**Greater Manchester Humanists**

**Humanist Discussion Group**

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**TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD THE STATE REQUIRE THAT WE TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR ACTIONS?**

Almost everyone agrees that we are responsible for driving with due care and attention and that the State is responsible for providing good roads and driving ability tests. There is a contract between drivers and the State which almost everyone accepts. The status of personal responsibility with regard to safe driving is not controversial. In contrast the examples in the next two paragraphs are very much open to dispute. There are many areas in which personal freedom is seen as paramount. Usually these are cases where our actions do not cause direct harm to others but indirect harm may still be considerable. Have we got the balance right and would individuals and society be better if the State was less understanding of self-damaging actions?

In the case of smoking the State encourages us to act otherwise (for example though taxes and mandatory warnings on cigarette packets) but does not stop us for choosing how to act. Many other addictive drugs are illegal but in either case, if things go wrong for us, the State will attempt to pick up the pieces. This still comes at a cost to others. Taxes on cigarettes might be used to fund treatment but this always represents a diversion of limited overall resources. So should people who voluntarily harm themselves in this way receive State help with the same priority as, for example, children with inherited diseases? For some people the answer may be no - but then where would this policy stop? What about people who participate in dangerous sports like bungee jumping or even skiing or playing rugby?

Recently there have been attempts to tax sugary foods – which begins to put sugar in the category of tobacco. The food industry responds that we should be free to choose what we eat and at the same time bombards us with adverts for unhealthy foods. However, we are told that excess sugar now kills more people than wars and terrorism combined. Parts of the NHS are refusing or delaying treatment for the obese. Putting aside rare medical conditions, obesity, it is argued, is a personal choice. Eat fewer calories than you burn and you *will* lose weight, the laws of thermodynamics are never broken. In contrast to smoking not everyone is aware of the risks and almost all of us have been exposed to food adverts since we were very small children. But assuming that people are aware of the risks, should a person with a history of willful obesity be treated for diabetes (or indeed any of them many types of obesity related cancers) with the same priority are a child with and inherited disease? Let’s not forget that in a world with limited resources this lifestyle choice is denying people who did not make self-damaging choices access to treatment. Does the availability of free treatment even encourage poor health?

For interesting opinions on obesity and personal responsibility see the following articles – the second offers a rather deeper and fact based analysis:

<http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/26/the-best-cure-for-obesity-personal-responsibility/>

<http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/29/3/379.long>

This article - Responsibility in health care: a liberal egalitarian approach – is also relevant:

<http://jme.bmj.com/content/31/8/476.full>

David Kemmish  
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