

Lying to Ourselves



by Theodore Dalrymple

One of the peculiarities of our age is the ferocity with which intellectuals and politicians defend propositions that they do not—because they cannot—believe to be true, so outrageous are they, such violence do they do to the most obvious and evident truth. Agatha Christie (a far greater psychologist than Sigmund Freud), drew attention almost a century ago to the phenomenon when she had Dr. Sheppard, the protagonist and culprit of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* say, “It is odd how, when you have a secret belief of your own which you do not wish to acknowledge, the voicing of it by someone else will rouse you to a fury of denial. I burst immediately into indignant speech.”

Among the propositions defended with such suspect ferocity is that men can change straightforwardly and unambiguously into

women, and vice versa. Now everyone accepts that they can change into something different from ordinary men and women, and can live as if they were of the opposite of their birth sex; moreover, there is no reason to abuse or otherwise maltreat them if they do, and kindness and human decency require that we do not humiliate them or make their lives more difficult than they are. But this is not at all the same as claiming that those who take hormones and have operations actually *are* the sex that they choose, or that it is right to enshrine untruth in law and thereby force people to assent to what they know to be false. That way totalitarianism lies.

To propound and defend ideas that you know are false is intellectually and morally frivolous, but it lacks the usual enjoyment that frivolity is supposed to supply. It is combined with earnestness but not with seriousness: one thinks of the Austrian saying under the Habsburgs, "the situation is catastrophic but not serious."

An excellent example of the tendency to adopt ideas that are known to be false and yet are made the basis of policy is the Scottish government's bill to reduce the legal obstacles to sex change. The bill proposed that adolescents from the age of sixteen could change their sex (for all legal purposes) without having to undergo any medical examination or treatment, and simply after completing three months of living as the sex that they desired to be.

Let us overlook the fact that "living as a woman" or "living as a man" implies that there is a binary distinction between male and female that is not merely a matter of social convention: no one, surely, could truly believe that after three months of role-playing, however successfully or gratifyingly to the person who role-plays, someone changes his or her sex. And this theory was put to a practical test very shortly after the passage of the bill (though it was vetoed by the British government). There was an understandable outcry in Scotland when violent sex offenders against women who claimed

to be changing sex were [sent to women's prisons](#). The Scottish administration was forced to back-pedal, and the two were sent to men's prisons instead.

Now according to the theory adopted by the government, these men were straightforwardly women because they identified as such. They were as female as Marilyn Monroe. Their motive for changing sex was beside the point: according to the theory, it was their self-identification that counted. And the fact that they had been violent towards women was also beside the point: a woman's prison, after all, can be expected to house women who have been violent to women. If the administration genuinely believed the theory behind its own legislation, it would have stuck to its guns: the sex offenders who were men when they committed their offences were now women, and since women should be sent to women's prisons, these two offenders should have been sent to women's prisons, outcry or not.

If we try to look on this episode with the eye of a future social historian, on the assumption (by no means certain) that western societies will someday come to their senses and that their social historians will be at least moderately sensible, what will we hypothesise? How to explain that societies that prided themselves on having overthrown superstition and on basing themselves to an unprecedented extent upon scientific enquiry, and that had a higher percentage of educated people than ever before in human history, nevertheless believed in the grossest absurdities? What could have possessed them?

I think that social historians will find a clue in G. K. Chesterton's book, *Orthodoxy*, though it was published more than a century before the phenomenon for which the explanation is sought, in 1908. Chesterton wrote:

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered ... it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and

they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.

Pity and compassion, formerly Christian virtues, are the virtues that run wild in the modern social liberal's mind. Indeed, one might almost say that he has become addicted to them, for they are what give meaning and purpose to his life. He is ever on the lookout for new worlds not to conquer, but to pity. In his mind, pity and compassion require that he adopts without demur the point of view of the person he pities, for otherwise, he might upset him; he must not criticise, therefore. In short, if need be, he must lie, and he frequently ends up deceiving himself as well as others. And if he has power, he will turn lies into policy.

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