

Altered States of Consciousness

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Medicine, sex, and religion are presented as related areas of human thought and behavior in which people traditionally have sought temporary release from daily living. In essence, these areas represent a search for altered states of consciousness. The harmful way is through drug addiction.

Five common characteristics are cited for the three areas. Examples of their universality are traceable by their omnipresence and their appearance in most childhood games—especially those taking on sexual nuances—which are usually hidden from adults.

If Eastern knowledge and control of bodily processes were geared to Western technology, mankind would benefit.

I would like to deviate from the usual format of discussing drug abuse within the context of pharmacology or medical ethics. I propose an entirely different framework whereby we may be able to differentiate between use and abuse of drugs. We all know that drug abuse is harmful. But a “lift” from daily living is pleasurable. It is my thesis that there exists a little understood interface, nebulous but challenging, between three areas of life: medicine, sex, and religion. I am using “medicine” to refer to both the use and the abuse of drugs prescribed for regular medicinal purposes. I refer to “religion” in the sense of religious fervor, the type of passion which characterizes the Passion Plays of Christ. And I define “sex” as sensual stimulation leading to its ultimate climax, the experience of orgasm which by definition is the highest form of pleasurable psychophysical intensity known to mankind. The following characteristics apply in each area:

1. All three contain a basic element of awe.
2. All three have some degree of reverence for persons or things which take us outside the confines of “self.”
3. All three foster the desire not necessarily for *more* but certainly for

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repetitive performance.

4. All three provoke feelings of intensity and confirmation that one truly exists, sentient and alive. Concomitantly, there is a dangerously counterparallel feeling of nonexistence, loss of contact with reality, and at times a partaking of the preternatural. The thought is understandable and loses nothing in translation when the French call orgasm “la petite mort.” The recuperating patient realizes how close to death he or she has been. And the religious believer never feels more alive than when contemplating immortality.

5. All three deal with the creation and preservation of life, and to some extent with immortality of influence.

Human Thought and Behavior

Thus, by characterizing these phenomena of human thought and behavior, and by categorizing them all as valid attempts to gain temporary release from daily living via an excursion into an altered state of consciousness, we not only begin to see their commonality, but further, we may find new ways of thinking about these phenomena, and thereby break the habit of pain-dependent behavior caused by drug addiction.

First of all, what do people want when they take harmful drugs or take medicines in inappropriate ways? Obviously, there seems to be immediate gratification. The user believes that the drug instantaneously and consistently provides him or her with relief of pain. This is the user’s *perception*. And in the drug scene, perception is all-important: not things as they are, but things as they seem! The user may be seeking a “lift” from the tensions of the day, the antidote of humor to alleviate the monotony of life, or peace of mind to quell one’s fears of death (ironically by resorting to narcotics). We ask further, what is the “kick” for people seeking sexual excitement either autoerotically or with a partner? Is it an attempt to find an altered state of consciousness with sex being the vehicle which propels one toward orgasm, that quintessential state of altered consciousness? And finally, we may well ask, why is the desire for religious expression so universal, and the need to show reverence for and immersion with a deity so intense throughout the span of recorded history? Is not the underlying quality of the pursuit of religious trance (at the extreme) versus meditation or worship (at the ordinary level) an attempt to seek an altered state of consciousness? Thus, medicine, sex, and religion—all three areas of human thought and behavior—meet and coin-

cide at an identical nexus.

Universality of Natural Phenomena

The test of universality for natural phenomena is twofold: the trait must be widespread in all communities of human beings, and it also must be found to appear early in life as an innate part of childhood. The quest for altered states of consciousness passes both tests. Who among us cannot recollect the early childhood games of holding someone's hands and swinging around at arm's length, and to the limit of one's endurance, until one or the other child spins off in a dizzying, giddy collapse on the ground, overventilating and completely enjoying the sense of "being out of it"—even temporarily? This is not drug-induced behavior; it is merely a child's game found all over the world, an exhibition of sheer exuberance. Who cannot recall, as a child, playing all sorts of squeezing, choking, and jostling ring games in which the point was deliberately and patently to alter your perception of the world—for the moment. Children press their fingers against their eyeballs until they can "see" kaleidoscopic imagery—just for fun. They do all manner of self- and other-stimulation until some wary adult stops them. But their behavior is not really stopped, just its visibility. The children go "underground"—they find garages, locker rooms, barns, empty corners and cubbies out of the purview of disapproving adults. Here they continue their excitement games with a dash of surreptitiousness now adding its own peculiar spice. Who among us cannot remember sexual overtones in these forbidden mystery games? There is inevitable, almost insatiable curiosity, there follows investigation, and just as surely, there is the culminating experience of an altered state of consciousness. It seems to be inherent.

Medical Ubiquity

There is no culture with a recorded history which has not tried to enhance life and to delay death. The ways in which each culture has tried to carry out these tasks has been tantamount to its practice of medicine. In preliterate societies medicine and religion were identical, and in many cultures today they remain on a continuum. The

search for curatives is ubiquitous, and has led inevitably to experimentation with natural and synthetic drugs. Thus, the physician is the first arbiter of the drug situation; the possibility for abuse lies most logically within the realm of medicine. The human hope to cure all has led us to the possibility of overdosing. Times have not changed so much since the ancient Greeks. The twin sisters who guarded the Temple of Science (medicine) were Hygeia, who taught cleanliness and prevention, and Panacea, who was thought to have magical powers and to be capable of curing everything.

Sexual Registration

If we look at this phenomenon through the sexual registration, we can make the case for universality even more convincing. The desire to reach orgasm, to share this experience with another person, is profoundly human. Yet there are many people, especially in our highly mechanized and technology-oriented culture, who have great fears about sex. For them it is not a joyous experience, but a threatening area of life because they have developed serious sexual dysfunctions. And then there are a few who turn to sex compulsively as though they were searching for a constant "high." It seems ludicrous perhaps, but real nonetheless. Laboratory investigations have elucidated the role of the hypothalamus by measuring the strength of sexual desire against an animal's need for food, rest, and sundry other physiologic drives. The experimenters permit the research animal (most often rats) to press a lever or a bar which sends throughout its body a vibration akin to orgasm. When given a choice between the lever and any of the alternatives, the animal stayed at the lever until reaching exhaustion. I suspect that there are some people who would die of an overdose of sexual activity—if such were possible. Fortunately, however, we homo sapiens are possessed of bodies which are self-regulating, sexually speaking; it is virtually impossible even to masturbate to death. Now, an interesting twist on this theme is that the altering of one's *perception* of sexual feelings is tantamount to directly increasing one's pleasure in the activity. As a Sex Therapist who

has worked with nonorgasmic women, I can attest to the fact that many have concluded that smoking marijuana facilitates and insures orgasmic response—perhaps for the first time in life. When this unfortunate set of circumstances occurs it is very difficult to convince the woman that nothing physiologically different has happened to her body, that she is just *perceiving* the experience differently. She is usually steadfast in her conviction despite evidence to the contrary. It need not be logical, it is psychological. And herein lies great difficulty. If she can be persuaded through counseling and with the help of a dedicated partner that she herself has put up "mental roadblocks" which have prevented her from normal sexual functioning, then she can learn to achieve a natural "high" of much more sustaining quality *without* pot. But it is difficult to unravel this Gordian knot.

Religious Sphere

In the religious sphere, there is much that we Westerners fail to understand about Eastern philosophy/science. We tend to impugn their scientific validity simply because they use their bodies instead of complicated electronic devices. Yet their yogi can, through meditation, force one hand to become quite hot while the other hand turns icy cold. Think what such knowledge and control over the parasympathetic nervous system could do to fight off harmful tumors and other disease processes in the body. The Judaeo-Christian heritage venerates "the family" yet is silent about or negative toward sex (ideas of original sin still abound). In the Madras section of India there is a popular cadence (a raga) which literally means sexual intercourse (orgasm) and "union with God" simultaneously. Can you imagine such a sermon being preached from St. Patrick's cathedral on Easter Sunday morning?

The search for altered states of consciousness is as old as human thought and human behavior. In medical practices, in sexual pleasure, and in religious ritual and meditation, people have sought restoration and rejuvenation in these natural "highs." The use rather than the abuse of drugs also is a part of medical practice and religious services. It is a refreshing point of view.