

COMMENTARY

The Pelicot case, the circumstances and the choice for evil

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The story is this: for almost a decade, Frenchwoman Gisèle Pelicot was drugged and raped by her husband, Dominique, who also contacted other men to abuse his wife while she was unconscious. The trial of Dominique Pelicot and 50 of the men involved in

the violence concluded with the **conviction of all the defendants**. The ex-husband received the maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. In the meantime, Gisèle has become a feminist icon.

The first question a psychologist is asked in such cases is: "What goes on in these people's heads to make them commit such acts? I answer immediately: I don't know. To find out, I would have to talk to them at length, reconstruct their family and personal history, and possibly subject them to tests; otherwise, I would be no different from an astrologer who invents horoscopes without any basis and says everything and the opposite of everything. I would also be committing an abuse: "In specific cases the Psychologist shall express professional assessments and judgements only if they are based on first-hand knowledge or on adequate and reliable documentation". (Article 7 of the Deontological Code of the Italian Psychologists).

The second question is: these 51 men are - I think all of them - husbands, fathers, grandparents, workers. In short, those who would be considered 'normal' people. And yet, it's not the case, they are not normal: normal people would never behave like this; because I, who am the prototype of the normal person, actually a little better, would never behave like this. And this is a subject I find interesting.

First of all, it is not true. It is not true that we would not behave like this: we just never been in that situation. Opportunity, as the saying goes, makes a man a thief. I myself have seen people who, as soon as they were given the slightest and most ridiculous power over others, exercised it in a cruel and vexatious manner. Anyone who lives in a block of flats knows that most flat owners, when faced with the choice of favouring or harming a neighbour, will choose the latter without too much scruple. When the 'keyboard tigers' in the media pillory were asked why they were so cruel to someone, the most common answer was 'because it's free'; that is, because I can't and won't suffer any consequences. In our secularised world we have forgotten that every human being carries the consequences of original sin, so it is easier to do evil than good: 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want' (Rom 7:15).

The famous British writer G.K. Chesterton understood this point well and put it at the centre of his fiction entitled *Father Brown's Secret*:

"The secret is," he said; and then stopped as if unable to go on. Then he began again and said, "You see, it was I who killed all those people." (...) "You see, I had murdered them all myself," explained Father Brown patiently. "So, of course, I knew how it was done." (...) "I had planned out each of the crimes very carefully(...), I had thought out

exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was." (...) I mean that I really did see myself, and my real self, committing the murders. I didn't actually kill the men by material means; but that's not the point. Any brick or bit of machinery might have killed them by material means. I mean that I thought and thought about how a man might come to be like that, until I realised that I really was like that, in everything except actual final consent to the action. It was once suggested to me by a friend of mine, as a sort of religious exercise. I believe he got it from Pope Leo XIII, who was always rather a hero of mine." (...) Science is a grand thing when you can get it; in its real sense one of the grandest words in the world. But what do these men mean, nine times out of ten, when they use it nowadays? When they say detection is a science? When they say criminology is a science? They mean getting outside a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect: in what they would call a dry impartial light, in what I should call a dead and dehumanised light. They mean getting a long way off him, as if he were a distant prehistoric monster. (...) I don't deny the dry light may sometimes do good; though in one sense it's the very reverse of science. So far from being knowledge, it's actually suppression of what we know. (...) Well, what you call 'the secret' is exactly the opposite. I don't try to get outside the man. I try to get inside the murderer. . . . Indeed it's much more than that, don't you see? I am inside a man. I am always inside a man, moving his arms and legs; but I wait till I know I am inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions; till I have bent myself into the posture of his hunched and peering hatred; till I see the world with his bloodshot and squinting eyes, looking between the blinkers of his half-witted concentration; looking up the short and sharp perspective of a straight road to a pool of blood. Till I am really a murderer." (...) No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; (...) till he's squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat."

When we discuss the Enlightenment myth of the 'good savage', we think it applies only to others: we exclude ourselves from the ranks of those deceived by the serpent. Who has ever read *The Lord of the Rings* and empathised with the monstrous orcs? Yet the orcs are elves who, given the chance, chose evil; just as Gollum is a degraded Hobbit. Remember: 'Catch us all', someone said, 'I have nothing to hide' - that is until they are in the limelight.

The truth is that being good is a choice; and it costs. It is neither spontaneous nor free. That is why we have to deserve heaven.

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