Thirst for Spirits? Thirst for Spirit? Two Models to Explain Alcohol's Impact

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Two main models, the spiritual and the physiological, have been put forward to explain the cause of drunkenness. While the spiritual model was dominant prior to the rise of modern science and medicine, it has been largely replaced during the past two centuries by the physiological model. This paper summarises both models, traces their history, and notes a contemporary new perspective and re-emergence of the older spiritual model. The paper suggests that theorists and therapists who remain unwilling to consider a spiritual cause of drunkenness in favour of a strictly physiological one, do so at the risk of adopting an inadequate working model of drunkenness and alcohol addiction.

Introduction

Is there a spiritual contribution to the experience of drunkenness, or is it adequately accounted for by biochemistry, microbiology, and physiology? In the long history of observation and discussion of alcohol's impact in its consumers, two main models have been put forward to explain the cause of drunkenness. The first model will be designated *spiritual* and the second *physiological*. While the spiritual model was dominant prior to the rise of modern science and medicine, it has been largely replaced during the past two centuries by the physiological model. This paper summarises both models, traces their history, and notes the re-emergence of the older spiritual model. Finally, it argues that the spiritual model remains useful, even central, in accounting for aspects of the sensations and behaviours accompanying drunkenness, which the physiological model has not been able to satisfactorily explain.

This paper employs Christopher Cook's definition of drunkenness, which distinguishes between drunkenness and intoxication. Cook (2006) defines intoxication as "a transient state, arising as a biological result of consumption of alcohol. The physical phenomena which mark intoxication include impaired physiological function, slurring of speech, coordination and cognition, memory and psychomotor tasks are all impacted, and in extreme cases of intoxication, coma and death follow" (p. 13). He defines drunkenness as behaviour. Drunken behaviour is influenced by a range of factors which include, but are not limited to, the beliefs, wishes, and cultural expectations of a drunk person (p. 14). This paper focuses on the phenomena of drunkenness rather than of intoxication, although ancient sources typically did not distinguish between them.

Spiritual Cause of Drunkenness in Greek and Roman Sources

According to surviving sources, most people in ancient Greece and Rome assumed a consistently "spiritual" cause for drunkenness that accompanied consuming alcohol. This section of the paper sketches this spiritual cause, and illustrates how it impacted both Greco-Roman and early Christian attitudes towards alcohol. A good starting point for illustrating this Greco-Roman understanding of the cause of drunkenness is the Greek *symposion*, or drinking party, which followed formal evening meals. The typical symposion carefully followed a ritual which included a libation, or drink offering, to Dionysos the god of wine, consisting of a small amount of undiluted wine poured out

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in his honour, to acknowledge his power. This was followed by the paean, a hymn sung by guests in honour of Dionysos. To participants, Dionysos was understood to be "present" at the symposion, guiding the conversation and other forms of interaction. While the ideal of the symposion, as depicted by Plato and other highbrow authors, consisted of civilised, philosophical dialogue, the day-to-day reality was sometimes different, as indicated by the following quotation (see Cook, Tarbet, & Ball, 2007) of a fragment (fragment 93) from a play by Eubulus (4th century BC):

> I mix three *krater*s [ancient equivalent of today's punch bowls in which wine was mixed with water before being served to guests] only for those who are wise. One is for good health, which they drink first. The second is for love and pleasure. The third is for sleep, and when they have drunk it those who are wise wander homewards. The fourth is no longer ours, but belongs to arrogance. The fifth leads to shouting. The sixth to a drunken revel. The seventh to black eyes. The eighth to a summons. The ninth to bile. The tenth to madness, in that it makes people throw things. (p. 1303)

The role of Dionysus in the ancient world grew increasingly complex, but the god's core manifestation remained that of the god of wine and drunkenness. The most sobering ancient account of his considerable spiritual power and modus operandi through his devotees is the tragedy by the Greek playwright Euripides, titled *Bacchae* (first performed 405 BC), in which Dionysos in human guise arrived in the city of Thebes where his human mother had been born, and approached the local king, Pentheus, demanding recognition. Anyone who failed to recognise the deity of Dionysos put themselves in great peril—in the case of the unbelieving Pentheus, a violent death at the hand of his own mother while under the spell of Dionysos. The spiritual basis of Bacchic celebration has been vigorously championed by, among others, E. R. Dodds in his classic works on ancient Greek thought (e.g., see Dodds, 1951). His definition of the Greek verb *Bakhuein*, from which the play derived its title, helps the modern reader grasp the ancient context: "*Bakchuein* is not to have a good time, but to share in a particular religious rite and (or) have a particular religious experience—the experience of communion with a god which transformed a human being into a *Bakchos* or a *Bakchē*" (p. 278). Dodd's definition continues to be cited approvingly by specialists (e.g., Schlesier, 1993).

Evidence that drunkenness, in the view of many Greeks and Romans, had a spiritual cause is also provided by the widely-held ancient view that dreams conveyed messages from the gods, but that distortion of both dream and interpretation was caused by the wine consumed by the dreamer. According to Flavius Philostratus (died c. AD 250), dreams could only be rightly interpreted at dawn or later, because by then the soul would have cleansed itself of wine. By implication before midnight, after drinking, dream messages were unreliable because of the wine-induced spiritual interference. To be more precise, the interference was attributed to the spirit of wine at work in its consumer. Even at midnight the soul was still "under the influence" (*Life of Apollonius* 2.37, as cited in White, 1975, p. 69). Philostratus maintained that priests of the famous if semi-legendary Greek seer Amphiaraus required three days of abstinence from wine by those consulting him, so their souls would be "in a state of absolute transparence" and able to receive divine oracles without distortion (White, p. 70).

A spiritual cause of drunkenness is expressed in the Socratic-Platonic traditions. According to his two most illustrious students, Plato and Xenophon, Socrates (469-399 BC) assumed that drunkenness had a spiritual cause. The view that Socrates was atheist was communicated by his younger contemporary, the playwright Aristophanes, through his influential comedy, *Clouds* (see Henderson's discussion in his introduction to *Clouds* in Aristophanes, 1998). But he was not correct. Atheism was certainly not at the heart of the charge levelled against Socrates by his fellow

Athenian citizens, which led to his execution, so, according to the testimony of both Plato and Xenophon, Socrates was a believer in God, or the gods. His theology was unconventional for a man of his time and place. Xenophon noted in his *Memorabilia* (1.1) that Socrates was "guilty of not recognizing the gods which the city recognizes, and for bringing in new daimones. To Greeks, *daimones* was a stock expression for the spiritual presence of a god, any god, among people. It was not used in the negative sense that its English equivalent *demons* has inherited. Xenophon (1.2) claimed that his teacher acknowledged the existence of his own personal guiding daímōn.

In a dialogue with Critobulus recorded by Xenophon, Socrates provided what may be termed a divine, or spiritual explanation for the behaviour of people who, despite opportunity, intention and will to act, are "prevented from doing these things by the rulers [Greek *archontes*] .... and goddesses [*despoinai* 'mistress, lady of the house'; feminine form of *despotēs*]" (*Oeconomicus* 1:18-22). These rulers and goddesses are not earthly masters. The spiritual nature of the archontes is confirmed by Plato, as are the despoinai, despite translators' efforts to "secularise" Socrates' concept of them. According to Socrates, these spiritual archontes and despoinai manifest themselves in such human behaviours as idleness (*argia*), moral cowardice (*malakia psuchēs*) negligence (*ameleia*), and excessive indulgence in pretended pleasures such as gambling, gluttony, lechery, and, important for this paper, drunkenness (*oinophlugia*) (*Laws* 10.903). The point of this passage is that Socrates directly attributes drunkenness to spiritual entities.

When the Romans came under Greek influence, they identified their ancient god of wine, Liber Pater, with the Greek Dionysos, and continued to worship his power in wine. In summary, most Greeks and Romans understood drunkenness resulting from wine consumption to have a spiritual cause. The drinker "invited" Dionysos to enter and take over the life while "under the influence." The sensations experienced, and the behaviours manifested while drunk, were understood to come from the god. Transformed attitudes and actions during the time of this divine takeover were attributed to the wine god within. As god of wine and drunkenness, Dionysos was both powerful and unpredictable—just like human behaviour while under his influence. While Dionysos was welcomed for his soothing effect, his destructive power caused dismay and was the frequent focus of Greek and Roman authors.

Spiritual Cause of Drunkenness in Scripture

The Judaeo-Christian Scripture heritage contains little direct address of the spiritual nature of wine and alcoholic addiction, but there is sufficient incidental reference to suggest that, here too, a spiritual cause of drunkenness was assumed in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The most deliberate and direct Hebrew Bible contrast of the spirit of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, with the spirit of wine, is in Deuteronomy chapter 29. Immediately following the programmatic recital of the covenant blessings and curses, the reader is reminded of the marvel of the exodus, during which garments and sandals of the migrants did not wear out, and their food and water were providentially provided: "I led you through the wilderness forty years, the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. Bread you did not eat, wine and other intoxicant you did not drink, in order that you might know that I [am] Yahweh your God" (Deuteronomy 29:4-5).

Note the total absence, in this summary of the wilderness wanderings of Israel, of the two basic ancient foodstuffs, bread and wine (or beer), referred to in the heart of this covenant reminder passage. The purpose for this extended period of abstinence from bread and alcohol is clear—Israel was to become experientially acquainted first-hand with Yahweh as provider, keeping his covenant promise to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Both Hebrew and later Jewish readers of this passage lived in cultures where the god of wine and the god of grain were acknowledged nearly every mealtime. Ancient Jewish readers of this passage realised its goal was

not asceticism, but rather the removal of competing spirits, the elimination of other spiritual influences.

Belief in the spiritual cause of drunkenness is likewise behind New Testament passages such as Acts 2, the account of the street-side attempt to account for the Spirit-inspired exuberances expressed by the followers of Jesus assembled in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. The jeering explanation of passers-by, that the disciples were "filled with new wine" (Acts 2:13), was countered by Peter, who rejected drunkenness as the cause of their exuberance by declaring: "These are not, as you suppose, drunk … but … God declares 'I will pour out my Spirit'" (2:15-16). In other words, there was an unequivocal contrast between the Spirit of God and the spirit of Dionysos.

Note also the contrast between drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit of God in the epistle to Ephesians 5:18: "Do not get drunk with wine … but be filled with the Spirit." According to Romans 13:13-14, the antidote to drunkenness, with its assumed spiritual cause, is likewise clearly spiritual: "clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ and make no allowance for the flesh, to gratify its cravings!"

Physiological Cause of Drunkenness in Greek and Roman Sources

While the belief in a spiritual cause of drunkenness pervaded the classical and biblical world, its dominance was being challenged by some Greek physicians even prior to the Christian era. Working in the tradition of Greek investigative science, they put forward a natural account of the cause of drunkenness, free from appeal to spiritual intervention. It was based on observation and expressed with the terms, and within the constructs, of human anatomy, biochemistry and physiology available to them. They employed primarily the bodily properties of hot and cold, wet and dry, to explain drunkenness. While their explanations, if taken out of context, may strike today's reader as farfetched, they were based on rational analyses of phenomena. Drunkenness was asserted to occur more quickly, for example, when the heat inherent in wine was mixed with the heat and moisture inherent in young men!

The work of these Greek physicians laid the foundation for modern methods and approaches to explain drunkenness widely employed by those who research into the mechanism of alcoholic intoxication. This paper employs the term *physiological cause* to refer to any explanation of drunkenness employing, and limiting itself, to natural properties and processes. A physiological cause and a spiritual cause of drunkenness tend to be mutually exclusive, standing over against one another, and competing to have the final word in explaining the cause of drunkenness.

Present Dominance of the Physiological Cause of Drunkenness

Nineteenth-century advancements in the sciences and their accompanying revolution in medicine set the stage for the rapid sophistication of the physiological account of drunkenness, and it gained predominance over earlier belief in a spiritual cause. Firmly rooted in the categories of biochemistry, microbiology and physiology, it continues to serve with increasing precision to explain alcoholic intoxication as defined in this paper's introduction. However, it has been less successful at explaining the behavioural dimension of drunkenness. This is illustrated whenever (a) two drinkers with nearly identical physiologies, who consume equal quantities of alcohol in identical circumstances, exhibit widely differing behaviour; or (b) an individual consumes the same quantity of alcohol on two occasions, yet exhibits different behaviour on the second occasion. In an effort to account for individual variables, the remainder of this paper traces the revival of the idea of a spiritual cause of drunkenness, and suggests it be employed alongside the physiological cause, which is so successful at explaining intoxication.

Revival of Spiritual Cause of Drunkenness

Concurrent with the dominant physiological cause, there have been renewed suggestions in the past century that there is also a spiritual cause for the behaviours associated with the consumption of alcohol. Two twentieth century expressions of this spiritual dimension, by William James and Carl Jung, will introduce this section.

William James

Harvard physician and psychologist William James (1842-1910), at the beginning of the twentieth century, delivered the Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh. They were later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1960). James expressed his keen awareness of the mixed blessing/curse of alcohol, and referred to its somewhat autonomous nature and influence as "part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning" (p. 373). In the chapter titled *Mysticism*, James wrote, "The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour … The drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness" (p. 373). Here he attributed to alcohol power over a certain part of the individual, and declared an overlap of the drunken with the mystic within consciousness. James also employed language which attributed to an external entity the human states of drunkenness and sobriety: "Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth" (p. 373).

In his chapter on *Saintliness*, James declared:

> The man who lives in his religious center of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms, differs from his previous carnal self in perfectly definite ways. The new ardour which burns in his breast consumes in its glow the lower "noes" which formerly beset him, and keeps him immune against infection from the entire grovelling portion of his nature. (pp. 264-265)

James then disclosed precisely what this statement meant, by providing summaries of a significant number of reports of people whose lives reportedly underwent major transformation, most often accompanied by their abandoning of drinking and drunkenness. He labelled them "regenerate characters" (p. 265). Similar experiences of lasting transformation of lives, including the breaking of the hold of alcohol over persons, continue to be reported and subjected to scrutiny by psychologists (e.g., Hawks, 2002; Miller & C'De Baca, 2001). James was clearly impressed by what he termed the mystic power of alcohol, and took seriously the breaking of alcoholic dependence and the subsequent regeneration of persons by means of religious conversion, Spirit replacing spirits.

Carl Jung

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961) acknowledged a spiritual cause of drunkenness in communication about his treatment of alcoholic Roland H., during the 1930s. This case has become widely known because of correspondence between Jung and Bill Wilson, recovered alcoholic and co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson had written Jung to let him know Roland H. had been cured of his addiction. In Jung's reply to Wilson, dated 30 January 1961, he rejoiced at news of Roland H.'s release from alcohol, then went on to articulate his understanding of a spiritual cause of his addiction: "His craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of

the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God." Jung followed this with a reference to the "evil principle prevailing in this world" which can be countered by "a real religious insight." He closed his letter with the explanation: "You see, alcohol in Latin is *spiritus* and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*." In a footnote to his letter, Jung cited Psalm 42:1: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Jung, 1976, pp. 623-625). Here Jung expressed his conviction in unambiguous language, backed with a citation of Scripture, that alcohol exerted spiritual power over its consumers.

Hints at further evidence for the revival of belief in a spiritual cause of drunkenness are scattered through the works of twentieth-century novelists and other creative writers. Note, as an example, the phrase "God in a bottle." Novelist Thomas Wolfe, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, wrote: "Why, when it was possible to buy God in a bottle, and drink him off, and become a God oneself, were men not forever drunken?" (p. 525). Koch (1978) allowed for some sort of belief in the spiritual, or at least inner, non-material core of a person, when he wrote: "Drunk, he becomes more Australian" (p. 57).

Australian academic and social critic, David Tacey, addressed another dimension of the relationship of alcohol to spirituality when he paraphrased the Proverb 29:18, "when religious vision is lost, the people perish" (Tacey, 1995, p. 8). Tacey acknowledged a spiritual dimension to drunkenness when he contrasted "mythic vision and spiritual integrity," on one hand, over against "violence, alcohol and drug abuse, social disorder, and individual disorientation," on the other (p. 9). Tacey explicitly declared that drunkenness may take hold in lives experiencing a spiritual vacuum: "The loss of spiritual ecstasy in both white and black cultures has been replaced by the spurious, artificial ecstasy that is provided by alcohol and drugs" (p. 9).

Recent Expressions of Spiritual Cause of Drunkenness

The final section of this paper summarises two current examplars of the spiritual relationship of drunkenness by authors working within their respective professions, and within a Christian framework.

Nelson's "God Thirst and Alcoholic Thirst"

James B. Nelson, recovering alcoholic and professor (emeritus) of Christian Ethics in a Protestant seminary in the United States, has contributed to the revival of a spiritual model of alcohol addiction. He adopted Jung's term *thirst* as the title of his 2004 book, *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*. His treatment of the topic is especially credible because of his first-hand encounter with what to him was the spirit of alcohol. He drew not only on the richness of the Christian heritage of spirituality and theology, but also on his own journey, which he generously shared with the reader in order to bring home the flesh-and-blood realities of his suggestion that alcohol is "a way of searching for God" (p. 27).

Nelson's model of a spiritual cause of drunkenness rests on two theses. First, alcohol can be a mediated experience of God: "most, if not all, of our experiences of the divine presence are *mediated*" (p. 31). The infinite is accessed through the finite. Wine can mediate the divine. He supports this by quoting Psalm 104:15: "You bring forth … wine to gladden the human heart." He experienced a strong thirst for the seemingly godlike experiences that alcohol induced: "Alcohol gave me a sense of well-being and connectedness—and wasn't that an experience of God?" (p. 31). Second, mediated experience of God through alcohol can become absolutised. It can transmute from a mediation into a God-substitute. This is idolatry (pp. 32, 72, 76). The challenge is to discern the finite experiences that safely mediate God, and those that do not. Failure

to do so leads to idolatry: "How can we describe that idolatrous urge—the temptation to believe as infinite that which is only finite, to absolutize that which is only relative, and in doing so to make the good into something demonic?" (p. 32).

Nelson did not draw on Greco-Roman sources for his work, but knew the significance of Dionysos well enough to apply the following simile: "Like members of the cult of Dionysus, we were trying to become divine by consuming the god; it was communion" (p. 27). Nelson further stated: "Precisely because alcoholism expresses a fundamental longing for the divine, it finally takes homecoming to the Spirit to heal the alienating idolatry and wounding caused by alcoholic spirits" (p. 169). Nelson concluded his personal story/theological treatise/spirituality narrative with some of the final words of the risen Christ in the New Testament (Revelation 22:17), "let everyone who is thirsty come" (p. 191).

Cook's "Relatedness and Transcendence"

British psychiatrist and Christian theologian Christopher Cook has also developed a model for the spiritual component of drunkenness. Cook (2004) published a descriptive study of 265 published books and papers on spirituality and addiction. He found a diversity and lack of clarity of understanding of the concept of spirituality, but he identified 13 conceptual components of spirituality which recurred within the literature. Among these conceptual components of spirituality, "relatedness" and "transcendence" were encountered most frequently. Here, and in other publications, Cook has worked these two components into a spiritual model of addiction (Cook, 2006; Cook, Tarbet & Ball, 2007). His model includes two components: the power of sin, and the divided self and will. Cook (2006) describes the first component as:

> an apparent "power" of addictive behaviour which seems to enslave and to bring people into captivity.... The present argument is intended to imply neither the objective reality of evil powers nor their demythologization. What is inherent to the present discussion is that sin is experienced as a power which adversely influences human choice and decision-making. (p. 167)

Cook describes the nature of the second component as follows:

> Human beings thus face a choice between two competing powers . . . We are not neutral agents . . . we will be drawn into the sphere of influence of one or the other. The one will enslave, and the other will bring freedom. McFadyen has developed this theme in terms of worship and idolatry ... Idolatry, as worship of anything that is not God, acts to block and disorientate joy. Alcohol dependence, with its narrowing of the repertoire of enjoyment of alcohol, its salience of alcohol over other (more highly valued) people and things, and its subjective compulsion towards harmful behaviour is just such an orientation of life under the power of sin. (p. 168)

Cook has articulated a model of drunkenness, and especially of addiction to alcohol, which incorporates a spiritual contribution. In his words, it is the result of "*a desire* which exerts over an individual a *power which competes with the call of God*, and where it results in a life which is inappropriate to, or unready for, the kingdom of God" (p. 51). He has also implied a spiritual cause of drunkenness by his expression, "the religious and spiritual context of drinking" (p. 50).

Conclusion

Nelson and Cook are contemporary advocates of a model for drunkenness and alcohol addiction which allows for a spiritual cause. They have brought a new contemporary perspective to a belief once prevalent among ancient Greeks, Roman, Jews and

early Christians, that a spiritual power is at work influencing the behaviour of those who open themselves to it by drinking. Through their work, a spiritual account of drunken behaviour and of alcoholic addiction has now been articulated in the light of contemporary theological and psychological insights. Their contribution strengthens the platform for those engaged in analysis of drunken behaviour, and for those engaged in the work of intervention, to incorporate a spiritual dimension. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a critique of the models of Nelson and Cook. In the meantime, nevertheless, it is reasonable to suggest that theorists and therapists who remain unwilling to consider a spiritual cause of drunkenness in favour of a strictly physiological one, do so at the risk of adopting an inadequate working model of drunkenness and alcohol addiction.

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