

Struck by (bottled) lightning

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Humanist dilemmas III

PART ONE

To drink or not to drink? That is the question I turn to in this article. Religions such as Islam and Hinduism tell their followers what to believe in this regard. Other religions such as Christianity accept alcohol (at least when taken in moderation) by using it in their worship. Humanists, as always, must make up their own minds.

Drinkers recently took heart from official advice that, taken in moderation, alcohol is good for that central organ. Their new confidence was immediately dashed by a rebutter from Hans Emblad of the World Health Organization. Such advice, Hans solemnly said, is not the result of scientific research. On the contrary it is inspired by commercial interests who want to sell alcohol.

I shall not attempt to resolve this dilemma. All I intend to do is take a gentle canter through the many pronouncements that have been made on this vexed topic, just to see if there is wisdom, or at least entertainment, to be gleaned from them.

Voices in favour

Bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew! Thus pertinently commanded the gentleman in the small-clothes in *Nicholas Nickleby*. It's an invitation to warm the cockles of your heart.

If on my theme I rightly think,
There are five reasons I should drink;
Good wine; a friend; because I'm dry;
Or lest I should be, by and by;
Or - any other reason why.

Thus **Henry Aldrich**, revered seventeenth-century dean of Christ Church Oxford - in a state of confusion, no doubt alcohol-induced.

Throughout recorded history people have been very ready to find reasons for drinking. **Winston Churchill** said the long prowess of the English navy was based on rum, buggery and the lash (the order is significant). To his reproachful wife, Churchill added significantly: always remember Clemmie, that I have taken more out of alcohol than it has taken out of me. The music halls vociferously sang much the same of his predecessor at 10 Downing Street, **Herbert Henry Asquith**:

Mr Asquith said
In a voice serene and calm
Another little drink
Wouldn't do us any harm
Another little drink, another little drink
Another little drink wouldn't do us any harm.

At about that time **George Bernard Shaw** put into the mouth of his armaments millionaire Undershaft the sentiment that alcohol is an admirable commodity that enables parliament to do things at eleven o'clock at night that no sane person would do at eleven o'clock in the morning. Times have of course changed. All our MPs are now sober at every hour of their attendance in the House.

Everyone desires happiness. They who see no other way of achieving it turn to alcohol. When there is plenty of wine, then sorrow and worry take wing. **Maynard Keynes**, asked late in life if he had any regrets, replied that he wished he had drunk more champagne. The famous Greek scholar Porson, his predecessor at Cambridge, said:

I went to Frankfurt and got drunk
With that most learn'd professor Brunck
Then went to Worts and got more drunken
With that more learn'd professor Ruhnken.

What does drunkenness not accomplish? **Horace** said it unlocks secrets, confirms our hopes, urges the indolent into battle, lifts the burden from anxious minds, and teaches new arts. Wine, the essence of sunshine trapped in the grape, carries a lilt of romance in its very name.

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
Jungle apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine.

That, you will say, is the intoxication of language, surmounting meaning. What of sunny Palestine, when now absorbed in sombre Israel? Please! Have some respect. We must not ask such practical questions when guests in the land of squiffy poesy.

Come to that, there are potables other than wine. **Samuel Johnson** essayed a ranking: claret is the liquor for boys, port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy. **Richard Bentley** had earlier expressed his own preference for port, shrewdly adding that claret would be port if it could. **Washington Irving** condemned the yet humbler tipples of mere working men: they who *drink* beer, will *think* beer.

But what of that humblest drink of all, mockingly known as Adam's ale? Mark Twain helpfully pointed out that water taken in moderation could hurt nobody. **G. K. Chesterton** did not care where the water went if it didn't get into the wine. But tipplers fear the man who drinks water. He can recall this morning what the rest of us said last night.

Remember Euboulos the sober, you who pass by,
And drink: there is one Hades for all men.

Our society has an ambivalent attitude to drink. Frowning on drunkards, we are suspicious of abstainers. Dost thou think, Sir Toby Belch asked Malvolio, that because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale? The key to our fear of the abstaining listener is expressed in a saying of Pliny the Elder: *in vino veritas*. Truth lies at the bottom of the glass. When we have happily emptied the glass, truth springs out and confronts us. Drunkenness never creates vices, but it brings them to the fore. Though we at all times do our best to hide our ignorance, this is harder and harder as we stretch and relax over alcohol. When the wine is in, the wit is out.

A worse crime of drink is that it crushes the innocent. Sober, the weakling masters his inadequacy - as he is compelled to do. Drunk, he wreaks feeble vengeance on whoever stands

nearby. Maturity has arrived when we stop punishing others for what lies within us. The drunkard who is still obstreperous has not yet managed to forgive himself.

The main reason we drink is that it makes us feel good. Who loves not wine, women and song - he is a fool his whole life long.

Fill ev'ry glass, for wine inspires us,
And fires us
With courage, love and joy.
Women and wine should life employ.
Is there aught else on earth desirous?

Yet some few choice souls can, by the sheer determination to be merry, obtain the effect of alcohol without its actual costly presence in their veins. Young children do this all the time. Adults increasingly find it difficult. **Charles Lamb**'s poverty-stricken Captain Jackson, in his cottage on the Bath road, managed it easily. He entertained lavishly by sheer force of his instinct for hospitality. 'Wine we had none,' Lamb recorded, 'nor, except on very rare occasions, spirits; but the *sensation* of wine was there'. Some few sensitive people, often Irish women, can without touching a drop themselves progressively become intoxicated as others drink all around them. This is empathy raised to a height. My own Irish wife has it.

After all that moralising, it is the hour to be drunken! The hour has indeed struck, and has struck us drunkards down. So as to escape being the martyred slaves of time, be ceaselessly drunken. On wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish. Thus sang Baudelaire.

Man, being reasonable, must get drunk;
The best of life is but intoxication.

The Bible bids believers: Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart. A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, drink and be merry. Wine maketh glad the heart of man.

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -
And Wilderness were Paradise enow.

There is in all of us, said Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, a demand for the superlative - so much so that the poor devil who has no other way attains it by getting drunk. In vain moralists tell us that the man of pleasure, by a hopeless attempt to be more happy than any man can be, is often more miserable than his abstemious fellows. We gaily riposte with Byron-

Let us have Wine and Woman, Mirth and Laughter:
Sermons and soda-water the day after.

In closer detail, what are the advantages alcohol can give? First, it is a relaxant. When the life-press tightens our nerves and bunches our muscle, the wine-press bubbles forth liquor to smooth them all out.

Wine can of their wits the wise beguile,
Make the sage frolic, and the serious smile.

One noted frolic was that of a naval lieutenant-commander of the name of Woodroffe. Invited by the BBC to give a commentary on the Spithead naval review of 1937 he memorably announced to the wireless listeners (of whom my fourteen-year old self was one): 'The fleet's lit up.' It was, and so was he; as he proved by repeating that treasured phrase a number of times.

Next, alcohol can give confidence to the uncertain and diffident. As Mr Dooley says: 'Dhrink niver made a man better, but it has made many a man *think* he was better'. If an empty-headed man be discreet enough to take to hard drinking in his youth, before his emptiness is ascertained, his friends invariably credit him with a host of shining qualities which, we are later given to understand, lie baulked and frustrated by his one unfortunate weakness Drink.

More than confidence, drink can give courage. This is known for some reason as Dutch courage - an unwarranted aspersion on that valorous race. Who, after wine, fears war's hardships? As **Robert Burns** put it-

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!
Wi' tippeny, we fear nae evil;
Wi' usquaebae, we'll face the deevil!

A sorrowful person speaks of drowning their sorrows; and this is indeed another kindly function of alcohol. Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.

Then trust me, there's nothing like drinking
So pleasant on this side the grave;
It keeps the unhappy from thinking,
And makes e'en the valiant more brave.

Violent pleasures which reach the soul through the body are generally of this sort - they are relievers of mental pain. Anxiety is the name psychiatrists give such pain.

Drink! for you know not whence you came, nor why:
Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where.

In alcohol some seek oblivion. Others, more sensible or in less pain, merely seek heightened consciousness. For those with psychological or emotional problems, alcohol (like God) can be comforting. There's naught so much the spirit calms as rum and true religion.

Alcohol does more than calm. Taken in sufficient quantity, it alters consciousness. By this means we can change momentarily the dimensions of our life. The basics shift sideways, or even upwards. Instead of living all our lives as just *one* being, we don from time to time the temporary skin of another. Through that one's eyes, we see all the things in our old familiar world a little differently.

Consciousness-raising floods the emotions, for good or evil. If we are good, our goodness is magnified. If we are evil (and there are evil people), the restraints on our vices slacken. Either way, our ordinary senses become keener. As we glance at some familiar object, it springs to our gaze more sharply. It has suffered a sea-change, into something richer and passing strange. Sounds reach the tympanum with a veil removed.

More important, alcohol can give visions more true. That is why the bodies of people capable of visions, such as **Winston Churchill**, survive the onslaughts of the poison alcohol and outlive their contemporaries. Churchill, who towards the end drank a bottle of brandy a day, lived into his nineties. Only when his brain at last ceased to give birth to ideas of value did his body acknowledge the late signal and succumb.

Alcohol brings to life dear memories:

Kiss but the crystal's mystic rim,
Each shadow rends its flowery chain,
Springs in a bubble from its brim
And walks the chambers of the brain.

Above all, those who resort to grain or grape gain a quick escape to insight. Ascetic hermits acquire vision on bread and water, very slowly and with much pain. Alcohol provides a short cut. It can be the impatient one's route to enlightenment.

PART TWO

The other side of the coin

What of the other side of the coin? Just what harm can drink do to us?

First, we acknowledge that some people possess a body without a head. Like Othello, they have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking. For such unfortunates especially, excess brings on vacancy. To dispute with one who is unfathomably drunk is to dispute with an empty house. In eighteenth-century London the motto in the back streets was: drunk for a penny; dead drunk for twopence (clean straw free).

Drink *can* damage health. The body really prefers to be without it.

Little drops of porter,
Frequent sips of stout,
Make the breathing shorter,
Cultivate the gout.

An intake of alcohol can make us indifferent to peril. The peril may be to ourselves, which is bad enough. When the cock is drunk, says an Ashanti proverb, he forgets about the hawk.

Worse, the peril may be to other people - who have not had the pleasure of downing the drinks that made us so heedless. With powers of co-ordination voluntarily impaired, we betray both ourselves and our neighbour. The wise stay at home when drunk - particularly if owning that modern instrument of death a motor car.

If he does go out to drink, the toper may become rowdy and boisterous. **Walter Scott** tells us in *Guy Mannering* what this can lead to-

Gin by pailfuls, wine in rivers,
Dash the window-glass to shivers!
For three wild lads were we, brave boys,
And three wild lads were we;
Thou on the land, and I on the sand,
And Jack on the gallows-tree.

His aggression released, the hectic tippler may commit assault or even murder. His libido released, he may commit rape.

Or he may *try* to commit that last - but find himself not able to succeed. For lechery drink provokes and unprovokes. It provokes the desire, but takes away the performance. O God,

cried Othello, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains! That we should with joy, pleasance, revel and applause transform ourselves into beasts!

Because of these possible evil consequences, some religions have declared the consumption of alcohol to be sinful. **Richard Haines**, who in 1684 sought a royal patent for distilled cider, pleaded on behalf of this liquor that 'Tis so farr from Clogging the Stomach, or clouding the Brain with thick and muddy vapours, that I do believe a man may, *were it not a Sin*, be fuddled and sober two times in a Day without mischief to his health'.

Some say that even the joy drink gives is spurious. Drunkenness, wrote **André Gide**, is never anything but a *substitute* for happiness. It amounts to buying the dream of a thing when you haven't got money enough to buy the dreamed-of thing in fact. *Money enough?* What a mercenary thought! Does not this Frenchman know that most things we long for are not obtainable for cash? People, said Venter Nicholl, take to drink principally because they are not accorded the respect or friendship or love that they feel is their due. Yet Dr Johnson said-

'Wine gives a man nothing. It neither gives him knowledge nor wit; it only animates a man, and enables him to bring out what a dread of the company has repressed.'

On the other hand, as Charles Lamb wrote in his *Confessions of a Drunkard*, an astonishing piece of self-revelation that should be compulsory reading for every imbibor, the drinking man is never less himself than during his sober intervals. That is a sad conclusion. No one can be content to feel that his or her true self is drug-induced. We prefer to think that if and when the self chooses to select the alcoholic realm, that is an available choice and no more. For the rest of our time, we are content to be our drug-free self. *That* is our true self, we like to think. Perhaps foolishly. Bodies are, after all, made up of cells composed of chemicals in which very small organisms frolic at our expense.

For the young especially, to settle for toxic dreams is a sad second best. When actual situations conflict with the fantasies of an immature person, he or she may escape through drink into a world the conflict does not penetrate. For the self-indulgent, the joys derived from drinking are a synthetic gratification swamping the frustration felt when heartfelt wishes are not granted. At times, such frustration has been experienced on a mass scale. In Victorian England, drunkenness called forth a huge temperance movement. Drink was freely condemned as the curse of the working classes. (This attracted the spirited retort that work is the curse of the drinking classes.) *Beer is best*, proclaimed the brewer. *Left alone*, added the temperance campaigner.

On the continent of Europe, temperance movements began earlier. In the sixteenth century the Order of St Christopher flourished in Germany. The members were solemnly pledged not to drink more than seven goblets of wine at one meal 'except in cases where this measure is not sufficient to quench their thirst'.

At the farthest extreme from civility lies the scourge of alcoholism, formerly known as dipsomania. This carries in its train the nightmare threat of *delirium tremens*. The dependence may be physical, bringing measurable withdrawal symptoms in the absence of the drug. Or it may be psychological, demanding an intake of alcohol to free the victim from unbearable psychic tensions. Either way, the person is then dependent on drink to function efficiently as a social being. But the very substance on which he or she relies to function socially has the inexorable effect of impairing physiological functioning. The body revolts. The imbibor becomes chronically poisoned.

Sometimes an unhappy one subconsciously *longs* to poison their poor body. He or she then drinks to destruction; alcohol being the chosen instrument of the death-wish. There is the sad knowledge, as another glass is downed, that they are ravaging the only true asset they have. In extreme cases, inflicting this wanton ruin on oneself brings a perverse and morbid satisfaction. It ends in the welcoming arms of perpetual unconsciousness. The death wish has triumphed.

Conclusions

So we see that drink carries men and women through every extreme. That is why they have written so often and so much about its effects. No simple verdict can be given, but it is clear that the talisman is *moderation* or the happy mean. Drink moderately, said Cervantes, for drunkenness neither keeps a secret nor observes a promise. Or as Pascal put it, give a man no wine and he cannot find truth; give him too much, the same.

Wine is a good familiar creature if it be well used. Many however seek good nights only to lose good days.

They never taste who always drink;
They always talk, who never think.

The best of things, beyond their measure, cloy. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging. Look not upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, for at the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.

Intemperance is the plague of sensuality, of which temperance is not the bane but the seasoning. On the other hand, as **Somerset Maugham** said, excess on occasion is exhilarating. It prevents moderation from acquiring the deadening effect of habit.

To end we may look in more depth at the two principal virtues drink has, when it is used modestly. These are that it helps bring people closer, and that it imparts insight. One virtue is convivial; the other individual.

From wine, what sudden friendship springs! Over the bottle many a soulmate is found. Mr Dooley said, with tongue in cheek: 'There is wan thing an' on'y wan thing to be said in favour iv dhrink, an' that is that it has caused manny a lady to be loved that otherwise might've doied single'.

Drink insulates a group of people in thought, while it unites them in feeling. If a quarrel arises, drink can smooth the waters (unless it is a drunken quarrel).

A bumper of good liquor
Will end a contest quicker
Than justice, judge or vicar.

The processes of upbringing induce in most of us a degree of inhibition which unless occasionally relieved can be stultifying and harmful. The practice of *social* drinking is the axis of social life. It makes total strangers relax and mingle. Shyness evaporates, and people are released to be themselves. A lot less fearful of their own failings, they become a little less inclined to criticise those of others. Goodwill and good fellowship are set free. Wine in proportion maketh glad the heart of man.

The one virtue of *solitary* drinking is that it can give insight: malt does more than Milton can to justify God's ways to man. This attribute can be particularly valuable for the artist, who depends for effectiveness on perceptiveness.

Wine, to a gifted bard,
Is a mount that merrily races;
From watered wits
No good has ever grown.

Or as it was put by John Hay, wine is like rain. When it falls on the mire, it but makes it the fouler. But when it strikes the good soil, it wakes it to beauty and bloom.

Wine leads the poet to a new dimension, sited on a loftier plane. Unseen truths and insights become visible. Phrases of validity frame themselves inside the head. What is familiar suddenly looks brand new. The tired eye of the poetic soul refreshes itself, and is made keener.

The proper time for drinking is when the sun is over the yardarm. Brandy, says a German proverb, is lead in the morning, silver at noon, gold at night. Or, as the song of Solomon puts it, woe unto them that rise up early in the morning so that they may follow strong drink. The day's work is to be done without alcoholic assistance. Work now; play later when day is done. Then is the time to stretch out your legs under the table.

When it comes to hard physical labour, water is always preferred. Indeed it is usually felt as a boon. In **Rudyard Kipling**'s words-

You may talk o' gin an' beer
When you're quartered safe out 'ere,
And you're sent to penny fights and Aldershot it;
But when it comes to slaughter
You will do your work on water,
An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it.

Alcohol is a good servant but a bad master. Life would be simple if we could treat this demon or spirit as either all good or all bad - but life is not simple, and is evidently not meant to be. So, as with many things, we must try to use the drink that has been sent us for the good, and not abuse it for the bad.

I desire to end my days in a tavern drinking,
May some Christian hold for me the glass when I am shrinking;
That the Cherubim may cry, when they see me sinking,
'God be merciful to a soul of this gentleman's way of thinking'.

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