

The Tao of Drunkenness and Sobriety

Helen Douglas

This essay considers the meanings and relatedness of sobriety and drunkenness with reference to Levinas, Taoism, Sufism, the Bible, and the Beatles.

What does it mean to be sober? This means: to overcome drunkenness. It is always drunkenness at the beginning.

And what does it mean to be drunken? This means: to overcome sobriety. It is always sobriety at the beginning.

Sobriety without drunkenness is a cold sobriety. Drunkenness without sobriety is a blind drunkenness. Junnaiyd said: *There is a sobriety that contains all drunkenness, but there is no drunkenness that contains all sobriety.*

Drunkenness at the beginning is being caught up with the world. At the core of drunkenness, a dream of participation and union. Like the man newly placed in the Garden, before the naming, drunkenness is boundless: when I'm drunk I can't say where I am. Only am. Only want. The drunk and the world flow together seamlessly; the drunk staggers from the very spin of the earth. Like a child, for whom and from whom everything exists. Drunkenness is the breast, with a twist.

Sobriety at the beginning is the secret self, alone in the world. At the core of sobriety, a sovereignty and a freedom, a dream of separateness. To be sober is to stand within oneself, moderate, temperate, restrained.

The way of drunkenness is to saturate and dissolve. The way of sobriety is to withdraw and extend. The field of drunkenness and sobriety is relationship: bond and separation. Drunkenness and sobriety measure the distance between us. Getting it right or getting it wrong is simply the difference between love and hatred.

You get drunk in your desire for union, your desire to belong, and because you hate to be apart. When you say "*I am yours,*" when I say "*you are mine,*" we are a couple of drunken fools. From alone to all one, union

with the beloved is the end of the lover or the end of the beloved.

(But which one would you save and which would you have die? This is a question for mystics, for those who would leave behind the hateful self for union with the divine. And yet, there is a difference between self-oblivion and surrender, and a moment in which suicide and deicide cannot be distinguished. It is a question of love or hatred, and drunkenness is always at risk of murder.)

And, time and time again, drunkenness naturally falls from all one to alone again. Dissolution, disillusion. I want you! (*I want you so bad.*) Violence, domestic or wild. (*She's so...*) Desolation and the maudlin, pathetic nostalgia of the drunk. (*And yet, at the death of a tattered dream, a chance to turn, to deviate, to wake the hell up.*)

The problem of drunkenness is glimpsed here within the ephemerality of union. Inebriation is an altered state, a dream, an illusion. It is untimely, inappropriate. While this way of participation is granted to a child, the drunk has to work for it, has to knock herself out. Move heaven and earth if she has to, just to get off. This suggests that the apostle was right, that there comes a time *to put away childish things*.

Drunkenness is, thus, unseemly. It is, thus, unbecoming. Sobriety is the dispersion of drunkenness. Sobriety is called for. In good time. In seemliness. In becoming. There is a promise, perhaps a prophecy. Paul said, *Now—through a glass, darkly*. He said, *and have not love, I am nothing*. Said, *but then—face to face*.

Promise. Prophecy. And drunkenness, fallen down from the heights, is overcome by sobriety.

The moment of sobriety is the calm light of consciousness, an awakening, a coming to one's senses. Sobriety in the beginning: the baseline of being oneself, the pivotal ground of self-awareness and self-reflection.

Where drunkenness refuses the distinction between self and world, sobriety takes its place in the world as something else again. The sober subject removes itself to a viewpoint of its own, to "behind these eyes that see," to see all things objectively. The arbiter—the very avatar—of perception and discrimination. So we say: sober as a judge. Sobriety is the condition of judgment.

Sobriety loves its innerness, its awareness, the self-possession that is

its freedom and its power, its own most precious possession. (A misbegotten love, this.) Cool sobriety watches out for itself, keeps itself in control. Sobriety withdraws. And from this interiority, extends back into the world, discriminates, manipulates, enjoys. Desires.

And time and time again, this magisterial subject is called up short. Feels anxious, at risk. To be? To die? What is this world to me? (*What am I, to it?*) Hears whispers and murmurings behind the walls. Longs, strangely, for escape, for...

Sobriety sinks within itself like a stone, exhausted, sleepless. Dreams of being able to slip away, or that the world might open again and catch it up, save it from this unbearable gravity of being. Inebriating dreams. Dreams of confessing: *drunk in a desire for union, a desire to belong, and because I hate to be apart.*

The turning point between sobriety and drunkenness is this pain of a self become hard to bear. The passage between drunkenness and sobriety is the pain of a hangover.

Sobriety falls hard to the drunk, coming back to himself like hell warmed over. A hangover is the survival of a remnant, the leftover self on a morning after. In my country, which recognizes eleven official languages, hangover is *babelas*, a word everybody knows; an Afrikaans word derived from the Zulu, from their words for *fall* or *collapse* and *sleep*. I fancy that *babelas* also remembers the loss of Babel, the second catastrophic Fall recorded in the Book of Genesis.

Babel, the construction site of human unity—and a drunken adventure from the start—was built *to make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth*. Babel, where God believed that the unity of the people (*Behold, God tells an angel, the people is one*) meant that *now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do*.

The people of Babel have imagined a city and its tower, *to make us a name, lest we be scattered*. We, named, will become us, indivisible. Where being scattered is a present fear. Where the building of a city and a tower—reaching *unto heaven*—will provide the name. What is this magic? Why *building*? Why *a name*?

It is such a human act, this taking of earth for brick and slime for

mortar. The work of building itself coheres the people, so that the work *is* the name, is identical with *us*. This reaching *unto heaven*: not ever to penetrate heaven but in order that the work never be finished. And so, we will never be scattered *abroad*, never be alienated from our labor, from our precious name.

And all of this depending upon understanding *one another's speech*. Can you imagine this? *And the whole world was of one language, and of one speech*. That my speaking and your speaking was one, and perfectly transparent? Can you imagine? One another, interchangeable. Can you imagine, yes, that then *nothing would be restrained* from us? (What a drunken raving is this!)

Genesis tells us that God went down *to confound their language*. We have been led to believe that this is God's famous jealousy at work again, God angry to see men climbing to heaven and acting to defend God's own separateness.

But surely this is nonsense: God's height is not one to be breached by bricks and mortar. The Genesis story is an alibi, a face-saving measure for the hurt pride of the builders of Babel. The truth of the matter (the *tao* of the matter, the *yin* and the *yang* of the matter) is that they did it to themselves. The very notion *to make us a name*, would always have been our undoing. Oneness cannot be named; where there is a name there is already division. Division is expressed in scattering.

If you can imagine *one speech*, then try to imagine that speech confounded, try to imagine the moment you ceased to understand and be understood. Imagine the moment you found yourself separate from your neighbor, your sister, yourself. A sobering moment of devastation, confusion, disbelief. Blame it on God. Babel lost, *babelas*. A fall, a scattering, a world swept away. A rending and a rendering that you, after all, survive. And so you come to, come to your senses, possessing an innerness, freedom and sovereignty, a new perspective on the world. To be sober is to stand within oneself, separate, moderate, temperate, restrained.

When we're drunk we're just trying to get back to Babel. As we drink and shout and dance and embrace, *Behold, the people is one!* But this drunkenness is an illusion; it merely tricks our ears and our tongues and our minds. We cannot speak together; we do not understand one another; we are confounded, confused. We fall down, only to wake up in a colder climate, alone, in pieces, in pain.

Sobriety, original consciousness, where we start from, should be a good thing. Except when it isn't, when it becomes too isolated or too painful, if there is too much world or too much self to bear. Or not enough of either to hold to.

This relationship is expressed in the desire for altered consciousness. If it's bad enough, as addiction. A self given over against itself.

Sobriety may be your true calling, but sometimes you're better off to assume an alias. Maybe to take a break from yourself, or just to play. Maybe leaving in order to return, maybe in hopes of a better shot. Or maybe to disappear into a safer house, to start a new life. Maybe just to be gone.

And so drunkenness overcomes sobriety. And sobriety overcomes drunkenness. Because sobriety is unbearable. Because drunkenness is an illusion. Search then for what is real and for the ground to hold it. Try to find a quickening balance: the going forth that attests to the starting place, and the withdrawal that keeps faith with the yearning. In some martial arts traditions, this is called *standing between heaven and earth*. Neither a cold sobriety attached too much to earth nor a blind drunkenness launching itself unto heaven. A desiring subject neither alone nor beside itself, but purely present.

Presence is guaranteed by the bond of your name. Your true name. The one that, when you are called by it, you must respond. As if you *are* the response. A secret name that rises to your own lips as *I*. Here I am.

Who calls? Who can find you here, like this? Emmanuel Levinas says it is a *stranger*, and also, a *neighbor*, a *brother*. Precisely, an *other*. This one calls; I answer. An unavoidable and irreplaceable assignation.

Levinas on drunkenness:

It is perhaps by reference to this irremissibility that the strange place of illusion, intoxication, artificial paradises can be understood. The relaxation in intoxication is a semblance of distance and irresponsibility. It is a suppression of fraternity, or a murder of the brother. The possibility of going off measures the distance between dream and wakefulness. Dream and illusion are the play of a consciousness come out of obsession, touching the other without being assigned by him. A play of consciousness is a semblance."

So. *I could be drunk, but I dare not. I will not.* The question of drunkenness as an ethical question. Not because a moral prohibition has been broken, but because it arises between us. When the Other comes calling, it is my innermost door he knocks upon. This one will always find me at home and I am always called to answer, to be where he finds me. The very meaning of presence. *I am here.*

When I am drunk or asleep, in some *play of consciousness*, I fail to open. Without resource or presence of mind; mistaken and at fault. As if it didn't matter that the drunken dream of union is the very dream that this one will come. The poisoned princess, dreaming of the prince's kiss, who—even as his lips touch hers—does not dare to wake lest she fall again under the spell of some evil genius or jealous queen. Still she is called.

You never hear the name by which you are called. This naming is pure communion, siren song, an expression purely of the relationship it reveals. The appeal comes to you alone and unique, but it also shows the way to the other, the one to whom you already respond. A *semblance* of distance, Levinas says. The name already resounds within you, and yet it comes from elsewhere, from the other. The name measures the distance between us, and yet it is no distance at all. It rises to your own lips only as *I*, nominated and assigned by the other. A distance traversed by love, in the name of love.

Let this name and its assignation—a transcending and diachronic instant between us, a coming to oneself in the immediacy of contact, of call and response—bring the words of Junnaiyd to mind again. *There is a sobriety that contains all drunkenness, but there is no drunkenness that contains all sobriety.*

Etymologically, sobriety contains drunkenness from the first. *Sober*: (L. *sobrius* [opp. to *ebrius*]) moderate, temperate, avoiding excess. *Ebrius*: that has drunk enough. But the Greek root of *-brius* has nothing at all to do with drink or intoxication, only with abundant fullness. It means to be full of anything, to swell or teem with. To cause to burst forth. It is the same root that yields *brio*, which means liveliness, vigour, nerve, and spirit. It is the same root that produces *embryo*, which is a germ or a seed, or “the offspring of an animal before its birth.”

Sobriety and drunkenness (*so-brius* and *e-brius*) are both full, abundant. To find the difference between them go back further, to the posited roots of Indo-European. *Sober*: from the Indo-European root *s(w)e-*:

Pronoun of the third person and reflexive; further appearing in various forms referring to the social group as an entity, “(we our-)selves.” Derivatives include *self*, *gossip*, *suicide*, *secret*, *sober*, *sullen*, *ethic*, and *idiot*.

Ebrius: from the Indo-European root *eg-*: “the nominative form of the personal pronoun of the first person singular,” which enters Latin as *ego*.

Thus: *sobrius* (self-fulfilled; moderate, temperate, avoiding excess), opposed to *ebrius* (I-fulfilled; that has drunk enough). The difference arises in relationship, sociality, judgment.

Next, consider *addiction*, while keeping Levinas’s *obsession* in mind. From Latin *addicere* (lit. *speaking to, assent to*), originally an act of Roman law—to be delivered over by judgment, as a slave to a master or a debt to a treasury. Gepp and Haigh: “In a good sense, *devote, consecrate to*; in a bad sense, *abandon, sacrifice, surrender*.” In the approach of the Other, all of this. More.

A sobriety that contains all drunkenness. No drunkenness that contains all sobriety. *Contains* means: to have in it, by which something is equal to, to enclose, to hold together, to restrain. To keep oneself in chastity.

A cold sobriety that rejects drunkenness and holds itself superior is not Junnaiyd’s sobriety. Sobriety that despises drunkenness begins too late, already in hatred and fear for itself, or for what its self is capable of.

It is always drunkenness at the beginning. Obsession, addiction, finding oneself in the silent secret saying of another. Rapture like Babel rising up. Rising up as presence, as *I* here now. *I* full, embryonic, bursting forth, delivered over to the other, to this stranger. Drunken, *embrioso*. *Con brio*, with spirit, with vigor.

Sobriety at the beginning is the *I* finding the stranger to be my brother: a revelation, a catastrophe. A fall, a scattering. A distance be-

tween us. *I* become *myself*, both subject and a “third party” turning between this binding and this separation. Self-conscious, full of myself, as opposed to the pure contact of drunken *ebrius*. And yet, loving the distance between us. The name of *I* become both assignation and responsibility, an obligation to respond. Myself, obsessed by the other. Addicted to the other. *Sobrius*. Junnaiyd’s sobriety.

The *Tao Te-Ching* says: *Carrying vitality and consciousness, embracing them as one, can you keep them from parting?*

Sobriety is called for whenever the self gets drunk on itself and its own desire (as if the Other were *elsewhere*), whenever there is a risk of fratricide, a *semblance of distance and irresponsibility*. Holding itself between heaven and earth, between the excesses of rapture and the arrogations of self-possession, *sobrius* is indeed moderate.

Sobrius, as a mingling of essences, is indeed temperate. As water tempers wine, as fire tempers steel. This sobriety is a sovereignty and a freedom, but its heart is on fire. How else could it bear to be? All sobriety is vigilance, all sobriety sits in judgment, but *sobrius*, the sobriety of Junnaiyd (and Levinas, and St. Paul) is always also completely besotted.

To be sober means: to overcome drunkenness. It is always drunkenness at the beginning. *To be drunken* means: to overcome sobriety. It is always sobriety at the beginning.

The cosmos of drunkenness and sobriety is relationship: bond and separation. Drunkenness and sobriety measure the distance between us. And getting it wrong or getting it right is simply the difference between hatred and love.

Notes

English definitions and derivations are from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd Edition*. Indo-European roots from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Edition*.

Greek and Latin references from *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1926) and *A Latin-English Dictionary* by C. G. Gepp and A. E. Haigh (London: Longman, 1912).

Passages from Genesis and Corinthians are from the King James

Version of the Bible.

Junnaiyd quotation cited in Andrew Harvey's *Perfume of the Desert* (Wheaton, IL; Quest Books, 1999), 146.

Emmanuel Levinas quotation from *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 92.

Tao Te-Ching quotation from *The Spirit of Tao*, ed. and trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambala, 1998), 9.

Author's note. Correspondence concerning this essay should be addressed to Helen Douglas, P.O. Box 99, Kalk Bay, 7990, South Africa. E-mail: helen@PHILOSOPHY-PRACTICE.CO.ZA.