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978-1-107-09120-7 - Moral Jeopardy: Risks of Accepting Money from the Alcohol,
Tobacco and Gambling Industries

Peter J. Adams

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Preface

It is surprising just how easy it is for one's mind to find justifications for what one wants to do. Similar to the way a knee reflex responds to a strike from a doctor's rubber mallet, justifications seem to emerge smoothly and automatically; they swing into action to counter even the slightest prod of conscience: I eat meat because where else will I get sufficient protein; I drive a car to work because the city's public transport system is so lousy; I avoid giving to that charity because that organization is corrupt.

But, of course, one's mind does not pull these justifications out of thin air.

This was brought home to me some time back while in the throes of preparing a grant application on behalf of our department. Our university had established a new fund available for staff to invite international experts into departments to promote teaching and research endeavors. It was a generous allowance with enough money to host an overseas visitor for one to three months. Since such opportunities were rare, we quickly arranged a meeting of interested staff and began brainstorming a proposal. We settled on the idea of inviting a leading academic in community development from overseas who could help boost our fledgling development initiatives. That person could present in seminars, guide our current projects, input into student research and help us devise and compile a funding application for a large new project. We were excited. The visit would raise our efforts to a new level.

I took the ideas from the meeting and sat down at my computer to fill in the application form. The first boxes asked for the usual information about the location, the people involved, their roles ... this was easy enough to complete. The boxes then asked for the aims of the visit and the activities we had in mind ... this took a little longer to formulate ... then my eyes scanned a box at the bottom of the page. Inside the box was a familiar brand logo and next to it a statement: "Proudly supported by the Lion Foundation." I instantly recognized the logo as belonging to the nation's largest brewery. I also knew that the Lion Foundation was one of the biggest of the six main organizations involved in distributing community benefit grants from the profits of gambling machines.

This complicated matters considerably. I could see the association was very inconvenient. The money we were seeking had come directly from people playing gambling machines in bars and, as I knew very well, it was these machines that contributed to the majority of gambling-related harm in our country. An unwelcome query was prodding from the back of my mind: Is this acceptable? Is it okay to proceed?

My first response – I am ashamed to admit – was to pretend I hadn't seen the logo. Well, we had already put so much work into the ideas for the project and our hopes were ablaze. The initiative now had momentum and the financial support would be an ideal stimulus for what our department was seeking to achieve. Maybe I could pretend I hadn't seen it? That's it, I didn't really see it. Perhaps later, if people were to point it out, I could claim I didn't know and by then it would be too late to stop. Maybe my colleagues would follow my example and choose to ignore it as well. It would be so simple to turn the page and continue filling in the boxes without thinking about the logo any further. But, alas, I had seen it and I was already worrying about it. The idea of deceiving myself was beginning to lose its appeal. I was going to have to try something else.

My second response was more measured. Okay, I can't pretend I didn't see it, but perhaps it's not really such a bad thing to receive money from this source. After all, gambling has its

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positive side: most people gamble purely for enjoyment and gambling venues help create rich opportunities for family and friends to gather together and to have some fun. Only a churlish spoilsport would stand in the way of people having fun. Besides, it is really only a very small minority of those who gamble who experience serious problems, and they would probably have formed an addiction to that or another product anyway. No harm would be done in making good use of this money.

Such justifications might work in an ordinary university department but, unfortunately, in this arena our department was not so ordinary. It contained three active groups devoted to research on harm from tobacco, alcohol and gambling. How would it look to others if we were seen to fund our activities from the very source that generates these harms? On a daily basis our work reminds us of the widespread harm and misery inflicted on individuals, communities and populations by these consumptions. On top of the conflict we would experience in our own minds, we would find it difficult to stand up and, with any credibility, criticize the activities of these industries. We could not with any seriousness get away with pretending the impacts of addictive consumptions are minimal. Besides, we had known for a long time that locating the origins of these harms with certain individual “addictive personalities” was in reality a convenient fiction, a fiction that only industry spokespeople appear committed to promoting.

My third response drew on a complex mix of justifications. Its spontaneous logic flowed somewhat as follows: the money is sitting there already; our views regarding how it was collected won't make any difference; it is still going to be distributed, so someone has to make use of it, and if we don't access it then somebody else will. Similar to the way gambling profits are distributed to sports clubs to fund overseas travel or new uniforms, if we don't access these funds then it is likely to end up supporting activities far less deserving than our own. It could end up funding obscure research projects in fields such as sports science or literary criticism or plant morphology or archaeology – areas of research with little relevance to the problems associated with these consumptions. Surely it is better that these profits are channeled back into addressing the source of these harms? And our work on strengthening communities will in the long run provide a very important platform for relevant initiatives. We almost have, therefore, a duty to apply. We mightn't succeed, but, after all, you need to be in to win. Besides it would be very irksome to watch researchers in these unrelated fields scoring without us having at least had a shot at obtaining some of it for our more worthy endeavors.

Now, this is indeed a complex cluster of rationalizations. How do I sort out what these thoughts all mean? Behind it I recognized my primary motive was a raw desire to take the money. I so much wanted to be able to proceed with the application. But can I trust these thoughts when my desire is so strong?

I sat back and reflected on some of what I was telling myself: gambling is okay, you need to be in to win, we deserve to succeed, our cause is more worthwhile ... I could see how these messages resonated with the many very familiar messages we use to justify engagement in addictive consumptions: drinking is fun, it's worth having a flutter, I deserve a smoke ... I realized that, while my justifications appeared to bubble up from within, they were in fact connected to the many messages that circulate in advertisements, in films and in everyday conversations about the permissibility of such consumptions. I concluded that instead of me coming up with these justifications, they were coming from outside; they were already a resource out there, standing ready to service decisions that enable me to attain what I desire. The link between the justification and my desire for the money was too strong

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and I could not trust it. What I really needed was some way of weighing up and sifting out what is important in this decision; some sort of guide that would assist in methodical deliberation on the issues.

The following book sets out to describe the dilemmas and pitfalls when people and organizations are faced with the opportunity of accepting funds from an ethically questionable source. It will provide a step-by-step guide for how to make decisions on such matters and places them in the wider context of government and global interests.

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