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The Deconstruction of Hope

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According to Cornel West, the notion of race was non-existent until the discovery of North and South America bred sentiments of white superiority; from then on, the color of skin determined the quality of life.

In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolfe depicts daughters of educated men who perpetually scrimp, save, and sacrifice to send their brothers and sons to a prestigious university, which will prepare them to join the male-dominated “procession” of society. These are the struggles and inequalities which women long accepted as conditions of life. It is in this regard that people born of different color and sex face different realities, and why, according to these great thinkers, race and gender can be viewed as constructs. Neither West nor Woolfe asserts that reality itself is a construct; this statement is much too broad of a generalization to be true. All humans, regardless of race, gender, creed, or any other distinguishing characteristic, are subject to common realities such as mortality, hunger, and gravity. One of these natural realities which all individuals face is the experience of feelings, both physical sensations and psychological emotions. However, reality can be, and always has been, constructed by the use of mind and behavior-altering drugs. In the past, an individual could use drugs to create a new reality if he so desired, but today, American society, through the exploitation of prescription drug use, is deciding for individuals whether or not to construct a new reality, one that better fits with society’s desires.

To be human is to be subject to the laws of nature. Every individual is born and so will die. Every individual needs sustenance to survive and so requires nourishment. Every individual is subject to physical restrictions of the earth such as gravity and so, if pushed, he will fall. Despite distinctions created by social prejudices and judgments, it is undeniable that all persons, regardless of race, gender, creed, or culture, are subject to the same natural realities of life. In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, the character Shylock comments on this concept: “Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?” (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene I) All humans are bound by these common actualities. In addition to such inherent biological certainties, natural realities also include the experience of feelings. As information is received from external and internal environments, certain sensations are experienced as an indication of the present reality. Pain is notification when the body is injured and
needs care. A growling stomach informs of hunger and the need to eat. Shivering and goose bumps are indications that the body is cold and needs to be warmed.

However, physical sensations are not the only natural realities. Instincts, ingrained into human nature as a response to the environment, can be triggered by emotions as well. For instance, when an individual experiences the emotion of fear, there is a biological response of fight-or-flight: heart rate increases, pupils dilate, and adrenaline courses through the body in preparation to face an impending threat. Besides existing for biological purposes, emotions are imperative for social reasons. Such is their importance that an infant, still in its mother’s womb, already possesses the facial muscles necessary to express emotion and he is born able to convey pain, interest, and disgust. This expression of emotions is vital to an infant’s survival. An infant must connect with others and communicate internal conditions in order to get what he needs to survive. Emotions are natural realities essential for an individual to interact with others, form relationships, and integrate into society.

Considering the importance of natural realities, it may be perplexing to first discover that people have used drugs since antiquity to alter perceptions of the mind. In fact, archaeological records reveal that ancient civilizations consumed psychotropic plants and other drugs. Psychotropic plants were used by hunter-gatherers purely for reasons of survival. In addition to their nutritional value, the mind-altering effects of these plants were psychologically advantageous; increased tolerance to outside elements such as temperature, increased energy, and decreased fatigue enabled people to forage for food for longer periods of time and to survive difficult times when resources became scarce. The Aztecs considered mushrooms sacred for their hallucinogenic properties. Known as “God’s flesh”, mushrooms were used ritually by shaman as medicine and as a way to gain divine insight. The use of peyote, a small cactus, has been intertwined with the culture of indigenous North American tribes for thousands of generations. Exalted for its healing purposes and as a scared symbol of good luck, peyote was used in religious ceremonies to obtain knowledge by communicating directly with God. Once it is realized that these drugs were seen to serve a higher purpose, whether it be nutritional, medicinal, or spiritual, it can be understood why ancient peoples treated drugs with such reverence and respect.

Compared to these societies of the past, society today selfishly disrespects the power of drugs. According to Sigmund Freud, certain realities are simply too hard to face and people are often overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions such as pressure, uncertainty, and discomfort. In order to cope, people turn to intoxicating substances to construct a new, more favorable reality. However, though the human race has enjoyed such mind-altering effects for centuries, society only has a tolerance for drugs up to a certain point. Social stigma is attached to drug abuse, which is associated with character weakness, lack of productivity, and crime; a teenager carelessly driving his car while high on LSD is a much different situation than an Aztec shaman seeking divine knowledge. In the late 1960s, the use of recreational drugs in the United States soared and, according
to the government, spiraled out of control. A chronology on drugs by PBS Frontline shows that by 1971, President Nixon proclaimed that drug abuse was “public enemy number one” and declared a war on drugs. In order to combat this adversary, the government created agencies such as the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and passed bills such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, creating mandatory minimum penalties for drug offenses and devoting billions of dollars to the fight. Programs such as the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) were established with the aims of educating children about and deterring them from drug use at an early age. The laws and programs created during this period are still in operation today and, moreover, have proved to be effective. According to a national survey sponsored by the US Department of Health and Human Services, in 1979, 69.0% of 18-25 year olds reported ever having used illicit drugs; within ten years, that number had fallen to 48.1%. Due to this decreased participation in recreational drug use, it seems that the war on drugs has been victorious.

Yet this presents a grand contradiction in American society: the use of recreational drugs is heavily discouraged while the use of prescription drugs is eagerly embraced. Doctors in the United States play a key role in encouraging this trend, writing over 2.5 billion prescriptions annually. It is the easy attainment of these mind-altering substances that has caused the use of illicit drugs to fall. Instead of furtively obtaining an escape from reality through a dealer on the street corner, people are readily provided with psychoactive drugs prescribed to them by a doctor; the methods of obtainment may have changed, but the effects are still the same. Thanks to technology, these drugs are exceptionally potent and precise, able to target specific chemicals in the brain to achieve specific results. They are also perfectly legal. With the myriad of behavioral disorders that exist today, doctors are handing out pills to alter a person’s natural reality and deeming it “treatment”. Society has come to decide what qualifies as a disorder and what qualifies as acceptable feelings and behaviors.

The disorder perhaps most ubiquitous today is depression. A psychological condition characterized by feelings of low self-worth, guilt, and an impaired ability to enjoy life, depression can result in lethargy, appetite loss, and disturbed sleep. The biochemical culprit is a chemical messenger in the brain known as serotonin; deficient levels of serotonin are the origin of depression. To alleviate the unwanted side effects of the disorder, antidepressant drugs were developed to correct this chemical imbalance. The most popular kinds of antidepressant are known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs. These drugs, such as Prozac, slow the absorbance rate of serotonin in the brain, allowing the chemical to remain in contact with nerve cells for longer periods. This in turn reduces pain and relieves feelings of anxiety, despair, and fear, greatly elevating a patient’s mood. These desirable outcomes are why antidepressants are used to treat not only depression, but anxiety and panic disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and chronic pain as well. Science has figured out a targeted way to construct a less painful, more pleasant reality and society is reaping the benefits.
As a result, antidepressant drugs have become omnipresent in American society and consumption is on the rise. Between 1988 and 1994, the number of adults in the United States using antidepressants tripled – and then tripled again by the year 2000; the phrase “Prozac Nation” was not coined arbitrarily. Yet depression is a multifaceted and incredibly complex disorder, one which scientists admit is far from being understood. How can one diagnose such an ambiguous disease? Such a feat is impossible. Even the long-term effects of the medication are unknown. In 2004, controversy about the safety of the antidepressants grew when a study found the drugs caused an increase in suicidal thoughts and risk of suicide in teens; despite this new knowledge, according to the F.D.A., prescriptions of antidepressants for children and teenagers continued to rise by seven percent. Millions of patients, many of whom do not even have the typical characteristics of depression and who do not know the potential effects, are taking these mind-altering drugs on a daily basis. It seems that the desire for a constructed reality is so great that the risks of medication are willingly and easily ignored. Society does not want depressed, lethargic, unproductive individuals and so, through legal drugs, encourages the construction of content, energetic members to fit a more pleasing reality. However, problems and pain are a part of natural reality; valuable lessons are learned and skills are gained by dealing with difficult situations. If such experiences are permanently deconstructed, people will never overcome adversity or learn to adapt. By constructing a more complacent, desirable personality, society is deconstructing the strength of human character.

Besides altering emotions, prescription drugs are also designed to modify behavior. Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a behavioral disorder common in American society and treated with medication. It is most often diagnosed during childhood and, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Strokes, the possible warning signs include constant fidgeting, difficulty paying attention, excessive talking, and failure to finish projects, chores, and homework. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the main effects of ADHD are interference “with a person's ability to stay on a task and to exercise age-appropriate inhibition. ADHD children…often act in a socially intrusive and inappropriate manner such that they are considered to be immature. Consequent to poor foresight and poor impulse control, ADHD children frequently get into social difficulties with adults and peers.” Treatment includes the prescription of stimulants, often in the form of methylphenidate, a drug more commonly known as Ritalin. Just as Prozac slows the absorption of serotonin, Ritalin slows the absorption of dopamine, the neurotransmitter that causes motion and feelings of pleasure, and stimulates the areas of the brain responsible for inhibition. Restlessness, impulsivity, and distractibility are reduced while feelings of contentment and the ability to concentrate are increased. Treatment helps an individual with ADHD complete more work and have improved social relations. These effects are desirable to society and, unsurprisingly, prescriptions of medications to treat ADHD have
skyrocketed: among 5 to 19-year olds, the number of prescriptions increased by 274 percent between 1993 and 2003.8 Unwilling to have its constructed utopian reality thwarted by hyperactive children who do not interact well with others, society readily disperses prescriptions of stimulant drugs to revise this undesirable behavior.

ADHD, like depression, is a disorder that is far from being understood. Its cause remains unknown, there is no definitive diagnostic test for ADHD, and its symptoms can vary immensely. As is the case with modern antidepressants, there have been no long-term studies of effectiveness and safety of stimulant treatment in growing children and adolescents. Once again, it appears the desire for a constructed reality - in this case, altered behavior - is so great that the risks and potentially permanent effects of this medication are willingly and easily ignored by society. What is even more unsettling is the fact that today doctors are recommending more and more of these medications, encouraging their consumption not only for adults, but for children as well; these children are having their realities altered for them without being given a choice. Gone are the days when drugs were used with reverence. Gone are the days when a consenting individual would ingest a drug in order to escape unwanted feelings. These are the days when American society determines what constitutes a flawed reality, whether a new reality needs to be constructed, and what that new reality should be.

The use of prescription medications to alter emotions and behavior on a regular basis is a frightening thought. The fact that these drugs are designated as “treatments” is evidence of a burgeoning social normalcy: using drugs to inhibit or produce certain emotions and behaviors. In other words, it is becoming socially acceptable to construct reality because that is a reality more befitting with society’s wants and expectations. Depressed members of society are undesirable because they are unproductive and burdensome; pills can change that. Pills create sedated, complacent children desirable to society because they are much easier to mold to ideals and expectations. The prescription of mind- and behavior-altering drugs is dangerous because natural realities are then compromised. Physical pain is a reaction when a hand touches a hot stove; consuming a pill to remove the sensation of pain does not remove its cause, the flame. Emotions and behaviors exist as natural realities for a reason; their purpose is to provide the body with important information and to alter them fails to address the origin of a problem. By placing societal desires over natural functions, Americans are engaging in a dangerous new trend of constructing reality.

With the prevalence and acceptance of these medications, the distinction between what is natural and what is constructed is becoming increasingly blurred. There are certain prescriptions to eliminate the highs, others to eradicate the lows; human emotion is being artificially homogenized. By being manufactured with chemicals, emotions and behaviors are losing all sense of value and the consequence of this could be dire to modern civilization. In his speech to Colgate University, Cornel West explained the concept of non-market values, unselfish emotions and behaviors unaffected by a desire for money. According to him, non-market values
such as sacrifice, trust, courage, love, and compassion are what have the ability to fight against the problem of evil. While admittedly not optimistic, it is these values which give West hope for the future. But if these emotions and behaviors are destroyed by the construction of reality, can there really be any hope at all of fighting the constructs of evil?
Works Cited


