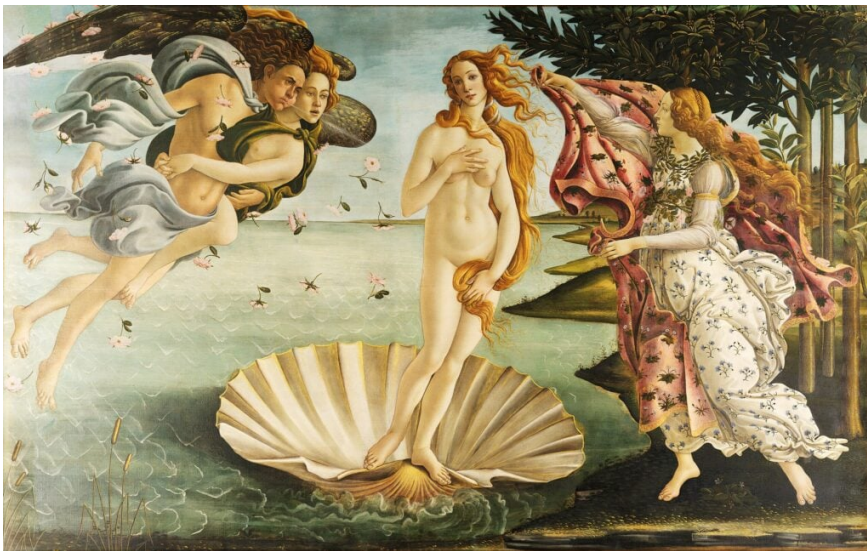


The Root Cause of Crime

By Theodore Dalrymple

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, said Juliet, but the legislature of Illinois does not agree. It believes that the word “offender” should now be replaced by the term “justice-impacted individual.” Among other things, this is typical of the verbal inflation so beloved of apparatchiks and other political timeservers to disguise what they do or fail to do.



Everyone hates an offender, of course, but everyone will sympathize with a “justice-impacted individual,” who is implied by that very name to be the equivalent of the random victim of a hit-and-run accident

in which a pedestrian is run down by a careless driver who drives away afterward, leaving the poor pedestrian to his injuries. Thus, the justice-impacted individual becomes himself a victim, that of the system that impacted him.

In order further to obfuscate and divorce official from normal usage, the justice-impacted individual will soon no doubt become the *J.-I. I.*, thus placing a further barrier to comprehensibility in official pronouncements about crime and criminality.

Meanwhile, the mayor of Boston said that she supported the idea that those who commit theft, receive stolen property, drive with a suspended license, or break and enter and commit

damage, among other crimes, should not be prosecuted.

What is behind these bizarreries? I think one can trace it back to a whole conception of what it is to be a human being and ultimately to philosophical determinism—about others, of course, never about oneself.

In the first place, there is the belief that the criminals, poor lambs, cannot do otherwise than they do. They are the Luthers of crime: "Here I steal, I can do no other." And, of course, since the great majority of them are poor, or relatively poor, it is only compassionate (so the argument runs) to extend maximal understanding toward them.

So firmly is the eye attached to one end of the telescope that it is almost always forgotten that the great majority of criminals' victims are also poor, and since most criminals commit considerably more than one crime, it follows that victims greatly outnumber perpetrators. Being poor is not in itself evidence of criminality, and extenuating crime away that is committed by the relatively impoverished, to such an extent that crime is regarded, even by the law, as only natural, in the sense that eating is a natural response to hunger, is to do the poor no favors. In fact, it is both condescending about their possibilities, indeed their very humanity, and creative of more victims.

The root cause of crime, its condition both necessary and sufficient, is the decision to commit it. Without such a decision there is no crime, for no one can be held responsible for what he did not decide to do, the consequences of which he could not reasonably have foreseen.

But, it will be said, decisions are themselves the result of a chain of causation; they do not emerge fully formed, like Venus rising from the sea. Those causes will not be of the criminal's making, for example his heredity, his intelligence, the things done to him in childhood, the ideas he had absorbed

from his social environment, and so forth. Even if his decision is based upon the likelihood of his being caught, and the punishment that he will receive if he is caught, it is not of his making. Thus, if he decides to shoplift because he knows that even if he is caught, he will not be punished, his decision is attributable to whoever decided that shoplifters should not be prosecuted, rather than to him.

But thoroughgoing determinism applies not only to the criminal but to everyone else, including those who blame him. They can no more help blaming him than he can help being a criminal. Nor does determinism have the liberal logical consequences that those who argue for it suppose (liberal in the sense of leniency toward criminals). In fact, it is perfectly compatible with the most repulsive cruelty, because there is quite literally nothing with which it is incompatible. For suppose that we were to hang, draw, and quarter shoplifters rather than fail to prosecute them, no argument against such a proceeding could be made on the grounds of injustice, for determinism, *ex hypothesi*, has abolished the very idea of justice. Whoever did the hanging, drawing, and quartering would be as much in hock to his circumstances as were those whom he is thus treating.

On the contrary, the only reasonable argument in a deterministic world would be in favor of such a proceeding, for it would almost certainly be effective from the point of view of reducing shoplifting. It wouldn't eliminate it altogether, for there are kleptomaniacs who would steal whatever the penalties for doing so; but it would be highly effective by comparison with all other possible punishments.

The fact is that no one is a thoroughgoing determinist. Those who would excuse shoplifters and others because of their backgrounds are most unlikely to excuse Donald Trump for being as he is. They are unlikely to say, "Poor Donald! It's his background and heredity. He can't help lying, going bankrupt to cheat creditors, making cruel jibes, being uncouth and

inflammatory in public, etc.” And when people are deterministic about themselves, it is only opportunistically, to explain their bad actions, never their good ones. No one ever tried to get to the root causes of his kindness or probity.

One cannot think of oneself in a deterministic fashion, only of others, and this is illogical, unless one believes oneself uniquely in the universe to be possessed of free will—not a modest philosophical position to take. The liberal (in the penological sense) takes an intermediate position: People like himself, or those whom he thinks ought to be like himself, are possessed of free will, but everyone else, particularly the criminal, is the pure product of his circumstances. Such a liberal divides humanity into two, the real humans like him, and the rest, the automata, or what used by snobs to be called the *hoi polloi*.

That the criminal justice system is highly imperfect is true; that circumstances may be extenuating, from slightly to greatly, is true; but that criminals are “justice-impacted individuals” is an implicit lie based on a false philosophy.

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