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Lowering the Drinking Age to Eighteen

Since the first man had an opinion about whether we should get Thai or Mexican tonight, he has tried to use the might of armed men like the police and military to force the other into conforming. But should the opinions of one or many men dictate how all should act? To answer the question of whether or not the government should jail people who are under the age of 21 for consuming alcohol, one must look far beyond the subject of alcohol itself and evaluate questions whose answers define the very fundamentals of human life. To answer this question, one must decide whether or not the government should prevent people from engaging in behaviors which a majority have deemed undesirable, and behaviors which a scientific consensus have shown produce undesirable consequences. It is our view that despite a body of empirical evidence showing that banning alcohol consumption for those between the ages of 18 and 21 is correlated with fewer alcohol-related deaths, government banning of alcohol consumption is a violation of fundamental human rights. The protection of those rights is more important than the protection of the subjective values of individuals, and thus, the policy of prohibition of alcohol for young adults in the United States should end.

When looking at the available literature, there is little conclusive evidence, but that which there is, seems to show adverse consequences as a result of lowering the MLDA (Min-

imum Legal Drinking Age). A review published in the Journal of Studies on Alcohol looked at 241 empirical analyses on the MLDA and its effects between 1960 and 2000.(Wagenaar and Toomey) The review considered multiple factors to determine the methodological quality of a study, and of 79 higher quality studies 46 (58%) found a statistically significant inverse relationship between MLDA and traffic crashes, or that a higher MLDA resulted in fewer crashes. The rest did not find any statistically significant relationship between the two. Of the 33 higher quality studies on the MLDA and alcohol consumption, 11 (33%) found an inverse relationship, one found the opposite, and the rest found no relationship. None of the studies on college campus alcohol consumption found a relationship with the MLDA. Observational studies, no matter how well designed, have significant limitations. One cannot develop a causal relationship from observational studies, they can only illuminate potential causes. In addition, there are a few clearly identifiable flaws in any attempt to study these effects. Namely, the tendency of survey respondents to under-report illegal and stigmatized behaviors(Johnson)(Mensch and Kandel)(Harrell et al.) and the potential effect that increased safety measures in vehicles, maturing standards and tests for Driver Licenses, and advances in highway engineering have on reducing collisions. But, these criticisms only serve to question the potential accuracy of the surveys, they do not completely disprove the findings. In addition, the higher quality studies employed techniques that mitigate the potential influence of these factors, like using under-reporting prevention methods, and performing large sample size longitudinal surveys. If the only ends one seeks to satisfy are fewer traffic incidents and less alcohol consumption, the MLDA should not be lowered.

If our end truly is reducing traffic incidents, alcohol consumption, alcohol-related death and injury, then we must apply this end universally. During the United States National

Prohibition of alcohol, consumption of alcoholic beverages was cut in half(Miron and Zwiebel) and reduced the number of deaths to cirrhosis, extreme liver scarring caused by chronic alcohol usage(Walsh and Alexander), to 50% of what it was prior to prohibition(Dills and Miron). If the evidence previously presented regarding the lowering of the MLDA is sufficient justification to not do so, then following that logic we must bring back the national policy of prohibition. The reason that we do not do so is because the negative consequences of any prohibition become much more pronounced when that prohibition is universal. Consequences where nearly the entire population is breaking the law behind close doors, and harbor nothing but fear and resentment towards the law enforcement who will send them to prison for what the public sees as a harmless pleasure.

In its current state, the prohibition of alcohol only applies to a small minority of the population for whom enforcement of the prohibition of any substances is nearly impossible. I know, anecdotally, a student who attends a school in one of the strictest states in the country in regards to drug and alcohol enforcement. Getting caught with liquor or any narcotics in that state will land you in a federal prison. But on campus, the laws of the state don't really apply. Alcohol and cannabis consumption are nearly universal on campus, and the school does not enforce any of the state law. Underage students drink alcohol and smoke cannabis publicly on the campus without any reprimand or consequence.

The single most fundamental idea in morality is self-ownership. Most moral systems are predicated on this axiom, the idea that the body is vessel for the mind, and the single piece of property that all human minds have rightful claim to are their own bodies. Now, corollaries of this idea, like private property rights, are hotly contended, but the idea that the skin, flesh, and muscle that hold you together are inalienably yours is so fundamental that

if you do not accept it to be wholly and universally true, then all theories of morality and ethics fall apart. It is an act of extreme cognitive dissonance to claim that slavery is wrong, but prohibition of alcohol is right. If you believe that slavery is wrong because of the poor working conditions for most slaves, then surely you must believe that if a slave is treated well, as many were, then it is still a morally acceptable act to continue to enslave him. But, if you believe slavery is wrong, because one man cannot legitimately claim ownership of another man's body, then how can you claim that the government has the legitimate authority to dictate that it owns the body of those between 18 and 21? Because, fundamentally, by determining that the government use force to throw those between the age of 18 and 21 in prison for putting substances in their bodies, then as a corollary, you also believe that the government owns those bodies. For if I am deeply offended by the color of a car, and I claim that I can justly confiscate that car because I am offended, does it not also follow that I have a just claim to that car or that that car is my property? Understanding this, you could not say the government justly has the authority to decide what substances one puts in their body, unless you also believe that the government has a just claim to that body.

If, however, you believe that the government can use force to coerce people in the situation that it produces positive effects, then Nazi labor camps and slavery were acceptable practices. The practice of African Slavery in America created a huge return on investment (13% as compared to the next most lucrative industry, railroads at 7%), and a global market of very cheap goods. Many more benefited from the practice of slavery than those who suffered (Evans Jr). In the time of Nazi concentration camps, despite the oppression of a few million "undesirables" who made up 20% of production and the fact that a few years prior Germany was suffering a far greater depression than that in the United States, 80 million

Germans experienced extreme economic prosperity and comfort.(Lee p. 85) It's important to note that I am not equating prohibition and slavery, I am saying that they violate, principally, the same human right of self-ownership, but in varying degrees.

Alcohol is a narcotic, and a potentially dangerous one at that. It has one of the lowest lethal dose to effective dose ratios, meaning that typical levels of alcohol consumption are closer to the lethal dose than that of cocaine.(Gable) By no means should young people be regularly drinking, and people should limit their own alcohol consumption, but by no means should the government be in the business of throwing those people who don't in prison and creating a culture of fear surrounding a mostly harmless substance. Individuals, not the government, own their bodies, and consequently, individuals should be the ones deciding what substances they put in their own bodies, not the men with guns.

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