The Inescapable Inadequacy of Psychology

by Theodore Dalrymple

At what point do we say that we understand human behaviour in general, or even a single human action?

If we see a man swig water from a bottle, we tell ourselves, without thinking, that he did so because he was thirsty, and we seek no further explanation. We have all experienced thirst, know what it is to be thirsty, and we have all reacted in the same, or similar, fashion.

And yet, of course, our explanation may be wrong, or at least incomplete or partial. Perhaps the man was not thirsty but

drank under strict orders to drink a certain amount; perhaps he was thirsty because he suffered from diabetes mellitus or diabetes insipidus, or even compulsive water drinking, a peculiar pattern of behaviour in which a person, not diabetic, drinks all the water he can find, such that he must be restrained from doing so if he is not to drink himself to death. On most occasions, though, a man swigs from a bottle of water simply because he is thirsty. We are not puzzled.

But once action becomes a little more complex, explanation becomes more difficult and more contentious. Being human, nothing human is alien to us, and we are compelled by our nature to try to understand the conduct of others. But that returns us to my starting point: at what point do I say, 'Ah, *now* I understand'?

Consider the July 8 assassination of the former Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe. No clear motive of the killer has been vouchsafed to the public aside from a connection to the Unification Church. It was ironic that he wore a face mask as he shot Mr. Abe, though whether this was because he was concerned to protect others from the virus, or because he would not have gotten anywhere near the former Prime Minister if he had not done so, is unclear.

He manufactured a gun of his own, which suggests a clarity of mind in at least some respects; a schizophrenic suffering from thought disorder could not have made a gun of his own. But paranoia comes in many forms, and some people are paranoid on one subject only, being perfectly normal and clear-sighted on all others. Perhaps the closest parallel will be with the attempted assassination of the British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in 1843, by Daniel M'Naghten, who shot the Prime Minister's secretary instead, Edward Drummond, mistaking him for the Prime Minister. (Some say that Drummond died of his medical treatment rather than of the gunshot).

The case gave rise to the famous M'Naghten Rules, which laid

down the criteria of legal insanity, against which doctors railed for years because they do not coincide with medical criteria of insanity. To me, the rules seem to have merit. In essence, a man was said to be not guilty by reason of insanity if his act would have been justified had his mad ideas been true: all other forms of derangement of mind might go to extenuation, but not as far as complete excuse. The judges, I surmise, were presciently worried about bogus speculative psychological explanations that would sway jurors and lead to medical usurpation of proper legal powers.

No doubt these speculative psychological explanations will be prominently on display in the trial of Highland Park shooter Robert Crimo III when it happens. Indeed, his upbringing has already been revealed as having been suboptimal to say the least; what is striking about most of the reports, however, is that none of their authors think even to wonder how many people with similar upbringings (insofar as we can disregard the uniqueness of each upbringing) do *not* commit mass shootings.

We can thus confidently expect people to point to certain adverse features in the shooter's life and experience to account for his actions, but the fact remains that no matter how much we refine the search for explanatory factors, there will be some remainder that escapes us. We are condemned to seek a total explanation but not to find one, which is both uncomfortable and comforting: it is uncomfortable because we feel we ought to be able to understand and comforting because the impossibility of a complete explanation assures us that total control of people will never be possible, even for the most totalitarian of regimes. The heart of Man's mystery will never be plucked out.

We are, in fact, never very far from inexplicable behavioural lunacy (I use the word in its loosest sense). A few days ago, I looked out of the window of my isolated house in France to see a mushroom cloud forming quite near: actually, about eight

or nine miles away. The upper part of it was white, and the low a purply-black, with a dark pink underside. It turned out to be the consequence of forest flames.

We phoned the fire department. “No need to move,” they told us. The fire, which was not brought under control until the following day, was—thanks to the prevailing wind—moving in the other direction. My sense of relief was no doubt somewhat selfish: I should have wished for the extinction of the fire, not that it was moving in another direction. But I was horrified by the possibility of my house, with its 20,000 books collected, or rather accumulated over a lifetime, going up in smoke within minutes.

Six hundred firemen put the fire out, and some of them were injured in the brave performance of their duty. Aeroplanes flew back and forth overhead, dowsing the fire from the air. We complain about much; we forget what is admirable in our society, both organizationally and from the point of view of human character.

Ninety per cent of such fires are caused deliberately by arsonists. The mayor of our commune told us that there is a fire-setter in the area who, shortly before Covid, is suspected of having set three fires, without ever being caught. Hot, dry, and forested, the area is particularly susceptible to dangerous fires.

What kind of person would set a fire like that one, that produced a mushroom cloud, injured several firemen, and caused a village to be evacuated? I turned for enlightenment to a textbook of forensic psychiatry, to which, as a member of a jury, I once helped to award a prize. It is very well-written (though multi-author) and jargon-free. It contains about 2500-3000 references. I mean no disrespect, therefore, when I say that what it offers is descriptive rather than explanatory. For example, it classifies the motives of arsonists:

- *Reactions to (or against) society*
- *Vengeance against an employer*
- *Simple revenge*
- *Jealous rage*
- *Opportunity for heroism*
- *Perverted sexual pleasure*

Admittedly, the book is nearly 30 years old (and interestingly, sexual pleasure could still then be described as "perverted"). But I doubt that things have moved on much since then.

Where human behaviour is concerned, except in very few and limited cases, there is always a gap—which I believe to be metaphysical—between the explanandum and the explanans. For this reason, I believe the role of psychology is very limited in the legal context, and that the presumption of responsibility for actions is both necessary and realistic. Mitigation (which may be very strong indeed) must not be confused with exculpation. Such psychology as is applied in or by the courts should be of the commonsense, everyday kind.

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