Example 2: On the legalization of cannabis

This is not an ideal time to persuade politicians to talk about legalising drugs. Political parties are not in a mood to take risks. When they want to attract attention, they prefer to do so by offering thrusting new thoughts on the economy and other mainstream subjects. But crime is now as main-stream as you can get, and a great deal of crime is related to drugs. Any politician who talks about crime without confronting the debate on drugs is evading half the issue.

The recent police raid on 'Cannabis Café' in Brighton is only one example of police time being wasted on drug-related offences. How many houses were burgled and cars stolen in Brighton while the police were busy with the offending café? Yet the police were not to blame. The provocative opening of the café had been so well publicised that to have ignored it would have signalled that drug offences would now be ignored. The police are not entitled to convey such signals. They are supposed to uphold the law as it is, not as it should be.

What is wrong is the law itself. The criminalisation of cannabis derives from a number of prejudices and misconceptions. Although the drug is not entirely harmless, it is less harmful than tobacco. It is not addictive, nor dangerous in moderate quantities, and it does not provoke violent or antisocial behaviour. It mostly induces nothing worse that a state of rather happy, foolish withdrawal. It was partly this effect that worried orthodox society in the Sixties, because it became associated with the demotivation of an entire generation that was exaggeratedly seen as dropping out of the acquisitive, consumerist society. Cannabis was felt to be subversive.

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Since then, successive generations have responded normally to economic stimuli and remained as acquisitive as anyone could wish. But they have continued to take cannabis. Almost all 25-year-olds in London have tried it, according to a recent survey by *Time Out* magazine. Cannabis should therefore have lost its association with drop-outs and have come to be seen as a recreational drug, offering much the same sort of respite from reality as alcohol but with less dangerous side-effects. It is also being found to have a widening variety of valuable medicinal qualities, particularly for the alleviation of multiple sclerosis.

In a period of rising crime, when practically every householder and car-owner feels vulnerable, and when peaceful citizens form vigilante groups because they are insufficiently protected by the proper authorities, it is absurd that the police and the courts should have had to spend valuable time dealing with 47,616 drug offences in 1991, and probably more last year, of which about 85 per cent concerned cannabis. Legalising the drug would save substantial amounts of time and money as well as bringing in tax revenue from legal sales. It would reduce the number of crimes committed to raise money for cannabis by lowering the price, unless heavily taxed, and undermine the power of the criminal underworld.

That world, however, is also deeply involved in hard drugs, which pose more complex problems since they can be dangerous and addictive. Some experts, including Commander John Grieve of the Metropolitan Police, believe the answer is to license and control the supply of all drugs. 'We need to undermine the economic or acquisitive base of drugs crime and the economic base of organised crime', he said at a conference in May.

If the Government wants to be seen to be serious about crime, it must look at the causes, one of which is drugs. A legal market in drugs under tight, selective controls, would not end drug-related crime, and people would still rob in order to raise money for drugs, but much more of the problem would be above ground and therefore more manageable. As suggested by Release, the drugs advisory service, this would be a suitable subject for a Royal Commission.

(*Leading article,* Independent, *2 October 1993*)

1 What is this passage trying to persuade us to accept? The main message is that the law on cannabis should be changed. How could we best summarize the case which it makes out for this?

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This passage is trying to get us to accept that the use of cannabis should be made legal, on the grounds that, first, cannabis is not very harmful; second, police time is wasted in investigating crimes involving cannabis; and third, fewer crimes of theft would occur if using cannabis were legal.

We need to look in more detail at these three lines of reasoning.
First, how is the claim that cannabis is not very harmful supported? In the third paragraph we are told that it is not addictive, not dangerous in moderate quantities, and does not provoke violent or anti-social behaviour, is less harmful than tobacco and, in the fourth paragraph, that it has less dangerous side-effects than alcohol. We are also told that its use does not turn people into drop-outs, the evidence offered for this being that almost all 25-year-olds in London have tried it, and they continue to conform to the acquisitive behaviour expected of members of the consumerist society. The medicinal value of cannabis is mentioned, particularly its use to alleviate multiple sclerosis.
The second line of reasoning concerns the waste of police time on drug offences, illustrated by the example of the police raid on the 'Cannabis Café'. In the fifth paragraph, figures are offered in support of the claim that the police spend valuable time dealing with drug offences, and especially those which concern the use of cannabis.
The fifth paragraph also contains the third major reason, that making cannabis legal would reduce crimes associated with the crime of using cannabis. It states that crimes are committed in order to raise money for buying cannabis, which could be cheaper if its use were legal. Another reason for legalizing cannabis is offered here,—that not only would it save money spent on police time, but it would also increase tax revenue from legal sales.
It is not clear what the final two paragraphs are meant to contribute to the reasoning, since they seem to change the subject. Instead of focusing on cannabis, they discuss what should be done about hard drugs, and suggest that a legal market in all drugs might lead to a reduction in crimes associated with drugs. We shall have to consider whether a strong enough case is made for the legalization of cannabis, bearing in mind that it may be weakened by these further comments about drugs in general.

2 What assumptions underlie the reasoning? The first line of reasoning makes comparisons between cannabis use and the use of tobacco and alcohol. It assumes that because we accept that the use of tobacco and alcohol should be legal, we should accept that the use of cannabis, which is claimed to be less harmful than either tobacco or alcohol, should also be legal. The facts that 'successive generations' have 'remained acquisitive' and 'almost all 25-year-olds in London have tried [cannabis]' are taken to indicate that taking cannabis is not associated with dropping out, but is merely done for recreational purposes. This seems to assume that the majority of 25-year-olds questioned in the survey have not tried cannabis just once or twice, but make a habit of using it.

The second line of reasoning refers to householders and car-owners feeling that they are insufficiently protected, whilst the police spend so much time on solving crimes concerning cannabis use. There is an assumption here that the time spent

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by the police on drug crimes reduces the time spent on other crimes. The third line of reasoning assumes that if cannabis use were legal, it would be taxed (hence increasing tax revenue), but not so highly that the price of cannabis would be the same as it is now (otherwise, the claim that legalization 'would reduce the number of crimes committed to raise money for cannabis' would not be supported).

There are no obviously ambiguous or insufficiently defined words, but it is not entirely clear what is being recommended in the final paragraph under the description—'A legal market in drugs under tight, selective controls'. Does this mean that drugs would be available only on prescription, so that you could buy heroin, for example, but only if your doctor said you needed it for medical reasons? This interpretation suggests that the last two paragraphs do not have much to do with the argument about the legalization of cannabis, since what is being recommended in relation to cannabis seems to be that it should be legal to sell it as tobacco and alcohol are sold.

We have already mentioned the comparison with tobacco and alcohol, and there are no explanations of evidence (apart from the explanation of the evidence from the *Time Out* survey); indeed, no evidence is cited to show that cannabis is harmless, non-addictive, not dangerous and not anti-social.

3 We now need to assess the truth of the reasons and assumptions. We have to rely on the authority of medical evidence concerning the effects of cannabis, but we can attempt to read about a wide range of medical opinion. One problem with the absence of evidence that cannabis is harmful is that perhaps insufficient research has been done into its effects. The evidence as to how much police time is spent on offences concerning cannabis is presumably a statistic which could be checked, and police records would also, presumably, give some information about the number of thefts which are associated with cannabis use. Is cannabis really so expensive to buy that many people steal in order to buy it?

Now let us consider whether we should accept the assumptions. Should we accept that because the use of tobacco and alcohol is more harmful than cannabis, yet legal, the use of cannabis should also be legal? Why should we not conclude that the use of tobacco and alcohol should be made illegal? In order for this comparison to give support to the conclu-sion, more would need to be said about the undesirability of making tobacco and alcohol illegal.

The assumption about the results of the *Time Out* survey seems ill-founded. Even if all 25-year-olds in London have tried cannabis, we cannot assume that its recreational use is widespread amongst a group of 'normally' 'acquisitive' people, and hence that it is not associated with 'dropping out'. Moreover, if using cannabis is so common, can it be true that it is so expensive a habit that many people steal in order to buy cannabis?

The assumption that if the police spent less time on drug related crimes they would spend more time on crimes such as burglary and car theft is questionable. Perhaps they already do all that could reasonably be done about such crimes, short of having an unacceptably high level of police presence on the streets and police surveillance of everyone's lives and activities. However, even if the police were already doing all they could about burglaries and car crime, it might still be

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claimed to be a good thing to reduce the amount of time they spend on crime relating to cannabis, since this could reduce the costs of policing.

It seems reasonable to assume that the legal use of cannabis would be taxed, and that the taxes would not be set so high as to fail to reduce the incidence of theft to finance cannabis use.

4 Does the reasoning depend upon any unreliable sources? We have already pointed out that it relies on medical opinion, but there is no reason to think that doctors have a vested interest in making people believe that cannabis is relatively harmless. The passage refers to the opinion of Commander John Grieve of the Metropolitan Police that the supply of all drugs should be licensed and controlled. Is there any reason to regard this person as unreliable? It seems unlikely that he would make any personal gain from the legalization of drugs, but it is possible that his official role gives him a vested interest in reducing the amount of police time spent on drug offences.

5 Can we think of any additional information which would strengthen or weaken the conclusion? It is often claimed that using cannabis leads to the use of hard drugs, which are both dangerous and addictive, and that this is why the use of cannabis should be illegal. Suppose we found evidence to support the claim that many of those who use cannabis also go on to use hard drugs, would this weaken the conclusion? Perhaps not, because the temptation to go on to use hard drugs may exist only because cannabis use is illegal.

There is no reason to think that use of tobacco and alcohol lead to the use of hard drugs, so perhaps if cannabis had the same legal status as tobacco and alcohol, its use would have no connection with the use of hard drugs. Possibly this is something which could only be discovered from a trial period of legalization of cannabis. It is sometimes claimed that a tolerant attitude to the use of soft drugs in the Netherlands has led to an increase in drug-related crime and violence there. However, even if it is true that tolerance of the use of soft drugs has been a contributory cause of such problems (a claim which is disputed by the Dutch), there may be differences between Britain and the Netherlands such that the same result would not occur here.

6 We did not identify any explanations in the text.

7 We mentioned the comparison between cannabis on the one hand and alcohol and tobacco on the other. This is an appropriate comparison, since all are drugs, and their harmfulness should be the criterion which determines whether or not they ought to be legal. That means of course, that *all* their effects need to be taken into account, so if cannabis use would lead to hard drug use, whether it was legal or not, then perhaps it is harmful in a way in which tobacco and alcohol are not.

8 There are no obvious conclusions to draw from the passage, beyond those discussed in relation to assumptions.

9 No obvious parallel arguments come to mind.

Summary: Assessing an argument

Analysing	Evaluating
1 Identify conclusion and reasons:	**3 Evaluate truth of reasons/ assumptions.**

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- **look for 'conclusion indicators',**
- **look for 'reason indicators',**

and/or

- **ask 'What is the passage trying to get me to accept or believe?'**
- **ask 'What reasons, evidence is it using in order to get me to believe this?'**

2 Identify unstated assumptions:

- **assumptions supporting basic reasons**
- **assumptions functioning as additional reasons,**
- **assumptions functioning as intermediate conclusions,**
- **assumptions concerning the meanings of words,**
- **assumptions about analogous or comparable situations,**
- **assumptions concerning the appropriateness of a given explanation.**

- **how would you seek further information to help you do this?**

4 Assess the reliability of any authorities on whom the reasoning depends.

5 Is there any additional evidence which strengthens or weakens the conclusion?

- **anything which may be true?**
- **anything you know to be true?**

6 Assess the plausibility of any explanation you have identified.

7 Assess the appropriateness of any comparisons you have identified.

8 Can you draw any conclusions from the passage? If so, do they suggest that the reasoning in the passage is faulty?

9 Is any of the reasoning in the passage parallel with reasoning which you know to be faulty?

10 Do any of the reasons or assumptions embody a general principle? If so, evaluate it.

11 Is the conclusion well supported by the reasoning? If not, can you state the way in which the move from the reasons to the conclusion is flawed? Use your answers to questions 5 to 10 to help you do this.

10 We could perhaps regard the passage as relying on the principle that if something is not harmful, it should not be illegal. This seems a reasonable principle. What is at issue is whether cannabis is harmless.

11 We have already discussed the weaknesses in some parts of the reasoning. In general, the passage presents a fairly strong case for the legalization of cannabis, the weakest points being the failure to explore whether cannabis use might lead to use of hard drugs, and the questions over the connections between cannabis use and other crimes such as theft.

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