

Why Do People Stupefy Themselves? (N.H. Dole Translation)

Leo Tolstoy

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Chapter 1

What is this demand for stupefying things,—vodka, wine, beer, hashish, opium, tobacco, and others less universally used; ether, morphine, mukhomor¹? Why did it begin and so quickly spread, and why does it still spread among all classes of men, savage and civilized alike? What does it mean that everywhere, if there is not vodka, wine, and beer, there you find opium or hashish, mukhomor, and other things, and tobacco everywhere?

Why must people need stupefy themselves? Ask a man why he began to drink wine and still drinks it, and he will answer you, "Why, it's agreeable, every one drinks," and he will add, "for gaiety's sake."

Some who have never once given themselves the trouble of thinking whether it is right or wrong for them to drink wine, will add that wine is wholesome and gives strength; in other words, they will say what has long ago been proved to be incorrect. Ask a smoker why he began to smoke tobacco and still smokes, and he will reply in the same manner, "Why, to cure low spirits; every one smokes."

Thus also will probably reply the devotees of opium, hashish, morphine, agaricum.

"Why! to cure low spirits, for gaiety's sake, all do it."

But it is just as good as a *cure for low spirits* or for *gaiety's sake*, because *all do it*, to twirl one's fingers, to whistle, to sing songs, to play on the dudka, and do other things; in other words, to do anything whatever, for which it is not necessary to squander ancestral wealth or expend great physical powers, to do what does not bring manifest woe on yourself and on others. But for the production of tobacco, wine, hashish, opium, often among settlements needing land, millions and millions of better lands are occupied with crops of rye, potatoes, hemp, poppies, grapevines, and tobacco, and millions of workmen—in England one-eighth of the whole population—are engaged their whole lives long in the production of these stupefying objects.

Moreover, the use of these things is manifestly injurious, producing terrible evils, known and confessed by every one, causing the destruction of more human beings than have perished in all wars and contagious diseases together.

And men know this; so that it cannot be that this is done to keep men's spirits up, for gaiety's sake, simply because all do this.

There must be something else in it. All the time and everywhere you meet with men who love their children, are ready to make all kinds of sacrifices for their well-being, and yet squander on vodka, wine, beer, or spend on opium or hashish, or even on tobacco, enough to feed their suffering and starving children, or, at least, keep them from deprivation. Evidently if a man placed under the necessity of choosing between subjecting his family which he loves to suffering and privation, and refraining from stupefying things, nevertheless chooses the first, he is stimulated to this by something more serious than that every one does it and it is pleasant. Evidently it is not done to raise spirits, or for gaiety's sake, but there is some more important reason.

This reason, as far as I can understand it from reading about this subject and observations on other men, and especially on myself when I used to drink wine and smoke tobacco—this reason, according to my observations, is as follows:—

During the period of conscious life a man can frequently detect in himself two separate beings: one blind, physical, and the other gifted with sight, spiritual. The blind animal being eats, drinks, rests, sleeps, propagates, and moves about like a machine wound up; the seeing spiritual being, connected with the animal, itself does nothing, but only estimates the activity of the living being by coinciding with it when it approves of this activity, and by being indignant with it when it does not approve.

This seeing being may be compared to the needle of a compass, which points with one end to the north, with the other in the opposite direction, to the south; and, being protected in its whole extent by a strip, is invisible as long as the thing that carries the needle moves in its direction, but comes out and becomes visible as soon as that which carries the needle turns from the direction indicated.

In exactly the same way the seeing spiritual being, the manifestation whereof in common language we call conscience, always points with one pole toward the right, and with the other, its opposite, toward the wrong, and is not noticed by us until we turn aside from the direction given to us—that is to say, from wrong to right. But it requires to perform some action contrary to the direction of conscience for the consciousness of the spiritual being to appear, showing the deviation of the animal activity from the direction indicated by conscience. And as a sailor could not continue to work with oars, machinery, or sails, if he knew that he was going in the wrong direction, until he gave his course the direction indicated by the needle of the compass, or else hid from himself the deviation; just exactly so every man who is conscious of the duality of his conscience and his animal activity cannot continue this activity until he either brings it into accordance with his conscience, or conceals from himself the warnings of conscience about the injustice of his animal life.

The whole life of man, we may say, consists only of these two activities: (1) the bringing of one's activity into harmony with conscience; and (2) the concealing from oneself of the indications of conscience so as to be able to continue a certain course of life.

Some do the first, others do the second. For the attainment of the first there is only one means—the moral enlightenment, an increase of light in oneself, and attention to that which the light shines on; for the second—to hide from oneself the monitions of conscience—there are two methods: one external, one internal. The external method consists in occupations which draw the attention away from the monitions of conscience; the internal method consists in darkening conscience itself.

As a man may hide from his eyes any object before him in two ways, by an external turning away of his eyes to something else more striking, and by shutting his eyes; just so a man may hide from himself the monitions of his conscience by a twofold method—the external by diverting his attention with all kinds of occupations, labors, amusements, games; the internal by blinding the organ of attention itself.

For men with an obtuse, limited moral sense, it is often simply sufficient to have external diversions, so as not to perceive the monitions of conscience about their irregular lives. But for men morally keen, such a method is not generally sufficient.

The external methods do not completely divert the attention from the discordance between life and the demands of conscience; this consciousness makes it hard to live, and men in order to

be able to live have recourse to an unquestionable inward method of blinding conscience itself, and this consists in poisoning the brain with stupefying things.

Life is not what it should be according to the demands of conscience. One cannot possibly turn one's life into conformity with its demands. The diversions which might distract from a consciousness of this dissonance are insufficient or they become disgusting, and so as to be in a condition to prolong existence, notwithstanding the monitions of conscience about its irregularities, men temporarily cut short its activity by poisoning that organ through which the monitions of conscience are manifested, just as a man purposely shutting his eyes would hide what he would not wish to see.

Chapter 2

Not in taste, not in pleasure, not in dissipation, not in gaiety, lies the explanation for the universal use of hashish, opium, wine, tobacco, but wholly in the necessity that men have for concealing from themselves the monitions of conscience.

I was going along the street once, and as I passed two izvoshchiks disputing, I heard one say to the other:—

”It’s a certain fact, on my conscience as sure as I am sober.”

What appeals to a sober man’s conscience does not appeal to a drunken man’s. In these words was expressed the essential fundamental reason, why men have recourse to stupefying things. Men have recourse to them either so as not to feel the pricking of conscience after committing some act contrary to conscience, or so as to bring themselves into a condition to commit some act which is contrary to conscience, but to which a man’s animal nature tempts him.

A sober man has conscientious scruples about going to dissolute women, about stealing, about committing murder. A drunken man has no such scruples; and so, if a man wishes to commit an act which his conscience forbids him to do, he stupefies himself.

I remember being struck by the testimony at court of a cook who had killed a relative of mine, a lady in whose service he had been. He told how when he had sent away his mistress, the chambermaid, and the time had come for him to act, he went with his knife into her sleeping room, but felt that while he was sober he could not perpetrate the act which he had planned. . . . This was ”the conscience of a sober man.” He went back and drank two glasses of vodka which he had prepared in anticipation of it, and then only did he feel that he was ready, and acted.

Nine-tenths of all crimes are accomplished in that way: ”drinking to keep up the courage.”

Half of the women that fall, fall through the influence of wine. Almost all visits to houses of ill fame are made by men in a state of drunkenness. Men know the power of wine in drowning out the voice of conscience, and deliberately employ it with that end in view.

Moreover, men stupefy themselves in order to deaden conscience—knowing how wine acts, they, wishing to compel other men to commit some act contrary to their conscience, purposely stupefy them, organize the stupefication of men so as to deprive them of their consciences. In war they always get soldiers drunk when they are to fight hand to hand. All the French soldiers in the assault on Sevastopol were thoroughly drunk.

All of us know of men who have become drunkards in consequence of crimes tormenting their consciences. All can bear witness that men living immoral lives are more inclined than others to the use of stupefying things. Bands of thugs and robbers, prostitutes, never live without wine. All know and acknowledge that the use of stupefying things is in consequence of the reproach of conscience, that in certain immoral professions stupefying things are employed for the deadening of conscience. All know and acknowledge that the use of stupefying things deadens the conscience, that a drunken man is punished for crimes which he would never dare to think of when sober. All are agreed in regard to this: but—strangely enough—when, in consequence of the use of stupefying things, such deeds as theft, murder, violence, and the like do not make

their appearance; when stupefying things are taken, not after terrible crimes, but by men of the professions which are not considered by us as criminal; and when these things are not taken all at once in great quantities, but all the time, in moderation,—then somehow it is supposed that stupefying things do not affect the conscience, deadening it.

Thus it is taken for granted that the drinking by an opulent Russian of a glass of vodka every day before each meal and a glass of wine at each meal, by a Frenchman of his absinthe, by an Englishman of his port and porter, by a German of his beer, and the smoking by a well-to-do Chinaman of his moderate portion of opium, and the smoking of tobacco, are done only for pleasure, and have no influence on the consciences of men.

It is taken for granted that if, after this ordinary stupefying of themselves, men do not commit such crimes as robbery and murder, but only certain stupid and wicked actions, then these actions are spontaneous, and are not produced by the drugging. It is taken for granted that if these men do not commit some capital crime, then they have no reason for deadening their consciences, and that the life which is led by men who are all the time stupefying themselves is a perfectly good life, and would be just the same if these men did not stupefy themselves. It is taken for granted that the constant use of stupefying things does not darken their consciences.

Notwithstanding the fact that every one knows by experience that from the use of wine and tobacco the disposition is changed, and things which without their incitation would have been shameful, cease to be shameful; that after every reproach from conscience, however slight it was then, is such a tendency toward folly that under the influence of stupefying things it is difficult to think of one's life and one's position; and that the constant and moderate use of things that stupefy produces the same physiological effect as the immediate and immoderate use of them,—to men who drink and smoke in moderation it seems that they use stupefying things, not at all for the deadening of their consciences, but merely for their taste and satisfaction.

But it requires only to think about this seriously and dispassionately, without any special pleading, to understand that in the first place, if the use of stupefying things taken in large quantities at a time deadens a man's conscience, then the constant use of these things must produce the same effect, since the stupefying things always act physiologically in the same way—always exciting and then moderating the activity of the brain, whether they be taken in large or in small quantities; and in the second place, that if stupefying things have the power of deadening the conscience, then they have it always, both when under their influence murder, robbery, or violence is perpetrated, and also when under their influence a word is spoken which would not be spoken, when thoughts and feelings would be aroused which without them would not have been aroused. And in the third place, that if the use of stupefying things is necessary for robbers, murderers, and prostitutes to stifle their consciences with, then it is just as necessary for men occupied in professions of which their consciences do not approve, even though these professions are called lawful, and are held in honor by other men. In a word, it is impossible not to understand that the use of stupefying things in large or in small quantities, periodically or constantly, in upper or lower circles, is due to one and the same cause—the need of quieting the voice of conscience so as not to see the discord between life and the demands of conscience.

Chapter 3

In this only is the reason for the spread of all kinds of stupefying things, and among others of tobacco, perhaps the widest spread and most dangerous of them all.

It is taken for granted that tobacco enlivens and clears the mind, that, like every other habit, it allures to itself, in no case producing that effect of deadening conscience such as is caused by wine. But all it requires is to look more carefully at the conditions in which special temptation to smoke appears, in order to be convinced that the stupefaction caused by tobacco, just the same as that caused by wine, affects the conscience, and that men consciously have recourse to this form of stupefaction, especially when they need it for this object.

If tobacco merely cleared the mind and made men cheerful, then there would not be any of that terrible necessity of using it and especially in certain definite circumstances, and men would not say that they had rather give up bread than their tobacco, and they would not in reality often prefer smoking to eating.

That cook who murdered his baruinya said that, when he went into her bedroom and cut her throat, and she fell back with the death rattle, and the blood spurted out in a torrent, a panic seized him.

"I could not finish the job," he said; "I went from the bedroom into the drawing-room, sat down there, and smoked a cigarette."

Only when he had stupefied himself with tobacco, did he feel sufficiently fortified to return to the bedroom, and finish dispatching the old lady, and examine her things.

Evidently the need of smoking at that minute was induced in him, not by the desire to clear or cheer his mind, but by the necessity of drowning something which prevented him from accomplishing the deed he had planned.

Such a definite necessity of stupefying oneself by tobacco in certain very difficult moments will occur to every smoker. I remember that in the days when I smoked I used to feel the special need of tobacco. It was always at moments when I wanted not to remember what I remembered, wanted to forget, wanted not to think.

I am sitting alone, I am doing nothing, I know that I ought to begin my work, and I do not feel like it. I smoke and continue sitting idle.

I promised some one to be at his house at five o'clock and I have stayed too long. I remember that I am late but I do not want to remember it, and I smoke. I am annoyed, and I say something disagreeable to a man, and I know that I am doing wrong, and I see that I ought to stop doing so, but I feel an inclination to my bad temper—I smoke, and I continue to be angry.

I am playing cards, and I am losing more than I wanted to hazard—I smoke.

I have placed myself in an awkward position, I have done something wrong, I have made a mistake, and I must recognize my position in order to escape from it, but I do not want to do so—I blame others and smoke! I am writing and am not quite satisfied with what I am writing. I ought to throw it away, but I want to finish writing what I had in mind, and I smoke. I am discussing,

and I see that my opponent and I do not understand and cannot understand each other; but I want to express my thoughts to the end, and I go on speaking, and I smoke.

The peculiarity of tobacco, distinguishing it from other stupefying things, besides the faculty which it offers for stupefying and its apparent harmlessness, includes also its portability, so to speak, the possibility of applying it to various minor occasions. To say nothing of the fact that the use of opium, wine, hashish, is coupled with certain accessories which cannot always be had, while one can always take tobacco and paper with one, and that the smoker of opium, the alcohol user, arouses horror, while the man that smokes tobacco presents nothing repulsive; the advantage of tobacco over other intoxicants is that, whereas the intoxication of opium, hashish, or wine is spread over all impressions and acts, received or produced during a sufficiently protracted period of time, the intoxication of tobacco may be directed to every separate occasion.

If you want to do what you ought not to do, you will smoke a cigarette, you will stupefy yourself just as much as is necessary in order to do what ought not to be done, and again you are fresh and can think and speak clearly; for if you feel that you have been doing what you ought not to have done, again comes the cigarette, and the disagreeable consciousness of the wrong or awkward action is done away with, and you can occupy yourself with other things and forget.

But to say nothing of the frequent occasions when every smoker betakes himself to smoking, not for a gratification of habit and a pastime, but as a means of deadening conscience for actions which have to be performed, or are already performed,—is not the strenuous definite interdependence between men's ways of life and their passion for smoking evident?

When do boys begin to smoke?

Almost always when they lose their childish innocence.

Why do smokers cease to smoke as soon as they come into more moral conditions of life, and begin to smoke as soon as they come into perverted environment. Why do gamblers almost all smoke? Why is it that the women that lead a moral life smoke least of all? Why do prostitutes and madmen *all* smoke?

Habit is habit, but evidently smoking is directly dependent on the need of deadening conscience, and it attains its end. How far smoking deadens the voice of conscience may be observed in the case of almost any smoker. Every smoker, yielding to his passion, either forgets or despises the very first demands of society, such as he claims from others and observes in all other circumstances, as long as his conscience is not smothered by tobacco. Every man of our average education recognizes that it is not proper, polite, or humane for one's own pleasure to disturb the comfort and happiness and still more the health of others. No one permits himself to wet a room where people are sitting, or to make a disturbance or shout, or admit a cold, hot, or fetid atmosphere, or perform actions which disturb or injure others. But out of a thousand smokers not one hesitates to puff out volumes of smoke into a room where women or children that do not smoke are breathing the atmosphere. Even if smokers are accustomed to ask of those present, "Is it disagreeable to you?"—they all know that the usual reply is, "Oh, we like it!"—notwithstanding the fact that it cannot be pleasant for one not smoking to breathe the vitiated air, and to find stinking cigar-ends in glasses, cups, and plates, on candlesticks or even in ash-trays.

But even if grown-up nonsmokers endure tobacco, at least for children, of whom no one asks permission, it cannot possibly be agreeable or advantageous. But, meantime, respectable people, humane in all the other relations of life, smoke in the presence of children, at dinners, in little rooms, vitiating the atmosphere with tobacco smoke, and not feeling the slightest pricking of conscience because they do so.

It is generally said, and I used to say, that smoking conduces to intellectual labor. And undoubtedly this is so, if one considers only the amount of intellectual labor. It seems to a man who smokes, and therefore ceases to value and weigh his thought, it seems as if many thoughts suddenly occurred to him. But it is not at all that many thoughts have occurred, but only that he has lost control of his thoughts.

When a man is working he is always conscious of two beings in himself; the one working, the other estimating the work. The stricter the estimate the slower and the better the work, and vice versa. If the one that estimates finds himself under the influence of an intoxication, then there will be more of the work, but its quality will be worse. "If I do not smoke, I cannot write. If I do not drink, I begin, but I cannot go on."

This is commonly said, and I used to say so. What does it mean? Either that you have nothing to write, or else that what you wish to write is not yet sufficiently matured in your inner consciousness, but is only confusedly beginning to present itself to you, and the estimating critic dwelling in you, not being stupefied by tobacco, tells you so. If you did not smoke you would put aside what you had begun, and await the time when what you had in mind became clear to you, you would try to think out what had dimly presented itself to you, you would consider the objections that arose, and you would direct your whole attention to clarifying your thought.

But you smoke, and the critic who has his seat within you becomes stupefied, and the obstacle in your work is removed. What seemed to you insignificant when you were unintoxicated with tobacco again acquires importance; what seemed to you obscure, no longer seems so; the obstacles rising before you are concealed, and you continue to write, and you write much and rapidly.

Chapter 4

”But,” it is frequently said, ”may not a slight brief change, like the mild exhilaration produced by a moderate use of wine and tobacco, bring about some significant results? It is comprehensible that if a man smokes opium, hashish, or drinks so much wine as to fall and lose his senses, the consequences of such a stupefying of himself may be very grave; but that a man should come under the exceedingly mild effects of alcoholic exhilaration or tobacco could never have any serious consequences.”

It seems to people that a slight intoxication, a slight darkening of consciousness, can never produce a serious effect. But to think so is the same as to think that it may be injurious to a watch to strike it against a stone, but that to put an obstacle in its works cannot harm it.

You see the chief work which moves the whole life of a man proceeds not in the motion of arms and legs, the physical powers, but in the consciousness. In order for a man to accomplish something with his arms and legs, he must first undergo a certain change in his consciousness. And this change determines all the man’s subsequent acts. These changes are always brief, almost unnoticeable. Brüllof was correcting an *étude* for a pupil. The pupil, glancing at the changes that had been made, said:—

”Here you have scarcely touched the *étude*, but it is entirely changed.”

Brüllof answered:—

”Art begins where scarcely begins.”

This observation is strikingly true, not in relation to art alone, but to all of life. It may be said that a true life begins where ”scarcely” begins, where the scarcely perceptible, almost infinitely small, changes take place. The true life is produced, not where the great externals are effectuated, where men move about, jostle one another, struggle, and fight, but it is produced where the scarcely differentiated changes are accomplished.

The true life of Raskolnikof¹ was not accomplished when he killed the old money-lender and her sister. While he was killing the old woman, and especially her sister, he was not living his true life, but was acting like a machine, doing what he could not help doing, discharging the cartridge with which he had long ago been loaded. One old woman lay killed, the other was before him there; the ax was in his hand.

The true life of Raskolnikof was not proceeding at the time when he met the old woman’s sister, but at the time when he had not as yet killed even the old woman herself, had not yet entered another person’s room with murder in view, had not taken the ax in his hand, had not the noose under his cloak on which he hung it, before he had ever thought of the old woman; but it was while he was lying on the divan in his own room, not even thinking of the old woman or even whether he could or could not at the will of another man wipe from the face of the earth a useless and dangerous person, but was deciding whether it was suitable or not for him to live in Petersburg, whether it was suitable or not for him to take money from his mother, and other questions not at all affecting the old woman. And here at that time, in the animal kingdom, entirely independent of the reality, were decided the questions whether he should or

should not kill the old money-lender. These questions were decided, not when he, having killed one old woman, stood with his ax before the second, but at the time when he had not yet acted, but was only thinking, when his conscience alone was working, and in this conscience scarcely perceptible changes were taking place.

Now there is often needed the greatest clearness of mind, especially important for the regular decision of a question, and a single glass of wine, a single cigarette smoked, may prevent the decision of the question, may turn this question, may stifle the voice of conscience, may make the decision of the question, to the profit of the lower animal nature as was the case with Raskolnikof.

The changes are imperceptible, and from them come the most enormous and awful consequences. From what happens when a man has decided and begun to act, great material changes may ensue: houses, property, men's bodies, may be destroyed, but nothing can happen greater than what was hidden in the man's conscience. The limits of what may come forth are given to conscience.

But from the scarcely perceptible changes which take place in the domain of the conscience may proceed consequences utterly beyond the power of the imagination to show their importance, and wholly beyond limits.

Let it not be thought that what I say has anything in common with questions of free will or determinism.

Discussions about these subjects are superfluous for my purpose or for any other. Without deciding the question whether a man may or may not act as he wishes—a question, in my opinion, wrongly stated—I only say that, as human activity is determined by scarcely perceptible changes in the conscience, then—it being all one, whether you do or do not recognize the so-called freedom of the will—one must be especially attentive to the state in which these almost imperceptible changes appear, as it is necessary to be especially attentive to the condition of the weights by means of which we weigh objects.

We must, as far as in us lies, try to place ourselves and others in such conditions that the clearness and delicacy of the thoughts necessary for the regular work of the conscience may not be disturbed, and not to do the opposite by trying to make this work of the conscience more difficult and troublesome by the use of stupefying things.

A man is both a spiritual and an animal being. A man may be moved, by influencing only his spiritual nature, and may be moved by influencing his animal nature, just as a watch may be moved by a hand and by a main wheel. And just as, in a watch, it is more convenient to regulate its movement by an internal mechanism, so a man—you yourself or any one else—is more conveniently guided by his conscience. And as in watches it is necessary more than all to observe that by which the central mechanism is more conveniently moved, so in the case of a man it is more than all necessary to observe purity, clearness of conscience, whereby it is more convenient to move a man. It is impossible to doubt this, and all men know it. But the necessity arises for men to stupefy themselves. Men are not so desirous of their consciences working regularly as for it to seem to them that what they are doing is regular, and they deliberately employ such means as prevent the regular work of the conscience.

Chapter 5

Men drink and smoke, not to keep their spirits up, not for gaiety's sake, not because it is pleasant, but in order to stifle conscience in themselves. And if this is so, then how terrible must be the consequences. In fact, just think what kind of a building men would build if they did not have a straight rule whereby to lay the walls, or a rectangular rule whereby to square the corners, but a soft rule which would give at all the irregularities of the wall, and a square which would bend out and in for every acute and obtuse angle!

But now by means of this self-stupefaction this very thing is done in life. Life does not fit conscience—conscience is made to yield to life. This is done in the case of individual lives, it is done also in the life of all humanity which is made up of individual lives.

In order to comprehend the full significance of such a stupefying of conscience, let any man remember carefully his spiritual state at every period of his life. Every man finds that at every period of his life before him stood certain moral questions which he has had to decide, and from the decision of which depended all the welfare of his life. For the decision of such questions great stress of attention was required. This stress of attention constitutes labor. In every labor, especially at its commencement, there is a period when the labor seems difficult, painful, but human weakness suggests the desire to shirk it. Physical labor is painful at first; still more so is intellectual labor.

As Lessing says, men have the quality of ceasing to think when thinking begins to present difficulties, and especially so, I add, when thinking begins to be fruitful. A man feels that the decision of questions facing him demands strenuous, often painful, labor, and he wants to get rid of it. If there were not internal means of stupefaction, he could not drive away from his consciousness these insistent questions, and willy-nilly he would be compelled to decide them.

Now the man knows the means of ridding himself of them whenever they present themselves, and he employs them. As soon as the questions presenting themselves for solution begin to torment him, he betakes himself to these means, and saves himself from the discomfort caused by the disturbing questions. The consciousness ceases to demand their decision, and the undecided questions remain undecided until the next period of enlightenment. But at the next period of enlightenment the same thing repeats itself, and a man for months, for years, sometimes his life long, continues to face the same moral problems, having never advanced one step toward their solution. And meantime on the decision of these moral questions the whole movement of life depends.

Something occurs analogous to what a man would do, who, needing to see the bottom through turbid water, in order to reach a precious pearl, and not liking to go into the water, should deliberately roil the water as soon, as it began to settle and become transparent. Often for a whole lifetime a man who has stupefied himself stands motionless on the same, once adopted, obscure, contradictory system of philosophy, each time the period of enlightenment approaches, beating against the same wall on which he had beaten ten, twenty years before, and finding it impossible to break through it, because he had deliberately blunted the keenness of his thoughts whereby

only he could break through it. Let any one remember how he was at the epoch when he smoked and drank, and let him verify the same thing in others, and he will see one constant line of demarcation separating men who stupefy themselves from men who are free from the habit; the more a man stupefies himself, the more immovable he is morally.

Chapter 6

The effects on individuals of opium and hashish, as described for us by them, are horrible; horrible for the drunkard are the consequences of the use of alcohol, as we well know; but incomparably more horrible for society in general are the consequences of taking brandy, wine, and tobacco, though the majority of men, and especially the so-called classes of our world, use them in moderation, and consider them harmless.

The consequences must necessarily be horrible if it be granted, as one must grant, that the dominant activity of society—political, official, scientific, literary, artistic—is largely carried on by men who find themselves in an abnormal condition—by intoxicated persons.

It is ordinarily taken for granted that a man who, like the majority of the people in our well-to-do classes, uses alcoholic stimulants every time he takes food, finds himself the next day, when he goes to work, in a perfectly normal and sober state. But this is absolutely false. The man who in the evening drinks a bottle of wine, a glass of vodka, or two tankards of ale, finds himself in the customary condition of headachiness or depression which follows exhilaration, and therefore in a condition of intellectual debasement, which is still further increased by smoking.

For a man who constantly smokes and drinks in moderation to bring his brain into a normal condition, he must go for a week, or even more, without drinking or smoking,¹ and this rarely happens.

Thus the large part of all that is produced in our world, both by men that direct and teach others and by those directed and taught, is accomplished in a non-sober condition.

Now do not let this be taken as a jest or as an exaggeration—the ugliness, and above all the senselessness, of our lives proceed, primarily, from the constant condition of intoxication in which the majority of men find themselves. How would it be possible for men not intoxicated calmly to do all that is done in our world, from the Eiffel tower to the general war debt?

Without the slightest necessity a society is formed; capital is paid in, men work, enter into calculations, form plans; millions of work-days, millions of puds of iron, are consumed in building a tower; and millions of men consider it their duty to climb up the tower, stay there a while, and go down again; and the construction and the visiting of this tower arouses in men's minds no criticism upon it, but only a desire to build still more tall towers. Could sober people have done such a thing?

Or again: All the European nations have been occupied for decades in devising the very best means of destroying human life, and in training all their young men that had reached mature growth how to commit murder. All know that there is no danger of a descent of barbarians, that these preparations for murder are meant by Christian and civilized nations against one another, all know that this is burdensome, painful, inconvenient, wasteful, immoral, blasphemous, and senseless—and yet all prepare for mutual murder: some, inventing political combinations as to who shall be allied with whom, and who shall be killed; others taking the command of these prospective murderers; still others submitting against their will, against the dictates of their conscience, against reason, to these murderous preparations.

Could sober men do this?

Only intoxicated men, not knowing a sober moment, could do such things, and live in such a horrible state of discord between life and conscience, as the men of our day live, not only in this, but in all other respects.

Never, it seems to me, have men lived in such evident contradiction between the demands of conscience and their acts.

The humanity of our time is, as it were, fastened to something. It is as if some external cause prevented it from taking that position which is natural to it according to its conscience. And this cause—if not the only one, at least the principal one—is the physical condition of stupefaction in which, by wine or tobacco, the immense majority of the men of our time bring themselves.

Emancipation from this terrible evil will be an epoch in the life of humanity, and this epoch is apparently at hand. The evil is recognized. The change in conscience in relation to the use of stupefying things has already taken place; men have recognized their terrible harmfulness and begin to point them out, and this imperceptible change in the conscience inevitably brings with it the emancipation of men from the use of stupefying things. The emancipation of men from stupefying things opens their eyes to the demands of their consciences, and they begin to lead lives in accordance with conscience.

And this is apparently beginning to take place. And, as always, it begins with the upper classes, when all the lower classes are already infected.

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Leo Tolstoy
Why Do People Stupefy Themselves? (N.H. Dole Translation)
1890

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