

Burning Indignation

A law student's callous treatment of a homeless man sparks a national outrage.

by Theodore Dalrymple



In February 2017, an 18-year-old Cambridge University law student, Ronald Coyne, was filmed on the streets of Cambridge at night burning a £20 note in front of a 31-year-old homeless man, Ryan Davies, who had asked him politely for spare change. According to Davies, Coyne said, “I’ll give you some change. I’ve changed it into fire.” Coyne then continued down the street as if he had done nothing worthy of note. A member of the university’s Conservative club, he was drunk at the time—though not dead drunk, for he was more swaggering than staggering—and dressed in white tie and tails.

The video of the encounter went viral; a picture of the young man, looking very pleased with himself, appeared in most British newspapers. Public condemnation swelled. Before long, 23,000 people signed a petition calling for his expulsion from

the university.

In a drop of rain, said the eminent British historian Sir Lewis Namier, can be seen the colors of the sun: and in this episode, brief and simple as it appeared, all the social, political, and philosophical conflicts of modern British society, and perhaps of Western society in general, can be seen.

No decent person could witness, or read of, Coyne's conduct without revulsion. But expressing a universally shared disgust is not enough; it is necessary to go deeper and analyze the reasons for it. Why did the incident—relatively harmless, compared with the examples of violence and savage acts that fill the British tabloids daily—provoke such outrage?

At the moment of his gesture, Coyne exhibited a disturbing coldheartedness. It strikes fear in our hearts that men should be so effortlessly capable of such cruelty. If a young man—intelligent, educated, privileged, and with everything to look forward to in life—can behave like this, of what else might he, and others like him, not be capable? We cannot console ourselves that his action was mere thoughtlessness, a momentary lapse, like someone with much on his mind who passes through a swinging door without thinking of who might be behind him. Coyne's gesture was not only malign; its malignity was its whole point. He took pleasure in the pain he knew it would cause, in the extra humiliation inflicted upon a man already in a humiliating position. His was an archetypically malicious action.

Coyne's mother, who did not condone her son's conduct, claimed that it was completely uncharacteristic. He had always been a quiet, studious boy rather than a roustabout, she said, and indeed, while still at school, he had worked as a volunteer for a homeless charity. Even if this were all true, however, it would not be entirely reassuring, for it would mean that a decent, even a good, person could suddenly transform into a

bad one and perform a callous act. But at least such a reflection would warn us that we must constantly be on guard against ourselves.

Many, though, took Coyne's act to be indicative of something much deeper, and more important, than a mere character defect. That he was wearing a white tie and tails acted metonymically for the growing inequality in our society: not so much the gap as the unbridgeable gulf between the well- and ill-born, the winners and losers in an increasingly divided society. As William Blake put it, in a different context:

*Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are Born
Every Morn and every Night
Some are Born to sweet delight.*

In a radically unequal society such as the one that Coyne's behavior purportedly symbolized, arrogant conduct could only be expected, for the divide in experience makes it hard for the fortunate to sympathize with the unfortunate, or even to imagine what their lives are like. Inequality is of such a level that it "begins to affect people's ability to see themselves in the lives of others," as legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron put it in the 2015 Gifford Lectures.

If this were really the case, Coyne's conduct would actually be less reprehensible, insofar as he failed, through a lack of imagination, to understand the humiliation that he was inflicting on Davies. But to believe this, one would also have to believe that his attempt to set fire to the banknote in response to a request for spare change was random and meaningless, rather than cruel and malicious. And surely, no one could seriously believe this.

The inequality of a society in which a student could burn money solely to humiliate an unemployed homeless older man is, at first sight, shocking. Money to burn, on the one hand, and

no money at all, on the other! The contrast could not be starker, and no emblem of economic and social injustice more emblematic.

But let us cool our indignation for a moment—an indignation that, if we are honest, makes us feel good about ourselves—and examine in what the injustice actually inheres. Coyne almost certainly did not earn his money. True, he must have worked hard at school and made the most of his abilities to have become a law student at Cambridge, but that is not the same thing as having earned his money. Though his mother denied that his family was in any sense plutocratic, it is probable that, through no merit of his own, he had never experienced economic hardship. He had done nothing to deserve the £20 that he could easily afford to burn for an ugly gratification.

Yet, is it actually *unjust* that he had money to burn—and, if so, unjust to whom? All of us, even the poorest, enjoy benefits that we have done nothing to earn or deserve. We have done nothing, for example, to deserve the comparatively long life expectancies that we enjoy, or at least possess. Most of us enjoy, without gratitude and as if by cosmic entitlement, the fruit of the efforts of past generations. Indeed, one could almost define material progress by the amount of unearned benefit one generation passes on the next compared with what it had itself received from the preceding generation.

Of course, people are not born with precisely the same level of inherited advantage. Ronald Coyne was born with a silver, or perhaps silver-plated, spoon in his mouth compared with Ryan Davies. This disparity would be unjust only if it were conceivable that unmerited inheritance from the past *could* be equal: not only between Coyne and Davies but among everyone in the world. For this to be arranged would require a world government with powers beyond the wildest dreams of Kim Jong-Un. If justice requires this, so much the worse for justice.

To eliminate the kind of relative advantage that Coyne enjoyed would simultaneously remove one of the incentives to save, invest, and preserve, for it is, above all, to their children that people wish to pass on the results of their efforts, including intangible ones. If prevented from doing so, why not just live for the day? Taking no thought for the morrow has its attractions, doubtless, but it does not encourage the maintenance of civilization.

What about Davies's homelessness? Oddly, the media expressed no interest about how he came to be sleeping rough on the streets of Cambridge, as if being an unemployed crane operator (his onetime occupation) were sufficient explanation. But even in hard times—and currently, the unemployment rate in Britain is low—something more than unemployment is required to reach such a pass.

A considerable proportion of homeless people are schizophrenics undergoing what is nowadays called “care in the community.” But homelessness has other causes, too, principal among them alcoholism and drug addiction, or rather the behavior associated with these two conditions.

Of course, one can view these two conditions as beyond the control of the individuals who have them. The individuals might, for example, have a genetic propensity to addiction (though this explains little of the variance between those who suffer from addiction and those who do not). Or they might have had such awful life experiences that they wound up driven into the welcoming arms, as it were, of addiction. One might even attribute their predicament to the price of the substance to which they are addicted, and therefore, in the case of alcohol, to the government's taxation policies. A statistical relationship exists between alcohol prices and the level of its consumption, and government regulators, by reducing “sin” taxes on alcohol, have allowed its price to fall to half of what it was 60 years ago. When the average level of consumption increases, the number of alcoholics increases

disproportionately. Therefore, if Davies were on the streets because of alcoholism, he might be considered the victim of government policy, in that he might not have become an alcoholic if prices had remained higher.

Even so, it is unlikely that he contributed *nothing* under his control to reach his current destitute state: for example, by estranging his family by his conduct, for even drunken conduct is not purely physiological but a matter of preexisting character, predilection, and choice. In fact, it is probably the case that, hard as his life may have been compared with Coyne's, his choices had seldom been wise, and may well predictably have led to disaster.

If we accept a fully deterministic conception of human action, by contrast, the very concept of justice is without possible application. In a fully deterministic universe, every situation is neither deserved nor undeserved—it just *is*. And hence, the case of Coyne and Davies could not be emblematic of injustice, social or otherwise. But if Davies was largely, or entirely, the author of his own misfortune, the case could not be one of injustice, either. We find ourselves forced back to the original position: that what appalls us, and should appall us, about Coyne's behavior was its heartlessness, for even if Davies's situation was his own fault, it was extremely unenviable, and we owe him compassion because he is our fellow human being. Whatever the correct response to his plight should have been, it could not possibly have included burning money in front of his face.

The episode had other interesting aspects. It is unclear who filmed Coyne that February night, though the most plausible explanation is that a fellow student made the video. That the question did not arise in the reporting of the incident suggests how far we have come to expect that everything that we do is likely to be filmed.

But whoever filmed it also made it available online, and Coyne

was immediately identified—whether by the person who captured the scene, or someone else, is unclear. Was this the right thing to do? The person filming Coyne seems to have made no effort to tell him to behave otherwise: and, badly as he acted, Coyne was obviously not a dangerous person, likely to attack someone who expostulated with him.

How should we respond in such a situation? I once faced this question in New York, while standing in line at a fast-food restaurant. The man in front of me, wearing an expensive business suit, was abusing the staff behind the counter because they had gotten his order slightly wrong. The workers, recent Peruvian immigrants, had an imperfect grasp of English, and the man bullied them relentlessly. Should I have taken out my phone and filmed the scene, or told the man to stop? I did neither, only signaling by facial gesture to the staff that I thought he was vile. To this day, I regret my pusillanimity—for such it was.

Some months after the Cambridge incident, after his college decided that he could continue his studies, Coyne apologized by e-mail, not to Davies but to his fellow Pembroke College students:

On that evening, I forgot what it really meant to study at Cambridge. I misrepresented what it meant to be a student here. . . . I made a terrible mistake, and I quite rightly faced disciplinary action for it. I have addressed the root causes of my behaviour by attending awareness classes, relating to both alcohol and social inclusion.

I am truly sorry for the upset I have caused my fellow students. I cannot begin to express my heartfelt remorse for the guilt by association you all faced, on many levels. When the media commentary flared up, strangers sent piles of abusive mail to my family home threatening me with violence, and chemical attacks. I received some sympathetic letters and

emails from people who thought that the online abuse went too far. To those people, I am still grateful.

This apology is itself worthy of reflection, keeping in mind that a young man wrote it. First, it addresses not his primary victim but those whom he assumes must have felt guilt by association—the kind of guilt that sometimes seems to be the only kind of guilt felt these days. Second, Coyne half-suggests that, had he not been at Cambridge, his conduct would not have been as bad; it was not so much the conduct that was reprehensible, but where it took place. Third, the apology minimizes his actions by suggesting that he made a mistake, a miscalculation—as if he had used, say, the wrong value of π in estimating the area of a circle.

Fourth, Coyne suggests that root causes were to blame for his conduct and that a technical solution can uproot them: attending awareness courses about alcohol and social inclusion. (He does not mention whether Cambridge mandated them as one of the conditions for remaining a student.) But what do such courses teach? Does an 18-year-old really have to be told that drunkenness can adversely affect one's judgment? And do people really need to be indoctrinated—doubtless with dubious propositions about politics and economics—to know that it is wrong to taunt and bully people? Ronald Coyne writes about Ronald Coyne as if he were someone other than himself, more of a machine than a person. And the schools certainly seem to teach children to write bureaucratese, to judge by his prose style.

Finally, though he might have lacked empathy for Davies, Coyne certainly seems capable of self-pity; by the end of his apology, he becomes almost a victim himself. Interestingly, he appears to believe, along with some of his correspondents, that some of the abuse he received went too far, implying that there was an appropriate level of abuse. This is an example of how criticism and abuse are now conflated in people's minds, with abuse taken for criticism.

It was undoubtedly believable that Coyne received ugly abuse by post and electronically. A website for aspiring lawyers in Britain published, inter alia, the following sentiments: "Is it just me, or does he have one of the world's most punchable faces? I think I would never tire of jumping on his head." (Remarkably similar language surfaced in the United States more recently, among Twitter commentators condemning a group of Catholic high school boys for supposedly mocking a Native American protester, in what became the latest example of how social media can facilitate groupthink.) And a man calling himself Savage Bastard had his comment removed because it breached the website's standards.

It is a sad state of affairs when the moral sentiments of a man such as Ryan Davies, sleeping on the streets, are vastly superior to those of aspiring lawyers. While Coyne's actions had been revolting, Davies observed, he had known worse: passersby had kicked him and spat at him in the past. Henceforth, perhaps, we may look to our homeless for moral refinement and to our lawyers for moral crudity.

If the Coyne case illustrates anything other than merely itself, it is the superiority of the Christian to the dogmatically secular view of a situation like this (and I write as a nonbeliever). The Christian accepts, without the need for second thought, the duty of charity toward others; he can respond unself-consciously to his natural feelings of sympathy for such as Davies because he knows that we are all sinners, and that there but for the grace of God go we. He can also extend mercy to Coyne.

The adamant secular determinist, who experiences the same natural feelings of sympathy for someone like Davies, has to justify them to himself, for if such people are to any extent the authors of their own downfall, sympathy is no longer due them. The easiest way for the secularist to justify his sympathy is to turn people like Davies into immaculate victims, usually of society. The secularist does not notice

that, in so transforming them, he dehumanizes them: in essence, they become for him no different from amoebae that move toward, or retreat from, chemical stimuli. But to deny the part that people play in their own downfall requires painful intellectual contortions and the mind's assent to what it does not, because it cannot, truly believe. The secularist ties himself up in knots, often complex ones, to prove to himself what he knows in his heart to be untrue. That he cannot empty human conduct of its moral dimension, a dimension that requires that human beings are not just amoebae responding to chemical stimuli, is proved by his often extreme anger toward those whom he believes to have acted badly—but who, according to his theory, ought to be just as much automata as those to whom they have behaved badly. That is why those who claim to forgive all because they understand all, in scientific outline if not in scientific detail, can also espouse extreme cruelty.

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise to us, then, that many of those who expressed themselves about Ronald Coyne's awful behavior did so with a violence that belied their supposed humanity.

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