Sense and Sentimentality

by Theodore Dalrymple (January 2014)

Recently I have participated in more public debates and discussions than usual (for me, that is). I discovered what many people before me have discovered, namely that it is not logic that convinces but emotion, and that this is so even with highly educated audiences. A carefully constructed argument tends to bore rather than to impress, and even to make him who employs it look arrogant or self-satisfied in the eyes of those who attend. A joke is more effective than a statistic.

I also discovered how difficult it is to tell the truth in public, at least on certain matters. A few days ago, for example, I took part in a public discussion in a university on the question of whether prison works. This is a very loosely-framed question because there is almost nobody who supposes that we could do altogether without prisons, for example to incapacitate persistent robbers or other violent criminals. The question is rather whether we use prison wisely or foolishly.

The students were polite, attentive and lively, just what university students should be. Perhaps not all is quite lost in our civilisation, then.

On the panel of discussants was a woman, I should estimate in her late thirties, who had been in prison for ten years and since release had run a voluntary organisation to assist woman prisoners to a better life after their release. All honour to her for that, of course; even the most punitive among us do not want punishment in effect to continue for ever, beyond the term laid down by law.

So far so good, but the woman in question went further. She depicted women prisoners as pure victims of circumstances, for example of sexual or physical or psychological abuse. She cited her own case as proof. She came from a tough area of a once-industrial city where crime and disorder were endemic, where it was easy ‘to go with the wrong crowd,’ as she had done, and where no one bethought him or herself of a better life. She had formed a relationship with a man thirteen years her senior who had been violent and criminal to whom she had found it difficult to say no. She was not, as she put it, in the driving seat of her own life. When she was sent to prison for what she had done she was the victim of stigmatisation and ostracism by her family and the people around her. By going into prison she had lost her child, her home, everything. She appealed for a more understanding, tolerant society, where victims of circumstance were better treated, with more compassion, and were not just thrown into gaol as

bad people. ‘I don’t believe I’m a bad person,’ she said.

This is the kind of emotional pabulum which it is very difficult to answer in public. The woman, who went round the country giving this speech, was clearly a reformed character and so her belief that she was not a bad person, in the sense of being irredeemably the Devil’s spawn, was perfectly true. To have pointed out the contradictions in her story would therefore have seemed like an attack on her person rather than on her argument and would have been a rhetorical mistake as far as gaining the sympathy of the audience was concerned. In any case I am not a ruthless person and would not have wanted to humiliate a person who, whatever the falsity of her argument, was almost certainly somewhat fragile but who had nevertheless made a creditable transition. It is much easier for me to write about her in anonymity than to have confronted her directly; but my scruple about confronting her directly, which I am sure I share with many others who appear in public with her, meant that she could continue unopposed to spread her fundamentally dishonest or at least sentimental gospel around the country. And what is unopposed unfortunately tends to go by default. Silence is taken for acceptance or agreement.

Let us examine the ways in which what she said was evasive. First she gave no details of what she had done, but for a woman to have served ten years in prison in England it must have been something very bad and certainly out of the ordinary: at any rate, not shoplifting.

Then (not necessarily dishonestly, we all make the same mistake from time to time) she used the old technique of citing the denominator without the numerator, that is to say she told us that a high proportion of women prisoners had been abused without telling us how many women had been abused without becoming prisoners. This technique makes an association appear all the stronger and thus also causative in a direct way, as a brick thrown at a window causes the glass to shatter. Nor did she notice that if the causation were as close as she made out – ‘I was abused, I can do no other’ – the penological consequences would not necessarily be in the direction of leniency, tolerance and understanding. If there really were an unbreakable causative link between abuse and crime, such that consciousness and decision-making had no part to play, then those who were abused should be held in preventive detention or at least imprisoned for a very long time for the sake of public safety.

She made much of her environment where crime was endemic and easy to ‘fall into,’ as Newton’s supposed apple fell to the ground. She also claimed that she was the victim of stigmatisation both by her family and the people around her, without realising the contradiction. The fact that she was so stigmatised suggests that crime of the kind she committed (whatever it was), and perhaps her whole way of life that led to that crime, was *not* the norm in her family and

social milieu, and that therefore she chose her path in life rather than merely fell into it almost by accident or by inevitability. No doubt she was a victim in the sense that she had been brought up in much less than optimal conditions, there is no reason to doubt it; but by the same token she was not just a victim and nothing but a victim.

Moreover, the story of her imprisonment was not one of futile vindictiveness on the part of the authorities, and indeed proved the worth of prison at least in her case. While in prison she had obtained a university degree by external study; it was in prison that she had decided to follow a different path. This decision, as she herself said (without necessarily realising the implications of what she said), was not the work of a moment. When she first went to prison she was surrounded by women with a criminal outlook that she shared. It took years for her to change her own outlook; had she been released much earlier than ten years, or not sent to prison at all, it is unlikely that she would have changed in the way she had changed, or achieved what she had achieved.

Had she been my patient I should have felt perfectly able to point these things out to her, firmly but I hope kindly. But if I had done so in public, especially before an audience that had probably already been sensitised by years of such sentimental pabulum that increasingly is our mental diet, I should have appeared a monster of insensitivity. So I said merely what I had set out to say, such that our respective contributions were like ships passing in the night. And she was able to go her way, in effect arguing that what she had done (whatever it was) was not her fault or her responsibility, and in effect giving an excuse in advance to those who in future would behave likewise.

She also used another argument that is rhetorically very effective but of very doubtful intellectual validity, to put it mildly. She said that, until you had lived experiences such as abuse and imprisonment you could not know or understand their effects. This is an argument often used by addicts in their grand effort to excuse themselves to themselves and to others.

It is a banal truth that one cannot know the experience of others from the inside, as it were. You cannot know the sensation of skiing in this sense without having skied. But what is true of everyone cannot be made the grounds of a scepticism that is used only to excuse wrongdoing. Moreover, it cannot be true that, just because you have not had precisely the same experiences as someone else, you can form no estimate whatever of what those experiences are like. I cannot say that, because I have never been punched on the nose, I have absolutely no idea what it is like to be punched on the nose, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, frightening or reassuring, likely or not to break my nose or make my nose bleed. Much less can I use the fact that I have not been punched on the nose, and therefore of not knowing what it is like to be

so punched, as an excuse for punching someone else on the nose. In any case extenuation is not exculpation. We should make allowances, but not to the extent of denying altogether the difference between good and evil.

Finally, the woman on the panel said something that initially sounded well to the audience but on reflection was brutal, if unintentionally so. She said that everyone deserved a second chance, and there was much sage nodding in agreement. How pleasant it is to be so universally forgiving, especially of what has been done to others!

But a moment's reflection is all that is necessary to show that there are some people who should *not* be given a second chance. Had Himmler and Goebbels not committed suicide, would anyone have said they should be given a second chance? To take an example on a less world-historical scale, there was a jealous violent man in England not long ago who drugged his girlfriend and, while she was drugged, gouged out her eyes and rendered her permanently blind. Why should such a man be given a second chance, a scintilla of a chance? If you cannot imagine (after a recent century of such horrors as the Holocaust, Pol Pot and the Rwandan genocide) a crime so terrible that people who commit it forfeit their *right* to live as free persons in society, then your imagination has been brutalised to an astonishing degree – or you are ignorant to an equally astonishing degree.

But if I had denied in public that everyone deserved a second chance I would most probably have been taken to mean that the woman on the platform should not have been released and should still have languished in gaol. And since she was there before us, a reformed and in many ways a sympathetic character, I would have seemed like a nasty, censorious, punitive sadist: and everything else I said could therefore have been dismissed on this ground.

To say that the man who gouged out his girlfriend's eyes should never be set at liberty is not the same as saying that he should be treated with cruelty inside prison (as, in strict justice, he would deserve to be treated, a proof, if any were needed, that justice is not the only value that we hold dear). But on the contrary, to say that he should have a second chance because everyone deserves a second chance *is* to say that there is nothing we find intolerable, that everything is tolerable to us. A tolerant society according to this woman was a society in which nothing was beyond the pale. A society in which nothing beyond was the pale would be extraordinarily vicious.

Does everyone deserve a third chance, a fourth chance, and so on, *ad infinitum*? And who is to pay for these chances? Generosity at the expense of others, whether it be financial or moral, is not generosity, it is moral exhibitionism. Where sentimentality pervades, we cannot make

the proper distinctions.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.