



Weiner Case Highlights the Differences: Morality v. Biology

Upon discussing the Anthony Weiner situation with a friend of the disgraced congressman on his nationally syndicated radio show, self-described “Reagan conservative” Sean Hannity expressed his wish that Weiner “get the help that he needs.” Just a few days later, Weiner himself announced that he would be temporarily leaving the Congress in order to pursue treatment—i.e. “help.”



If one didn’t know anything of Weiner other than that he needs help, one could be pardoned for thinking that he suffers from a potentially terminal illness. In reality, though, such is far from the case, for what is at issue is Weiner’s *moral character*, not his *biological condition*: a married man with a child on the way, Weiner is the subject of relentless criticism from his fellow Democrats and his Republican rivals alike for having sent photos of his naked genitalia to several women.

While the disposition to conflate the language of morality with that of biology has long been a feature of leftists’ character, neoconservative Republicans such as Hannity have acquired it as well. For example, the entire War on Drugs of which Hannity and his ideological brethren are enthusiastic supporters would be unthinkable in the absence of the notion that the harmful — “addictive” — effects of drugs, like the harmful effects of natural illnesses, are *intrinsic* to the drugs.

It is this idea that accounts for the argument that Ann Coulter made a few years back that there can no more be a right in liberty to use drugs than there can be a right to become a *slave*, for drugs, like slavery, undermine liberty. That the drug “addict” is a slave to his master, the drug to which he is “addicted,” is certainly the reasoning of which “the King” of “conservative” talk-radio, Rush Limbaugh, availed himself when it was disclosed that [he had been purchasing and ingesting pain killers](#). Almost immediately thereafter, [Rush was ordered into a rehabilitation center](#).

Evidently, few people, and even fewer “social conservatives,” recognize what an incoherent state of affairs they have created. The language of biology is *not* the language of morality and vice versa. Attempts to conflate the two come at the cost of obscuring both.

Morality, regardless of the type, necessarily presupposes free agency, *persons* with the capacity to make choices. Moral agents are not *compelled* by *causes*; they are *motivated* by *reasons*. And because they have the freedom to choose *this* rather than *that*, they are *responsible* for their actions. What this means is that in acting, they invite “praise” and “blame” for their right and wrong conduct, respectively.

If, though, the Weiners and Limbaughs of the world are in need of “help” — *therapy* or *rehabilitation* — then it is resolutely *inappropriate* to hold them responsible for their conduct. In fact, it is inaccurate in these instances to even speak of their “conduct”: only free agents, *subjects* possessed of rationality, *conduct* themselves. As [Michael Oakeshott](#) observed, insofar as an entity’s movement is beyond its control, like any other *object*, it “*behaves*” in accordance with *forces* or *causes* — it doesn’t conduct itself on the basis of reasons.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on June 16, 2011

So, the “social conservative” is stuck upon the horns of a dilemma.

On the one hand, he can continue to employ the pseudo-scientific terms of “addiction,” “causes,” “therapy,” “rehab,” and the like to characterize obsessive and compulsive “behavior” as it pertains to drug use, sex, and so forth. This choice, however, comes at the cost of divesting these activities of all moral import and those who engage in them of all moral responsibility. What this in turn implies is that it is as justifiable to penalize, say, those who regularly use non-prescription drugs — “addicts” — as it is justifiable to penalize those with physical illnesses.

To this contention, some may object that the analogy here is weak, for drug addiction is a *choice* — people choose to use drugs — while no one chooses physical illness. This objection, however, is easily met.

There *is* indeed some sense in which people can be said to choose some of the physical illnesses with which they’re afflicted. Sexually-transmitted diseases such as AIDS, alcohol-induced sclerosis of the liver, and cigarette smoking-induced lung cancer are just some of the diseases that those who embarked upon these perilous activities can be said to have chosen.

But even more importantly, this objection is not an option for those who insist on grabbing this horn of the dilemma, for the language of “choice” is the language of *morality*, not science (or pseudo-science).

On the other hand, if the “social conservative” seeks to grab the other horn and maintain that whether it is drug use, sex, or any other form of conduct, people *are* morally responsible for their actions, then he must relinquish all talk of “addiction,” “rehabilitation,” “treatment” and related terms when it comes to these matters.

The irony is that it is almost invariably the “libertarian” — exactly that character who seeks to end the “social conservative’s” War on Drugs — who speaks of drug use solely in moral terms. One prime example of this is the libertarian’s substitution of “habit” for the social conservative’s “addiction.” The social conservative, in stark contrast, views the War on Drugs as preeminently a moral crusade, but the confused lines along which he understands drugs and drug usage divests it of this moral import.

Indeed, if the “social conservative” wishes to convince (rather than compel) others to endorse his case for the criminalization of what [Ron Paul](#), speaking on behalf of libertarians and constitutionalists, refers to as “personal habits,” he must first make sure that it is coherent.

As of this juncture, however, he has singularly failed to achieve this end.



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