

Measuring morality on the sickness scale

Relying on psychiatrists to tell us whether sex with children is normal means we've lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong.

Does something have to be sick to be wrong? That's what I keep asking myself as I read article after article about pedophilia and seeing it portrayed as the scariest epidemic of our time.

Recently, when a news release from the American Psychiatric Association announced "there are no plans or processes set up that would lead to the removal of the paraphilias (the lovely term given to sexual deviations or perversions) from their consideration as legitimate mental disorder," an editorial appeared in the *Washington Times* applauding the association for "getting it right" because "the safety of our children" depends upon keeping pedophilia on the list of mental disorders.

The decision followed a debate about removing it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), psychiatry's catalogue of mental disorders, after psychiatrist Charles Moses and Peggy Kleinplatz had argued that "any sexual interest can be healthy and life-enhancing." Since when does a debate end an illness? If it is really an illness, how can it be voted out of existence?

The answer is that every mental illness, at least those in the DSM, is voted into existence—sort of a reverse popularity competition. Homosexuality, as we all know, was considered a mental illness until it got enough votes to get thrown out.

Therein lies a clue to why there is so much hype about pedophilia remaining one of the mental illnesses. The fear is that if it gets kicked out of the DSM, it might eventually end up being considered normal. "It's just a matter of time," say those who believe in the notorious slippery slope.

So I return to my quandary. If something has to be sick to be wrong, does this really mean that if it is no longer an illness, it's OK? That's what the syllogists seem to think; that's what the furore is about.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that sex with children is OK or understandable or normal. What I am saying is that even if, metaphorically speaking, thoughts of the act make me sick, that doesn't make the act a symptom of illness.

But that's what the society we live in wants to believe. People seem to need psychiatrists to call it an illness, thereby making it all seem understandable and, if not curable, at least manageable. As the *Washington Times* editorial says, "whatever the root cause, it is safe to say that someone who desires to have sex with a minor is not in his right mind."

Psychiatry, it seems, is just saying what people want to hear. The American Psychiatric Association statement goes on to declare, "An adult who engages in sexual activity with a child is performing a criminal and immoral act and this is never considered normal or socially acceptable behaviour." No one points out how this statement says nothing medical—that it talks not about illness or disease, but about morality, criminality and normality. That's what bothers me. When we have our psychiatrists determining moral issues by ballots as they vote whether or not pedophilia is a "healthy sexual instinct," we're allowing them to medicalize immorality.

We see this all the time in reports of court cases. At the recent parole hearing for pedophile Robert Noyes, a treating psychiatrist told the board that Mr. Noyes's pedophilia "was in remission," implying that he suffered from one of those chronic illnesses, such as cancer, that one never gets over. Our courts and parole boards accept this notion, ordering perpetual treatment for the sickness. Mr. Noyes had been in prison for 17 years getting sex-offender treatment and what they say he needs, of course, is more—to prevent "a relapse." Why do we choose to think this way, to believe that pedophilia is an illness even when doctors admit that they neither know the cause, the treatment nor the prognosis—the usual characteristics of any medical disease?

Is it that we have come to rely too much on psychiatrists to explain criminal behaviour and to influence our judiciary? We have let them turn countless forms of abnormality into illness, virtually every crime into pathology and punishment into therapy. Or is it that, in a twist of irony, by turning pedophilia into a sickness, we have found a way of showing faint mercy for these who are today the most hated of offenders. So that, like lepers of old, we may cast them outside the wall or, in modern terms, incarcerate or monitor them forever, while feigning compassion by offering treatment, too. Or is it that we have lost touch with the fundamental notions of what's right and what's wrong? If we stopped arguing about whether or not people who want sex with children are sick with some mental disorder called "pedophilia," we could focus instead on making clear distinctions about what, in our society, we think people should and should not be doing.

