

## Bad example

*Are the worst behavers the best teachers?*

“ In the United States, it is now customary for us to select our addiction experts from among those who have misbehaved most badly in the course of consuming drugs and alcohol. Let me just give you some examples. John Phillips was a former Mama and Papa who made the cover of *People* magazine long after his music career was over. He got there by admitting he had been a drug addict for so many years, injecting cocaine and heroin – and from getting Mark Gold to treat him.

He talked about how he had completely ignored his oldest daughter, how he and his addicted wife conceived and brought up a child while they were in the midst not only of the addiction, but living a crazy, disgusting lifestyle. He wrote a biography of himself because so many people wanted to learn about this situation. In the *New York Times* the book's reviewer said: “John Phillips is not altogether realistic about himself. He recalls that when he was a postman he threw mail away because his mail bags were too heavy. As a graveyard plot salesman, he received down payments and pocketed the money and never recorded the transactions. Still, on page 297 of a 444-page book, in reporting on how he skipped out on a \$2000 hotel bill, he writes, ‘My values were beginning to corrode under the prolonged influence of hard drugs’”

The reviewer's implication is that the moral corrosion preceded the drug use.

One other quote from the many in my files. “Thomas Hollywood Henderson, the former Dallas Cowboy linebacker, who has been gaoled in California since 1984 on sex charges involving two teenage girls, will be released this week and has already been scheduled for a paid speaking tour to talk against drug and alcohol abuse”. Let's be clear. This man was arrested for sexually abusing adolescents. It has now been decided that he is a good person to lecture us on drug and alcohol use. Do you follow the

logic here? These articles appear without apology in the papers. Now what are these moral outrages predicated on?

Our inability to establish a firm moral basis for evaluating human behaviour has placed us in this dilemma. Let me just give you an example. In America now the concept of drug testing has become widely accepted. That's where you call people in and say, ‘We are not clear whether you have been doing anything wrong or not, but we are going to check your internal bodily fluids to see if you have been doing something we don't appreciate’ – that is to say, drinking or taking drugs.

In the cases I cited earlier, people who had flagrantly misbehaved have, in a sense, been excused and lauded for that misbehaviour – have been put before others as some kind of model or paragon, or certainly as people able to impart some kind of wisdom to everybody else. Here we show that we are incapable of forthrightly taking a moral stand against misbehaviour.

Having shown that we are incapable of keeping up that half of the equation, what remains for us to do but to ferret out people who are not outwardly misbehaving and examine their bodily fluids, thereby to accuse and imprison them?

I think this is a pretty accurate representation of where I would put the split between morality and moralism. For me, morality is being able to establish reasonable and consensual standards against conduct which harms yourself or other human beings in flagrant and obvious ways which deny the standards of the society. Moralism, on the other hand, is a tendency to disapprove of behaviours which somehow

abstractly we have decided we dislike because they are not characteristic of groups of which we are members. If science is not able to help us make this distinction, then I fear that our science will be an abomination and will be used to abuse society, rather than to help us. ”

by

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*Extracted from a talk given in 1988 and published in The Future of the Addiction Model, edited by Wendy Swift et al and published by the Australian National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. The author is a US social psychologist whose works include Love and Addiction and The Truth about Addiction and Recovery.*

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