Tempted by “College Candy”? What Would the Philosophers Say?
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The pressure to achieve academic success has led many college students to look for ways to gain an edge against the competition, like misusing prescription amphetamines intended for ADHD patients. Adderall, or “College candy”, sells for $3 to $5 dollars a pill and is popular among some students because it gives them energy and helps them focus. While using any drug without a prescription is unhealthy and illegal, there are ethical aspects to Adderall abuse. We can evaluate the morality of taking such drugs by using philosophical methods founded by some of the greatest thinkers of our civilization.

Centuries of philosophical debate have led us to some ethical principles that we can apply to discover the most virtuous action to take. Virtue ethics and utilitarianism are commonly used today to analyze controversial actions. How might they help us to analyze prescription drug abuse?

Aristotle’s theory of virtue ethics sets the foundations for ethical analysis. His book The Nicomachean Ethics described the steps necessary to achieve complete happiness, which Aristotle thought was intrinsically valuable and a shared human desire. Aristotle stated that “the happy life” cannot be obtained without virtue and so he encouraged people to develop character traits that reflect this. Thus, the virtuous person must act according to these qualities and be moderate. Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean was that the acceptable act would average the excess and the deficiency: neither too much nor too little of anything is righteous. Aristotle also acknowledged that virtue is still situational, and each case should be evaluated based on the people, objects, and occasions involved.

I doubt that pill popping was much of a concern in 384 BC; however we can still use Aristotle’s principles to determine the morality of modern Adderall abuse. Applying the principle of moderation, we could argue that appropriate use of a necessary drug is the virtuous act, abuse is the excess, and neglect is the deficiency. Any unauthorized use of prescription drugs could be considered abuse, and therefore an over-indulgence. For Aristotle, no excess was ethical; therefore based on his doctrine of the mean, students exploiting ADHD medication are being unethical.

What about John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism? Utilitarianism’s goal is to appropriately select the action that will maximize universal happiness. “Seek the greatest good for the greatest number” is the motto of utilitarianism and Mill’s greatest happiness principle. From this theory we now have the hedonistic calculus, a technique for calculating pleasure. The hedonistic calculus involves listing the people who will be affected by a particular decision, and numbering the amount of positive or negative influences that the decision will have on each person. These units of measurement are referred to as hedons (positive) and dolors (negative). Another number is assigned to represent the likelihood of these influences occurring. The hedons and dolors are then multiplied by the number of people affected to produce an
end result. The goal is to find the action that will generate the most hedons or positive influences in any given situation.

Using the hedonistic calculus and carefully analyzing the number of people affected by one’s decision can help each individual decide whether to take a drug not prescribed to them. Because Mill so strongly endorsed mental stimulation and exploration in education, it seems likely that he would support the use of prescription medicine as long as the positive consequences outweighed the negative. Of course, one would need to demonstrate that taking such drugs is in fact beneficial. Hedons might be produced after taking Adderall because of the pleasure generated from feeling successful, being productive, and being mentally engaged. But dolors could result if the user overdosed or was arrested, or set unfair standards in the overall academic competition.

As a Texas Tech student, I quickly learned that some students use prescription drugs to pull all nighters and study more intensely. From an ethical stand point I feel that it is wrong to use medications to gain an edge in scholarly settings as it sets an unfair advantage for those not willing to participate. Aristotle, I believe, would acknowledge this and view the unnecessary intake of a drug as intemperate and therefore unethical. Mill, however, would insist that people carefully compare the negative and positive effects to determine which action would prove to be the most ethical in any given situation. The beauty in adopting ancient philosophical principles like virtue ethics or utilitarianism is that they can support each individual in make the decisions most suitable for them. Using these thought processes worked for ancient philosophy legends and they can certainly help us as well!

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