

A Strange Reason to Legalize Marijuana

Here's a news flash from the front page of modern neuroscience: "You don't exist." At least, not in the way most people believe they do.

We feel as if we look out upon the world as a detached ethereal consciousness floating behind our eyes, inside our head. We feel as if we're a weightless self or soul inhabiting a body.

These feelings are wrong. The sense of self is an illusion. You, me, and everyone else are billions of neurons woven together via trillions of electrochemical connections.

Marvelously, the brain tells itself stories about how it is other than it is.

As biologist Edward O. Wilson puts it in his new book, "The self, despite the illusion of its independence created in the scenarios, is part of the anatomy and physiology of the body."

Mind-blowing, right?

Scientifically obvious, yet shocking to our intuitive sense of ourselves as immaterial self or soul. I am brain-meat that has evolved the capacity to consider itself, if not divine, largely aloof from physicality.

Which is my philosophical neuroscientific reason for voting "Yes" on Measure 91, Oregon's marijuana legalization initiative.

Apparently an underlying assumption of legal pot opponents is that human consciousness is some sort of pristine, pure pool of unsullied awareness which shouldn't be contaminated by chemical substances like THC, the major psychoactive ingredient in marijuana.

Here's another science news flash: the brain produces conscious awareness, and it is filled with over 100 chemical neurotransmitters. They make us happy, horny, hungry, and so much more. Including, high.

I'm writing these words buzzed on a chemical my brain adores: caffeine. Is this wrong? Should caffeine be illegal because it alters my consciousness, increasing alertness and improving my mood?

Of course not. It's beautifully, really, how humans can bring parts of the world into their brains, then those substances enable them to view the world differently.

We are the world. The world is us. There is no immaterial self standing apart from materiality.

So it isn't a big deal to add marijuana to the long list of ways human brains are legally altered chemically in Oregon. Marijuana is safer than alcohol, tobacco, and prescription drugs. Informed adults should be able to choose their preferred consciousness-changing substance.

After all, there's no such thing as a normal state of consciousness.

No one knows how anyone else experiences reality. If somehow this were possible, likely we would be surprised by how differently another person subjectively perceives the same objective world.

Further, whatever you or I experience in the privacy of our own awareness, it is extremely doubtful that the socially accepted definition of psychological normality is the best we humans are capable of.

Artists, visionaries, mystics, poets, meditators, and, yes, users of psychoactive drugs, along with other explorers of altered states of consciousness, tell tales of how they opened doors of perception that made them feel more in touch with reality, not less.

Vote for Measure 91. This is a wonderful way to strange up Salem, and Oregon.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com