

IN DEFENCE OF DRINKING ALONE

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All *silent* intoxication has something shameful in it; that is, intoxication that does not enliven sociability and the reciprocal communication of thoughts

Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

Enjoying several glasses of wine at a dinner party, sharing a case of beers with a friend while watching the football, or toasting an achievement with a round of cocktails are all considered normal and acceptable. Less socially acceptable is to do any of these things in solitude. Even holding the amount of alcohol constant between settings, drinking alone rather than with friends is often seen as more troubling.

We'll explore two reasons for thinking drinking alone is worse than drinking in company. The first involves the inference that drinking alone is symptomatic of an underlying problem with the drinker. The second involves a moral disapproval of drinking alone.

The view that solo drinking is bad for solo drinkers

One reason to be concerned for the solo drinker is that she strikes us as more at risk of pathological alcohol dependency than the social drinker. In so far as a person's solo drinking is associated with addiction, we agree that there is cause for concern. However, in such a case, solo drinking is an indicator of a problem, not the problem itself. The real problem for such a person is her relationship with alcohol *per se*, not

that she consumes it alone. One does not address her alcohol dependency by encouraging her to find a drinking partner, but by encouraging her to drink less alcohol.

Another health-related worry is that alcohol is associated with depression. This association holds regardless of whether one drinks alone or in company. However, we might be more likely to suspect depression in a solo drinker because he appears withdrawn, and so fits our view of what depressed people are like better than the social drinker.

Alternatively, we might pity the solo drinker. If only she had a friend, she would be drinking with them. Or perhaps the alcohol is itself a substitute for a friend.

The view that solo drinkers are bad

These examples illustrate that drinking alone might be thought worse than drinking in company because it may be indicative of a problem. What about drinking alone when it is *not* indicative of a problem? The quotation from Kant, above, encapsulates the view—still common today—that drinking alone is morally problematic. The assumption seems to be that drinking *ought* to be a social activity: the odd beer alone is fine, but any more than this requires the presence of others for moral legitimacy.

It is true that drinking is often a social activity, but we suggest that there is no defensible reason why it *should* be. What is acceptable drinking behaviour in company is equally acceptable in private. Moral disapprobation of solitary drinkers is a product of misconceiving social norms as moral principles.

Bias in favour of being sociable

There are various reasons why drinking is viewed primarily as a social activity, including the role that it has historically played in our culture. However, it is surprising that drinking to oil the wheels of social intercourse tends not to attract disapprobation, since certain well-known arguments in applied ethics—specifically arguments in the ethics of human enhancement—find a natural analogy here.

For example, a common argument against enhancement in sport ('doping') and cognitive enhancement has it that achievements made

with the aid of enhancement are less valuable than those made without enhancement. This is one reason why Olympic medalists who fail drugs tests are stripped of their medals. We might view drinking in social settings as a form of social enhancement: Ernest Hemmingway once said, 'I drink to make other people more interesting', and many of us have deepened a friendship with someone over a beer. Yet people do not view friendships cemented with alcohol as *less valuable* than those that develop solely in sober settings. Another example: the idea of enhancing our romantic attachments through the use of drugs has been met with alarm by some people. Yet nobody is alarmed by familiar ways of using alcohol to enhance our relationships. Bonding with a colleague over a post-work drink or celebrating an achievement with a bottle of champagne between friends is not seen as morally objectionable.

Even so, viewing alcohol as a social enhancement does not do full justice to its value for us. Drinking often involves appreciating—in gastronomic or aesthetic ways—the drink itself, and one can do this alone as well as in company. Indeed, perhaps the tastes and textures of alcoholic drinks are best appreciated when not distracted by friends: wine tasting, after all, can require a great deal of attention and reflection.

We do not suggest that we *ought* to disapprove of social drinking. Rather, we want to highlight that, whatever the reason for social drinking being viewed as morally preferable to solo drinking, it is not because there exist no moral arguments against social drinking. Such arguments do exist, but people do not make use of them. Excepting extreme cases where social drinking is problematic—such as the dangerous drinking game Neknominat¹—few of us have the moral intuition that social drinking is objectionable. Why, then, do people disapprove of solo drinking?

One possible explanation is a cultural bias in favour of sociable behaviour and against solitary behaviour. Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts In a World That Can't Stop Talking*, argues that there is such a bias. According to Cain, Western society overvalues extroversion and undervalues introversion. Introverts tend to be misunderstood, often being seen as anti-social when in fact they simply need more time alone, and have as much to offer society as do extroverts.

If this bias in favour of extroversion extends to popular views about drinking, this might explain the moral stigma attached to drinking

alone. Cain's work illustrates that we often—without good reason—view solitary people as anti-social and shy. The same inclination might be responsible for us viewing solo drinkers with suspicion. To be sure, alcohol causes serious problems for many people. But, among other drinkers, it plays a valuable and morally innocuous role in our social lives. There seems to be no reason why it cannot also play a valuable and morally innocuous role in our solitary lives.

Note

1. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-26302180>>