

BOOTLEGGERS AND BAPTISTS: WHY OUR VIEWS ON DRUGS DIFFER

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As medical students in the 1950's our famous professor of surgery, Jannie Louw, taught us that one should never tell a patient that they have cancer. Patients behaved irrationally as they could not carry the burden of such news – there was anger, denial and blaming. This teaching was then common in the world but is an example of *paralogical reasoning* that appears superficially logical or that the reasoner believes to be logical – but more of this later.

In exploring why people, when given the same information, get strange ideas or come to opposing conclusions, such as dealing with drugs, I focus on a few key concepts and people from physiology, psychology and philosophy.

In 1983 the economist, Bruce Yandle, coined the term 'Bootleggers and Baptists' relating to the prohibition days in the USA. Religious groups wanted to prohibit drinking on Sundays to stop members being drunk at services, which escalated to prohibition and its evils. But groups with differing moral positions opposed the abolition of prohibition; preachers demand prohibition to make alcohol illegal while the criminal bootlegger wants it to stay illegal to stay in business. This is a model of politics in which the opposite moral positions lead to the same vote

The brain has evolved as a modular multitasking, problem-solving, organ which has been likened to an app-loaded iPhone or anatomically to a collection of scoops of ice cream.

Physiologists recognised that a constant internal environment is required, which if disturbed, could result in illness or death; that the sympathetic nervous system helps to fight stress – the 'fight or flight' response; and that the brain influences the body in coping with stress (the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis). The body also affects the mind - adopting an assertive or defensive posture changes the levels of our testosterone, the dominance hormone, and cortisol, the stress hormone. Stresses and stimuli can be one and the same and much depends on our approach to challenges whether they are harmful (distress) or helpful (eustress).

Research has uncovered other neurohormones with varying functions such as the endorphins and dopamine – the feel good hormones. Functional MRI can identify anatomical parts of the brain that are activated by suggestions and stimuli. Merging with other disciplines neuroscience has spawned, amongst others, neurolaw, neuromarketing, neuroeconomics and neurophilosophy. As a reaction to excessive claims others have spoken about 'neurobollocks'.

A helpful finding in changing our learning and behaviours is the understanding of the plasticity of the brain. The brain is not static or constantly declining, as we formerly believed - it responds to new learning and experiences by bulking up its relevant connections. We can change at any age

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) was a Swiss doctor who received many awards including 20 honorary doctorates. She studied psychiatry in the US. Appalled by the treatment of dying patients in American hospitals she discussed her findings on people with terminal illnesses in her book *On death and dying* in 1969. Predictable though varying responses to grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance and can occur with any major loss, e.g. a job, divorce, or financial ruin. Such responses were considered abnormal when I was a medical student but Kübler-Ross and Hospice have shown that they are normal human responses. These do not necessarily all occur or follow in order e.g. when

first faced with the reality that my squash and running activities were to end due to well-deserved and genetically predisposed worn-out hips, my reaction was a well-disguised depression that lasted some two years.

Daniel Kahneman is one of the world's foremost psychologists. He received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 and invented 'behavioural economics'. In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, two characters in our human thinking and interactions are described: *System 1* is responsible for the very rapid, intuitive, emotional thought processes. *System 2* is the slow, logical, and sceptical thought that can diminish the emotional intensity of a response. This two tier system distinguished intuition from reason. He also identified "cognitive biases" which are largely unconscious errors of reasoning that distort our judgement of the world. We respond differently to the same information depending on how it is presented e.g. patients are more likely to accept a treatment that gives them a 90% chance of surviving than over one that carries a 10% chance of dying.

William Gardner is a psychologist/philosopher. In his book, *Handling truth: Navigating the riptides of rhetoric, religion, reason and research* he describes four domains of truth that we all occupy to varying degrees: In *Rhetorica* statements are advanced or discredited by the process of persuasion and debate such as used in the law courts and parliament; however, the truth remains a matter of opinion. In *Mystica* truths are articles of faith or beliefs arising from spiritual revelation or personal enlightenment. In *Logica*, truths have been validated with methods of logical analysis and thinking. The truths of *Empirica* are empirical findings, confirmed and documented by research.

Putting them together: The Brain:

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|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Heart / gut feelings | Mind |
| • System 1 (intuitive) | System 2 (cognitive) |
| • Mystica | Logica |
| • Reptile | Thinking |

LIMBIC SYSTEM

CORTEX

The activities of the brain on the left are located centrally in the limbic system in which is where our beliefs, emotions, fears and flight-or-flight responses are located. Those on the right in the cortex or outer part of the brain represent the slower regulating activities. Once in the limbic system an idea or belief is extraordinarily difficult to dislodge. In his 1976 book *The selfish gene* Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme* for an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person. Like genes memes can also mutate to ensure survival.

Any challenge to a belief is perceived as a threat and may provoke a fight or flight response. The intuitive brain springs into immediate action, often as a result of real or imagined uncomfortable feelings we experience. These responses may be irrational but are real for us and may include denial and seeking to blame others. Thus emotions interact with our cognitive thought processes to guide our behaviours toward the goal of survival and reproduction.

When defending our views we may think that we are thinking logically but often use *motivated reasoning* or *confirmation bias* by only accepting evidence that favours our beliefs.

Cognitive dissonance is the term for the mental tension experienced when someone holds two conflicting thoughts simultaneously e.g. President Mbeki was an AIDS denialist but nevertheless supported a quack cure for the disease.

The *backfire effect* may occur when people have to face evidence conflicting with their beliefs. Instead of changing, the beliefs of some get even stronger.

Because of the interest generated by the ‘cure’ of Joost van der Westhuizen by Anton Neethling, a former panel beater, who put Joost in strange apparatus and pronounced him cured from his motor neurone disease, *Die Beeld* posed the question to me “are beliefs harmless”? I provided some examples where beliefs were clearly harmful:

The Virodene scandal was a great blot on South Africa’s medical history in which the former president Mbeki and the then minister of health, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, were prominent. When Olga Visser presented it to the cabinet as an AIDS cure she received a standing ovation– and the ANC would get 10% of its profits. Its registration was refused by the Medicines Control Council (MCC) as it is a toxic solvent harmful to health. Its chairman, Prof Peter Folb, and several senior managers were fired, from which the MCC has not fully recovered. Despite doing only harm when taken, people clamoured for Virodene.

Another example concerns vaccination which is a major health benefit to the world by providing immunity against communicable disease. Andrew Wakefield in an article published in the *Lancet* in 1998 claimed to show a link between the MMR vaccination and autism. Wakefield was found to have falsified the data and had been paid by lawyers to cook the books. Because of several fraudulent activities the paper was withdrawn and he was banned from practicing. Despite vaccinations’ well-demonstrated benefits and that no link with autism can be demonstrated the anti-vaccination lobby, backed by celebrities, has resulted in the reduction in herd immunity and outbreaks of potentially lethal childhood diseases such as measles.

‘Mense will verneuk word’ (People want to be conned)

Considering the drug issue

Everyone agrees that drugs are harmful and that dependence may harm the users, their families, and the community. Thus it seems logical that their use should be stopped or reduced, which led to the apparent logic of the increasing war on drugs. But this may be another example of paralogical reasoning.

Has the war worked? The quote from *‘The Prevention and Treatment for Substance abuse Act No. 70, 2008’* says it all: “The drug trade has increased globally in intensity and reach, and substance abuse in South Africa has escalated rapidly”. Many global national and regional acts, laws, guidelines etc. with the aim of a drug-free society have tried in vain to stem drug use and abuse.

The **prison population** of a country may serve as a crude proxy for the effect of its war on drugs – some examples / 100 000 population: US 748, RSA 324, England 154, India 32. The US has 5% of the world’s population but 25% of its prison population and much of this has to do with the war on drugs.

The **US declaration of the war on drugs** during Richard Nixon’s presidency was also the time of the Vietnam War. Tactics employed in the Vietnam War resemble those presently used in the war on drugs such as expenditure of vast sums of money, propping up autocratic

regimes seen to favour their policies, providing arms to those seen to be on their side, defoliating vast tracts of land and the indiscriminate ruination of the livelihood of small farmers and other innocents. The US plays a disproportionately large role in maintaining a militaristic stance in dealing with the world's drug problems.

Effects on Mexico and on homicides

The effect of the US war on drugs on its neighbour, Mexico, has been devastating and has resulted in tens of thousands of homicides (the killing of one human being by another).

World homicide rates are the highest in countries that act as conduits for the drugs that are consumed in the USA – some rates / 100 000: UK 1.2, USA 5, Mexico 18.1, RSA 33.8, Venezuela 49, and Honduras 82.1 (the highest in the world).

Most countries have criminalised the use of drugs other than alcohol, cigarettes and prescription drugs because of the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. However, there is much evidence of the success of dealing with drug addicts by programmes that supply clean needles and drugs. They have reduced the stigma and petty crimes, are cheaper than criminalising addicts, and have had beneficial health benefits.

Responding to their increasing drug problem in 2001 Portugal dramatically changed its drug policies by decriminalising the use of all drugs. Contrary to doomsday prophecies children's use of drugs decreased and overall the use of drugs is no higher than in the rest of the EU.

The **UN Global Commission on Drug Policy** 2014 publication found that the war on drugs was a failure in its own rights; threatens public health and safety; undermines human rights and fosters discrimination; fuels crime and enriches criminals; undermines development and security, fuelling conflicts; and wastes billions and undermines economies.

The alternate to drug wars can be simply put as legal regulation, education and rehabilitation.

We all have the capacity to commit evil deeds, which are influenced by our inheritance and also to a significant extent by circumstances and conditions. Societies have developed constitutions and laws to enable populations to live in harmony. Great leaders such as Tutu and Mandela demonstrated how to bridge the *us-and-them* gap to become a communal *we*!

In the long run it is the force of ideas more than the force of arms that marshall moral advancement – in the words of Victor Hugo “One can resist the invasion of armies; one cannot resist the invasion of ideas”. Major changes in society have included the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, women's rights in the 20th century (Switzerland allowed women to vote only since 1971), and gay rights in the 21st century – each, shamefully, after prolonged debate and demonstrations, often with violent resistance. But change does not have to be glacially slow. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was able to rapidly rally society - trade unions, religious organisations, health professions etc. to legally force the government to provide treatment to patients with AIDS.

When we look at the accumulated evidence (empirica) and apply logica we must conclude that we have relied on paralogical thinking that has created a meme or deep seated belief that has lasted for decades. The time has come to reduce the harm of drug use through a human rights and public health approach rather than criminalising their use and waging war. However, expect fierce resistance from vested interests including, drug traffickers,

politicians, the police and faith groups – the Bootleggers and Baptists of our introduction. Understanding how and why our views differ also helps us to bridge the divides.

I end with two relevant quotes:

The first is by Friedrich Hayek, the great economist and philosopher, wrote that **“It is indeed probable that more harm and misery has been caused by men determined to use coercion to stamp out a moral evil than by men intent on doing evil”**.

And second is from CS Lewis the influential Christian writer and academic **“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satisfied but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience”**.

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