

A BENEFICIAL HISTORY OF INTOXICANTS

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By Stuart Walton

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science* (1882) wonders whether intoxication is not simply a natural human instinct, but might play a founding role in culture. 'Who will ever relate the history of narcotics? It is almost the history of culture, of our so-called "higher culture".'

Where did intoxication come from? Perhaps from one of the areas of alcohol haze that exist in space in the form of giant molecular clouds of ethyl alcohol, methanol and vinyl alcohol, such as W3(OH), 6500 light years from Earth, or Sagittarius B2(N) near the centre of the Milky Way, 26,000 light years away. They are chemically very simple amalgams of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. Ethyl alcohol (C₂H₅OH) is the kind that humans can drink. Molecules from these clouds once formed

into interstellar dust particles, which would have been carried through the galaxy on the ice-heads of comets. When the ice melted at high velocities, the polymer dusts were released and may well have been what seeded the first primitive organic compounds on Earth, and in the process made fermentation possible.

The first accidental encounter with an intoxicant must be of fermented natural materials – fallen fruit, palm-sap, honey. There is a weak evolutionary advantage to fermented items, in that they generate energy within the body by means of intracellular transfer. They generate ATP (adenosine triphosphate), which captures and transports the chemical energy obtained from food molecules within cells to assist with the metabolic system. ATP generates the energy for just about all the activity of living beings. But fermented foods and drinks are only very inefficient generators of ATP, making it all but impossible to argue that the recourse to consuming fermented items is a biological necessity. Animals in the wild will seek out spoiled fruit, and so did we. We can only conclude that this was primarily for its effects rather than for any nutritive benefit. There are those who believe that the first crops to be grown at the dawn of the Neolithic era in certain parts of the world were of intoxicants such as tobacco, rather than food crops.

What construction was put on the intoxicated state by its earliest subjects? Of course, it depends on the substance and the type of intoxication, but materials of the inebriating, hypnotic and hallucinogenic classes – roughly, alcohol, psychotropic mushrooms and cacti, cannabis and pure tobacco – would have created a sense of stepping outside of habitual consciousness, perhaps of becoming somebody or something else, of contact with cosmological powers, of entering another realm either parallel to, or else completely removed from, this one, before gradually returning to it. It is the rhythm of flight and return that creates the original practice of intoxication, the idea that a controlled release from the bonds of the present can be incorporated into present experience. This is both a gift to humanity, and a curse, in the sense that to this day, there is still a temptation to see intoxication as something other than what we should ideally, naturally be, something apart from us to which any access is a matter of reprehensible or dangerous self-

indulgence, as opposed to according it a place in the overall repertoire of universal human experience.

It has been suggested that intoxicants, particularly hallucinogenic materials, lie at the origin of all mystical belief and supernatural perception, perhaps even of the idea of divinity itself. If primordial terror didn't first require magic mushrooms, however, they nonetheless undoubtedly deepened and complicated those metaphysical beliefs that a terrifying world had already brought into being. Ergotised grain was the probable sacrament of two thousand years of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the peyote cactus of primeval Aztec and Toltec shamanic rituals. Before they became institutionalised into these shared practices, the visionary states they induced were accorded an objectified external reality of their own by the uncomprehending user. The question is whether all religious ritual is derived from such experiences, or whether ritualistic practices would have developed anyway, as a means of propitiating and soliciting the aid of natural forces, and the intoxicants were subsequently amalgamated into these beliefs and practices in order to help the celebrants to communicate more directly with the gods and the forces of nature. Even when ritualised though, psychoactive states were understood as a parallel reality to which their natural agents provided entry. 'In tears and singing', said Adorno in the postwar era, 'the alienated world is entered.' The first gateway to it was drugs.

What this sets up in humanity is the abiding struggle between the instinct to preserve the self and the impulse to suspend it, to lose it. This is duplicated in every individual's development from childhood to maturity. To maintain a stable, unified self is a great effort, and remains so throughout life. A&H: 'The narcotic intoxication that permits the atonement of deathlike sleep for the euphoria in which the self is suspended is one of the oldest social arrangements that mediate between self-preservation and self-destruction – an attempt of the self to survive itself.' What the experience of intoxicated states does is hold out the possibility of another modality of living, a happier one ultimately, but it is precisely that which is so dangerous to civilised life, which otherwise requires a more or less willing surrender to the compulsion of labour and duty and obedience. If love and works of art and religious belief represent the goals that hover in the middle distance, casting a redemptive light on the present and illuminating the road out of it, intoxicated consciousness represents the easiest, because most readily available, means of achieving that redemption. For this reason only did it become sinful, immoral, and finally illegal.

Psychoactive substances at the dawn of civilisation, when they became a universal sacrament rather than the exclusive preserve of a priestly caste, were both spiritual and social. If they allowed a glimpse of the divine, they also strengthened the bonds between self and other, uniting estranged individuals in a common state of altered consciousness. Indeed, it may be that human togetherness, the togetherness of love and mutual understanding rather than simple cooperation, just is the result of altered consciousness. For this reason, they are not only one of the central supports of symbolic ritual, but of culture itself, of the complexities of social development, the making of war and the celebration of peace, the most elevated achievements of the artistic faculty, the means of ringing in the new year and ringing out the day's labour as occasion stipulates. They point the way beyond the present world to one that could be different. They belong, like culture itself, to humanity. This is a point that should be borne in mind when it comes to assessing not just the legitimacy, but the moral justice, of legal restrictions on their use, which have grown into a network of repressive global law over the past century.

The only substantial example of ritualistic use of any psychoactive substance other than alcohol in the European context took place at the temple of Eleusis in ancient Greece. Originating around

1500 BC, its practice spanned two thousand years through the zenith of classical Athens to the time of Emperor Constantine and the ascendancy of the established Christian church in the eastern Mediterranean. The Eleusinian Mysteries were a vast ten-day ritualistic celebration, attended by thousands every year in a temple to the west of the city of Athens. It was held only once a year in September, in honour of Demeter, goddess of agriculture, to acknowledge her providence at another bountiful harvest-time. The festival climaxed with a day-long procession from Athens to the temple, culminating in a nocturnal ritual in which new initiates would be enrolled into the cult. A sacramental cup was shared, some sacred brew drunk from it, but what was it? The question has been the focus of much academic examination, but remains tantalisingly unsettled. It was called *kykeon*, and descriptions of the ritual in both Greek and Roman writers, Homer and Cicero among them, leave us in no doubt that the celebrants underwent a hallucinatory experience, seeing astonishing visions and entering a benign state of ecstatic consciousness, the memory of which persisted indestructibly. The participants felt they had left the everyday world of travails far behind them, had been reminded of the notion that a joyful life was not an elusive chimera but a real and present possibility. Many of the principal philosophers and writers of classical Athens, as well as Roman royalty during the imperial era, had at least one experience of the Eleusinian ritual, including the great tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles, the poet Pindar, Aristotle and even the metaphysical Plato, who perhaps found himself more attuned to hallucinogenic intoxication than to the base vulgarity of the alcoholic kind.

At the conclusion of the Mystery night, after much exhilarated dancing and celebration had gone on under the influence of the *kykeon*, the Eleusinians assembled in an internal enclosure within the huge temple complex. At the bidding of the officiating priest, a burst of fire would pour forth from behind the enclosure's one great door and, as it swung open, the purple-robed apparition of Demeter herself would be made manifest to the gathering. It is scarcely possible to imagine the effect that an apparent materialisation of the divine presence would have had on sensibilities far less sceptical than those of Plato or Sophocles. Fainting fits, helplessly surging joy, outbreaks of gibbering hysteria must all have been common, and as the goddess withdrew, the spectacle ended with the priest didactically presenting a single cereal grain to the gaze of the new initiates. The Mysteries were theirs too now.

The most favoured theory over the years has been that they were ingesting ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*), a fungus that parasitically attacks cereal grasses, rye in particular, but also wheat and barley. It forms hard little bruise-purple nodules that invisibly take the place of the seeds in these plants, and are massively toxic if regularly swallowed. Their stupefying disorienting effects would doubtless first have been observed in cattle or sheep that had eaten them. Sustained consumption causes traumatic obstruction of the bloodstream, with the result that entire limbs become useless, insensate and finally rotten with gangrene. Outbreaks of ergot poisoning have bedevilled farming communities from time to time over the centuries, usually because the unnoticed fungus will have been consumed in grain used for bread. Since Demeter was the goddess of grain, the sacrament taken at the Eleusinian ceremonies would certainly have been grain-based rather than a wine preparation, which in any case was specifically forbidden. And if the intoxication that proceeded from it really was as psychotropic as the written accounts insist, some form of ergotised beer – or possibly simply a mixture of infected grain with water, and maybe handfuls of mint to make it more palatable – seems the likeliest candidate.

Some cultural historians have rigorously attempted to undermine this theory on the not unreasonable grounds that if ergot had been systematically used in this way, we would expect there to have been, certainly at some point over two thousand years, recorded outbreaks of mass

toxicity. And yet there are none. One argument suggests that a probable explanation for the hallucinatory quality of the experience lies in the fact that celebrants traditionally fasted for several days before the night of the Mystery. In this state, and perhaps mesmerised by the nature of the mass spectacle, the first taste of alcohol, even if it were only normal beer, would have been relatively dramatic. This is an undeniably practical possibility, and yet it seems a feeble proposition to account for the reactions of so dignified a figure as Cicero, who candidly says that what happened to the communicants at Eleusis provided them with a means for living in unalloyed happiness. That would seem a bit strong as a description of the well-known effects of drinking on an empty stomach, but in any case, it would hardly account for the fact that the Mysteries were an arcane procedure, their sacrament a secret. If all they amounted to was drinking after fasting, the more learned at least would have realised what the source of the experience was. Moreover, it would have been practically replicable in everyday life, but nobody appears, over two millennia, to have compared the rapid inebriation of drinking after fasting with Eleusinian ecstasy.

So how to explain the evidently non-toxic effects of ergot if it did indeed lie behind the Mystery? Some have argued that in low concentrations, and used only very occasionally, it need not be particularly dangerous. This seems to me a triumph of hope over probability. Somewhere along the long line, there would have been at least one large-scale disaster, if not several. A single outbreak of ergotism from poisoned rye bread killed 40,000 people in the French district of Aquitaine in the tenth century AD. There is seemingly no such thing as a slight case of ergotism. In most instances, its constrictive effect on the blood-vessels leads to the extremities literally dying on the body and dropping off like withered leaves – and that sometimes within days. Alternatively, it produces convulsive seizures like epilepsy that lead to total delirium. In either event, the chances of survival are vanishingly small. Two more persuasive theories have been advanced. Firstly, we know that the grain that went into the cups at Eleusis was specifically barley rather than rye, and that the strain of ergot to which barley plays host is significantly lower in toxins than rye ergot. Secondly – and this point may well compound the first – soaking the grains in water would effectively separate the hydro-soluble psychotropic alkaloids from the lipo-soluble toxic ones. The preparation of the sacrament was obviously done to a strict, closely guarded recipe. However that may be, when the temple was destroyed, the last ritual use of hallucinogenic substances in Europe was buried in the rubble. The last pagan emperor of Rome, Julian, attempted to revive the flagging cult, and was the last emperor to be initiated into it, but his reign only lasted two years (AD361-363), and interrupted what had already been half a century of Christian government. The temple was officially closed, and then destroyed, about 30 years later.

The European voyages of discovery, antecedents of the colonial enterprise, came upon primal societies all over the unknown world that incorporated the use of intoxicants into their religious rites, their symbolic practices and their social lives. Psychotropic mushrooms, cacti, tree-barks, seeds, resins, alkaloids were everywhere, gleaned from nature in a mythologised, largely forgotten antiquity, pressed into service as agents of group solidarity, cultural elaboration, spiritual insight. When colonists discovered these indigenous intoxication rituals, they made an immediate attempt to eradicate them, with varying degrees of success. In 16th-century Mexico, the Spanish Inquisition began by dismissing indigenous belief in peyote (the natural plant source of the hallucinogenic alkaloid mescaline) as mere superstition. Inasmuch as it was used in divining the future, they were on secure ground. However, they also denied even the psychoactive effects of the plant, claiming that they were purely imagined:

...neither the said herb nor any other can possess the virtue or inherent quality of producing the effects claimed, nor can any

cause the mental images, fantasies and hallucinations on which the above stated divinations are based. In these latter are plainly perceived the suggestion and intervention of the Devil... [1620]

But if the effects were purely imaginary, why would peyote have to be banned? It seems unlikely that the Inquisition's officers on the ground actually believed the official line. They could see for themselves that the intoxicated state was not faked, but in any event, peyote proved uncontrollable. Not only did the indigenous peoples cling tenaciously to it, the semi-converted among them managed – despite the attentions of the Inquisition – to effect a compromise in which peyote was incorporated pragmatically into Christian ceremonial. By the end of the 17th century, the Coahuila group of northern Mexico had successfully appropriated the concept of the patron saint for their own devotion to peyote. El Santo de Jesús Peyotes was his name, and both the nomenclature and the eucharistic practice of sanctifying the peyote cuttings at an altar were enough to persuade the Inquisitors that the Christian God's influence had taken root. Sometimes the peyote Jesus, also known as El Santo Niño de Peyotes, could be glimpsed hovering iridescently among the little cacti that he loved and cared for.

Ritual hallucinogenic use closer to home came to light among the tribal peoples of Siberia, for some of whom the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom species was so highly prized, it was used as currency in a thriving barter economy. When the Russians first encountered these peoples in the 17th century, they were bemused by the strange behaviour that ingestion of the mushrooms, either dried or boiled in a sort of soup, caused in them. The most repulsive aspect of it to the Cossacks was that after the hallucinatory state began to fade, the tribesman would urinate into a vessel, and then either drink his bladder's contents himself or offer them to another. Urine-drinking was also encountered towards the end of the 19th century among the Coast Salish native group of the northwestern tip of Washington State, distant descendants of the first eastward migration into the Americas across the Bering Strait at about 10,000 BC. The explanation for this phenomenon was only provided in modern times, when it was shown that *Amanita*, in common with other hallucinogens, remains active in the urine, albeit at lower potency. Finding the whole spectacle deeply unedifying, the Russians attempted to suppress the mushroom trade in Siberia, but failed. Even when they introduced distillation to the region, not all its inhabitants obediently turned to simple spirit-drinking instead. The Koryak of eastern Siberia, having learned to distil a kind of rudimentary eau-de-vie from bilberries, would then steep the mushrooms in it, drink the resulting infusion, and go on to consume the urine it produced.

Prior to the era of medical concern, psychoactive materials belonged to anybody who had the means to procure them. It was accidentally discovered that the ancient panacea of opium, when smoked or tinctured in alcohol, produced a state of visionary narcosis, for which property it was fancifully invested by writers and artists of the Romantic generation with the quality of a creative catalyst. In 1799, Humphry Davy sat in the Avon Gorge in western England in the dead of night, out of his skull on nitrous oxide, and dreamed of a reconciled world that would no longer need the perennial toxin of alcohol. The swallowing of hashish would trigger the same hopes for aesthetic productivity and philosophical insight in the Paris of the 1840s. The quest was to see what uses psychoactive, specifically hallucinogenic, states might be put to beyond that of vulgar entertainment.

If the classical period in ancient Greece and Rome marks the watershed, when intoxicants pass from being central to devotional ritual and become an aspect of social conviviality too, there is a

similar, though less clearly defined, transition over the course of the 19th century from intoxicated states as the spur to creativity and transports of the soul to being purely recreational in the sense that alcohol had long been. If you are not a poet or a painter, and you don't necessarily consider your soul to be in need of transporting beyond a weekly attendance at church, what intoxicants return to being is simply what they always were in prehistory, before any ritualistic or symbolic meanings were attached to them, a means of temporarily altering one's state of consciousness for its own fascinating sake. This is what happened to all those substances that had been divorced from their original cultural contexts – cannabis, coca, opium – and become instruments of pleasure for their own sake in western industrial societies, especially where, as with coca and opium, they were concentrated into their active alkaloids as cocaine and morphine or semi-synthetic derivatives such as heroin.

What this leads to is the question of whether people have the right of access to these states of consciousness, and what the proper response of state authorities ought to be when uncontrolled use of them begins to create growing medical problems. It was the developing awareness of physical addiction in the 19th century that led first to attempts to find magic-bullet cures for it (morphine was once suggested as a cure for cocaine addiction, and then heroin in turn as a solution to morphine addiction), and then when that failed, to apply the legislative sledgehammer in a fateful attempt to cut off the supply of them to civil society altogether. The greatest conspiracy ever mounted against the mass of humanity – greater than organised religions, greater than capitalism, greatest of all because so enormously ambitious in its reach – is the effort to close off access to alternative mental states completely.

The past century of obsessive legislating, much of it under the auspices of the United Nations and its precursor, the League of Nations, some of it at the behest of successive administrations in Washington, is only the blink of an eye in the context of historical time. Its roots lay in the medicalising of intoxicated states which began in the latter half of the 19th century, and with which legal restrictions were to proceed hand in hand. If the excessive and dysfunctional use of intoxicating substances could be shown to be a matter of whatever demonic power they contained within them, which had the potential to ensnare the feeble-minded, the weak-willed, the criminally predisposed, the naively curious, savages, juveniles, idiots, women, only entire removal of the means of access to them could free society of their noxious influence. This was to be achieved firstly by permitting only licensed medics and pharmacists to dispense them, then by prohibiting the attempt to sell them on even when they had been legitimately purchased, and then by criminalising mere possession of them. The result has been a widespread public health catastrophe and the unintended encouragement of a global black market racket founded on the exploitation of impoverished farmers, ruthless gang networks prepared to kill indiscriminately to protect their territories, the criminalisation of blameless citizens, and an entirely unregulated street trade often selling fatally toxic materials to its eternally trusting customers.

In short, intoxication in the last century has hit rock bottom. If it once pointed the way to a transfigured consciousness of the world, the message of today's hyper-legislation and relentless medical propaganda is that it is always either a critical problem, or on the way to becoming one. While mass culture and the pop philosophy of self-help books are endlessly fond of encouraging the citizen of the global economy to dream big, never to give up on his dreams, to follow his dreams wherever they will take him, on the spurious grounds that anything can happen if you want it enough, all the way to becoming a millionaire, a megastar, president of the United States, the means that have actually lain at his disposal throughout human history, by which his consciousness of what was possible could be transformed more readily and more concretely than

by dreams, have been turned instead into something that can only make him unhappy and unwell. This is an attempt at anthropological engineering that was hugely ambitious in its scope, and has produced, as we have seen, one of the greatest administrative disasters ever visited on free peoples.

What we have to relinquish is the notion that intoxicants are the recourse people have for supplying a lack at the centre of their own beings. By contrast, when Adorno, in his late work *Aesthetic Theory*, acknowledges the strength of the comparison between art and intoxicants, he allows that the impact of some artworks can be intoxicating, and in a positive sense indeed, but that the feeling is nothing compared to the pleasure of actual drunkenness. The use of intoxication both as an analogue for, and as a literal consequence of, the strategies we employ to conceal the inadequacy of what life delivers to most of us is, I believe, a culturally specific idea whose time has gone. It speaks stridently through Jung's celebrated dictum that 'every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol or morphine or idealism'.

Much intellectual energy was expended in the twentieth century on what the post-antagonistic society envisioned in the emancipatory political tradition inaugurated by Marx might look like. There would be an end of the economic relations that define individuals by their function and value in an exchange system. There may be an end of armed conflict. It may even be, thought some, that the self-deluding notion of romantic love would wither away, perhaps at a faster rate than the stubbornly undissolving apparatus of the state did. And intoxication? If drugs are only there to provide the illusion of an escape from dreary reality, would they evolve away too? Not a chance. If the alteration of consciousness is indeed a purely consoling operation, then human life in its limitless contingency would still provide us with many occasions to need it – to cope with every accident and disappointment, every personal dilemma and untimely loss of a loved one. If, on the other hand, it is primarily a reinforcement practice, as deeply imprinted in human beings as the desires for good food and sexual pleasure, one can only imagine that such a well-ordered society would provide more time for it. In fact, it is an intricately meshed dialectical compound of the two, and thus – at the very least – doubly indispensable.

Even the most intolerant societies cannot police personal behaviour all the time. The exemplary executions, even summary shootings on the spot, carried out in Islamic jurisdictions on those people caught in possession of alcohol or other drugs have not succeeded in putting intoxicants out of people's grasp. It is precisely because the effort to stamp out intoxication runs up against its near-universality that it proves both impractical, and morally revolting, to keep trying. Even if some new palliative drug were to be found that would annul social and political dissent and keep everybody quietly obedient after all, without compromising their health or creating lifelong dependency, it still wouldn't displace all the others available, both legally and illegally, that go on supplying our need, established already as we emerged from the caves, to change our experience of the world. If drugs are beneficial to human beings, as they very largely have been when used safely and wisely, it is because they reassure us that the faulty world we live in could be different.