

Thoughtless Experiment

By Theodore Dalrymple

It is all too easy to claim analogies with Nazi Germany whenever you want to decry something. All the same, one can't help thinking of Dr. Mengele and his experiments on children when one reads that a number of prepubertal children in Britain are to be the subject of an experiment in which they will be given puberty blockers, drugs that prevent the development of secondary sexual characteristics, in order to discover whether children who express "gender incongruence" will derive long-term benefit from them.

The widely publicized Cass Report, chaired by a distinguished pediatrician, found that these drugs were being given to children in Britain in the absence of clear knowledge of their long-term effects. It found in addition that large numbers of children were being "treated" for a condition whose causes and outcome were unknown. It



suggested that henceforth puberty blockers should be given only in the context of a properly controlled therapeutic trial, which would establish the benefits or harms of the drugs.

The report was both widely praised and widely condemned. Its claims to fair-mindedness were disputed, as you might have expected, by the transgender lobby, but the monstrosity of its suggestion of a therapeutic trial was not noticed at first. Of course, it suggested nothing as bad as Josef

Mengele's experiments on children in Auschwitz, but there is a good deal of room for badness before reaching Mengelean levels of infamy.

According to an article in the *British Medical Journal*:

Researchers aim to recruit 226 children over three years into one of two study arms. In the first group participants will get puberty blockers at the outset for 24 months, which participants in the second will have to wait for 12 months. Participants will be assessed at the outset, at 12 months, and at 24 months. Assessments will be compared with 300 children with gender incongruence not taking puberty blockers.

The subjects of this experiment will be followed up into early adulthood. By a strange association of ideas, I thought here of some words of Siegfried Sassoon, from his celebratory poem "Everyone Sang," written after the armistice of the First World War: The singing will never be done. Only it is not the singing that will never be done; it is the experiment that will never be over, at least not until its subjects are dead.

The ethical objections to the experiment are so obvious that what is most significant is that there is any need for them to be pointed out. A prepubertal child by definition cannot give valid consent to such an experiment, and since the condition from which he or she is said to be suffering is not fatal, there can be no justification for parents to give such consent either, or for doctors even to seek it. This is all the more so since it is just as probable that the results of giving the drugs will be deleterious as that they will be advantageous. If it is argued that, without such an experiment, we will never know whether the drugs do any good or not, the reply must be: *So be it*. There are some things that we cannot, for ethical reasons, find out, not without losing our humanity.

In any case, whatever the results, we may be fairly certain

that they will be disputed, that they will not answer any question once and for all. As it often says at the end of a scientific paper, further research will be required, which in this case means experimenting on yet more children. The results will be of very doubtful scientific value because the 300 children not given the drugs will know that they have not been given them, especially if they have progressed in their puberty, and might be either relieved or disappointed not to have received them.

The assumption of the study is that a problem such as "gender incongruence" in prepubertal children can be solved in the same way as, say, whether a certain antibiotic is better or worse in the treatment of a given bacterial disease than other antibiotics. This is scientism at its worst, the belief that different types of questions can all be answered in the same way, namely that of straightforward scientific experimentation.

It is obvious, or ought to be obvious, that "gender incongruence" is not just an illness like any other, and that its sudden increase in prevalence and prominence is unlikely to be explicable by mere physiology. Of course, the dramatic increase in the number of cases could be explained in more than one way: for example, that it was a condition that was always just as prevalent but was not previously recognized. Alternatively, something in the environment may have provoked the increase—microplastics, for example.

Far more likely, however, is that the increased prevalence is the result of psychosocial contagion, of which there have been many examples in history: a kind of collective delusion. When the delusion cannot be exposed as such because a lobby group exerts a kind of low-grade terror (and sometimes not so low-grade), it transforms itself into an unassailable orthodoxy.

Some years ago, the Irish State Television Service contacted me to ask me whether I would appear on one of their programs

to say that the transgender movement did not represent a scientific, medical, or political advance, which is what I believe. I was reluctant to do so, first because I find the whole subject tedious, disagreeable, and even ridiculous, and second because there must have been people better qualified than I to speak about it.

The producers of the program, however, begged me to consent. They could find many people to say that the transgender movement represented an advance in understanding and compassion, and they had found many people—eminent doctors, scientists, endocrinologists, psychologists, etc.—who thought that it wasn't; but they had found none of the latter prepared to stick his neck out and say so in public. In the end, I consented, but whether my immortal thoughts on the subject were ever broadcast, I do not know. Probably not, for I have heard nothing since.

This experience, though, was important to me, for it demonstrated very clearly how freedom can be lost by means of social pressure without there having to be any legal or police repression. All it needs is monomania, and—for reasons that I have not the space to explain—we live in a golden age of monomania.

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