

Psychiatry's Bad Reasons



by Theodore Dalrymple

A case has come to light in the French *département* of Vaucluse that is so horrible, and almost incredible, that I do not want to describe it in more than bare outline.

Over a period of ten years, a married man regularly drugged his wife, now in her sixties, to the point of unconsciousness, having previously offered her as an object of rape on an Internet site. Eighty-three men, aged from 28 to 73 and all local, accepted the offer. Fifty-one of them, including a town councilor, a journalist, and a fireman, have been arrested. The husband videoed them while they performed and sent them the images. Some of the men were “regulars,” repeating their performance five or six times. The police have found hundreds of pictures of child pornography on the computers of several of the accused.

It turned out that the husband was the perpetrator of an

attack on a woman 24 years ago. She was a young estate agent, and he lured her to a property that she was selling. There he strangled her and rendered her unconscious with ether, before assaulting her sexually. His DNA has been found to match that taken at the time from one of her shoes. The husband is now also strongly suspected of an unelucidated murder committed 32 years ago, also on a young estate agent, in similar circumstances.

The only comic element in this terrible story was provided by the first psychiatrist to have examined the husband, the perpetrator and initiator of the crimes, who found that the accused did not respect the intimacy of others and was lacking in empathy, but whose criminal dangerousness was "slight."

It must have taken many years of education and training to be able to reach such a conclusion: or perhaps the psychiatrist had experience with persons much worse than this man, though it is hard to know who they might be.

But to be fair to the psychiatrist, he is not alone: I have seen and heard such ludicrous professional opinions expressed in court and elsewhere in cases only less grave because they were not on quite such an industrial scale. The philosopher, F. H. Bradley, famously said that metaphysics was the finding of bad reasons for what we believe on instinct; psychiatry, it often seems, is the finding of bad reasons for believing what we cannot possibly believe.

There is a more general point, touching it on the rule of law and the role of punishment. Why, in a case like this, or indeed in any case, should a psychiatrist be asked to speculate on the dangerousness of a man, as if issuing a prognosis in the case of, say, pneumonia? Punishment is not therapy and should be proportional to what a man *has* done and not to what he *might* do in the future. The latter is pure speculation.

In a case such as this, even if one were 90 percent convinced that the man was contrite and would never do it again, would one say, "No need for punishment," then?

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