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Virtuous drug use in the neoliberal age

Caroline Chatwin^a and Richard G. Alexander^b

^aSchool of Law and Criminology, University of Greenwich, London, UK; ^bWillem Pompe Institute for Criminal Law and Criminology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Background: Agency over personal happiness has become established as a normative discourse within the self-interested agendas of neoliberal individuals. Within this context, we argue that it is possible to frame drugtaking as “virtuous.”

Methods: We aim to: i) provide evidence that a neoliberal individualized presentation of drugtaking as “virtuous” is emerging; and ii) explore the processes by which such a framing is legitimated by society.

Results: Findings suggest drugtaking can be constructed as “virtuous” when engaged in by good neoliberal citizens as part of the rational pursuit of personal happiness. Virtuous drug use, however, could not be styled as such unless it was legitimated by wider society through its congruence with prevailing norms. An examination of the recent rapid shift in construction of psychedelics demonstrates the methods by which drugtaking can be culturally accommodated and socially legitimated within the neoliberal context.

Conclusion: Our presentation of virtuous drug use makes a significant contribution to the field because it offers an over-arching conceptual frame encapsulating the processes by which perceptions of illegal drug use undergo cultural transformation. Ultimately, however, we find that the construction of “virtuous” drug use protects the status quo and proliferates the inequalities prevalent in constructions of drugtaking.

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Introduction

In neo-liberal societies ideal citizens are construed as rational, productive actors, who are expected to take steps to secure their own health and wellbeing and work towards self-improvement (Rose, 1990). Within such societies, the use of illegal drugs is problematized (Baachi, 2009) as dangerous, irrational and irresponsible, interfering with productivity, agency, self-care and responsabilization culture. People who use drugs are portrayed as diseased and lacking in control (Levine, 1978), as natural enemies of the state (Christie & Bruun, 1969) rejected by mainstream society (Goffman, 1963), labelled as deviant (Young, 1971) and stigmatized (Room, 2005). At the same time, people who have developed dependent drug use are reconstituted as “autonomous choice makers” (Riley et al., 2010, p. 446) who must take responsibility for their addiction and take steps towards their own recovery. These perspectives on drug-taking constitute direct outgrowths of neoliberal ideology; individual autonomy is valorized as an ethics of self-interest and personal responsibility and constitutes the prevailing ideological operant in the present stage of capitalist society (Wrenn & Waller, 2017).

Recent years, however, have seen these dominant neo-liberal narratives around drug use somewhat disrupted, particularly under the influence of the “happiness turn.” Happiness in general has become established as a normative discourse within

the self-interested agendas of the neoliberal individual, defining and dictating what is healthy, prosperous, and appropriate for the well-adjusted participant in neoliberal society (Ahmed, 2010). The pursuit of personal happiness has become a super goal and self-evident good which can be primarily achieved by engaging in personal development activity aiming to transform the self (Binkley, 2014; Spicer & Cederstrom, 2015). For the self-governed individual, a sense of identity and purpose is thus derived from reflexive acts of choice and consumption in relation to psychological self-development (Rindfleisch, 2005).

The consumerist rationale that underpins the happiness discourse is dependent upon the consumption of marketplace commodities and a “healthism” industry organized around the maintenance of individual mind and body as cultural signifiers of an appropriate lifestyle morality (Crawford, 1980). A wide array of material and immaterial commodities are sold as products, techniques, and services for self-help, self-care, and self-actualization: the neoliberal citizen is presented with a variety of opportunities to mold themselves into a well-adjusted, effective individual who contributes to wider social order and stability through actions in their personal life (Hazleden, 2003). The trends mentioned here naturally converge upon existing discussions of consumer culture. In his book *Burnout Society*, for example, Byung-Chul Han (2015) explores the manner in which this centering of

individual freedom and personal happiness can place significant pressure on good neoliberal subjects to continually engage in activity aimed at enhancing, improving and reinventing the self. The result is that people are no longer repressed by external constraints but are instead driven by an internal pressure to constantly achieve, self-optimize, and excel in various aspects of personal and professional life.

Within this context of individual happiness, self-enhancement and reinvention, and drawing on recent and diverse drug-related research, our article aims to introduce the concept of “virtuous drug use” as an overarching frame linking the use of drugs to the neoliberal trend of “healthy consumptive happiness.” The work is significant because it builds upon research findings from individual studies in specific areas, to suggest we are experiencing a “cultural transformation” (Pennay & Measham, 2016, p. 188) of internal and external representations of drug use, allowing illegal drugtaking to sometimes be culturally constructed as a “virtuous” activity oriented towards the fulfilment of the individualized goals associated with modern consumer society (Ayes, 2022). In line with Jock Young’s (1971) observation that the ways in which societies respond to psychoactive substances are more important than any effects of the substances themselves, we argue that “virtuous drug use” is not just destigmatized and internally accommodated by individuals, but overtly legitimated in wider society according to the moral imperatives of neoliberal ideology.

We begin by combining a “virtue ethics” approach with an increased emphasis on the requirement for good neoliberal citizens to demonstrate self-governance in their pursuit of personal happiness, to define “virtuous” drugtaking. Next we link its emergence to the proliferation of psychoactive substances aimed at enhancement rather than hedonism, challenging the existing dyadic construction of drugtaking along lines such as medical/non-medical or legal/illegal. Drawing on Askew and Williams’s (2021) definition of “transformative” drug use, we demonstrate that even macro doses of illegal and heavily sanctioned substances can be construed as “virtuous,” provided drug takers align themselves with neoliberal values. Finally, we suggest that the “virtuous” nature of drug use depends not just on the motivations of individual users, but is only possible in situations where it has been socially legitimated by wider society, emphasizing the socio-cultural dynamics which facilitate dramatic shifts in the construction of some drugtaking while simultaneously perpetuating the archetypal status quo in relation to the most vulnerable drug takers.

Defining “virtuous” drug use

People consume drugs to alter their state of consciousness in various ways; different drugs have different effects and each one brings its own moral dimension. Smoking a cigarette for example poses significantly different questions to injecting heroin, demonstrating the implicit social pharmacophobia/philia that renders the use of one drug problematic and another acceptable. In a recent article exploring these significantly differing attitudes to individual drugs, Sjoquist (2023) draws on the work of moral theologian John C. Ford (1902–1989) to ask whether the non-medical use of drugs can ever be defended as a morally acceptable (or virtuous) activity.

Applying a virtue ethics perspective, he suggests that non-medical drug use is usually seen as immoral because it compromises the work ethic and interferes with an individual’s ability to reason—sobriety thus becomes the virtue. In some cases, however, where drug use is functional or used in some way to enhance, he conceives that the benefits are worth any risk of temporary loss of reason, addiction or other harms. He thus concludes that non-medical use of drugs *can* be considered virtuous provided the following conditions are met: the drug is used for some kind of enhancement; any associated loss of reason is temporary or mild in nature and outweighed by the benefits; harms are minimal; and use is moderate.

While the virtue ethics perspective Sjoquist (2023) employs is quite specifically theological and philosophical, it is readily apparent how these criteria for virtuous drug use align with the dynamics of neoliberalism discussed above. Applying these more neoliberal principles, we might thus say that “virtuous” drug use must: 1) enhance or increase happiness as the principal signifier of social prosperity, 2) be informed by the impetus of neoliberal reason 3) conform to the neoliberal emphasis on “healthism,” and 4) mitigate risks of addiction where appropriate. While Sjoquist (2023) concedes that virtuous drug use is possible (he provides the example of an air traffic controller with twin babies at home who are not sleeping well using wakefulness drugs to be able to concentrate and focus at work) he, like others before him (e.g. Sullivan & Austriaco, 2016), cautions that illegal drugs like cannabis are too harmful to benefit from a positive moral evaluation: the harms and incapacities of intoxication will always outweigh the benefits. In what follows, however, we apply a neoliberal lens to virtue ethics to suggest that, in some situations, the non-medical use of even those illegal substances deemed to be most harmful can be presented as a virtuous activity, socially legitimated through their moral proximity to pervading neoliberal social norms.

Our argument for the emergence of virtuous drug use begins by suggesting that the divide between the medical use of drugs to provide treatment or reduce pain and the non-medical or recreational use of drugs for their pleasurable effects is artificially dyadic. In reality, and especially in line with the neoliberal direction to take responsibility at an individual level for one’s own health, happiness and self-care, prescription drugs are increasingly used recreationally (Pino et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2013) and recreational drugs are increasingly used therapeutically (Bornemann et al., 2021; Holborn et al., 2023). Askew and Williams (2021, p. 2) note that these kind of “over simplistic categorisations and binaries ... flourish around substance use,” and argue that by challenging them we can reframe the use of drugs around the practice of “enhancement.” Coveney et al. (2011), for example, have done so, suggesting that the duty of the neo-liberal citizen to take responsibility for maintaining or optimizing their health has led to a “pharmaceuticalisation of life” whereby health problems are increasingly conceptualized as having a pharmaceutical solution:

The customization of bodies through tailor-made medicines, technologies and cosmetic surgery in addition to the proliferation of lifestyle drugs are thought to mark the move away from medicine as therapy towards medicines as enhancement (Coveney et al., 2011, p. 384).

Thus, in tandem with the neoliberal marketisation of self-care, healthism and happiness, psychoactive substances, whether legal or otherwise, can be reconstructed as a legitimate means to enhance or improve one's existing state.

The idea that a variety of psychoactive substances can be used as a means of enhancing the self is key to our argument that non-medical drug use can sometimes be presented as virtuous. It chimes with the recognition that the attainment of functional goals can be a motivation for non-medical drug use (Boys et al., 2001) encapsulated by instrumental drug theory:

We propose that the large majority of non-addicted humans who consume psychoactive drugs as a normal part of their lives, take drugs because the drugs' effects are useful for their personal goals (Muller & Schumann, 2011, p. 295).

Ultimately, we will argue, in line with Askew and Williams (2021), that it is not as simple as dividing substances into those that enhance vs those that do not, but rather it is increasingly conceivable that the use of any substance may be framed either as a method of enhancing the self or as something else. More important to acknowledge is *how* the use of certain substances becomes equated with specific societal values—in the pursuit of which individualized ends can the use of illegal drugs become socially legitimated? Answering this question demonstrates how it does not necessarily follow that everybody can present their drug use as being virtuous.

Drug research abounds with examples of the unequal ways in which people who use drugs are “assembled around stereotypical notions of race, class, age and gender” (Taylor et al., 2016). Statistics on drugs and ethnicity provide the most obvious example of this phenomenon. In the UK, the numbers of white people reporting drug use are historically consistently higher than the numbers of black people (Eastwood et al., 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2017), yet young black men are much more likely to be stopped and searched for suspected drug possession, and are treated more seriously for drug offences at every stage of the criminal justice system (Shiner et al., 2019). These disparities can be seen even more starkly in the US where, for more than 30 years, a disproportionate sentencing policy mandated a 5 year prison sentence for just 5 grams of crack (a less expensive derivative of the coca plant more accessible to those living in poverty, including many African Americans) vs 500 grams of cocaine (more expensive and thus more likely to be used by affluent white Americans) (Vagins & McCurdy, 2006). The impact of this disproportionality on young black and Hispanic men has been significant (Alexander, 2010). Summarizing this inequality, Askew and Salinas (2019, p. 315) describe a visible population of drug offenders who come to the attention of criminal justice or treatment services, are often from ethnic minority groups and experience a complex web of inter-related social and economic inequalities, as “low hanging fruit” frequently sanctioned for their drug-taking behaviours. It is important to note here that this visible population of drug users may well engage in drug use for the purposes of enhancement and may feel that they are doing so in ways that satisfy our virtue ethics definition. As we shall go on to argue in our section on social legitimation, however, they are not able to present

their drug use as “virtuous” externally to wider society as they do not fit the mould of a “good neoliberal citizen.”

Askew and Salinas (2019, p. 314) go on to describe the manner in which other more privileged groups appear to experience reduced stigma in relation to their drug use, “whose behaviour goes unchecked, unpunished and therefore is hidden from public view” (Askew & Salinas, 2019, p. 314). Consider for example the recent claims that 11 out of 12 bathrooms in the UK parliament showed traces of cocaine, prompting allegations of a cocaine culture within British government and leading to the issue being raised with the Metropolitan police (Sunday Times, 2021), before being quietly dropped. Or the length of time the widespread provision of prescription opiates to white, middle-class patients was facilitated unchecked in the US, contributing significantly to the sharp rise in drug-related deaths (Dasgupta et al., 2018). Or “women on web,” an organization openly providing abortion medication to countries where it is illegal without attracting law enforcement attention (Fleetwood et al., 2020). Mohammed and Fritsvold (2010) term these groups the “silent majority” of drug takers and argue that their distance from drug using archetypes combined with an ability to draw on legitimate roles and identities, act as protective factors, shielding them from the stigmatizing, marginalizing and harmful effects an association with drug use can bring. Our virtuous drug users also draw on their legitimate roles and identities to avoid the stigmatization that can come from drug use.

Key to existing understandings about how some drug takers are able to avoid stigmatization, however, is the notion that they simply do not often come to the attention of law enforcement or members of society more generally. Askew and Salinas (2019), for example, describe how their participants avoided stigma by keeping their drug use hidden from those around them, presenting themselves as conventional, law-abiding citizens. In this respect, the “silent majority” of people who engage in drugtaking without attracting attention or sanction, differ from our conceptualization of the “virtuous” drug user. Leaving aside theological debates about virtue ethics, to do something “virtuously” means not just to escape attention, but to actively display moral superiority and righteousness about what is being done. Our definition of “virtuous” drugtaking thus depends upon several factors. It must be: underpinned by a neoliberal enhancement agenda in line with our virtue-ethics approach; engaged in by people who can present as good neoliberal citizens; characterized by openness about experiences; and morally legitimated by wider society.

Evidencing virtuous drug use

The recent development of a plethora of Human Enhancement Drugs (HED) in tandem with the proliferation of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), provides a good starting point for exploring the construction of psychoactive drugtaking as a viable method of self enhancement, virtuously engaged in pursuit of the personal goal of happiness. NPS and HED are both unwieldy categorisations designed to encompass the significant increase in the number of psychoactive substances being synthesized and developed for widespread consumption. While

NPS, broadly speaking, encompass substances which are designed to mimic the effects of illegal drugs, HED are primarily valued not for their intoxicating properties, but for their ability to enhance various aspects an individual may wish to develop. Evans-Brown et al. (2012) have subdivided HED by their intention to enhance attributes relating to six different areas: image, performance, weight, sexual prowess, cognition and mood. For the purposes of our argument, a long-standing and familiar example of the use of substances for human enhancement is provided by Anabolic-Androgenic Steroids (AAS) in the pursuit of both performance and image enhancement. Initially the use of AAS, as well as other Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs (PIED) was mainly engaged in by elite athletes or those heavily involved in professional and competitive weightlifting. Over time, however, such drugtaking spread to an increasing number of people interested in improving body image, engaging in physical training and maximizing fitness potential more generally (Christiansen, 2020). The use of AAS and PIED therefore constitute a suitable method of autonomous self-improvement, a mode of virtuous drugtaking that conforms to the neoliberal emphasis on self-interest and responsibility for one's personal care and happiness (Wrenn & Waller, 2017).

Van de Ven and Mulrooney (2017, p. 9) describe how the use of PIED has become culturally normalized amongst this population as just one everyday part of a lifestyle devoted to the enhancement of performance potential:

PIED are often not perceived as something deviant or transgressive but rather are considered to be the norm and just one of several components, such as training and nutrition, when seeking to enhance performance and/or appearance.

Viewed through this lens, the use of PIED can be construed as just another rational or instrumental method by which individuals strive to improve their overall health and work towards personal fitness goals. Their use, alongside a vast array of vitamins and other health-inducing supplements, is often recommended and thus legitimized by personal trainers and gym owners (Salinas et al., 2019; Tavares et al., 2022), allowing end users to feel virtuous about their self-improvement efforts as the maintenance of their individual health and body becomes a cultural signifier of an appropriate lifestyle morality (Crawford, 1980)

Similar arguments can be made in relation to cognitive enhancers, such as Ritalin and Modafinil, drawn upon by Sjoquist (2023) in his assertion that virtuous drug use was possible. The non-medical use of these substances is often engaged in by students and professionals as a method of optimizing work performance and in line with the neoliberal principle of maximizing individual productivity:

Experimentation with neuroenhancement can be seen as a self-governing strategy aimed at achieving continued focused productivity (Vargo & Petróczy, 2016, p. 1).

Cognitive enhancers are often framed as a way to beat sleep, boost performance, and increase productivity, extending one's ability to fulfil a neoliberal work ethic and enhancing rather than limiting one's ability to reason (Fleetwood & Chatwin, 2023). Such drug use therefore taps into widely held

cultural values such as self-determination and entrepreneurship as part of the neo-liberal project of the self (McGuigan, 2014) and broadens the range of optimal human functioning for flourishing, healthy individuals (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). As such, evidence suggests that some users of cognitive enhancers do not regard themselves as engaging in a deviant, taboo or stigmatized activity, but rather in a rational and virtuous action to bring about the normal and legitimate goal of personal productivity. Consider assistant head-teacher, Mark, who when asked what he would do if his boss found out he was using cognitive enhancers responded: "I would just say the truth: that I was using it to work harder" (cited in Daly, 2016); or Amber, a student explaining her experience of using Modafinil: "It was me on the best day I could ever have" (cited in Vargo & Petróczy, 2016, p.7); or Guardian journalist Bridgid Delaney (2016) who wrote about being prescribed a wakefulness drug by her doctor when she needed to get a lot of work done fast. Collectively, these examples, and many others like them, allow the presentation of individual use of cognitive enhancers as "credible, authentic, and legitimate: a community of practice" (Hall et al., 2020, p.81) whereby people "do good by feeling good" (Frederickson, 2013, p. 3).

It is a relatively simple matter to argue that HED such as PIED and cognition enhancers can be used virtuously—that is to say, in a manner that befits the fourfold criteria outlined earlier in this paper (enhances the self/happiness, informed by "healthism", without undue loss of reason or other associated harm, and in moderation). However, it is our intention to further suggest that the use of a range of illegal psychoactive substances, including those usually categorized as the most harmful, can be presented as virtuous. A good starting point concerns the recent practice of microdosing: the consumption of very small quantities of psychedelics "not for the purposes of intoxication but to enhance everyday functioning" (Johnstad, 2018, p. 3939). Fadiman and Korb (2019) list the key perceived benefits of microdosing psychedelics without becoming intoxicated as increased productivity, energy and creativity, not dissimilar to the effects of cognitive enhancers. Despite the harmful and stigmatized reputation of these substances, their virtuous use becomes possible through their association with self-enhancing effects that do not compromise the work ethic and, because they are moderately consumed in small, non-intoxicating quantities, do not significantly interfere with the ability to reason or carry the risk of undue harm. Echoed again are the fourfold criteria of virtuous drug use as psychedelic drugs are presented as a socially accepted solution to the culturally constructed problems of the neoliberal subject, further evidenced by the many media articles drawing on user accounts and interviews to report on using microdoses of hallucinogens like LSD or magic mushrooms to get ahead at work (Solon, 2016), to save your marriage (Williams, 2017), to connect with your children (Garlick, 2019) or to improve wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Batty, 2021).

Finally, we suggest that even those consuming "macro" doses of psychedelics can draw on neoliberal values to present themselves as virtuous, whereby the temporary loss of reason can be justified via the self-enhancing benefits that outweigh the harms, and where use remains moderate. Askew

and Williams (2021) describe personal growth or transformation as a kind of enhancement sometimes achieved through large doses of powerful psychedelics such as ayahuasca and DMT. In doing so, they draw on Duff's (2015, p. 93) assertion that "drug use provides many individuals with an effective means of caring for the self" to establish "transformational drug use" as part of rational and justifiable tools in the pursuit of happiness. As part of the late neoliberal age, the demand for spirituality, healing and personal growth opportunities has expanded exponentially (Bowland, 1999) and often in opposition to established medical authority (Davis & Freethy, 2014). One result has been a proliferation of shamans, mystics, gurus and tantric yoginis offering enlightenment, typically through a medley of contemplative practices offered in tandem with the "ceremonial" consumption of psychedelic drugs.

For example, one online platform operating on the clear-web (which we have chosen not to name) styles itself as offering "the world's largest collection of transformative experiences" as part of a community of 500k+ retreat goers, 4000+ centres and 10,000 teachers. At the time of writing 329 "retreat products" featuring ayahuasca consumption and 1163 focusing on psychedelic and plant medicine were advertised. Neoliberalist ideals reverberate throughout the promotional material:

Every day this world tells us that we're not enough. If only we bought this, looked like that, took the perfect Instagram picture ... then we would be enough. Then we would be happy. But it's a lie. An illusion ... You are already so much more than enough, despite what this world would have you believe. There are many paths to this truth: yoga, meditation, plant medicine, art, community, dance, spirituality, nature. But every path leads within you.

With standard retreat packages priced at \$3000, customers present as middleclass professionals employed as teachers, psychotherapists, accountants, insurance brokers, market researchers and recruitment consultants.

Whilst critical academic research into this area is starting to emerge (Elf et al. 2023; Hartogsohn, 2023), individual motivations for engaging in such behaviour can be readily ascertained from a variety of media sources where ordinary participants enthusiastically expound upon their experiences: A psychedelic retreat helped me "face up to stage four cancer" (The Times, 2024); the experience is "by no means recreational. It's like 10years of intensive therapy in five days" (Deevoy, 2023); it "transformed my mental health" (Stylist, 2024); I participated in a "psychedelic-assisted leadership retreat" (Collins, 2024); "they're not drug dealers—merely intermediaries who assist those looking for a transcendent experience" (The Guardian, 2023). Further, many public figures are equally inclined to promote the use of psychedelics to achieve spiritual and personal growth, seemingly without censure: Pop-science writer Graham Hancock described them as the ultimate adventure in his (now banned) TED talk, advocating their use as a way to challenge oneself; popular US commentator Joe Rogan who regularly discusses using psychedelics on his show describes them as a learning tool; and Prince Harry has spoken openly about how they were useful in addressing the residual grief around his mother's death: "for me they cleared the windscreen, the windshield, the misery of loss" (cited in Gunn, 2023).

Arguably, these examples of people openly discussing, and sometimes extolling, their drugtaking across a range of research articles, media, new media and social media sources, are indicative of a more fundamental change in the mainstream constructions of illegal drugs. In part, as we have argued, this "virtuous" approach to drugtaking becomes possible because neoliberal drug takers have internalized the legitimacy of their behaviour as part of an individualized, self-enhancement agenda emphasizing self-governance and the pursuit of (personal) happiness. As important as these internal representations may be, however, virtuous drug use could not be styled as such unless it was legitimated by wider society through its congruence with prevailing norms and values. The social legitimation of drug use must thus be added to our virtue-ethics definition of virtuous drug use and it is to this crucial aspect that our discussion turns next.

The social legitimation of virtuous drug use

Key to the concept of virtuous drugtaking is an understanding that this kind of drug use is not problematized or stigmatized but is instead socially validated as a legitimate strategy for achieving individualized, neoliberal life goals. Young (1971) argued that societal response to psychoactive substances was more important than any inherent qualities or labels associated with the substances themselves. Continuing in this vein, Parker et al (1998) emphasized the importance of "cultural accommodation" in the journey of any substance from the "margins to the mainstream." Thus far, we have presented evidence which we believe demonstrates that a variety of different psychoactive substances can be used "virtuously" across diverse contexts by socially advantaged groups of people. Here we turn to an exploration of the socio-cultural dynamics without which such a construction would not be possible.

When examining how virtuous drugtaking is socially legitimated it is helpful to reflect upon the ways in which "regular" drug use is not. Singer and Page (2016) have discussed in detail how the interconnected arenas of media industry, governmental discourse, and legislative exchange have routinely portrayed drug users as social outcasts consigned to their role as the human rubbish of contemporary social life (Friedman, 1998). Since the inception of President Nixon's War on Drugs, cultural messages about drug users in the media have reflected an overly simplified worldview of binary opposites composed of the healthy mainstream and its malignant, drug using deviants (Young & Buchanan, 2000). Instead of being recognized as a highly complex social issue, the consumption of illegal drugs for pleasure has consistently and forcefully been presented as both harmful and dangerous, not only to the individual but to society generally (Cunningham, 1998).

The media reporting on "virtuous" drugtaking that we have drawn upon in previous sections, however, provides a stark contrast. Even in relation to micro and macro level doses of psychedelic substances such as LSD, magic mushrooms and DMT, underlying neoliberal narratives of "enhancement" and "happiness" provide a different perspective. The financial times (Schollenbarger, 2023) in a feature on

“wellness travel” suggests retreats ranging from Japanese flower arranging, detoxification in Tuscany, cycling in Crete or Spain, or mind-expanding with DMT in Mexico. Broadsheets feature non-sensational stories about mothers using magic mushrooms as a parenting tool: “I took magic mushrooms to relieve the stresses of motherhood” (The Times, 2023); “It makes me enjoy playing with the kids” (Garlick, 2019). German billionaire Christian Angermayer is reported as using magic mushrooms to get to grips with the ins and outs of Bitcoin (Cormier, 2022) and the ubiquity of psychedelic use within the tech sector is demonstrated in The Onion (2016) parody article “Ayahuasca shaman dreading another week of guiding tech CEOs to spiritual oneness.” Glossy magazines feature the phenomenon: “Inside the great shroom boom” (GQ, 2022), “Guide to Ayahuasca Retreats” (VICE, 2023), “Meet the women who regularly microdose psychedelics” (Cosmopolitan, 2021). Classified as amongst the most harmful illegal substances in the UK context, psychedelics have usually been styled by the media as incompatible with parenting, business success or aspirational travel, but become an entirely different entity when viewed through the neo-liberal lens of self-enhancement in the pursuit of happiness. We argue that this marked reversal signals a new degree of social legitimacy being cast upon a specific category of drugs and drugtakers, validating their prospective use and providing the context within which they can style themselves as “virtuous.”

From Sjoquist’s (2023) virtue ethics perspective it was conceivable that the non-medical use of prescription medicines or HEDs such as modafinil or Ritalin could be presented as “virtuous.” Illegal drugs such as cannabis, however, were too harmful to fit within this category. Yet the transformation of attitude described above relates to substances which are generally categorized within national and international legislation as being among the most harmful of those we have chosen to criminalize, but are presented here as equivalent with healthy mainstream values. As previously outlined, neoliberal values have long been drawn upon to style illegal drugtakers of all kinds as deviant social outcasts undermining socio-cultural norms. In this article we have argued that neoliberal values can *also* be drawn upon to style takers of even the most strictly controlled illegal substances as legitimate and responsible social actors. As we have argued, to be able to claim the “virtuous” label, drugtakers must be engaged in some kind of self-enhancement and present as otherwise productive and law-abiding citizens. Crucially, their claim to “virtue” must also be legitimated by wider society. The significant reversal of attitude in relation to psychedelics provides an important opportunity to begin to draw out the shifts in wider socio-cultural dynamics which have *allowed* some psychedelic drugtakers to present as “virtuous.”

The recent so-called “psychedelic renaissance” is key to understanding the means by which public opinion on psychedelics has transformed. Emerging early interest in the potential medical benefits of psychedelics was curtailed as the global “war on drugs” project took hold, leaving them subject to the stigmatization of substances associated with non-medical or hedonistic use. Recently, however, there has been a renewed and sustained interest in their effectiveness in treating a full range of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety,

PTSD, addiction, and end-of-life distress (Wheeler & Dyer, 2020). As these studies, their findings, and the individuals producing them have become increasingly visible in mainstream news and media outlets a growing acceptance of the substances owing to their purported therapeutic benefits has been observed (Gründer & Jungaberle, 2021). One result of this has been several cities in the United States decriminalizing and lowering enforcement of psychedelic drugs and states such as Oregon going so far as to legalize psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy (Marks, 2023). The medical validation of psychedelics is being facilitated by the rapid creation of a “scientific” infrastructure surrounding them encompassing research institutes, philanthropic organizations and academic conferences (Marlan, 2019). This emerging psychotherapeutic paradigm has coincided with the neoliberal ideology of total individual responsibility for managing the psychological stresses of the life cycle (Rustin, 2015). Therapies offering the possibility for self-enhancement and growth have become the luxury goods of a possessive individualism and global therapeutic consumer culture that fetishes the responsible, autonomous, and resilient social subject (Rimke, 2020). Within this context, the transcendental experiences psychedelics can induce in individual users are imbued with self-enhancing, wellness increasing potential that corresponds to the higher social values implicated within the neoliberal agenda and allows their non-medical use to be constructed as “virtuous.”

Also important is the marketing of psychedelics as high end products used by hyper-normal (Fleetwood & Chatwin, 2023) customers (drugtakers). Returning to the online platform we visited for the purposes of this article, the “professionalism” of both providers and clients (drugtakers) is routinely emphasized: “We are a truffle retreat center for professionals to experience personal growth, emotional breakthroughs and spiritual development”; “You’ll be joining a community of over 500 pioneering professionals who have trusted us to guide them through their self-exploration and growth”; “This is the most professionally run retreat I’ve been to”; “Everyone was professional and beautifully caring.” The focus on self-improvement is prominent: “Our sacred intention is to offer a unique and personalized experience that is crafted for you to access Ancient Wisdom and call forward your own dreams and personal intentions”; “753,395 life-changing retreats booked—elevating a more wakeful world.” The aggressive repetition of professional here signals a close association with neoliberal ideals and feeds into the self-improvement agenda which Byung-Chul Han (2015) suggests impacts most strongly on those living aspirational and high achieving professional lives. Similarly, this professional emphasis echoes the observation of Ayres (2022) regarding consumer culture—the commodification of drugs reshapes their social meanings via their association with specific lifestyle and identity statuses. The way that language is used to separate the construction of psychedelic drug consumption from drugtaking archetypes is also relevant. Psychedelics are routinely labelled not as hallucinogens or illegal drugs, but as plant medicines. Participants are not drugtakers or junkies aiming to get high, but rather people engaging in entheogenic practices aiming to generate the divine from within. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that “virtuous” drug

users are not just using drugs such as ketamine or psilocybin; they are paying top end prices to do so in luxurious environments or as part of treatment programmes. The power and privilege necessary to be able to engage in this kind of drug-use are an important part of the process by which it is legitimized by society. By these methods, psychedelic drug consumption is further separated from negative stigmatization and is, instead, positively constructed as a necessary modality for deeper engagement with the neoliberal project.

Superordinate cultural messaging thus plays a pivotal role in the social legitimation of virtuous drug use. The psychedelic example delineated here demonstrates how the “virtues” of drug use lie not only in the neutralizations (Sykes & Matza, 1957) of the individual at the time of use, or in line with the parameters of the virtue-ethics perspective, but also in the way certain drugtaking attributes are positively framed and culturally accommodated within the neoliberal context. Users themselves are therefore only one part of the virtuous drug-taking picture. The cultural universe, the confluence of images and meanings shaped by dominant social institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the attitudes and understandings through which people assimilate opinions about drugs and their use; it is from within this cultural universe that virtue-ethics gestate and emerge.

To illustrate this point it is worth considering the various discourses through which users of an online Danish forum frame their own psychedelic drug use (Holms et al., 2023): the recreational, the therapeutic, the spiritual, the scientific, and the functional, emphasizing the nuance in user perceptions and the variations in motive and modality they inevitably entail. Our concept of the virtuous framing of psychedelic drug use sits above the latter four of these discourses—the therapeutic, spiritual, scientific, and functional labels exist only through being defined, shaped, and determined by the social legitimation bestowed upon them. For example, without the contemporary moral framing of the so-called psychedelic “renaissance” by the psychotherapeutic paradigm (Sessa, 2018) the associated drugs would have retained their stigmatization as the culpable and problematic artifacts of the failed counter-cultural period. Therefore, what the study of Holms et al. (2023) helps to critically highlight, is how the broader, neoliberal framing of virtuous drug use permeates, determines, and regulates the nature of post/subcultural discourses emerging in the contemporary context.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that neoliberal values have typically constructed the use of drugs as socially undesirable and labelled drug takers as social outcasts. More recently, however, an increasing emphasis within neoliberalism on the responsibility of the individual to engage in self-governance aiming towards continual self-improvement or pursuit of personal “happiness,” has allowed an alternative, neoliberal construction of drug takers to emerge as “virtuous.” Our concept of “virtuous” drug-use builds on existing evidence from diverse academic research and popular culture, enabling a more nuanced understanding of why people engage in

drugtaking and a less dyadic approach to distinguishing drugs along lines such as medical/non-medical or legal/illegal. In line with Sjoquist’s (2023) “virtue ethics” perspective, we argue that non-medical drug use, even macro doses of illegal substances generally considered to be the most harmful, can be constructed as virtuous provided it is engaged in for purposes of self-enhancement, the benefits outweigh the harms, any loss of reason is temporary and use is moderate. A virtuous construction of drug use, however, also relies on external validation through social legitimation without which the framing falls flat. We have argued that in order for virtuous drug-use to be externally recognized as such, users must be able to draw on their power and privilege to present as “good neoliberal citizens.” We hope to have demonstrated the interdependency between the emergence of neoliberal motivations for “virtuous” drugtaking, and the shifting socio-cultural dynamics legitimating it: just as increasing levels of “virtuous” drugtaking in pursuit of personal goals facilitates the social legitimation of formerly deviant activities; so the social legitimation of such drug use reinforces the ability to present drugtaking as virtuous.

Our presentation of virtuous drug use offers an over-arching conceptual frame which encapsulates the processes by which perceptions of illegal drug use undergo cultural transformation in neoliberal societies such as ours. In *The Drugtakers*, Jock Young (1971) established the idea that neither the legal status of substances nor the peculiarities of their effects on individuals held any intrinsic application or purpose: the problems to which they offer solutions are socially defined and thus constructed. Culturally appropriate means of administration and distribution regulate drug use in line with the extent to which they are either culturally sanctioned or legitimated. Our concept of “virtuous” drug-use addresses the constructed nature of drug-use directly, emphasizing the manner in which drug use can be socially legitimized by conforming to neoliberal values and goals. In doing so, one of its most significant observations is the potential a “virtuous” drug-user representation has to reinforce the structures of inequality inherent in drug policy around the world.

The lines of privilege around which drug taking is constructed prove much harder to shift and much more impervious to socio-cultural change. “Virtuous” drugtakers must, by definition, be healthy, productive, successful members of society who can afford to access luxury settings for drug use. The concept cannot be used to legitimate the drugtaking of people from cultures, classes, and ethnicities not aligned with these neoliberal values. Neglected, poverty-stricken, marginalized, and subordinated social groups will not be afforded the possibility that their drug-taking might, for example, be a legitimate response to ongoing trauma, discrimination, and vulnerability. Instead, they will continue to be sanctioned and stigmatized for their anti-neoliberal drug taking and its threat to the very fabric of democratic society. Taylor et al (2016, p.463) introduced the concept of “drug apartheid” to describe our response to drug taking from the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs onwards as “a brutal system of inclusion and exclusion rooted in politics and culture ... a deliberate strategy to protect the privileged.” Ultimately, the emergence of “virtuous” drugtaking perpetuates this status quo. Any adjustment to a

policy that relaxes sanctions for expensive ketamine-based treatments or those engaging in exclusive wellness retreats will only serve to further deepen this divide and will do nothing at all to help the small, marginalized groups of people who use drugs in circumstances of extreme vulnerability.

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