

Why animals eat psychoactive plants

The United Nations says the drug war's rationale is to build "a drug-free world — we can do it!" U.S. government officials agree, stressing that "there is no such thing as recreational drug use." So this isn't a war to stop addiction, like that in my family, or teenage drug use. It is a war to stop drug use among all humans, everywhere. All these prohibited chemicals need to be rounded up and removed from the earth. That is what we are fighting for.

I began to see this goal differently after I learned the story of the drunk elephants, the stoned water buffalo, and the grieving mongoose. They were all taught to me by a remarkable scientist in Los Angeles named Professor Ronald K. Siegel.

The tropical storm in Hawaii had reduced the mongoose's home to a mess of mud, and lying there, amid the dirt and the water, was the mongoose's mate — dead. Professor Siegel, a silver-haired official adviser to two U.S. presidents and to the World Health Organization, was watching this scene. The mongoose found the corpse, and it made a decision: it wanted to get out of its mind.

Two months before, the professor had planted a powerful hallucinogen called silver morning glory in the pen. The mongooses had all tried it, but they didn't seem to like it: they stumbled around disoriented for a few hours and had stayed away from it ever since. But not now. Stricken with grief, the mongoose began to chew. Before long, it had tuned in and dropped out.

It turns out this wasn't a freak occurrence in the animal kingdom. It is routine. As a young scientific researcher, Siegel had been confidently told by his supervisor that humans were the only species that seek out drugs to use for their own pleasure. But Siegel had seen cats lunging at catnip — which, he knew, contains chemicals that mimic the pheromones in a male tomcat's pee — so, he wondered, could his supervisor really be

right? Given the number of species in the world, aren't there others who want to get high, or stoned, or drunk?

This question set him on a path that would take twenty-five years of his life, studying the drug-taking habits of animals from the mongooses of Hawaii to the elephants of South Africa to the grasshoppers of Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia. It was such an implausible mission that in one marijuana field in Hawaii, he was taken hostage by the local drug dealers, because when he told them he was there to see what happened when mongooses ate marijuana, they thought it was the worst police cover story they had ever heard.

What Ronald K. Siegel discovered seems strange at first. He explains in his book [Intoxication](#):

After sampling the numbing nectar of certain orchids, bees drop to the ground in a temporary stupor, then weave back for more. Birds gorge themselves on inebriating berries, then fly with reckless abandon. Cats eagerly sniff aromatic “pleasure” plants, then play with imaginary objects. Cows that browse special range weeds will twitch, shake, and stumble back to the plants for more. Elephants purposely get drunk off fermented fruits. Snacks of “magic mushrooms” cause monkeys to sit with their heads in their hands in a posture reminiscent of Rodin’s Thinker. The pursuit of intoxication by animals seems as purposeless as it is passionate. Many animals engage these plants, or their manufactured allies, despite the danger of toxic or poisonous effects.

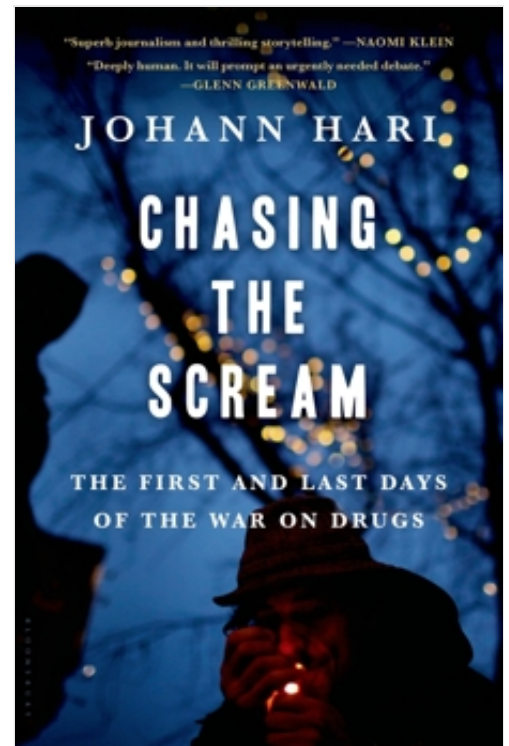
Noah’s Ark, he found, would have looked a lot like London on a Saturday night. “In every country, in almost every class of animal,” Siegel explains, “I found examples of not only the accidental but the intentional use of drugs.” In West Bengal, a group of 150 elephants smashed their way into a warehouse and drank a massive amount of moonshine. They got so drunk they went on a rampage and killed five people, as well as demolishing seven concrete buildings. If you give hash to male mice, they become horny and seek out females — but then they find “they can barely crawl over the females, let alone mount them,” so after a little while they yawn and start licking their own penises.

In Vietnam, the water buffalo have always shunned the local opium plants. They don't like them. But when the American bombs started to fall all around them during the war, the buffalo left their normal grazing grounds, broke into the opium fields, and began to chew. They would then look a little dizzy and dulled. When they were traumatized, it seems, they wanted — like the mongoose, like us — to escape from their thoughts.

I kept returning to the UN pledge to build a drug-free world. There was one fact, above all others, that I kept placing next to it in my mind. It is a fact that seems at first glance both obvious and instinctively wrong. Only 10 percent of drug users have a problem with their substance. Some 90 percent of people who use a drug—the overwhelming majority—are not harmed by it. This figure comes not from a pro-legalization group, but from the United Nations Office on Drug Control, the global coordinator of the drug war. Even William Bennett, the most aggressive drug czar in U.S. history, admits: “Non-addicted users still comprise the vast bulk of our drug-involved population.”

This is hard to dispute, yet hard to absorb. If we think about people we know, it seems about right—only a small minority of my friends who drink become alcoholics, and only a small minority of the people I know who use drugs on a night out have become addicts.

But if you think about how we are trained to think about drugs, this seems instinctively wrong, even dangerous. All we see in the public sphere are the casualties. The unharmed 90 percent use in private, and we rarely hear about it or see it. The damaged 10 percent, by contrast, are the only people we ever see using drugs out on the streets. The result is that the harmed 10 percent make up 100 percent of the official picture. It is as if our only



Excerpted from Johann Hari's
Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs

. Available from Amazon.

picture of drinkers were a homeless person lying in a gutter necking neat gin. This impression is then reinforced with the full power of the state. For example, in 1995, the World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a massive scientific study of cocaine and its effects. They discovered that “experimental and occasional use are by far the most common types of use, and compulsive/dysfunctional [use] is far less common.” **The U.S. government threatened to cut off funding to the WHO unless they suppressed the report. It has never been published; we know what it says only because it was leaked.**

As I write this, I feel uncomfortable. The 10 percent who are harmed are most vivid to me—they are some of the people I love most. And there is another, more complex reason why I feel awkward writing about this. For anybody who suspects that we need to reform the drug laws, there is an easier argument to make, and a harder argument to make.

The easier argument is to say that we all agree drugs are bad — it’s just that drug prohibition is even worse. I have made this argument in debates in the past. Prohibition, I said, doesn’t stop the problem, it simply piles another series of disasters onto the already-existing disaster of drug use. In this argument, we are all antidrug. The only difference is between prohibitionists who believe the tragedy of drug use can be dealt with by more jail cells in California and more military jeeps on the streets of Juárez, and the reformers who believe the tragedy of drug use can be dealt by moving those funds to educate kids and treat addicts.

There’s a lot of truth in this argument. It is where my instincts lie. But — as I try to think through this problem — I have to admit it is only a partial truth.

Here, I think, is the harder, more honest argument. Some drug use causes horrible harm, as I know very well, but the overwhelming majority of people who use prohibited drugs do it because they get something good out of it — a fun night out dancing, the ability to meet a deadline, the chance of a good night’s sleep, or insights into parts of their brain they couldn’t get to on their own. For them, it’s a positive experience, one that makes their lives better. That’s why so many of them choose it. They are not suffering from false consciousness, or hubris. They don’t need to be stopped from

harming themselves, because they are not harming themselves. As the American writer Nick Gillespie puts it: “Far from our drugs controlling us, by and large we control our drugs; as with alcohol, the primary motivation is to enjoy ourselves, not to destroy ourselves . . . There is such a thing as responsible drug use, and it is the norm, not the exception.”

So, although it is against my instincts, I realized I couldn’t give an honest account of drug use in this book if I talked only about the harm it causes. If I’m serious about this subject, I also have to look at how drug use is deeply widespread — and mostly positive.

Professor Siegel’s story of buzzing cows and tripping bees is, he believes, a story about us. We are an animal species. As soon as plants began to be eaten by animals for the first time — way back in prehistory, before the first human took his first steps — the plants evolved chemicals to protect themselves from being devoured and destroyed. But these chemicals could, it soon turned out, produce strange effects. In some cases, instead of poisoning the plant’s predators, they — quite by accident — altered their consciousness. This is when the pleasure of getting wasted enters history. All human children experience the impulse early on: it’s why when you were little you would spin around and around, or hold your breath to get a head rush. You knew it would make you sick, but your desire to change your consciousness a little — to experience a new and unfamiliar rush — outweighed your aversion to nausea.

There has never been a society in which humans didn’t serially seek out these sensations. High in the Andes in 2000 b.c., they were making pipes through which they smoked hallucinogenic herbs. Ovid said drug-induced ecstasy was a divine gift. The Chinese were cultivating opium by a.d. 700. Hallucinogens and chemicals caused by burning cannabis were found in clay pipe fragments from William Shakespeare’s house. George Washington insisted that American soldiers be given whiskey every day as part of their rations.

“The ubiquity of drug use is so striking,” the physician Andrew Weil concludes, that “it must represent a basic human appetite.” Professor Siegel claims the desire to alter our consciousness is “the fourth drive” in all human minds, alongside the desire to eat, drink, and have sex—and it is “biologically inevitable.” It provides us with moments of release and relief.

Thousands of people were streaming in to a ten-day festival in September where they were planning — after a long burst of hard work — to find some chemical release, relaxation, and revelry. They found drugs passed around the crowd freely, to anybody who wanted them. Everyone who took them soon felt an incredible surge of ecstasy. Then came the vivid, startling hallucinations. You suddenly felt, as one user put it, something that was “new, astonishing, irrational to rational cognition.”

Some people came back every year because they loved this experience so much. As the crowd thronged and yelled and sang, it became clear it was an extraordinary mix of human beings. There were farmers who had just finished their harvest, and some of the biggest celebrities around. Their names—over the years—included Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero.

The annual ritual in the Temple at Eleusis, eighteen kilometers northwest of Athens, was a drug party on a vast scale. It happened every year for two thousand years, and anybody who spoke the Greek language was free to come. Harry Anslinger said that drug use represents “nothing less than an assault on the foundations of Western civilization,” but here, at the actual foundations of Western civilization, drug use was ritualized and celebrated.

I first discovered this fact by reading the work of the British critic Stuart Walton in a brilliant book called [Out of It](#), and then I followed up with some of his sources, which include the work of Professor R. Gordon Wasson, Professor Carl Ruck, and other writers.

Everyone who attended the Eleusinian mysteries was sworn to secrecy about what happened there, so our knowledge is based on scraps of information that were recorded in its final years, as it was being suppressed. We do know that a special cup containing a mysterious chemical brew of hallucinogens would be passed around the crowd, and a scientific study years later seemed to prove it contained a molecular relative of LSD taken from a fungus that infested cereal crops and caused hallucinations. The chemical contents of this cup were carefully guarded for the rest of the year. The drugs were legal – indeed, this drug use was arranged by public officials – and regulated. You could use them, but only in the designated temple for those ten days. One day in 415 b.c., a partygoing general named Alcibiades smuggled some of the mystery drug out and took it home for his friends to use at their parties. Walton writes: “Caught in possession with intent to supply, he was the first drug criminal.”

But while it was a crime away from the Temple and other confined spaces, it was a glory within it. According to these accounts, it was Studio 54 spliced with St. Peter’s Basilica – revelry with religious reverence.

They believed the drugs brought them closer to the gods, or even made it possible for them to become gods themselves. The classicist Dr. D.C.A.

Hillman wrote that the “founding fathers” of the Western world

were drug users, plain and simple: they grew the stuff, they sold the stuff, and more important, they used the stuff . . . The ancient world didn’t have a Nancy Reagan, it didn’t wage a billion-dollar drug war, it didn’t imprison people who used drugs, and it didn’t embrace sobriety as a virtue. It indulged . . . and from this world in which drugs were a universally accepted part of life sprang art, literature, science, and philosophy . . . The West would not have survived without these so-called junkies and drug dealers.

There was some political grumbling for years that women were behaving too freely during their trances, but this annual festival ended only when the drug party crashed

into Christianity. The early Christians wanted there to be one route to ecstasy, and one route only – through prayer to their God. You shouldn't feel anything that profound or pleasurable except in our ceremonies at our churches. The first tugs towards prohibition were about power, and purity of belief. If you are going to have one God and one Church, you need to stop experiences that make people feel that they can approach God on their own. It is no coincidence that when new drugs come along, humans often use religious words to describe them, like ecstasy. They are often competing for the same brain space – our sense of awe and joy.

So when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and brought the Empire with him, the rituals at the Temple at Eleusis were doomed. They were branded a cult and shut down by force. The new Christianity would promote wine only in tiny sips. Intoxication had to be sparing. This “forcible repression by Christianity,” Walton explains, “represents the beginning of systematic repression of the intoxication impulse in the lives of Western citizens.”

Yet in every generation after, some humans would try to rebuild their own Temple at Eleusis—in their own minds, and wherever they could clear a space free of local Anslingers.

Harry Anslinger, it turns out, represented a trend running right back to the ancient world.

When Sigmund Freud first suggested that everybody has elaborate sexual fantasies, that it is as natural as breathing, he was dismissed as a pervert and lunatic. People wanted to believe that sexual fantasy was something that happened in other people – filthy people, dirty people. They took the parts of their subconscious that generated these wet dreams and daydreams and projected them onto somebody else, the depraved people Over There, who had to be stopped. Stuart Walton and the philosopher Terence McKenna both write that we are at this stage with our

equally universal desire to seek out altered mental states. McKenna explains: “We are

discovering that human beings are creatures of chemical habit with the same horrified disbelief as when the Victorians discovered that humans are creatures of sexual fantasy and obsession.”

Just as we are rescuing the sex drive from our subconscious and from shame, so we need to take the intoxication drive out into the open where it can breathe. Stuart Walton calls for a whole new field of human knowledge called “intoxicology.” He writes: “Intoxication plays, or has played, a part in the lives of virtually everybody who has ever lived . . . To seek to deny it is not only futile; it is a dereliction of an entirely constitutive part of who we are.”

After twenty-five years of watching stoned mice, drunken elephants, and tripping mongooses, Ronald K. Siegel tells me he suspects he has learned something about this. “We’re not so different from the other animal life-forms on this planet,” he says.

When he sees people raging against all drug use, he is puzzled. “They’re denying their own chemistry,” he says. “The brain produces endorphins. When does it produce endorphins? In stress, and in pain. What are endorphins? They are morphine-like compounds. It’s a natural occurrence in the brain that makes them feel good . . . People feel euphoric sometimes. These are chemical changes – the same kind of chemical changes, with the same molecular structures, that these plants [we use to make our drugs] are producing . . . We’re all producing the same stuff.”

Indeed, he continues, “the experience you have in orgasm is partially chemical – it’s a drug. So people deny they want this? Come on! . . . It’s fun. It’s enjoyable. And it’s chemical. That’s intoxication.” He seems for a moment to think back over all the animals guzzling drugs he has watched over all these years. “I don’t see,” he says, “any difference in where the chemical came from.”

This is in us. It is in our brains. It is part of who we are.

Image: Shutterstock

About the Author

Johann Hari is a British journalist who has written for the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, *Slate*, the *New Republic*, and the *Nation*. He has reported from many countries, from the Congo to Venezuela. He was twice named Newspaper Journalist of the Year by Amnesty International UK, awarded the Martha Gellhorn Prize for turning political writing into an art, and later named Journalist of the Year by Stonewall. He can be followed on Twitter: [@johannhari101](https://twitter.com/johannhari101)