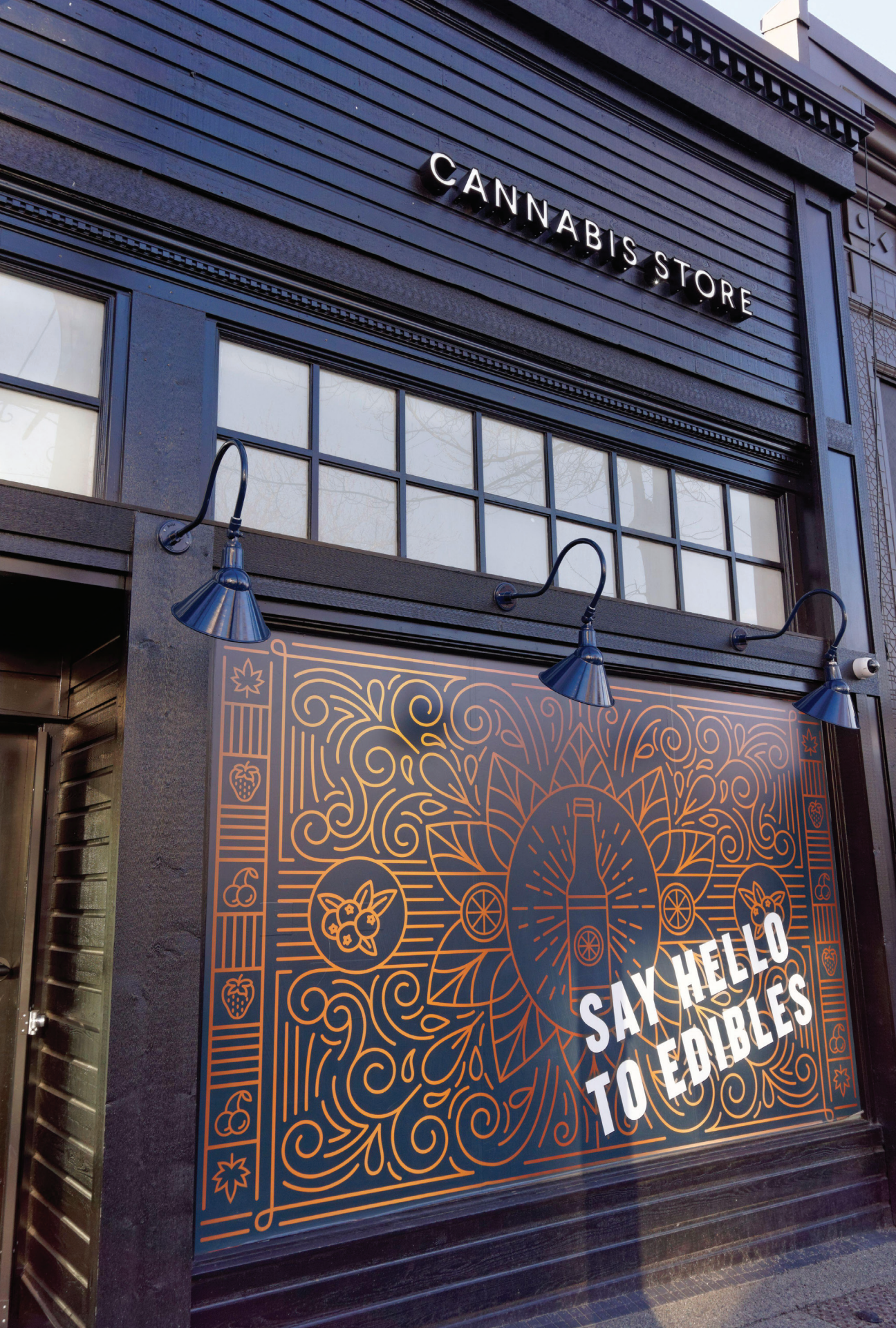
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Cannabis as a Cultural Question

James Mumford

"RELIGION…IS THE OPIATE OF THE MASSES," Karl Marx declared in 1844, but today in the secular West, one might argue that marijuana has elbowed religion aside. Americans' marijuana use has doubled over the last two decades, and 67 percent of US residents now favor overturning federal law under which marijuana remains a proscribed substance.[1] The states are dropping their opposition to legalization with metronomic regularity, eleven of the fifty, plus the District of Columbia, having legalized cannabis for recreational use since 2012. Marijuana is also set to become big business. The data analytics firm Nielsen projects that legal weed sales will quintuple, to an estimated $41 billion, by 2025.[2] "This is one of the most exciting opportunities you'll ever be part of," John Boehner, former Speaker of the House of Representatives and now a board member of marijuana investment firm Acreage Holdings, told the National Institute for Cannabis Investors. "Frankly, we can help you make a potential fortune."[3]

What are we talking about when we talk about weed? Until recently, when someone announced that it was time for a serious debate about marijuana, what that person typically had in mind was a debate about the function of law in liberal society. The libertarian says, "What business is it of government what I choose to ingest into my body?" Meanwhile, the progressive decries the failed prohibition regime that has led to the criminalization of 600,000 Americans a year, and rues a war on drugs that has had such disproportionate effect on African American communities. For a generation, in terms of our national discourse, we have so fixated on the question of whether we should be *allowed* to get high that we have neglected to talk about whether it would even be *advisable*.

Last year, however, the debate changed, when former New York Times reporter Alex Berenson published a book, *Tell Your Children: The Truth about Marijuana, Mental Illness, and Violence*, that provoked the ire of pot enthusiasts with its contention that marijuana can induce psychosis.[4] When we talk about cannabis, we should not be talking about the law any more, Berenson contends. We should be talking about *health*.

Berenson begins his book with the admission that he, too, had long thought pot was harmless.

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Left: Exterior of a cannabis store in Vancouver, Canada; JSMimages/Alamy Stock Photo.

As he puts it, "I've smoked it myself, I liked it fine. Maybe I got a little paranoid, but it didn't last. Nobody ever died from smoking too much pot." But one night he was talking to his wife, Jacqueline, a psychiatrist, who specializes in evaluating mentally ill criminals. They were discussing a particularly grisly case when she said, "Of course he was high, smoking pot his whole life."

Hearing his wife voice her profession's working assumption sent Berenson on a mission to explore the connection between marijuana and psychiatric disorders. He began by unearthing the most authoritative studies. For example, in Dunedin, a coastal city on New Zealand's South Island, a database was initiated in the late 1960s on every baby born in Queen Mary's Hospital (Dunedin's main obstetric center). It has enabled creation of the most comprehensive study of human development ever conducted. Because they were able to obtain data drawn from individual cases at age eleven years, researchers were able to account for preexisting psychoses when investigating whether cannabis triggered later psychotic states. Their results, published in the *British Medical Journal*, are terrifying: People who had used cannabis at age fifteen were *four* times more likely to develop schizophrenia than those who had not.[5]

How are we ethically to evaluate the practice of getting stoned?

Next, Berenson went to the professionals working at the frontlines, such as Erik Messamore, a psychiatrist who moved to Ohio in 2013 to work at a high-end private psychiatric center attached to the University of Cincinnati. What Messamore encountered there was a new type of patient: privately insured, affluent, stable, with family, a job, and advanced degrees, who had used only cannabis before succumbing to a disease that resembled schizophrenia, but had developed later and responded poorly to antipsychotics.

Berenson's book has touched a nerve. It has been denounced as dangerously alarmist and as playing fast and loose with the facts, particularly regarding the connection between pot use and violent crime. (And it should be said that Berenson's contrarianism has led him, more recently, to some questionable conclusions about the reality of a COVID-19 pandemic.) Yet there can be no getting away from the reality of our unnerving ignorance about what marijuana actually does to our minds, and from the fact that, while policymakers are becoming more confident about the safety of cannabis, the medical community is becoming less so. For instance, in January 2017 the National Academy of Medicine published a 468-page report saying a lot about knowing a little.[6] Even though ascertaining the "dose-response relationship" of a new compound is par for the course for a drug company when initiating trials in human subjects, the authors wrote, this work has not been done with cannabis. In advance of the legalization of cannabis in Canada the following year, an editorial in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* decried the move as "a national, uncontrolled experiment in which the profits of cannabis producers and tax revenues are squarely pitched against the health of Canadians."[7]

Yet despite psychiatry's penetration of public consciousness on the issue of wider access to cannabis, we may still ask how far we have really advanced when we are able to discuss marijuana use only in a highly medicalized away. If we are talking about social practices and not legal permissibility, what might it look like to bring into view the fundamental question of the nature of getting high as a social practice, and its relationship, if any, to human flourishing. Let's ask about the kind of life we aspire to, what kind of culture we hope for or even expect, in which marijuana is not only decriminalized but commercially sold and promoted. Let's think about how dropping the prohibition against the adult use of marijuana might not only compare with the

legalization of alcohol but possibly compound the individual and social costs of having another widely available intoxicant. How are we ethically to evaluate the practice of getting stoned? What kind of phenomenon is this? What is its telos, its peculiar end?

Forgetting the Adventure

I should admit at this point that I have never smoked marijuana, let alone inhaled. This is not, I hasten to add, some heroic moral stance. As a youth, I was more afraid of my father than my friends (and still am, God rest his soul). But now that I find myself a father, I am hoping to do more than merely recommend risk assessments to my daughters, regarding all manner of choices they will have to make. I am hoping to have something more substantial to say in the unlikely event that they openly ask if they can spend my whacking great writer's royalties on weed. I hope at least to be able to proffer a view on the good that my girls can evaluate for themselves.

But to say anything substantive on this subject—is it not too fiendishly difficult? Am I to discourage my daughters from weed on the grounds that it involves the chemical management of mood, when they see me crack open a craft beer on a Friday night? What is qualitatively different about weed? Or what about when they pine for the spiritual experiences of those who have used the drug to open the doors of perception? Do I not, through prayer or fasting or praise, manipulate myself in some way to open myself to the spiritual? Why are *those* practices qualitatively different from getting high?

Perhaps progress can be made by trying to be precise about the kind of practice we have in view, and how it compares to the practices Aristotle originally considered constitutive of human flourishing.

Between 1845 and 1849 a group of young French writers, including Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Eugène Delacroix, and Gérard de Nerval, would gather at the Hotel Pimodan on the Île Saint-Louis to consume hashish. A doctor named Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, having encountered cannabis in Egypt, then a French colony, had brought it back to Paris to administer to the hospitalized insomniacs under his care. But he was also happy to bring "the green fudge" to the writers' potluck dinners at the Pimodan. It was much appreciated. After "the convulsive gaiety of the beginning," wrote Théophile Gautier in an essay, "Le Club des Hashischins," "an indefinable feeling of well-being, a boundless calm took over. I was like a sponge in the middle of the ocean." Gautier further observed, "I was in the happy stage of hashish that Orientals call kief. I understood the pleasures tasted by spirits and angels according to their degree of perfection."

Baudelaire warned against the use of hashish on the grounds of its "stupefying" effects.

But from the culture that emerged there was one dissenter. Charles Baudelaire sounded a more skeptical note in two texts he wrote on hashish, "Du vin and du haschisch" (1851) and *Les paradis artificiels* (1860), the latter a translation into French of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* complemented by Baudelaire's own analysis. Declaring that "if there ever existed a government whose interest it were to corrupt its citizens, it would have to encourage the use of hashish," Baudelaire warned against the drug on the grounds of its "stupefying" effects: "A profound languor, which is not without charm, invades your spirit. You are incapable of work and energetic action."

This "profound languor" contrasts sharply with the quality of the intrinsically valuable practices Aristotle believed were as bound up with human flourishing. There is room for pleasure in his

picture, but pleasure conceived not as a passive, experiential state but as unreserved involvement. "Pleasure," as Aristotelian scholar Talbot Brewer puts it in his book *The Retrieval of Ethics*, "is not a separate sensory effect on our doings but active attention in our unfolding activities that renders those activities complete or unimpeded." And the activities themselves are to be *intrinsically valuable*—not just any doing will do. They must be activities that actualize our potentialities, that fulfill the kinds of creatures we are. For Aristotle, we are the creatures who are made to throw ourselves into things; to launch ourselves into life, to project ourselves into the future; creatures who "express ourselves metaphysically in action," as another Aristotelian scholar writes. Even contemplation, for Aristotle the highest good, is presented as the most vigorous of activities. It is to be intellectually *taxing*.

For Aristotle, we are the creatures who are made to throw ourselves into things.

The enervating effects of marijuana would seem to frustrate the fulfillment of such capacities. This diminution is most clearly observed when taken to its extreme, in addiction. In its promotional literature, Marijuana Anonymous (MA)—a twelve-step recovery program with resemblances to Alcoholics Anonymous—draws movingly from Book IV of *The Odyssey* and the myth of the Lotus-Eaters. Landing on a new island, Odysseus sends out scouts to suss out the locals. Happily, the natives are a peaceable people. But Homer's comment that "they did them no hurt" proves heavily ironic, as the local delicacy the islanders share with the Greeks is a mysterious plant that induces a sleep of forgetfulness and dissolves their will to move on. Eventually, Odysseus must drag his men back to the ship and chain them to the rowing benches. According to MA, "The story of the Lotus-Eaters speaks particularly to us dopeheads. As addicts, we were stuck in a Lotus Land; we forgot our mission; we forgot the other adventures that awaited us; we forgot about going home."

The testimony of a former marijuana smoker is instructive. Here is Michael, an MA group participant from Simcoe, Ontario:

> No one sees you, you're not out robbing people. You're not beating people up, you're not getting into fights…. So for the rest of society, you're not really a problem. You're just a problem to yourself because you're not doing anything with your life.[8]

Though this is a case of addiction in which cannabis has come to impair a person's functioning in a systemic way, may we not also identify in a culture of *episodic* intoxication—for with the typical concentration of THC component of cannabis having altered from 1 or 2 percent to 20 percent, a culture of cannabis is increasingly a culture of intoxication—something of this sense of missing an adventure? May we not find revealing the language of "getting *wasted,*" whether speaking of alcohol or marijuana? Perhaps Aristotle, for whom the opposite of work was not the opposite of activity, would see in a culture of recreational cannabis use a crisis of *leisure*. The idea of "working for the weekend" in anticipation of "getting out of our minds" would to him have seemed tragic.

The Less Deceived

There are some, however, who would *agree* that our discussion of dope should extend beyond the medical, but then stridently *defend* getting high as a supremely worthwhile rather than tragically wasteful pastime. Ever since William James identified the four marks of mystical experience—"ineffability," "noetic quality," "transience," and

"passivity"—in his 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, writers, esoteric religious thinkers, and other opinion makers have insisted that drug taking *counts*. So what am I to say if my daughters appeal to a tradition that speaks of psychoactive substances as a perfectly legitimate means by which we can redeem the self from its imprisonment in material existence, which induces profound visionary moments, which allows the human being to awaken to eternity and to experience both the unity "ultimate and basic to the world" and a oneness with the Absolute?

Any Aristotelian answer, insisting as it would that the activities that make up the good life are those that realize our distinctively human faculties, would, I think, place a heavy emphasis on the role of *reason*. And to engage our reason is to commit to grappling with reality as given; to sift through mere appearance in search of truth; to flush out inauthenticity and falsehood; to work to become, to quote the title of one of Philip Larkin's great collections of poetry, "less deceived." The cliché of the stoner convinced that he has gleaned profound insight—"That's so deep, man!"—only to realize, upon inspecting it in the cold light of day, that he was trucking in banalities, suggests that getting high is fundamentally an abnegation of reality.

The abnegation of reality can have a tragic dimension, too. It is not just psychosis that psychiatrists are unsurprised to find among heavy pot-smokers. Speaking of patients aged sixteen to twenty-four who smoke pot regularly, one psychiatrist I interviewed, Aaron Kheriaty, of the University of California, Irvine, said, "As important and as damaging as the direct physiological effects on the brain is the fact that many have stopped contending with the world on its own terms." Seeking recourse to marijuana at difficult junctures in adolescence, "young people have not had to bump up against the social edges of reality and negotiate it." They got a D on their test. Their girlfriend broke up with them. By the time many marijuana users reach their twenties, "though they may have escaped paranoia and psychosis, their affective maturity is that of a fifteen-year-old."

Sticking It to the Man

You will be forgiven for dismissing anything I say here as the residual soreness of one who was once an ostracized adolescent. In high school, all the talk of getting high made me feel low, a constant reminder of my social exclusion. Yet looking back, there seems something ironic about this, because it seems that what I was alienated from was a state of alienation. I was distanced from those who used a drug that distanced them from each other.

The abnegation of reality can have a tragic dimension, too.

What, after all, had I missed at those pot parties to which I wasn't invited? Were they riotous affairs at which people forged enduring, meaningful friendships? Or were they merely gatherings of the glazed, congregations of the comatose, where "community" was limited to passing spliffs and raiding fridges? All in all, it seems difficult to maintain that getting stoned out of one's head is ordered to conviviality. Marijuana rather militates against mutual presence and thereby impairs out social nature. As Heraclitus observed, "The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own."

There remains, of course, a particular aura surrounding marijuana, which has to do with a lingering promise of its emancipatory potential.

In his recent book, *High Culture*, British religious studies scholar Christopher Partridge gives an enthusiastic account of drug taking in our culture as a "technology of transcendence."[9] The

formulation owes a debt to philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of a "technology of the self"—that which, in Foucault's words, "permits individuals to effect by their own means or by the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and the way of being, *so as to transform themselves*." (emphasis added)[10] Psychotropic substances do just this, Partridge contends, inducing "a transcendence of the hegemonic forces of domination." Getting high is the way we can free our minds from the control exerted by "anonymous structures, networks of knowledge and cultural and social institutions." This is supposedly how we defy authority. This is how we Stick It to The Man.

This promise of liberation is very much the legacy of the boomers. Last August, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Woodstock, PBS released a documentary, *Woodstock: Three Days That Changed the World*. Over endless footage of hundreds of thousands of bedraggled hippies, Thunderclap Newman sings, "We've got to get together sooner or later / Because the revolution's here, and you know it's right," and boomers reminiscence in solemn voice-overs: "We were looking for answers. We were looking for other people who felt the same way we did," and "This is what we've been talking about. This is what we've been aiming at, this kind of freedom." Close your eyes, and they might as well be talking about the Paris Commune.

Indeed, in a *New York Times* interview, one Woodstock hippie said, "There were so many people there I thought, wow wouldn't it be a good idea if we could show our power by, you know, getting political? And then I thought a little more about it and I said oh, what for? It's already here."

At the heart of it all, of course, was hash. The Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a band of Timothy Leary disciples founded in Laguna Beach, California, in 1966, is reported to have been America's foremost distributor of marijuana during the late 1960s. And their motivation was more than financial. Speaking to the *East Village Other* in 1969, one member explained: "Our lives have been saved from the plastic nightmare because of dope and we would feel selfish if we just stayed in our beautiful utopia…. We believe that dope is the hope of the human race, it is a way to make people free and happy."

This promise of liberation is very much the legacy of the boomers.

Yet when one looks at the studies of the demotivating effects of marijuana, "free and happy" smacks of some kind of cruel joke. (Data from Monitoring the Future, a study of thousands of American high school seniors conducted from 2007 to 2011, has compellingly demonstrated that marijuana use results in less energy or interest, and poorer school or job performance.[11]) Does the spectacle of "couchlock" bespeak liberation, or enslavement? And where would we begin if we tried to calculate the *opportunity cost* of weed—those grades never obtained, those goals never achieved, those promotions never sought?

Take Evan, interviewed by Anna Lowrey in *The Atlantic* last year. Evan began smoking weed to relax after his day's work as a paralegal. After a while, he lost interest in working out and socializing. Next, his ambition to go to law school eroded. Finally, he found he couldn't endure the day without dope: "I was smoking anytime I had to do anything boring, and it took a long time before I realized that I wasn't doing anything without getting stoned."[12]

Despite all that was promised, then, it seems that cannabis is more likely to impede, not impel, political progress. In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel of dystopia, the authorities must give the workers "soma"—a pleasure-inducing drug that causes them to hug one another and docilely return to work. Many

workers in today's precarious economy take their soma of their own volition. Rather than organize, or demand their rights, they tune in, turn on, and drop out.

Telling Our Children

Perhaps it is apt, then, to speak of cannabis as a cultural problem, to speak in terms of human diminution, and to take a wider view of the drug as an agent of demotivation. But such talk does make us bristle. Why does it sound so jarring, so judgmental? Why are we so hesitant to venture beyond the health paradigm, to move beyond the medical, on this most critical of issues?

Perhaps our present impasse can be attributed to a wider problem with the impoverished nature of our moral vocabulary. Unsure of the ethical foundation upon which we can speak of human flourishing, and fearful that any moral philosophy may become a political philosophy—that any conviction we muster may quickly become coercive—we eschew all debate about the kind of lives we should aspire to. Yet deep down, in places we don't talk about at parties, as parents or as siblings or as citizens, we do harbor intuitions that there are better and worse ways of living. We hope for more than health for our friends. I think we should let those intuitions lead us to question a culture of cannabis.

Notes

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4 Alex Berenson, *Tell Your Children: The Truth about Marijuana, Mental Illness, and Violence* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2019).

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6 A summary of the report findings: "Health Effects of Marijuana and Cannabis-Derived Products Presented in New Report," The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine news release, January 12, 2017, https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2017/01/health-effects-of-marijuana-and-cannabis-derived-products-presented-in-new-report; the full NASEM report "The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids" is available for purchase at https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24625/the-health-effects-of-cannabis-and-cannabinoids-the-current-state.

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10 Michel Foucault and Luther H. Martin, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London, England: Tavistock, 1988).

11 J.J. Palamar et al., "Adverse Psychosocial Outcomes Associated with Drug Use among US High School Seniors: A Comparison of Alcohol and Marijuana," *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* 40, no. 6 (November 2014): 438–46.

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