

Absolut Puritanism

By THEODORE DALRYMPLE

The American Medical Association has issued an angry and bitter response to NBC's decision to allow advertisements for liquor on its network after 9 p.m. It accused the network of putting profit before America's health. But people's behavior is determined only to a minor extent by advertising: No one has suggested, for example, that the current epidemic of obesity is caused by advertisements for cakes, while the use of crack cocaine spread very rapidly without the assistance of the advertising agencies.

In my case, it required no advertisements to persuade me to drink alcohol every day. It came naturally to me to do so, as fish swim in the sea. Things were rather different with pathology textbooks, however: There, even if the entire world had been plastered with billboards advertising their manifold attractions, I should not have read them daily. In fact, it was the fear of failing exams that convinced me to read them at all. In other words, advertising is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for bad (or good) habits to develop and become general: Most of us can develop them all on our own.

I am far from underestimating the dangers of excessive drinking—I have been threatened and even assaulted in the emergency room by too many men in delirium tremens for that. But insofar as there is an epidemic of excessive drinking (and the AMA points to a recent rise in the number of fatal teenage drunken motor accidents), it is surely a symptom of our collective loss of self-control in many spheres, as exemplified by a recent incumbent of the White House. Self-denial is hardly the characteristic of the age.

Of course, there is considerable pleasure to be had in blaming large entities such as the government and greedy corporations for our weaknesses and failings. Not only does it help to avoid the unpleasant thought that man is a fallen creature, but it holds out the prospect that we shall one day begin to behave well—once they have got the legislation and the regulations right.

What is interesting in the AMA's protest, however, is its assumption that considerations of health automatically trump all others. This assumption is not argued but taken as self-evident, like the truths of the Declaration of Independence. Health and safety are the measure of all things: What conduces to health should be promoted, and what conduces to illness or accident should be banned.

I do not want to argue the health benefits of alcohol: the famous j-shaped curve of consumption against longevity. Nor do I want to denounce irresponsible teetotal-

ism, that (if the j-shaped curve is to be believed) is killing thousands of Americans every year. Wine and other alcoholic beverages should not be drunk as if they were castor oil, good for the bowels but otherwise distasteful. They should be drunk because they give pleasure and add to conviviality.

We live in a cultural atmosphere of increasing health puritanism. The peculiarities of this atmosphere were made clear to me by a small item that appeared in the British Medical Journal a number of months ago. It stated, without further elaboration, and without indignation, that there were 17 million sports injuries a year in Britain.

Even allowing for a misprint of an error of magnitude, this seemed a lot of injuries to me, and even if some of them were caused by people falling off their sofas while watching football on television. Imagine what a medical outcry there would be if there were 170,000 injuries—or 17,000, or even 1,700—consequent upon eating chocolate! The calls for the sales of chocolate to be regulated, and advertising banned, would be deafening. But when it came to sport (other than boxing), not a single peep! That is because sport is good for you, in an *a priori* rather than in an empirical sense.

Why should this be? It is clear that most of the health benefits of sports, if any, could be perfectly well obtained by peaceful, non-competitive non-sporting activities in which the dangers of injury were much fewer. But no medical association anywhere in the world has called for the restriction of sports, or the banning of television sports programs that might be watched by vulnerable young people inclined to imitation. Why not? On the contrary, there are calls for sporting activities to be encouraged or even made compulsory for young people.

The reason is clear: Many people find the training and exercise necessary to the playing of sport either boring or painful, or both. But it is all too easy to suppose that, natural pleasures being bad for us, unnatural pains must be good for us. And since health, in our post-ethical and post-religious age, is the new heaven, a diet we don't want to follow and exercise we don't want to do are the modern equivalent of the spiritual disciplines of the past.

But health is not the only good, much less the supreme good, of human existence. Indeed, excellent health is neither sufficient nor necessary for the good life, and he is not always happiest who lives longest. It follows that, in deciding whether something is legally or ethically permissible, it is not enough to consider the health implications alone. Mountaineering should not be forbidden because

the only possible health outcomes are broken legs, frostbite or fatal falls, without any countervailing health benefits that could not be obtained in another, safer fashion.

Naturally, the AMA, being an association of doctors, is more interested in health than in any other aspect of human life. It is therefore perfectly right and proper for it to advert to certain dangers to our health. But it is wrong to seek to dictate social policy, as if it had been vouchsafed the key to existence. If it continues to do so, I would suggest it changed its name to the American Malvolio Society, as being more apposite to its goals.

And in the meantime, I suggest also that the following warning be placed on the bottles of all alcoholic drinks: Drinking alcohol can make you drunk.

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