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A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DRUG ABUSE AND THE CRISIS OF HUMAN FREEDOM AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTHS

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Abstract
Drug abuse among Nigerian youths is a complex social, moral, psychological, and philosophical problem that affects individual development, societal and national progress. This study therefore examined drug abuse beyond its medical and sociological dimensions by exploring questions of freedom, rationality, responsibility, moral agency, and human existence. It identifies peer influence, unemployment, poverty, family instability, social pressure, curiosity, emotional distress, and the desire for pleasure or escape as major factors contributing to substance misuse. Philosophically, drug abuse is presented as a distortion of human freedom because substance dependence can weaken rational self-determination and responsible choice. The paper used qualitative philosophical research method supported by contextual analysis. Drawing on virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialism, the study found moral implications of drug abuse for individuals and society. It argued that punitive measures alone are insufficient and advocates moral education, responsible parenting, youth empowerment, rehabilitation, psychological support, and character formation. Ultimately, philosophy can promote critical thinking, self-knowledge, responsible freedom, and meaningful living while addressing conditions that increase youths' vulnerability to drug abuse.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Human Freedom, Moral Responsibility, Nigeria, Philosophy, Youth.

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Introduction

The central question, is not simply whether young people are free to choose. It is whether they possess the kind of freedom that enables them to choose intelligently, resist destructive desires, recognize consequences, and take ownership of the direction of their lives. Freedom without wisdom can become destructive; choice without reflection can become impulsive; and responsibility without compassion can become merely punitive. A philosophically adequate understanding of human agency must hold these dimensions together. Ultimately, freedom, choice, and personal responsibility constitute a dynamic relationship. Freedom makes meaningful choice possible; choice reveals the exercise of agency; and responsibility gives ethical significance to that agency. A society genuinely committed to human freedom must therefore cultivate conditions in which persons can develop the capacities required for responsible self-direction. For young people in particular, this means combining personal accountability with education, moral formation, social support, rehabilitation, and opportunities for meaningful participation in society. The goal should not merely be to tell young people that they are free, but to help them acquire the wisdom and character required to use freedom well.

Freedom, Choice, and Personal Responsibility

Freedom, choice, and personal responsibility are inseparable concepts in philosophical reflection on human existence. Freedom concerns the capacity of persons to direct their actions; choice is the concrete exercise of that capacity; while personal responsibility concerns the extent to which individuals can legitimately be held answerable for what they deliberately do. The relationship among the three raises a fundamental philosophical question: If human beings are free to choose, to what extent are they responsible for the consequences of their choices? This question becomes particularly significant when examining contemporary social problems such as drug abuse among young people, where individual decisions interact with peer influence, social circumstances, psychological vulnerability, and addiction. Contemporary philosophy continues to examine whether freedom requires alternative possibilities, rational self-control, or a particular kind of relationship between an agent and the reasons for action (Latham, Tierney, and Varga 252–69). Philosophically, freedom is more than the absence of physical restraint. It involves the capacity of a person to act intentionally and to exercise meaningful control over conduct. Karen Stohr's Kantian account distinguishes negative freedom, understood as freedom from external constraint, from positive freedom, understood as the capacity to act according to rationally defensible principles (13–20). This distinction is important because a person may be physically unrestricted while remaining dominated by impulses, compulsions, fear, or destructive desires. Thus, the question "Am I free?" cannot be answered adequately by asking only whether someone is being prevented from doing what he or she wants. One must also ask whether the individual possesses sufficient rational and practical control to determine what he or she ought to want and do.

Stohr's discussion of Kantian freedom emphasizes that rational beings must understand themselves as capable of choosing among possible courses of action and of directing themselves through rational principles. However, not every apparent choice is necessarily an equally free choice. Human beings make decisions within particular psychological and social circumstances. Poverty, unemployment, family instability, peer pressure, inadequate education, cultural expectations, emotional distress, and social exclusion can influence the alternatives a person perceives as available (13–20). This does not mean that individuals are merely victims of circumstances, but it demonstrates that

freedom is exercised within conditions that can either enlarge or diminish practical agency. Andreas Schmidt's analysis of personal responsibility similarly shows that responsibility cannot be separated entirely from questions of equality, social circumstance, and the distribution of opportunities (1373–99).

The relationship between freedom and responsibility is therefore more complex than the popular maxim that "everyone is responsible for his or her own choices." Personal responsibility requires some meaningful degree of control, knowledge, and intentionality. If an individual is forced to perform an action under an immediate threat, for example, it would be problematic to attribute responsibility in precisely the same way as one would for an action undertaken voluntarily after careful deliberation. The philosophical problem is to identify the conditions under which an action can properly be regarded as belonging to the agent. Recent philosophical scholarship demonstrates that freedom and moral responsibility are not always conceptually identical. Latham, Tierney, and Varga's 2023 study of manipulation cases found that judgments about free will and moral responsibility can come apart, suggesting that people do not necessarily evaluate the two concepts in exactly the same way (252–69). This is significant because it challenges the assumption that proving or disproving freedom automatically settles the question of responsibility. A person may have some capacity for choice while the degree of responsibility attributed to the person depends upon the nature of the circumstances and the quality of control exercised.

The problem becomes even more profound when considering determinism. According to Herchenroeder, et al, determinism maintains, broadly, that events, including human actions, are causally connected to preceding conditions. If every decision is the inevitable outcome of prior causes, one may ask whether individuals genuinely deserve praise or blame for their actions. In contrast, libertarian theories of free will argue that genuine moral responsibility requires a stronger form of freedom, in which an agent could genuinely have acted otherwise (8). Compatibilist theories seek a middle position, arguing that freedom and responsibility can exist even if human actions have antecedent causes, provided the action appropriately expresses the agent's own reasons, desires, and deliberative capacities (6). Leonhard Menges' discussion of free will and "basic desert" illustrates the continuing importance of this debate. He examined whether individuals can be fundamentally deserving of blame for their actions and argued for a conception of responsibility that distinguishes different kinds of moral appraisal (615–36). The philosophical significance of this position is that responsibility should not automatically be equated with simple condemnation. To say that someone is responsible is to make a claim about agency, accountability, and the relationship between the individual and the action. This distinction is particularly relevant to drug abuse among young people. A young person who initially experiments with drugs may appear to exercise ordinary personal choice. Curiosity, peer pressure, the search for pleasure, the desire for acceptance, or an attempt to escape emotional difficulties may influence the decision. At this stage, personal responsibility may appear relatively straightforward. Yet repeated drug consumption may develop into dependence, creating a situation in which the person's capacity to regulate desire becomes increasingly complicated.

Edmund Henden's contemporary philosophical analysis of addiction is particularly relevant. He argues that emotional dysregulation can impair autonomy in addiction and therefore complicate judgments about responsibility. According to Henden, the fact that addicted individuals may continue to choose drugs does not necessarily demonstrate that their agency remains fully autonomous (8). The important philosophical distinction is

between having a choice and possessing sufficient control over the desires that shape one's choice. Someone may technically possess alternatives while experiencing powerful psychological conditions that make one alternative extraordinarily difficult to resist. Victor Tadros similarly examines addiction through the problem of craving and control. His discussion raises the question of whether addictive behaviour should sometimes attract reduced responsibility when the individual's capacity to control conduct is significantly compromised (167–84). This does not mean that addiction automatically eliminates responsibility. Rather, it suggests that responsibility may need to be understood in degrees, depending upon the individual's history, knowledge, control, and circumstances. This perspective offers an important challenge to simplistic moral judgments about young people who abuse drugs. The question should not merely be, "Why did you choose to take drugs?" A more philosophically serious inquiry asks: What influenced the choice? What alternatives were realistically available? What did the individual understand about the consequences? How much control did the person possess? And what happened between the first voluntary decision and subsequent dependence? These questions preserve the importance of personal responsibility while recognizing that human agency is situated within psychological and social realities.

At the same time, acknowledging these influences should not become an excuse for denying responsibility altogether. To remove responsibility completely would risk treating human beings as passive objects rather than moral agents. Philosophy must therefore avoid two extremes. The first is absolute individualism, which assumes that every decision is made independently of social and psychological circumstances. The second is absolute determinism, which portrays individuals as incapable of meaningful agency because every action is supposedly produced by forces beyond their control. A more balanced position recognizes that persons are influenced by circumstances while retaining varying degrees of capacity to reflect, resist, deliberate, and change. Kant's conception of freedom is valuable here because it connects freedom with rational self-government. Stohr explained that positive freedom involves the capacity to act for moral reasons rather than simply following immediate inclinations (13–20). Freedom, therefore, should not be confused with unrestricted desire. The person who says, "I am free because I can do whatever I desire" may actually be confusing freedom with enslavement to desire. If every impulse commands obedience, the individual is governed by impulse rather than reason. This insight has profound implications for personal responsibility. Responsibility is not the enemy of freedom; it is one of the conditions that gives freedom moral significance. If choices have no consequences for which persons can be held accountable, freedom becomes mere spontaneity.

Personal responsibility should therefore be understood not merely as punishment for past behaviour but also as an invitation to self-development and moral transformation. Stohr's discussion of Kantian personal development emphasizes the obligation to cultivate one's capacities and make something meaningful of oneself (195–202). In the context of drug abuse, this means that society should not only ask how a young person can be punished for harmful choices but also how that person can recover the intellectual, emotional, social, and moral capacities necessary for better choices. The deepest philosophical lesson is that freedom is exercised within conditions, choice expresses agency, and responsibility evaluates the manner in which that agency is exercised. Human beings are neither completely independent of their circumstances nor completely determined by them.

How Addiction can Weaken Rational Self-Determination

Rational self-determination refers to the capacity of a person to deliberate about reasons, form considered intentions, regulate impulses, and act in accordance with values that the person reflectively endorses. It is therefore closely connected with autonomy, practical reason, and self-control. Addiction presents a philosophical challenge because addicted persons often remain capable of understanding consequences and expressing choices, yet their capacity to govern conduct through reflective judgment may be substantially weakened. The problem is not simply that an addicted person "chooses badly." Rather, addiction can reorganize motivation, attention, emotion, valuation, and habits in ways that make immediate reward unusually powerful and long-term reasons increasingly difficult to translate into action. Contemporary research consequently supports a nuanced position: addiction can diminish rational self-determination without necessarily eliminating agency altogether (509).

A useful starting point is Harry Frankfurt's distinction between first-order desires and second-order volitions. Human beings do not merely desire things; they can reflect upon their desires and decide which desires they want to govern their conduct. For Frankfurt, freedom of the will involves the capacity for a person's effective desire to correspond with the desire he or she wants to constitute the will (10-11). Addiction becomes philosophically significant when an individual sincerely wishes not to be controlled by a particular desire but repeatedly finds that desire determining behaviour. A person may desire sobriety, health, family stability, or academic success while simultaneously experiencing an intense desire to drink, gamble, use drugs, or engage compulsively in another rewarding activity. The conflict reveals that having reasons and preferences is not identical with having effective control over action. This distinction helps explain why addiction should not be reduced to ordinary bad decision-making. Ordinary practical reasoning permits people to compare competing goods and revise their choices. Addiction can interfere with this process by making certain cues disproportionately salient. Robinson and Berridge's incentive-sensitization theory explains addiction partly through the development of heightened "wanting" toward addiction-related stimuli. Their 2025 review emphasizes that repeated exposure can sensitize neural systems involved in incentive motivation, so that cues associated with addictive rewards acquire excessive motivational significance.

The weakening of self-determination is also visible in the phenomenon of temporal discounting. Rational self-government requires some ability to integrate present decisions with future interests. Addiction can narrow practical attention toward immediate relief or pleasure while discounting distant consequences. The addicted person may know that continued use threatens employment, relationships, finances, physical well-being, or future plans, yet the immediate expected reward repeatedly dominates the decision process. Levy describes addiction as involving a significant loss of control that nevertheless remains compatible with the retention of agency, making it different from simple external coercion (Levy 1-15). The addict may still deliberate, choose, and act intentionally, but deliberation becomes distorted by unusually powerful short-term incentives. Emotional dysregulation provides another mechanism through which addiction can weaken rational self-determination. Henden argues that autonomy depends not only on the ability to select an action but also on capacities for comprehension, reflection, and effective implementation of decisions. Emotional dysregulation can interfere with the formation and stability of preferences, thereby affecting autonomous agency even when a person voluntarily consumes an addictive substance (Henden 7). This insight challenges the simplistic

distinction between “forced” and “freely chosen” addictive behaviour. A person may say, “I want this,” and genuinely mean it at that moment, while the desire itself has been shaped by a recurrent emotional and motivational pattern that conflicts with broader commitments.

Addiction may further weaken self-determination by reshaping the person’s evaluative landscape. Henden argues that emotional dysregulation can gradually contribute to a reorientation of values in which addiction-related experiences become central to a person’s conception of the good. This is philosophically significant because autonomy requires more than selecting among options; it involves having a relatively stable capacity to determine what matters. If maintaining access to an addictive reward becomes the organizing priority around which relationships, work, finances, and daily routines are arranged, other values may be subordinated. The person can therefore become increasingly governed by a motivational system that was initially only one part of life. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to conclude that addiction completely destroys rationality or responsibility. The evidence points instead to impairment that can vary in degree and context. The 2024 scoping review by Herchenroeder and colleagues shows that Self-Determination Theory has been increasingly applied to substance use and treatment, emphasizing the relevance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Research on self-change also demonstrates that addictive patterns are not invariably irreversible. De Meyer and colleagues’ 2024 scoping review identifies substantial research on self-change, indicating that some individuals alter problematic substance use without formal treatment. Such evidence is philosophically important because it preserves room for agency while recognizing that agency may be constrained.

The practical implication is that rational self-determination should be understood as something that can be supported or undermined by personal and social conditions. Kennett argued that self-control has a normative dimension: it concerns not merely the possession of cognitive resources but the capacity to shape a life one has reason to value (144-64). Treatment, therefore, should not be understood simply as forcing abstinence. Approaches that strengthen competence, social support, meaningful goals, emotional regulation, and participation in decisions can help restore practical control.

Practical Strategies for Developing Responsible Freedom Among Youths

Freedom is a fundamental dimension of human existence, but it becomes meaningful only when accompanied by responsibility, self-discipline, sound judgment, and concern for others. In this context, responsible freedom refers to the ability of young people to make voluntary, informed, and morally conscious choices while accepting the consequences of their actions. This is particularly important during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when youths gradually assume greater independence from parents, teachers, and other authorities. Positive youth development therefore emphasizes young people as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of adult instruction (3–14). The first practical strategy is moral and critical-thinking education. Young people should not merely be given rules; they should understand the reasons behind moral choices. Education should encourage reflection on justice, honesty, respect, compassion, accountability, solidarity, and human dignity. Through realistic discussions involving peer pressure, substance abuse, sexuality, academic dishonesty, social media, relationships, finances, and career decisions, youths can learn to identify alternatives, examine consequences, consider competing values, and defend their choices rationally. Responsible freedom consequently develops when young people learn to connect freedom of choice with responsibility for consequences.

The second strategy is progressive autonomy within reasonable boundaries. Responsible freedom cannot flourish through either excessive parental control or complete permissiveness. Parents and educators should gradually transfer responsibilities as young people's competence and maturity increase. Areas such as time management, finances, studies, friendships, and internet use can initially involve guidance and progressively greater independence. Soenens *et al*. distinguish genuine autonomy from mere independence, explaining that autonomy involves acting voluntarily and with personal endorsement rather than simply acting without supervision (11). The objective is therefore to develop youths who can exercise sound judgment even when authority is absent. Supporting this approach, a 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis of thirty-six self-determination-theory interventions involving over 11,000 participants found evidence that such interventions can enhance students' autonomy and competence (9). A third important strategy is strengthening accountability. Freedom should never be interpreted as freedom from responsibility. Parents and teachers should establish clear expectations and proportionate consequences. When youths make mistakes, responses should encourage reflection rather than punishment alone. Questions such as What happened? Why did you choose this action? Who was affected? What could you have done differently? can promote moral responsibility. Restorative approaches are particularly useful because they help youths recognize how their decisions affect other people and encourage them to repair harm.

Another strategy is developing self-regulation and emotional competence. Rational freedom is compromised when anger, fear, frustration, impulsivity, or peer pressure controls behaviour. Youth programmes should therefore teach stress management, delayed gratification, conflict resolution, emotional awareness, and resistance to destructive impulses. Positive youth development research identifies self-regulation, emotional regulation, goal setting, identity, purpose, and supportive relationships as important elements of youth flourishing (Arnold and Ferrari 23). The aim is not to eliminate emotions but to prevent temporary emotional states from producing lasting harmful decisions. Mentoring and intergenerational relationships also play a significant role. Youths benefit from trustworthy parents, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, counsellors, and other caring adults who combine encouragement with appropriate boundaries. Samuelson emphasizes trusted adults, safe communities, agency, identity development, and purposeful futures as important principles of effective youth-service organizations. Mentors provide experience and guidance without taking away the young person's responsibility to decide. In this way, mentorship strengthens judgment, confidence, and responsible independence (22). The fifth and final strategy derived from the discussion of this paper is digital citizenship education. It is essential because contemporary youths exercise considerable freedom through digital platforms. They can communicate, publish, purchase, create, and share information instantly, but such freedom involves responsibilities concerning privacy, truthfulness, intellectual property, misinformation, cyberbullying, digital footprints, and respect for others. Research on adolescents' moral reasoning concerning online incivility and cyberbullying demonstrates the importance of moral education for responsible digital citizenship (Harrison and Polizzi 5).

Conclusion

Finally, families, schools, religious institutions, communities, and government must cooperate in creating environments conducive to responsible freedom. It is unrealistic to expect individual youths to make responsible choices while surrounded by institutions that provide poor models of responsibility. Adults must therefore model honesty, accountability, respect, disciplined freedom, and constructive conflict resolution. Youth development is

ecological: young people are influenced by interconnected relationships and settings rather than by individual instruction alone. Positive youth development research stresses the importance of supportive developmental settings and relationships in enabling young people to flourish. The most practical approach is to teach young people how to think, give them opportunities to choose, allow them to experience manageable consequences, provide trustworthy guidance, and gradually expand their responsibilities.

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