

Review of: "A Philosophical Analysis of the Foundational Suppositions in Harm Reduction Theory and Practice"

Paul Hedges¹

¹ Nanyang Technological University

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I should note that my review is not directed to the analysis of harm reduction nor wider comments about addiction which are not my specialisation. Rather, I will focus on the claimed philosophical support.

The author in the abstract and introduction cites Gadamer and Ricoeur as providing a basis in terms of “critical hermeneutics”, but at no stage does the author explain what he means by this term, nor is it clear how any aspects of Gadamer or Ricoeur’s work inform this paper. As such, if this claim were omitted it would make no difference to the paper. Again, we see a range of philosophical authors and ideas brought in, but without any real depth of engagement, nor much sense of how they contribute to the overall argument. For instance, Heidegger is mentioned to note that any drug user would be a “being-in-the-world”, but this is not really elucidated upon and simply contrasted with what the author takes as more reductionist tendencies.

Towards the end of the paper the author mentions the stances of “ontological realism”, “critical realism”, and “integral pluralism” and of these only the last is given any discussion. This latter is particularly problematic being based in the work of Ken Wilbur who may perhaps best be described as a “New Age guru” rather than a serious philosophical thinker. While the usage made to suggest that the way we look at an issue affects what is seen is something that hardly needs the kind of supporting apparatus given here, and credible scholarly voices rather than Wilbur could have been invoked for this point.

Both “ontological realism” and “critical realism” arise earlier in the author’s discussion of relativism, but again are not unpacked, and sit alongside what seems to be a fairly cursory and somewhat stereotyped dismissal of what is termed “‘strong’ social constructionism”, and a nod to what he terms a “weak” version of this. As such, how his chosen stances provide a contrast is not explained nor what difference they make, which is seemingly left to the reader to surmise. A somewhat dismissive set of comments are made of Derrida (Jacques is spelt incorrectly), which seems to fail to understand the point made - some things we may term “drugs” have at times been legal, even lauded, in other social milieus, as such what gets deemed such is far from a natural feature of the world. The author may be correct that such questions may not necessarily help in the on-the-ground work of dealing with addiction, but this is supposedly a philosophical analysis and so may be expected to realise that questions in linguistic philosophy are part of what is being debated.

As such, despite a host of jargon and references, I see little that would warrant terming this a “philosophical analysis” of the issue at hand. We do not get any unpacking or definition of most of the philosophical terms and concepts. There is a stereotyping and straw man approach to other points of view. Some people and ideas raised seem entirely redundant. The most meaningful philosophical reference to my mind is that to Hume, but invoking this would hardly constitute the paper as a whole as being philosophical in nature.

I do not believe that a paper such as this would pass peer review in this form. There are some potentially interesting points made, and the general thrust of the author's argument may hold water. However, the details of the argument and the scholarly apparatus behind it are severely lacking at present.