

ETHICAL DILEMMAS RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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DISCUSSANT

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The next speaker, Harold Schmidt pointed out that new drugs affect the freedoms and responsibilities of individuals and of the state. They raise questions of agency: is the person you meet “John”, or “John on Ritalin”? Or with neurodegeneration, is the person you see today the one you knew before, either with or without medication?

NEW DRUGS, NEW PROBLEMS FOR REGULATION

This raises difficult questions about balancing the interests of people and society. For example, the role of the state could be anything from coercion and imprisonment to the provision of information. He quoted John Stuart Mill as saying that it is wrong to regulate individual foolishness unless it is harming someone else. But the state does have some softer roles, such as providing information for children who do not have detailed knowledge of drugs and their effects. He added that the philosopher Onora O’Neill has pointed to the fragility of concepts of individual autonomy. People have duties as well as rights, and different societies allow people different amounts of freedom.

Examples raised by the Foresight project include vaccination against addiction, which if it became practical might have issues if parents chose such an option for their children. Likewise the debate on cognition enhancers assumes that people are “better” if they are more competitive. Not everyone would agree with this position. Such drug use only improves life for the user if it coincides with her or his idea of improvement.

In the debate on his presentation, one speaker claimed that “recreational” drugs are those not for work, so that regulating them was wrong. Schmidt pointed out that regulation is meant to help make a better society, not necessarily a utopia. Another speaker pointed out that the whole of society bears the healthcare costs of problem drug use. The total cost is unknown but large. As another speaker said, the notion of harm varies from person to person but state intervention is needed both to ensure adequate information and to reduce harm.

KEY POINTS

Individuals have duties as well as rights.

Is it wrong to regulate individual foolishness unless it is harming someone else?

Drug use intervention by guardians, such as with vaccines, may preclude the right to choose.