true, at least for specific circumstances involving particular persons and their choices.¹¹

While I will not defend the following view in detail here, I wish to suggest that objective ethical claims appear to be subjective because, briefly, ethical claims pertain to how individual human beings ought to act, and that, in turn, depends to a considerable extent on who these individuals and their particular circumstances are. Only at the most fundamental level--vis-à-vis some very rare universal considerations--can we expect what is objective to be also universally applicable. As far as I can assess this, the best candidate for such a universal imperative is “One ought to think, be thoughtful, use one’s mind conscientiously. Wittgenstein, for example, makes the point—one many other philosophers, from Socrates, Aristotle, Spinoza to Kant and Rand have made, that it is vigilant thinking that makes someone a good human being. He says, in a letter to Paul Engelmann, “I work diligently enough but wish that I were better and wiser. And these two things are the same.”¹²

In some respects this idea is close to the way health-related claims appear subjective. Even though some basic claim(s) concerning human health is universally applicable, more often we face claims made in the discipline that apply to people in terms of their special or even unique situations.¹³

The Moral Imperative to Care for one’s Health

In the context of the ethics of virtue, there is an imperative to care for one’s health as well as other matters of benefit to oneself. The moral virtue

of prudence supports this unequivocally. The exception would be if some value, say the spiritual life or preparing for the life hereafter, requires that prudence vis-à-vis one's mundane existence be superseded by prudence vis-à-vis such an overriding value. Another sort of exception would be if some higher virtue might override prudence, such as courage or justice.

Is there some value pertaining to one's mundane life--leaving aside now the troublesome matter of whether an afterlife or purely spiritual life could be shown to be of value to human beings--that might require or at least permit neglecting one's health?

We can consider some examples to show that this is not an implausible suggestion. Athletics, sports, the arts, politics and adventure all may be values in support of which health might not be of primary value for a human being. It is, after all, not an unfamiliar idea that some good persons have pursued the goals of such ways of life in the face of very serious risks to their health, even their sheer lives. A dedicated mountain climber, race car driver, soldier and movie stunt person often takes such risks and is sometimes admired for it.

It perhaps strains credibility to compare smoking cigarettes to risking one's health for some higher purpose. Yet, it is not uncommon for people to take reasonably serious health risks in order to celebrate a birthday, attend a sports event or go to the barber shop. Most such activities involve driving a car, and accidents are always possible. Individuals with health problems routinely take risks to take part in family and fraternal celebrations.

Human beings would have to routinely live morally disreputable lives if we were to consider all this risk taking to be morally objectionable. But we recognize that we are not responsible merely to live, but to live well, to flourish. Flourishing, moreover, requires that different people will adopt different ways of life. This is what Isaiah Berlin meant when he said that the values of human life are both objective and not universalizable. And while I do not go so far as to maintain, mostly because of certain metaphysical considerations Berlin did not seem to fully appreciate, that the plurality of values often lands us with contradictory commitments, I would wish to argue that the diverse contexts of judgment created by our individual circumstances will often result in moral assessments that are by no means universal imperatives.

Integrity and Moderation

Although certain moral theories do not regard the virtues as prime candidates for guidelines to moral excellence, it is still arguable that a morally good life is a virtuous life. This means that we would live best not by

following rigid rules, but by habituating ourselves to practice virtues such as honesty, courage, prudence, generosity, and, yes, moderation.

What makes such an approach to morality different from and more realistic than a system of rules is a kind of economization. Although human beings are rational agents in that they guide their actions with theories, we are not the perpetual calculators that rule-driven moral systems depict.

Instead it is more plausible to view morality more on the analogy of a skill, such as driving or carpentry or being a business executive. In all these endeavors human beings must initially acquire some measure of proficiency by means of concentration and focus, only to have that proficiency turn into what we might refer to as second nature. And while our conduct should always be monitored and supervised by reason, conduct itself is not the product of constant calculation or cost-benefit analysis. Rather we gain confidence in the principles that become our virtues, even though we have the added responsibility to make sure that they are used in proper measure and we do not become fanatical about any of them as we use them to guide us in our lives.

Pleasures and Moderation

Barring the prospect that a morality of self-denial, such as championed (on metaethically highly dubious grounds) by Peter Singer and Peter Unger¹⁴ (on grounds that none of us is morally right to enjoy life too much if there are others who are destitute), as well some religions (on the more general grounds that a life of mundane indulgence distracts from our spiritual potential), is sound, it is a feature of the moral life for human beings to develop oneself in all benign respects, major and minor. According to an ethics of self-actualization, happiness requires that we cultivate our capacities for excellence. Excellence requires that we have serious purposes in life--that we become artists, merchants, parents, friends, athletes, citizens, educators, and so forth. But there is also a dimension of self-development, as Aristotle noted long ago, that pays heed to pleasures. To put the matter bluntly, for some people there is pleasure that comes from smoking--as from drinking, gourmet eating, exotic travel, entertainment and so forth. All these may be enjoyed well or badly, moderately or immoderately. There is nothing blameworthy about the sensible and moderate enjoyment of life and there is no honest way of using these arguments to rationalize senseless and immoderate conduct.

The issue is whether morality makes room for smoking or other possibly idiosyncratic pleasures in life that may be good for some but bad for others. What I have been proposing calls attention to the fact that there is a difference between imperatives about, for example, smoking as far as they

concern an opera singer or frequent lecturer versus someone who writes novels, directs movies, studies the structure of the atom or does accounting for a career.

Of course when we turn to the social dimensions of smoking, other variables, such as whether one has people in one's home who are sensitive to the irritation smoke can produce for some person or who have emphysema, would enter the discussion. I have dealt elsewhere with some of these issues.¹⁵ For present purposes, however, the issue is whether as a matter of one's private conduct smoking could be morally justified.

Bad Smoking, Whose Fault?

Let me turn briefly to cases of bad smoking--people who would not smoke or who smoke in immoderation. The issue here is not simply what is wrong and who is at fault but also whether fault can be ascribed at all and to whom it may be assigned. First of all, the issue arises of who is responsible for the behavior in question?

There has been an attempt on the part of many--including legal authorities and some victims of smoking related ailments who have sued tobacco companies--to blame the tobacco company executives for ill effects smokers experience from smoking. The issue goes back to one frequently discussed in connection with advertising.

The most prominent advocate of the idea that the evil that follows encounters with advertisements for any product or service, including smoking, has been John Kenneth Galbraith. In his book, *The Affluent Society*,¹⁶ he advanced the view that advertisers create a dependence effect by producing desires in potential consumers who then become hooked on what is being sold to them. This is especially true in the case of products and services that are by many experts considered to be addictive. Thus, if smokers, especially, cannot help themselves in the face of the "pressure" exerted on them by advertisements by tobacco companies, aren't the executives at least morally--but perhaps also legally--guilty of causing their ailments?

Let me for now ignore the reply to Galbraith given by F. A. Hayek, who did not so much deny that advertising creates desires but did undermine the claim that we are helpless in the face of this. (He argued that all creative activity by human beings produces desires in us but we are able to determine which desires to satisfy, which to ignore or reject.¹⁷) What is more important for my purposes here is that the Galbraithian thesis of how potential consumers are caused to depend on products and services being advertised to them has within it an implicit determinism that can then be applied equally to the tobacco executives.

Are we, in other words, going to blame company executives for causing people's smoking habits, only to have these executives defend themselves by pleading that they were, of course, helpless in the face of their upbringing--for example, when they went to college and took classes in marketing, advertising, and sales? If potential consumers are victims of manipulation, were not arguably the executives brainwashed into peddling their tobacco wares? So they had no control about becoming tobacco and other product peddlers, so they cannot be blamed either. And their teachers, too, went to various universities and learned how to teach their own students effectively, so they would do well at their professions. And so on and so forth--everyone is a victim of someone else's influence, ad infinitum. Which is to say, in the end none of us is responsible for anything and all the moral blaming is pointless: *que sera, sera*.

Advertising and Selling Cigarettes

In this discussion I will discount the determinist thesis that leaves no room for moral praise or blame or, more importantly, for moral responsibility, including in the matter of whether one smokes or not and whether to advertise and sell tobacco products.

It is generally understood that to advertise and sell hard drugs, ones that are either immediately very dangerous to--or produce a desire for continued use that is eventually very dangerous to--anyone's health is morally wrong. It is on par with encouraging some innocent person with much to live for to commit suicide. This is especially morally objectionable when directed at young persons not generally deemed capable of deciding for themselves. Even to adults it should not be done for it is a kind of support for something they should not do, especially when clothed in the normal garb of advertising, namely, gimmickry, celebrity endorsement, and the bias that all promotional activity contains.

Is the advertising and selling of cigarettes on par with the advertising and selling of hard drugs or similarly immediately dangerous or addictive and eventually very dangerous drugs? If everyone were susceptible to only heavy smoking or addiction to heavy smoking, advertising and selling tobacco products would be (nearly categorically) morally objectionable. If, however, this is not so, then advertising and selling tobacco products is not different from advertising motorcycles, skiing equipment, and mountain climbing gear.

All this, however, presupposes that the advertising and selling involved do not distort the facts about the products involved. For example, if there are factors about smoking that aren't generally known but would be deemed by reasonable persons to be dangerous, advertising and selling to-

bacco products would be unequivocally morally objectionable. It would amount to deception and perhaps even fraud. If, however, the hazards of the product are widely known, so that reasonable persons could not be misled by any biased promotional efforts, the advertising and selling would not be objectionable. Nor would it be morally objectionable to advertise and sell tobacco products if their danger to (some) persons would be made evident in the process.¹⁸ The reason is that individuals are responsible to attempt to earn their living, including by advertising and selling products that may only be of real value only to a few persons, while others being appealed to with the pitch are responsible to determine what they ought to consume or use that is available for sale in the market place.

Health and the Human Good

I wish to return here to the point hinted at before, namely, that health is really not all there is to human life. A piece in *The New Republic*¹⁹ makes the point beautifully--smoking has been with us way before advertising made its marketing so visible. Millions choose to smoke not without awareness that it is dangerous to their health (meaning it is going to reduce their lives by an average of 2.2 years).

There are purely recreational smoker who will light up maybe once a day, with a cup of espresso, so clearly addiction, assuming that it is a genuine phenomenon,²⁰ is not a universal reaction to taking up the practice. People quit all the time, so tobacco is not for everyone a special kind of commodity with which people who try it necessarily endanger their health.

Parental Responsibility and Smoking

Perhaps one of the most explosive public issues, with distinct moral dimensions, is what parents are responsible for in their children's behavior, including health-impeding ones such as smoking, drinking, and other matters. Although in some states it is illegal for those under 18 to smoke in public, never mind what the parents' views are on the matter, we can consider the issue apart from this fact of the law.

Once again the issue is one of context, not of categorical moral principles. Parents often rightfully expose their children to hazards that are as great if not greater than exposing them to various health hazards. They take them on long weekend vacations when the risk of automobile crashes are greatest. They let them swim in the ocean, go rafting in roaring Colorado rivers, and encourage them to take part in sports that sometimes cause serious injuries, even deaths.

Of course, many of these practices can be understood as quite justifiable, consider the importance of the goals they serve to achieve. Visiting grandparents or other family on vacations, building character through sports

and so forth can all be seen as not only permissible but valuable aspects of child raising. Can one say the same thing about allowing one's children to smoke, drink, even use some narcotics (apart from their sometimes being illegal)?

We might start addressing this issue by noting that certainly people in various cultures around the globe bring up their children differently, including allowing them to smoke, drink and otherwise indulge, at least in moderation. Hungarian children routinely drink wine at the dinner table when they are only 8 years old. And that is but a rather mild instance of the diversity involving the raising of children around the world. It would be very difficult to argue that in each case child abuse is going on. Even child labor, which in the United States is outlawed or officially regulated, cannot sensibly be uniformly condemned.

It is arguable, of course, that the context of American culture is such that given the information most parents could obtain about the health risks of various practices and given that taking certain health risks, such as those arising from smoking cigarettes, serves no overriding valued purpose, parents in America and similar cultures are morally irresponsible if they allow their children to smoke and indulge in similar risky practices. Yet America and many other developed societies are these days multicultural, despite the fact that information about health risks are nearly universally available. If, thus, some persons consider it valuable to encourage or permit independent decision making on the part of their, say, teen aged children, who then decide to smoke, this could be seen as no less morally justifiable than encouraging or permitting children to ride horses, play ice hockey, surf, ski, or even gamble a little for enjoyment. Similarly, letting children smoke or drink, especially in moderation, would be no parental mal-practice.

Morality and Smoking

Adults and even children might well choose to moderately indulge in smoking, drinking and similar practices, even granting the health hazards of such activities. Health is not the highest good and guarding it is not a categorical imperative for anyone. It cannot be said apart from knowing a reasonably detailed context of someone's life situation whether the person ought to or ought not to smoke. For some smoking would be morally wrong, self-destructive, impede personal growth and flourishing, for others this would not be the case. In most instances a moderate degree of such indulgence is morally unobjectionable.

When it comes to imposing the side effects of smoking on others, this too cannot be condemned categorically. If a proprietor of a restaurant or bowling alley or personal home consents, patrons and guests, respectively,

may indulge, taking the permission to indicate a judgment on the owner's or host's part that for him or her the side effects of smoking will not be a serious impediment or injury. To know if there is anything morally amiss, we would need to gain detailed enough information about the smokers and companions so as to see if what they ought to strive for in their lives is undermined through their indulgence in the practice.

Endnotes:

¹ I am on record objecting to any bans on smoking or consuming any other stimulants or narcotics or even the advertising of such practices and products. See, Tibor R. Machan and Mark Thornton, "The Re-legalization of Drugs," *The Freeman* (April 1991), pp. 153-155, and Tibor R. Machan, *Private Rights and Public Illusions* (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1995), Chapter 9, "Advertising."

² Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 61.

³ See, <http://library.thinkquest.org/17360/text/tx-e-zac.html>.

⁴ Even those who object to the claim that norms can be objective make purportedly objective claims when they say that others, too, ought to reject this claim. The "ought" may be only a very mild moral rebuke in this instance, yet judging by the intensity and seriousness with which it is advanced, it is hardly to be taken as an expression of a mere preference.

⁵ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 12.

⁶ Richard Rorty, "The Seer of Prague," *The New Republic*, 1 July 1991, p. 37. By "we," Rorty means "non-metaphysicians," that is, those who understand that words and ideas do not represent some reality "out there."

⁷ Just how prominent it is can be gleaned from the proclamation offered by Richard Posner, judge of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and professor at the University of Chicago School of Law, that he subscribes to pragmatism “in approximately the sense in which pragmatism is expounded and defended by the philosopher Richard Rorty” (Richard Posner, “Pragmatism and the Rule of Law,” lecture given at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., 7 July 1991).

⁸ “Objective” is used, in ordinary discourse, as a way to distinguish claims that are unbiased from those that are not. But in the philosophical sense, to call claims “objective” is to focus on the possibility of knowing what they assert, since these claims supposedly rest on what is “out there,” that is, features of objective reality -- the properties, relationships, attributes, aspects, and so forth of what exists in the world, as distinct from what we feel about them, prefer them to be, desire from them or of them, and so forth.

⁹ It might be objected here that what I have listed are at most “good policies” and that a policy cannot be true. Yet arguably, the claim that these are good policies could be either true or false, and the objectivist would try to show that it is true that they are good.

¹⁰ Those who deny the objectivity of moral principles usually contrast this with their view that other claims, pertaining to what science discovers or what we observe in the world around us, are capable of being true or false, that what is being asserted in these areas, in contrast to ethics, politics, or aesthetics, is knowable, or cognitively significant. Yet in these areas there is rarely universal agreement about the truths that can be ascertained, nor do all those who address the issues involved make identical knowledge claims. But those who uphold this thesis would tend to account for the lack of universal agreement not in terms of the impossibility of reaching it but, rather, in terms of certain

impediments some people face as they attempt to figure out what is true or come to know what is the case. Of course, there are those, including Rorty, who would extend their skepticism not just to value judgments and moral claims but also to claims advanced in the sciences and other non-normative areas. They would hold that even in these the possibility of objective truth is an illusion. See, for example, Rorty's essays "Solidarity or Objectivity?" and "Science and Solidarity," in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21--45.

¹¹ I mean here that as we discuss what we should or should not do in personal, social, political, international, and other contexts, we do adduce reasons and sometimes even reach agreements because of these reasons, despite what such thinkers as Posner tell us, namely: "I am denying the priority of reason in human [moral] judgment. I am suggesting that we can, because we do, have confident beliefs without reasoning to them from unimpeachable truths, unimpeachable or non-unimpeachable, because I haven't suggested and don't mean to suggest that our strong moral intuitions are true. They are merely undislodgable at the time, an undislodgable part of our grounds for action, and that is good enough for me, because I don't think we can do better" (Posner, *op cit.*). Of course, these intuitions are dislodged aplenty, for example, by people who do horrible things, for which Posner and those who agree with him give no explanation. One reason many think moral judgments do not lend themselves to being established as true is that they mistakenly assume that truths in non-normative disciplines can be established with timeless, unchanging, infallible certainty. Yet truth everywhere is different from this. When we know something, or when we have shown some claim to be true, we have the best possible cognitive grasp of it. Although this is difficult to explain by analogy since

such a feat is unique -- not surprisingly, since the human capacity for conceptually knowing the world is, so far as we know, unique -- one might get some assistance for grasping the idea by thinking of how some object can be (literally) covered up. To cover up an object does not require having done so totally, fully, perfectly, completely, only adequately for the purposes at hand. Covering something up *absolutely* may be impossible, in the sense that no conceivable improvement on the task is possible, whereas covering it up is possible. Thus knowing something absolutely is impossible, but knowing it is possible.

(We can also fail to cover something up, just as we can fail to know something.)

¹² Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein. With a Memoir.* (March 31, 1917) Ed., B. F. McGuinness (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 4. By “wiser” I take it that he means something along lines of “think more rationally, carefully and conscientiously.”

¹³ For a very well worked out application of this model, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). See, also, Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness, a New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964). See, also, Tibor R. Machan, *Classical Individualism* (London: Routledge, 1998), especially Chapter 4, “Why Objective Ethical Claims Appear Subjective.” For additional metaethical issues involved here, see, Douglas Rasmussen, “Ethical Individualism, Natural Law, and the Primacy of Natural Rights,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* (Winter 2000). In this paper and other works, individualists stress their serious disagreement with the characterization of ethics or morality as necessarily of the impartial observer type, where such bizarreness arises that parents aren’t morally correct in taking special care of their own rather than others’ children, that one is

morally remiss in caring for oneself and one's loved ones instead of the poor in Bangladesh, etc. (For these latter results of the impartial observer position, see note 13 below.)

¹⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Lond: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Tibor R. Machan, "Coping with Smoking," *More Controversial Issues* (New York: NewsSource Unit, 1996).

¹⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin 1958). The section in question, "The Dependence Effect," is reprinted in many business ethics texts, including in T. L. Beauchamp and N. B. Bowie, eds., *Ethical Theory and Business* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 360.

¹⁷ F. A. Hayek, "The Non-Sequitur of the 'Dependence Effect'," *Ibid.*, p.508.

¹⁸ When saccharine was first deemed to be a hazardous substance, which rendered its advertising and selling morally objectionable, some people jokingly proposed to advertise and sell it as rat poison, given that it was deemed hazardous because large amounts of it caused cancer in laboratory rats. The point of the joke was that if adult buyers are aware of what something is, selling it cannot be objectionable. It is the buyer who then needs to determine whether the product is good or bad for him or her to use. Consent, in other words, or caveat emptor, is the operative principles between sellers and buyers.

¹⁹ *The New Republic*, October 20, 1995. See, also, Tibor R. Machan, "Smokers Stand Alone in Blame," *The Los Angeles Times* (March 5, 1988).

²⁰ See, for a dissenting view on whether addiction even exists, Stanton Peele and Archie Brodsky, *The Truth About Addiction and Recovery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), and Thomas S. Szasz, *Ceremonial Chemistry* (New York: Learning Publications, Inc., 1987)