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**Theodore Dalrymple****Monstrous***Polyamorist Michael Philpott killed his children in pursuit of welfare benefits.*

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A recent case in Derby, an industrial city in the English Midlands, has ignited controversy. An unemployed man, Michael Philpott (now 56), fathered 17 children by four women, all of whom he treated violently. For ten years, he lived in one house with two of these women: his wife, Mairead, with whom he had six children; and his concubine, Lisa Willis, with whom he had four. Tired of Philpott's abuse, Willis left him in 2012 and took her children with her. Philpott, furious at this insubordination, wanted the children back. He, his wife, and a friend hatched a plot: they would set fire to the house in which his six children by his wife were asleep; Philpott would rush in and save them, showing himself to be a heroic and devoted father. He would then blame the departed Willis for setting the fire, which would result in her going to prison and his winning custody of her children. But the plan went catastrophically wrong: the fire got out of hand, and all six children died, five by asphyxiation and one by burns.

The bizarre plot was quickly exposed. It also came to light that all involved had long lived on government subsidies. In the trial that followed, the prosecution alleged that Philpott had wanted custody of Willis's five children—the four whom he had fathered and one by another man—because of the welfare benefits attached to them. When Philpott lived with the two women, the household was receiving about \$80,000 a year in such benefits, as well as money that both women earned in part-time jobs. Willis's departure, then, meant almost halving the household's welfare income—which, evidence suggested, Philpott used as much for his own pleasures as for the benefit of his progeny.

The revelations set off a furious debate about the indiscriminate nature of state welfare. The *Daily Mail*, for example, led with a headline about Philpott that has since become notorious: VILE PRODUCT OF WELFARE UK. Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, a Tory, remarked, rather mildly in the circumstances, that the case raised questions about the propriety of subsidizing the lifestyles of Philpott and of people who lived as he did.

Angry responses followed from defenders of the welfare system. The Labour Party accused the chancellor of using a "tragic" case for low political ends. A well-known liberal journalist, Owen Jones, observed that only 190 cases were known in which people dependent on benefits had ten or more children, adding that Philpott's example told us no more about welfare recipients than the case of Harold Shipman, a doctor who murdered as many as 200 of his elderly patients, told us about the medical profession. Unusually, Jones—who believes in the social causation of almost everything—blamed the children's deaths entirely on Philpott, calling him a "monster." A curious ideological reversal had taken place: those who normally made individuals accountable for their conduct blamed society (in the form of the welfare state) for the crime; those who normally blamed society blamed the

individual.

On the whole, the debate generated more heat than light, becoming, as so many things do these days, a media circus. A couple of observations may help to clarify matters. The first is that the welfare system as currently constituted was almost certainly a necessary condition for much of Philpott's conduct, though, of course, not a sufficient one. Philpott was able-bodied and capable of work. Even before the arson case made him infamous, he had appeared twice on television programs—first requesting larger public housing for his family, and then being told that the TV show had found three jobs for him. He showed up for none. By then, the generous benefit system had rendered work economically illogical; his children had become his milch cows. But while the state had made his conduct possible—and profitable—it did not require it. The great majority of people on welfare do not behave as he did, as Jones rightly noted.

Second, just as hard cases make bad law, so the extreme consequences of a system can lead one to draw hasty lessons. Any system involving large numbers of people will include extreme cases of almost anything that one can think of. To assess the significance of an individual story, then, we must study the meanings, beliefs, and purposes of the particular people involved in it. A biographical approach is essential.

And Philpott's biography does indeed shed light on his actions. One notices, to begin with, that the extreme frivolity of the English criminal-justice system facilitated his conduct at least as much as the welfare system did. (No doubt the defects of the two systems are related—for example, by a common view that people, especially at the lower end of the social scale, are the helpless creatures of bad circumstances: a view that quickly communicates itself to the people of whom it is believed, who then come to believe it themselves or to use it to extract the maximum benefit from the systems in question.) As a young man, Philpott almost killed his girlfriend when she told him that she was leaving him. Already displaying the jealousy and possessiveness that would mark his later behavior, the 21-year-old stabbed her multiple times, rupturing her bladder and her liver and puncturing her lung. She was fortunate to survive. When her mother tried to intervene, Philpott stabbed and injured her as well.

The attack clearly was not just an isolated adolescent outburst but a sign of a very bad character. In past incidents, the young Philpott had fractured his girlfriend's patella with a hammer and shot her in the groin with a crossbow. After the stabbing, authorities charged him with attempted murder and grievous bodily harm, for both of which the maximum legal penalty in England is life imprisonment. Instead of the maximum, he received a sentence of seven years' imprisonment and was released after serving only three years and two months.

But that was not the end of the negligent leniency of the criminal-justice system in Philpott's case. When he attracted the law's attention for acts of violence several more times, no inference was made that he remained a dangerous man. In 2010, for example, the police merely "cautioned" him for striking his wife and dragging her out of the house by her hair. It is true that a petty criminal who repeats his petty crimes may not become dangerous; but a man who has committed a dangerous crime and continues to commit lesser crimes is likely to return to dangerous crime, especially in a place like England, where the police have a poor success rate at detecting perpetrators.

If the criminal-justice system had worked properly, Philpott would never have been at liberty to father, let alone kill, his children. A sentence of 50 years' imprisonment for his first brutal crime would not

have been unfair or disproportionate; and even if he had been released from prison earlier, it should have been on the understanding that if he ever so much as laid a finger on anyone again, he would spend the rest of his life behind bars. Instead, he learned that nearly killing someone was of little account in the eyes of the law—an impression strengthened by the passage of time, as the memory of his three years in prison became foreshortened and as repeated acts of violence on his part met with slaps on the wrist.

Another significant feature of Philpott's life worth noting in this context is the ease with which he attracted young women and violently abused them. Though the number of children he fathered was far from typical, Philpott's abusive behavior was not statistically unusual. Jealousy and possessiveness have always belonged to the human repertoire of feeling and action, especially among men; but I have little doubt that laxity and absence of formality in relations between the sexes have inflamed these ugly tendencies. Over the years, I saw more and more Philpott-types in the hospital where I worked, at least in respect to their conduct toward women. Even more interesting is that I also saw more and more Philpott-type women, whose jealousy and possessiveness toward men manifested itself in precisely the same violent way.

The reasons for the trend are obvious. People tend to believe that others are like themselves. A predator sees a predator in everyone, and evidence abounds that Philpott was a predator. One way to protect against the predation by which one believes oneself surrounded is to be possessive and even violent toward the supposed objects of the predation. (For Philpott, the constant pregnancy of his women might also have served this end.) True, the method of violence and possessiveness usually fails in the end; the object of jealousy will finally have had enough and try to leave (it is then that jealous murder often occurs). But it can work for a time—ten years, say, as with Philpott. And one must remember that the excessively jealous man loves not the object of his jealousy but himself; what he cannot stand in the loss of the supposedly loved one is the wound to his inflated self-esteem. It is a gross mistake to suppose that self-esteem is always a good quality, the more of it the better.

Philpott lived in a part of society in which sexual mores had loosened, without the desire for exclusive sexual possession having diminished—rather the reverse. This poisonous combination, a virtual invitation to violence, has been encouraged by social and fiscal reforms over the past decades, reforms that resulted not from pressure from below but from demands from above (at least if intellectuals and the political class are considered “above”). Moreover, the reforms—for example, discouraging marriage as a protective institution against man's feral nature—were generally promoted by those who also favored the indefinite expansion of the welfare state and judicial leniency.

Philpott is not a typical product of these developments but their apotheosis: and apotheoses have their heuristic value. Not the welfare system alone, not judicial leniency alone, and not the jealousy consequent upon the sexual revolution alone produced Philpott; but all went into the witches' brew from which he emerged. And he emerged from it not as something resembling an automatic and inevitable chemical reaction but rather as a human being reacting consciously to his environment and circumstances. When Owen Jones called Philpott a monster, he was perfectly correct, and monsters there will always be, simply because of inherent human variation; but he was a monster who met a congenial system in which monsters could flourish (if you can call how he lived flourishing).

The Philpott debate in Britain, however, has focused narrowly on what, if anything, the case tells us

about our welfare system. What is undeniable is that the system was not intended to make lifestyles such as Philpott's possible (even if not inevitable). Its purpose was to offer a safety net for people who could not help themselves and to extend a helping hand to those who, through no fault of their own, fell on hard times, until they could become independent again.

The argument that the case told us *nothing* about the welfare system implied that, give or take a Philpott or two, everything else about it was working well. This is preposterous, for exploitation and fraud are not the mere by-products of the system; they are its essence. At the height of the last (supposed) economic boom, in 2006, 2.9 million Britons of working age were allegedly too ill to work and were claiming sickness benefits. When the financial crisis broke in 2008, the government decided to investigate these claims. When it announced its intention, a third of the sick miraculously felt better straightaway and stopped making claims. Once the investigations began, only one in eight claimants turned out to be incapacitated to such an extent that he could not work.

It would therefore be a conservative guess that three-quarters of the claimants are medically capable of work, either full-time or part-time. But when subsidies are removed, real hardship often results because the subsidies have become essential to people's lives and because, in removing them, mistakes inevitably will occur. We can be certain that those mistakes will receive a lot of publicity.

An important question is how and why such a situation could develop in the first place. Once again, the demand did not well up from below. Cui bono? Not the children of Michael Philpott, that's for sure.

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