

Can we begin, innocently and simply, with the question: what is a drug? I wanted to ask, without complication, what the nature of a drug is. My desire was to get a fix on it; I wanted to be able to say what precisely we are dealing with here when we address that thing with which we become obsessed, that substance to which we become addicted. And this should be read both literally and metaphorically; drug as the reality of an ingested substance or thing; and also "drug" as that prime metaphor for all that we become obsessed by – religion, house prices, the futures market, tulips from Amsterdam, the person we are in love with... Surely, if it is possible to grasp the drug in its essence, in its reality, in its nature – then, and only then, can we answer the question as to whether obsession is passion or pathological, compulsion or choice, lust or disease.

But what if the meaning of drugs is precisely to *disallow*, from the start and in principle, the question: *what is*? What if the nature of drugs are such that to ask: what is this thing? – is to misplace this phenomena: although, as you will immediately see, if indeed "drugs" are not the sort of thing of which one can ask what they are, then that will mean, firstly that the word has no meaning, conventionally defined; and secondly that it most certainly is not a *phenomenon*.

These statements and questions can only be expressed in certain milieu. They can only make sense in certain places, at certain levels of discourse. For instance, it would be better not to raise these questions the next time I am arrested for possession of addictive substances: it is unlikely that the police will take kindly to a para-ontological enquiry into the grounds of drug law. This is because the discourse which will take place in that milieu is defined by that very law; the written law which does its job by answering the question: what is a drug? Once the answer to that question is written down, once it is *made law* – and, for reasons of justice and the separation of the powers of the state, the milieu for *that* operation is an entirely other one than the police station – once it is *made law*, the type of question is legitimated together with the specifics of the answer. We are permitted – nay, *required* – to ask and to know: what is a drug; ignorance of the law, as they say, is no defence.

At what level of discourse, then, in what milieu – for it is surely not everywhere or at all times – in what milieu is it necessary or legitimate to disallow the question: what is a drug?

To answer quickly: perhaps – but this is not certain – in the academy. Not certain because the academy, the university, is founded on the principles of the study of disciplines; that is, within that milieu – *this* milieu – we should in principle be able to say what drugs are in order that they can be studied. Perhaps – but this is even less certain – in the context of a philosophical enquiry. Not certain since philosophy, as we know, tends to start off from the question of *being*, from the ontological question.

More likely, it would be in the obsessive milieu of something like Bataille's theory of a general economy, Nietzsche's eternal return of the same, Derrida's *mise en abime*, or Deleuze's play of differences without original opposing terms that we could lose the innocence of our original question.

In the essay *Plato's Pharmacy* (from 1970) Derrida famously interrogates Plato's notion of the *pharmakon*, in the context of a debate about the nature and status of writing and meaningful philosophy. The Greek word *Pharmakon* – which can be translated as "drug" – says, at the same time, simultaneously, in the same breath, both remedy *and* poison, beneficial medicine *and* harmful philtre. As he says:

The "essence" of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no "proper" characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity; it is aneidetic, firstly because it is not monoeidetic (in the sense in which Plato's *Phaedo* speaks of the *eidōs* as something simple, noncomposite: *monoeides*). This "medicine" is not a simple thing. But neither is it a composite, a sensible or empirical synthesis partaking of several simple essences (126, modified for speaking)

Hence, we cannot ask the question, if we are interrogating at a certain level: what is the *pharmakon*? What are *drugs*? By extension: what is it that we are obsessed by? What gives to be obsessed? This means, in turn, that there can be no “nature” of drugs, or that drugs are not defined in nature. Derrida, in an interview entitled *Rhetoric of Drugs*, says that:

There may be “natural” poisons and indeed naturally lethal poisons, but they are not poisonous insofar as they are drugs.... There is not, in the case of drugs, any objective, scientific, physical or “naturalistic” definition. (229)

We cannot, the claim is, if we wish to get to the bottom of what drugs mean, to the bottom of what obsesses us, make use of a scientific or positivistic definition. Such definitions, of course, exist, as we have already noted, and as Derrida immediately himself points out:

[the definition of drugs] may be “naturalistic”, if by this we understand that it attempts to naturalize that which defies any natural definition or any definition of natural reality. (229)

and such an attempt is entirely legitimate – indeed necessary - when, for instance, it comes to framing the law. But more widely than this, we can say that in order to speak, in order to make discourse, in order to have knowledge, in order indeed to have truth, we must – legitimately and entirely necessarily – go a certain way down this route of *naturalisation*. Naturalisation, as Derrida will say elsewhere, is never innocent. There is always a strategy, a politics, a structuring of power within society by those with power, behind the process of naturalization, precisely because the claim that something is natural or, conversely – like drugs or, say, masturbation – that something is unnatural – these are claims which rules out *in advance* any questioning of that thing’s status. It is the claim that *that is how it is*: and such claims usually have the police to enforce them.

Thus the dangerous status of drugs. Not just examples of drugs- real or metaphorical - but the concept – or perhaps we should say, the non-concept – of drugs, drugs in their non-essence. And this in a strange, manifold manner. For, firstly, it is on the basis of something like the non-concept of a drug, the non-identity of the *pharmakon*, on the basis of something which is not a thing because when we say it, we say more than one thing at the same time, we say (our) opposites at the same time – on *this* basis we can then differentiate between these two opposites which we subsequently give ourselves: poison and remedy. Things which have the character of drugs are, says Derrida, the *medium* within which we can differentiate that which we must differentiate in order to speak, to give knowledge, to allow truth to happen. In other words, they are that which enables differences to occur, and therefore have the status of Derrida’s neologism *différance* (spelt with an “a”), which means something like that which gives the possibility for difference to occur. They have, too, the status of Deleuze’s differences prior to any notion or possibility of identity; and the same status as Nietzsche’s eternal return, which is not the same thing returning, but rather the possibility of saying or positing the same within an eternal return; and the same structure as Bataille’s general economics, which means a milieu in which these non-ontological questions can be opened. This status is dangerous because it gets to the root, or rather beyond the root, beyond the thought of the root, of our current order, and therefore calls it into question.

Secondly, and to be more specific about the nature of obsession and addiction, we can see that in this environment of drugs there is a potentially obsessive movement. We can see that obsession, in general, has something to do with inappropriate movement, more specifically inappropriate positive feedback machines which mutually and reflexively reinforce in circular and potentially destructive fashion. We can see this across all fields of obsession. Drug addiction has something to do with the effect of tolerance on dopamine receptors in the brain; the more coke we snort, the less the pleasure effect, the more, therefore, we need the drug. This can be verified experimentally: rats which have their dopamine receptors removed do not self-administer cocaine; they do not, unlike their cousins, become dependent. The obsessive movement of the futures market in commodities, or indeed any boom and bust market such as that we are seeing for property, occurs due to the reflexive (that is, discourse-based) effect of knowledge and rumour on price in a reinforcing feedback mechanism; a phenomenon which Soros, amongst others, has learnt to use to his own advantage, precisely because he has theorised it and is thereby able to operate at the level of the *pharmakon* and not merely at the

innocent level of those who believe the naturalised information of the journalists and other reality-based commentators. The obsessive career of a film-maker such as Herzog is founded on his own eternal return to the same questions, questions which are essentially exactly that movement - the questions of inappropriate circularity, feedback, spiralling motions; why else does Fitzcaraldo expend exorbitant energy - Bataille's excessive energy of the general economy, we might say - to return in his ship to precisely the point he left off; what else does the final, spiralling movement of the camera around the raft in Aguirre Wrath of God signify except the lack of signification and therefore the primacy of obsession? Here we can perhaps see the essential connection between the question of an excessive creativity implied in what we sometimes call art, of the positing of a future to come, a future without solid basis in the past, and questions of obsession and the non-foundational status of drugs. The artist is perhaps the one who never asks or respects the question: what is? Hence the danger, hence their ejection from the ordered realm of Plato's city.

Thirdly, the manifold danger of drugs is evinced in the response of philosophy and law to these risks of rootlessness and obsessive movement. In an act of naturalisation, these discourses oppose the drug - that is, that which we are obsessed by, that which enables our obsession - to the "proper", to the beneficial, to the valid. Remember; the argument was that the drug is that environment in which it is possible to distinguish something from something else - that is, in this case and in philosophy and law, to distinguish between the bad drug and the good, proper, beneficial medicine. That which had enabled us to take a stance, to differentiate between things, to speak, to give validity to our discourse, to speak truth, is relegated to one of the terms of this differentiation - and the bad term at that. Drugs are given the status of the parasite, of the prosthesis, of those improper phenomena which should certainly be deprecated if not avoided. They are made accidental to the order of things; in a word, improper. This movement from enabler to parasite is what Derrida is alluding to when he claims that the *pharmakon* is "at once accidental and essential": it is essential because it is that which allows the differentiation between accidental and essential to be posited; and it is accidental because it is perforce relegated to this position in order to allow the certainty of a position to occur.

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It would be possible to show that it is this manifold and multi-layered character of the danger of drugs, of the danger indeed of the concept "drugs", which engenders the patently paradoxical and self-defeating attempts to control drug use, to engage in a "war on drugs" and a war on their supply, use and the obsessions which feed off this. That is not to say that we can escape this situation, but it may be that the politics of representation necessarily leave us ill-equipped to even begin to address it. The nature of representation is to re-present that which already exists. There is something present; representation gives this to us again in a movement of difference that somehow represents or provides the image - however imperfect - of that of which it is the image. Thus, democracy represents, in democratic fora, the will of those who are represented, however imperfectly. But the issue for a politics of drugs is not at all the necessary imperfection of this representation, but the fact that it implies a positing of a present thing *which can be* represented. Of its nature, we can ask legitimately of this present thing which comes to be represented: what is it? Is this not, in the end, an obsession? Are we not obsessed to the point of blindness by the demand of this question? All art, all creativity, is - as we have claimed - essentially non-representational. Can we be satisfied therefore to end, innocently and simply, with the question: what is?