

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Why Do People Get Drunk?*

HOW CAN ONE EXPLAIN why people use substances that make them senseless and drunk, such as wine, beer, tobacco, opium, charas (hashish), ganja (marijuana), and other less common intoxicants, among them ether, morphine, etc., etc.? Why did these intoxicating substances come into vogue? How did the vogue catch on so fast? Why is the use of such inebriants on the rise among both cultured and uncultured people? Why is it that where wine and beer aren't sold, opium, charas, and ganja are commonly used? And tobacco—its use is rife in every corner of the world.

Why do people get drunk?

If you were to ask anyone why he took up drinking and why he continues, he would most likely respond, "Drinking is pleasurable ... and ... well, everyone drinks." He might also add, "Besides, it relaxes me." On the other hand, those who to this day have never bothered to think about whether wine is a good thing or bad might answer that they drink to stay healthy. This statement has been proven wrong for quite some time now.

Ask a tobacco addict what pressing need drove him to start smoking and his answer wouldn't differ very much either: "Everyone smokes to pass the time."

To relax ... to pass the time ... No one objects, or can object, to a person cracking his knuckles, whistling, humming, or doing some such thing to feel refreshed or to pass the time. Why, because nature's riches aren't wasted by these activities and nothing is spent which requires an enormous investment of capital and tremendous effort to produce it. Moreover, it causes no harm to oneself or to others. This is not the case with tobacco, wine, and opium. Millions of workers toil to produce them, and as many acres of land are required to grow tobacco, poppies, hemp, and grapes. Furthermore, this stuff, as has been firmly established, breeds horrific vices and is more deadly than infectious diseases or war. These facts are quite

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well known. So the use of these mood-elevating agents simply cannot be attributed to “deriving pleasure” or “passing the time,” and the excuse that “everyone drinks” wouldn’t wash.

There has to be some other reason.

Not a day passes when we don’t meet people who dearly love their children and other family members, for whom they wouldn’t hesitate to do anything, however demanding or requiring the greatest sacrifice. And yet they spend so much money on their habitual use of hemp, opium or charas—indeed so much money that it would be enough to easily pull their family up from its chronic poverty, or at least deliver them from their dire indigence. Now if someone prefers his intoxicating substances over his family’s needs and difficulties, there has to be some logical reason for it. Here, excuses such as “for pleasure,” “for passing the time,” or “everyone drinks” won’t work. A more solid reason must lie behind it.

The solid reason—as I have discovered by reading books on the subject, by close observation of people and, most of all, from my own situation when I used to drink and smoke—can be described as follows:

If one were to reflect on his life, he would often find the simultaneous existence of two selves within him—one physical and blind, the other spiritual and endowed with insight. The former eats, drinks, takes rest, sleeps, grows, and moves exactly like an automaton. The spiritual self is bound up with its physical counterpart and is unable to act on its own; it merely probes into the actions of its mate. If it approves of any of them, it unites with it, but if it disapproves it pulls away.

This observing and discerning self is comparable to the needle of a compass, one of whose ends points to the north and the other to the south. We can detect a deviation between our target destination and what the needle points to only when we’re moving in the wrong direction. This is precisely how our spiritual being, whose expression we refer to as our conscience, points to the two directions of good and evil. We’ll be aware of it only when we do something contrary to our conscience, for in that case the point which the animal existence is directed toward will be different from the destination toward which the conscience is pointing.

Likewise, the captain who knows he is headed in the wrong direction cannot continue to pilot his ship unless he corrects his course according to the compass, or entirely ignores the fact that he is following the wrong course.

Human life is comprised of the following two activities or dynamic forces: (1) to make one’s actions accord with his conscience, or (2) to choose not to heed the voice of his conscience in order to carry on with the normal course of his life.

Some people act according to the first, others according to the second. The former is achieved through moral enlightenment, the latter in two different ways: external and internal. The external way lies in keeping oneself occupied in diversions that continually deflect attention away from the intimations of the conscience; the inner in extinguishing the very light of the conscience so that it becomes completely darkened.

There are two ways a man can avoid looking at what lies in front of him: either by removing his gaze from one object and fastening it upon a more appealing object, or, alternatively, blocking his vision altogether. In like manner, he can shut his ears to the voice of his conscience externally, by diverting his attention to diverse activities, concerns, and games, or he can do so internally, by rendering ineffectual the very organ in him that pays attention.

For men with a weaker sense of perception and limited moral sensitivity, external diversions are often enough to ignore or fail to understand the voice of conscience. But such diversions scarcely suffice for those who are prone to be quite sensitive morally.

External methods cannot fully still the voice of conscience or make us completely oblivious to its demands. The awareness of this fact becomes a big stumbling block in life. Now, those who want to follow the usual pattern of their life, resort to the inner, more dependable method, namely, to darken the conscience altogether. This is what drives them toward substances that dull their minds.

2

The worldwide use of alcohol, opium, hemp, drugs, and tobacco is not for the sake of pleasure or amusement but, rather, to screen oneself from the demands of conscience.

One day as I was going through a bazaar, two coachmen passed by me. I heard one of them say to the other, "We wouldn't be caught dead doing such a thing while sober; surely, we would die of shame." So when we're mentally alert and in control of our senses we feel contrite about doing a particular thing, but doing the same thing in a state of inebriation seems perfectly all right. The coachman's comment underscores the reason which impels people to use intoxicants. They indulge in them either to suppress the feelings of shame that inevitably arise prior to committing a reprehensible act, or to slip, beforehand, into a state in which they can act freely against their conscience—in other words, obey the commands of their animal self.

A man in possession of his senses hesitates to enter a prostitute's quar-

ters, is afraid of committing theft or murder. But a toper feels no shame doing any of these. This proves that a man needs to be pretty stewed to act against his conscience.

I remember the statement at the court hearing of a cook who had murdered the old woman he worked for, a relative of mine. He said that when the time came to finish off the old lady, he sent the maid, with whom he had an affair going, out on an errand. He then proceeded to the bedroom with a knife in hand. Suddenly the thought assailed his mind that he couldn't go through with the act clear-headed. He turned back, downed two shots of vodka, and found himself perfectly ready for the murder. He went into the room and killed the old woman. Here I'm reminded of the words of the coachman that "We wouldn't be caught dead doing such a thing while sober; surely, we would die of shame."

Nine out of ten crimes are committed in the same manner, acting, in other words, on the saying "Drink liquor to pick up your courage."

Fifty percent of women who lose their virtue do so while under the influence. Mostly people given to drinking visit prostitutes. They know that wine totally smothers the voice of conscience and they wittingly drink just for that purpose. They even offer it to others to numb their senses. Before face-to-face combat, men in the army are generally made to drink wine. When French soldiers attacked Sevastopol they were all pretty sozzled.

During an occupation, when troops refuse to slaughter the helpless young and old, orders are usually given to have them drink alcohol. Once inebriated, they willingly carry out whatever orders they're given.

Examples of people who started drinking after committing some heinous act abound. This was their way to fight back their own resisting self. Then again, everyone knows that lowlifes quickly take to drugs. Thieves, pickpockets, highwaymen and whores cannot do without intoxicants.

It is common knowledge that the use of intoxicants results from a gnawing conscience that a person attempts to silence when striking out on an immoral path. While inebriated one commits an act that he would not consider or even dream of committing when sober. Everyone accepts this to be the case. However, when intoxicants don't necessarily lead to theft, mayhem, carnage, or violence; when they are not used after committing a ghastly crime; when they are used by those who are not criminals or are used in moderation, somehow it is generally assumed that they do not, as a rule, silence the conscience. One then concludes that moderate amounts of such substances are taken merely for pleasure and exhilaration. Thus, they have no effect on the conscience.

It is said that when slight inebriation doesn't lead to crime, theft or murder, the vulgar and unseemly behavior that sometimes follows sub-

stance use cannot be attributed to it; if anything, it comes about spontaneously and entirely on its own. Since no criminal laws are broken, the question of silencing the conscience simply cannot arise. The life of moderate drinkers is a good life and would remain good even if they were to give up their habit. Furthermore, it is assumed that the habitual and frequent use of intoxicants doesn't wholly extinguish the conscience. Strangely, even if a person admits that alcohol and tobacco tend to alter the mental state of the user, he still doesn't feel any shame in doing things that would necessarily make him contrite if done while in full possession of his senses. Every stab of his conscience drives a man to one intoxicant or another, and he cannot grasp what his condition or his life are like in a state of inebriation. The regular use of intoxicants produces the same psychological effect as irregular but immoderate use. However, those who drink or smoke in moderation feel that they aren't using these substances to dull their conscience, but only for stimulation and to enjoy their taste.

Such people need to reflect on the matter with the objectivity and seriousness it calls for, not casually shrug it off. They must try to understand. First of all, if the regular and excessive use of intoxicants results in numbing the conscience, their regular use in small quantities might also produce the same effect. Second, it is inherent in intoxicants to kill the conscience; they don't lose this property in either case. When under their influence one says things or feels emotions that he wouldn't when sober. Third, if thieves, robbers, and prostitutes need intoxicants to still their conscience, so do those who go against the promptings of their conscience before electing to perform an act or enter a particular profession (regardless of whether, in their own eyes, these may be perfectly respectable and suitable).

In short, it cannot be denied that the use of intoxicants—even infrequently and in small quantities, whether in upper classes or lower—is preeminently necessitated by one need: to silence the voice of the conscience so that it doesn't get in the way. The secret behind the worldwide use of intoxicants and tobacco (smoked commonly and by far the most harmful) lies in these few words.

People somehow take it for granted that smoking tobacco is refreshing and buoys the spirit; it clears the mind, and, like other things, draws people's attention, or again, like wine, doesn't affect the conscience. But if you observed closely and studied the situations in which the desire to smoke becomes pressing, you would see that tobacco affects the conscience exactly like wine does. If tobacco were truly refreshing and cleared the mind, one absolutely wouldn't feel the urge to smoke so irrepressibly. If the urge to smoke didn't arise on particular occasions, you wouldn't hear

smokers say, "We can go without eating but not without smoking."

When the cook who had murdered the lady of the house entered her bedroom and slit her throat, blood gushed from the wound like a fountain and he lost his nerve. "I couldn't finish the job completely," he continued saying at the hearing, "so I went out of the room to have a smoke."

Only after smoking a cigarette, thereby getting high, was he able to return to the room and sever the old lady's head. His urge to smoke wasn't prompted by any desire to clear his thoughts or feel a rush of exhilaration, but rather to smother the conscience that was getting in the way of finishing his evil act.

Any smoker can understand, after some serious reflection, that in particular moments of his life he has the irresistible urge to become light-headed by smoking cigarettes. Let me tell you a personal incident from a time when I used to feel the need to smoke. I usually smoked particularly when I wanted to blot out something from my thoughts, to forget it, not to think about it. I'd be sitting idle, while I knew I had work to do. Since I wanted to remain idle, I would light up. I had promised to visit someone at 5:00 o'clock, but, unable to keep my promise, I would put it out of my mind by smoking. Or when in my crankiness I had uttered something unpleasant to someone, I would light my pipe to drown out my perception of my unseemly behavior. Or when I had lost more money than I cared to at gambling, I would resort to tobacco. Likewise, I would start smoking my pipe when I had done something bad and didn't want to admit it, putting the blame on others instead. If I wasn't satisfied with what I was writing, instead of giving it up, I would force myself to finish it and start smoking. Or, aware during a conversation that my interlocutor and I aren't following each other, I would start smoking because I still wanted to continue with my argument.

The salient difference between tobacco and other intoxicants is that we can easily feel high on smoke, and besides, in addition to its seeming harmlessness it is also portable. With opium, hemp and wine—well, they require some initial preparations and some paraphernalia. Not so with tobacco. You can carry it in your pocket all the time and you don't need any extra equipment. The sight of drunkards and hemp users generally evokes dread. But tobacco users don't terrify at all. People don't try to avoid them. While wine, opium, and hemp affect the balance of the senses and their effect lasts a long time, not so with tobacco. When you have to do something which you'd rather not, you smoke and get high to the degree needed, snapping back into full consciousness and clear-headedness after you're finished. Suppose you've done something that you shouldn't have. What do you do—you light up, expelling every thought of your mistake

from your mind and getting busy with some other work.

It is evident that tobacco isn't used to gratify some need or to while away time. Its principal function is to silence your conscience. Doesn't all this underscore the intimate connection that exists between one's life and one's desire to smoke?

When do boys start smoking? Mostly when they've lost the innocence of childhood. Why is it that a man gives up his habit of smoking when he decides to set off on a moral path, and then, once deflected from it, starts smoking again? Why are all gamblers smokers? Why do straight-laced women smoke but little, while prostitutes and the wayward are habituated to it. A habit is a habit after all, but smoking certainly has something to do with a desire to stifle the voice of conscience, and smoking, equally certainly, accomplishes that.

It is generally said (as I used to say myself) that smoking helps to do mental work well. This is certainly true, but only if quantity is the arbiter of "well." The fact is, a smoker eventually loses his ability to probe and critique his thoughts. Generally it is assumed that a whole host of thoughts come into one's mind while smoking. However, there is no guarantee that this, in fact, is the case. Actually, a smoker loses control over his thoughts and ends up drawing the wrong conclusions.

In the course of working, a man feels as though he has two selves within him: one that works, one that keeps a critical eye on the work. The greater the latter's vigilance, the slower but sounder the quality of the work. Conversely, if the critiquing self's vigilance and scrutiny is lax, the work proceeds faster but suffers in quality. When under the influence, the amount of work increases, but leaves a lot to be desired in terms of quality.

"If I don't smoke," people are found saying, "I absolutely can't write—well; I can start, but then I draw a blank." I used to say the same. But what, precisely, does it mean? As I look at it, it means one of two things: either you don't want to write or what you want to write hasn't fully gelled in your mind and you perceive it as something vague, so your critical self, provided it isn't tipsy, lets you know it. Now, if you didn't smoke, it's almost a certainty that you wouldn't attempt to write or pursue your vague thought at all until it had matured and acquired clarity. Conversely, if you did smoke, causing your critical self to plunge into a stupor, its critical function would be neutralized and would no longer block your way. What appeared to you already as a vague and jejune idea before smoking, would assume importance after lighting up and you would find nothing standing in your way.

Can a little tipsiness after moderate drinking or feeling slightly high after a smoke produce serious consequences? Well, if someone falls and is knocked out after imbibing wine or hemp, this can have serious consequences, but there are no serious consequences if these substances are consumed in moderate amounts. This is the popular wisdom. Somehow people suppose that slight wooziness doesn't lead to any great harm. Why, this is like saying that if you bang your watch against a rock, this will certainly damage it, but a little bit of dust won't do it any harm.

Bear in mind that what is done with your hands, feet, or back doesn't animate or stimulate life but, rather, it is what is accomplished at the behest of your conscience. If something involving the use of your hands and feet is started, changes will inevitably occur in your consciousness and will elucidate and differentiate the activities that follow. Nevertheless the changes themselves will be perceived as quite ordinary.

One day the famous Russian artist [Karl] Briullov (1799–1852) corrected a painting done by his student. Looking at the retouched work the student cried out in amazement, "With a few small brush strokes you've made the painting come alive!" The master commented, "Art begins where these small strokes do."

Briullov couldn't have been more correct. His comment can apply to life as a whole, not just art. Without a doubt, life begins where these small changes begin—in other words, where totally imperceptible changes occur as imagined. True life is not lived where powerful revolutions take place, where people come and go, fight battles, and slaughter one another, but, rather, where miniscule changes occur.

Miniscule changes? But they are the ones that produce absolutely horrific and exceedingly important results. Many material changes can occur between the time one plans an act and the time it takes to carry it out: a whole host of homes can be destroyed, all wealth be lost, and numberless men annihilated. However, more important is that which lies hidden in a man's consciousness, namely, possibility. Whether the latent will be actualized depends entirely on consciousness.

The smallest change in a man's consciousness can also cause unimaginable results. I hope you won't think that what I'm saying has anything to do with man's volition or his belief in determinism. It is totally pointless to talk about those. Quite apart from whether a man can or can't act according to his own will (which I don't think is a valid question), my contention is only this: when human activities and the slightest changes in consciousness are inevitably conjoined, is it not incumbent that we analyze the conditions that produce these changes (regardless of whether we accept

or reject the existence of volition)? Don't we have to pay special attention to the two pans of the scale when weighing something?

We must try to keep ourselves and others as far away as we can from the conditions that threaten to cloud our perception of the clarity and extremely delicate nature of this idea, without which our consciousness is not able to perform as well as it should. What that means is that we should never ever resort to the use of inebriants as they obstruct the proper functioning of our conscience and consciousness.

Because man simultaneously has both an animal and a spiritual nature, it is conceivable that he might be influenced by things that impact his spiritual nature and, equally, by those that affect his animal nature. Just as the hands of a clock can be made to move either manually or mechanically according to its internal mechanisms—though the latter method is preferable—so can man order his life by following the counsel of his conscience and consciousness.

4

People don't drink to throw off their depressive state temporarily, or to have a good time because they think wine is an exhilarating substance, rather, they drink to drown out the voice of their conscience. Obviously, this will lead to serious consequences. Just think of a structure whose walls and corners are not built using proper instruments. Can it ever be strong and durable?

And yet people get drunk. When life fails to align with our conscience, it is the conscience that is twisted every which way to align with our life.

During every period of your life you should reflect on the spiritual moments in order to gauge the true significance of silencing your conscience. You will recall that during every period in your life you were confronted with a moral question that needed to be resolved because your well being depended on its resolution. Working it out requires all your attention and concentration. Everything requiring effort and hard work, especially at the beginning, appears overwhelming and painful, and man's human weakness prompts him to give it up. Physical work looks formidable, and mental work even more so. According to Jung, people stop thinking just when a thought appears to be particularly complex and intractable. I would rather say, it is precisely at the point when something appears to be exceptionally grueling that thinking about it is the most productive and beneficial.

When it is felt that resolving some serious issues will inevitably entail great hardship, which is usually quite painful, man desires to wriggle out

of his quandary one way or another. If he didn't have the means to get drunk, he would be unable to expel those issues from his consciousness. Since he knows of no other means to eject them from his mind, he resorts to intoxicants as the need arises.

So now, the minute those serious issues requiring attention get on his nerves and trouble him, he quickly reaches out for intoxicants to dispel his anxiety. All this stops the conscience from resolving those issues and they persist till the next occurrence of a spiritual moment. When such moments finally arrive, the same process starts all over again and the man uses the same methods to dispel them. He spends his whole life this way, leaving those moral issues as thirsty for resolution as ever, although life's meaning and its entire dynamism lies in settling them.

5

As is generally said, opium and ganja produce harrowing effects; so does alcohol on its addicts, as we know. Even more deleterious for society are the consequences of the temperate use of wine, beer, and tobacco, which are generally believed to be entirely harmless.

Naturally, these effects are bound to be extremely dreadful, considering that the social, individual, scientific, literary, and artistic activities of a society devolve mostly around people who tend to be intemperate, because of their addiction to drinking. It is taken for granted that people who take a glass of wine after dinner appear entirely sensible the next day during work hours. This, of course, is a grossly mistaken notion. These so-called moderate users are actually found to be drowsy, listless, and somewhat depressed the next day, which eventually makes them edgy, crotchety, and irascible. Smoking cigarettes only adds to their feeble and droopy condition. It will take them a whole week to snap back into their healthy mental state. This, alas, happens but rarely.

Thus, whatever happens among us (whether its responsibility lies with the rulers, who issue orders, or with the ruled, who take orders) only happens in a state of non-sobriety, when the mind is not fully alert.

Please don't laugh it off when I say that the cause of the agitation and flaccidity found in our society today is the persistent state of tipsiness in which most citizens live their lives. Had this not been the case, could one even imagine everything that is happening around us these days. Whether it is building the Eiffel Tower or enlisting for army service; invariably a company is established without any pressing need for it, big capital is collected, people perform exacting work, estimates are drawn, schemes are made. A million or more tons of steel are used in building the tower,

and, most comical, countless millions of people consider climbing the hideous monster their bounden duty. The presence of the tower evokes the desire in other people to build even taller towers of their own. Now think about it: would anyone in his right mind ever think of such asinine projects?

Take another example. For years now, Europeans are hard at work thinking about inventing methods for annihilating people, and as soon as young men reach majority they are systematically trained in the tactics of pogroms and carnage. Everyone knows that the danger of Berber attacks is now as good as gone; yet the civilized and cultured Christian nations continue preparing for war, only to jump at each other's throats, even though it is no secret that such conduct is not just painful, harmful, destructive and peace-shattering, but also contrary to morality and good character. Still they won't let up in their mutual extermination.

Other people think up political intrigues: who to collude with to destroy whom. Others, under the pretext of organizing people, teach them how to kill and wreak havoc. Many surrender to such tactics against their conscience and will. Can a serious, sober person ever do that? Only drunkards, who never reach the threshold of sobriety and reflection, can.

In my opinion, never before in human history have people allowed such a gaping distance to exist between their conscience and their actions. It looks as though humanity has come to a dead end and frozen in its tracks, as if some external reason is obstructing it from adopting the natural state it must adopt collectively as a nation. Even though this may not be the only reason, it does drive people to intoxication and may be the biggest reason they lapse progressively into a state of infirmity and lassitude.

The day this menacing vice is rooted out will be a truly memorable day in the history of mankind. Such a day is not very far away. People are now familiar with the fatal consequences of this vice. Their ideas about intoxicants have changed to an appreciable degree, and they are aware of the disastrous outcomes. In fact, such a day is near at hand. Then this awareness will rid people of such intoxicants for good and open their eyes wide to look at and reflect on the demands of their conscience. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*