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Trends. Anti-Drug Public Policies: The Consequentialist- Deontological Distinction

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Most informed observers throughout the world would concur that anti-drug public policies--and related substantive and procedural legalisms proscribing various psychoactive drug usages--have been problematic. Defenders of such policies are subject to criticism that the cost of these policies may be more than their benefits when corruption, criminalization, and pressures on the criminal justice systems are considered. Yet even opponents of such policies are subject to criticism that they condone the negative consequences of proscribed psychoactive drug usages. Defenders, opponents, and their respective detractors can all marshal data to support their positions. With these data, all sides seem to talking through, above, below, and around each other.

A common meeting ground may comprise the consequentialist-deontological distinction. The former ascribes the goodness of a policy to its consequences--i.e., what the consequences of that policy are. In the present case, a drug policy's goodness and the goodness of a lack of a drug policy (which is policy by omission) might be contingent on the cumulative cost-benefit assessment for the people affected by that policy. The latter ascribes the goodness of a policy or lack of a policy to whether what is proscribed is bad and what is proscribed is good.

Too often in policy debates, consequentialist arguments are being made to deontologists as well as the converse. In a representative democracy at least, there should be two ongoing debates--(1) the deontological about whether various drug usages are bad or good and the requisite policy implications...and (2) the consequentialist given the deontological stance of the moment. In this way, policy deliberations about anything from property seizures of suspected drug possessors to the ratio of drug prevention and rehabilitation program dollars to drug interdiction dollars can better be joined. Unfortunately the politics affecting pro-drug, anti-drug, and neutralist interests seem self-sustaining and highly resistant to analyses against those interests. So the utility of the consequentialist-deontological distinction as well as the efficacies of drug and anti-drug policies inevitably go up in smoke. (See Buck, D., Godfrey, C., & Sutton, M. (1996). Economic and other views of addiction: Implications for the choice of alcohol, tobacco and drug policies. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 15, 357-368; Cheung, Y.W., & Ch'ien, J.M.N. (1996). Drug use and drug policy in Hong Kong: Changing patterns and new challenges. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 31, 1573-1597; Gorman, D.M. (1998). The irrelevance of evidence in the development of school-based prevention policy, 1986-1996. *Evaluation Review*, 22, 118-146; Lewis, D.C., Duncan, D.F., & Clifford P.R. (1997). Analyzing drug policy. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 17, 351-361.) (Keywords: Consequentialism, Criminal Justice, Deontology, Drug Policy, Psychoactive Drugs, Representative Democracy.)