Optimal drug use

By Geoffrey Miller

Bravo to Müller and Schumann for their gutsy rethink of drug use as a normal part of human behavior. Their concept of drug instrumentalization suggests that adaptive drug use is a major way that people try to overcome the mismatch between evolved human nature and the peculiar demands of modern society. In this view, humans evolved suites of endogenous psychoactive chemicals such as hormones and neurotransmitters to cope with the behavioral and experiential demands of prehistoric life.

Far-future humans may genetically engineer their brains to secrete a much wider array of useful psychoactives on demand, as depicted in the science fiction 'Culture' novels by Iain M. Banks, in which advanced humanoids can 'gland' substances such as Calm, Gain, Charge, Recall, Focus, Somnabsolute, and Softnow, to promote more effective interactions with technology, people, aliens, and artificial intelligences.

Until that future utopia in which endogenous drug-glands make exogenous drug use largely redundant, we do the best we can with the drugs available so far, for our brains as they work now, to cope with our alienation and anomie, with monotony at work and monogamy in marriage, with anxiety and depression, and with the existential burdens of being a mortal consciousness in a godless cosmos.

Against that background, what happens if we take the Müller and Schumann notion of drug instrumentalization even more seriously than they do, with regard to drug policy, education, legalization, research funding, and personal use by researchers? So far, three approaches have dominated the debates over drug policy:

1) the criminal justice model: punitive prohibition, the drug user as criminal, harm elimination, abstinence as the goal, the War on Drugs, moral panic, zero tolerance, 12-step programs;

2) the public health model: decriminalization, the drug user as patient, harm reduction, moderation as the goal, cost/benefit analysis;

3) the libertarian model: legalization, the drug user as normal citizen, benefit maximization, happiness as the goal, freedom and civil liberties, regulation and taxation to reduce any negative externalities of drug use, the Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics, techno-progressivism and transhumanism.

The Müller and Schumann article can be read as advocating the public health model over the criminal justice model, but it also shows sympathies with the more radical libertarian model in which drug use is a typical part of adult life.

That is, what if we take drugs forever out of the moral/legal/propaganda domain and put them into the pragmatic domain where we treat them like cars – often useful, sometimes thrilling, rarely dangerous, but always demanding respect and caution?

One implication is that the goal of drug policy should be to maximize the benefit/cost ratio of drug use in society, rather than just minimizing risk. Whereas the risk-minimization paradigm focused on the fact that a small proportion of people use drugs too much, a benefit-maximization paradigm inspired by Muller & Schumann suggests that most people have not tried enough drugs, do not use enough drugs, and do not manage their drug use as optimally as they might.

Thus, learning how to use drugs effectively should be an important part of formal education, with safe opportunities for exploring their various subjective effects, actual benefits, and potential risks. Debates over drug legalization should acknowledge not just the prevalence of adaptive drug use over addiction, but a fundamental human right to use mind-altering substances except when such use clearly imperils others (as when driving or pregnant). Given the diverse and complementary benefits of different drugs for different social, sexual, occupational, cognitive, recuperative, self-medicative, and existential-exploratory purposes, each drug should be legal unless its benefit/cost ratio demonstrably approaches zero.

Moreover, human welfare would be maximized by society allocating more resources to the discovery of new drugs that yield new benefits or reduced side-effects compared to currently available drugs. Drug discovery should prioritize not just drugs to alleviate mental illnesses, but drugs that allow normal humans to learn, work, socialize, mate, parent, enjoy life, and explore human consciousness more effectively.