Moral Aspects of Economic Growth, and Other Essays
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Social Sources of Anti-Social Behavior

What is anti-social behavior?
Leninists and fascists have no difficulty in answering this question. For them any kind of behavior apparently opposed to their regime is necessarily anti-social. So is lack of enthusiasm when the regime demands enthusiastic support. Even the suspicion that someone harbors thoughts critical of the regime, or just some of its current policies, is enough to label that person anti-social.

For liberals and democrats, however, the definition of anti-social presents some problems. A good many liberals are inclined to shy away from the expression because it seems to carry elitist and ethnocentric overtones. From this standpoint, for example, black urban riots are not anti-social because the riots at least indirectly improve the situation of many blacks by extorting concessions from whites. I agree with this interpretation. (White behavior is probably anti-social in this case.) Nevertheless there are forms of behavior that damage society without corresponding social and political gains, or with only small gains compared with the harm done.

Some examples taken from ordinary daily experience in the United States will elucidate the meaning of anti-social more effectively than vigorous wrestling with concepts and definitions. The most familiar example of anti-social behavior is that of the drunken driver who flees from the scene of an accident. Less familiar but probably more common is the fast boater (usually a male showing off) who speeds through a quiet anchorage endangering small boats with his wake and upsetting pots, pans, and crockery in larger vessels. Admonitions to slow down in accord with the law will usually generate obscenities, unless the admonition comes from a rare harbor police officer.

In this case and others the individuals who behave in an anti-social manner are likely to defend their acts by claiming a right to use or enjoy their property in ways of their own choice. Thus many middle-class Amer-
icans claim the right to let their dogs dispose of their droppings anywhere except on their own property. Animal rights are of course quite popular today, usually to the disadvantage of human medical rights. Then there is the familiar right to let the television set blare at full volume through the warm summer night when all windows are open. One might prefer to label such behavior as merely inconsiderate. But if inconsiderate behavior becomes commonplace, it is anti-social in its very frequency.

With the exception of the drunken driver, the anti-social behavior just mentioned does not as a rule have lethal consequences. Nevertheless lethal consequences are probably more widespread than we realize. Take the case of a Maine jury that in the summer of 1990 refused to convict a deer hunter who had accidentally shot and killed a woman in her own yard. The refusal to convict serves clear notice that, in Maine, society will not protect the innocent victims of hordes of trigger-happy hunters who swarm all over private property, even when posted with “No hunting” signs. The most serious forms of anti-social behavior, in the sense of being dangerous to large numbers of people, probably still occur in industry despite all the legislation and administrative regulation that has grown up since the turn of the century. (There was, in fact, some retraction of regulation during the Reagan years, and future prospects are far from clear.) Either the industrial product is dangerous or the plant that makes the product is dangerous, or both together. These forms of anti-social behavior have deservedly captured a great deal of attention in recent years. For that reason I shall not discuss them in any detail. It is enough to remind ourselves that they exist.

A common thread binds all of these examples together in a way that will serve as a working definition of anti-social behavior. (A working definition tells us what to look for in the course of further investigation. It blocks off a section of social reality as deserving special attention from the standpoint of a specific inquiry.) Thus anti-social behavior is the failure to carry out implicit or explicit social obligations, a failure that has consequences harmful or very disagreeable to other people. The driver who gets behind the wheel of a car while under the influence of alcohol violates the obligation to drive without being a menace to others on the road. Often the obligation itself receives no more than weak and ambiguous support from the general public or law enforcement agencies. There have been complaints about this weak enforcement in connection with drunken driving. The case of the Maine jury that refused to convict a deer hunter is much more striking. In that case there is an explicit denial of any obligation on the part of the hunter to behave responsibly and avoid
killing innocent bystanders. Instead there was some attempt to put re-
ponsibility on the victim for wearing white clothing that resembled or
suggested a deer in motion. The absence of weak public support for the
obligation is a crucial aspect of the problem.

The burden of these observations is that any account of anti-social be-
havior will have to explain not only the causes behind the violation or
rejection of social obligations by specific individuals and groups but also
analyze the degree of support or lack of it behind the obligation itself. An
increase in anti-social behavior can arise from the deterioration and in-
creasing ambiguity of old obligations as well as the failure to create new
ones. Industrial growth in an ever more crowded planet has already led
to the demand for new social obligations to protect our environment, a
demand that has by no means earned universal support. Finally any in-
quiry into anti-social behavior has to remember the message of the An-
tigone. Obligations with powerful emotional charges can conflict with one
another. What looks like piety and concern for the general welfare from
one point of view appears as blasphemy and capricious tyranny from an-
other.

At this point the whole topic of anti-social behavior may begin to ap-
pear confusing. There are just too many questions to ask. In the end
confusion may well remain. There are few if any issues in the study of
human affairs that have found a widely satisfactory resolution if the issues
present both an intellectual and an emotional challenge. Nevertheless it
may be possible to reduce the confusion considerably by classifying the
main forms of social obligation in modern societies and noting how the
obligations relate to anti-social behavior. We will start with obligations
to authority in (1) the political arena and continue, with a steadily dimin-
ishing emphasis on authority, through (2) the arena of the economy, (3)
that of sex, marriage, and the family, and finally (4) that of relations to
strangers. There is no pretense of completeness in this little scheme.
Rather it is a rough and ready scaffold enabling us to climb up a bit and
discover what there is to see from a higher but by no means lofty vantage
point.

I

The first obligation on citizens of a modern “civilized” state is to govern
and be governed. Obviously the obligation to govern rests upon a small
minority, while the obligation to accept their rule rests upon a large ma-
iority. The precise nature of the specific obligations inherent in ruling and being ruled also varies a great deal between authoritarian political systems and more democratic ones. Yet there is one common feature: the obligation to maintain domestic peace and order—most of the time. There is also another specific obligation: the military and patriotic one to oppose the enemies of the state by service in the armed forces. There is wide variation on this score as well. At one end of the spectrum we find the military obligations of a large predatory state such as Nazi Germany. At the other end of the spectrum there is the strictly defensive apparatus of a small state such as Switzerland.

The refusal on a wide scale to meet these two obligations leads to the disintegration of political authority and hence of the state itself. In the case of the Nazis one can claim that such refusal was really a pro-social act rather than an anti-social one. But under that kind of tyranny, refusal and resistance were almost impossible. What resistance did exist was quite ineffective. Such a polity prohibits the most important kind of opposition, one that would make major changes in the system of rule, and thus the most important kind of pro-social behavior.

In less tyrannical states political disintegration sets in when the central authority loses legitimacy because it cannot satisfy the often sharply conflicting demands of different segments of the population. Intransigence in making these demands has anti-social consequences even if the demands are justified on other grounds. An oppressed minority can make life worse for itself, and much worse for the majority, if its demands make a generally tolerable society ungovernable. (The decision of the German Communists to oppose the Weimar Republic comes to mind in this connection.) Financial difficulties, especially in the form of sharp disputes over the burden of taxes, are another symptom of deteriorating authority. In these cases self-interest easily takes priority over the general welfare in an anti-social manner. Nowadays it is hard to locate any concern for the general welfare in the ebb and flow of political discussion in the United States. War, perhaps the most expensive luxury of “civilization,” has often intensified the strain on legitimacy and group conflict after a brief period of initial euphoria. If the context intensifies, it reaches a stage when the central authority can no longer count on obedience. There is a paralysis of order, as in the final stages of the Weimar Republic or the end of the monarchy in the French Revolution.

The state may then break up into a series of groups trying to establish their authority by force, often in a restricted territory. By this point the society’s connective tissue has dissolved. The society breaks up into its
constituent parts or interest groups. Of these the most vociferous nowadays are liable to be religious and ethnic minorities. Even before the point of dissolution everybody has rights. Nobody has obligations. By 1991 it was obvious that the USSR was moving rapidly in this direction. In the United States similar lines of fracture have been apparent for some years.

When and if such trends approach their extreme limits, personal security almost disappears due to the impossibility of maintaining order. Likewise the use of force, revolutionary or popular-reactionary, to restore order and maintain territorial integrity will almost certainly claim numerous victims.

The next obligation on citizens of a modern state is to work. It is second mainly from the standpoint of convenience in exposition, though one can argue that without peace and order created by the political realm the economic realm can scarcely function. Work means taking part in the production of goods and services and also in social arrangements for the distribution of these goods. Work also includes rules about honesty in the quality of the goods and services as well as in the practices of distribution and exchange. The obligations inherent in these rules of honest working behavior are subject to widespread evasion.

There is nothing fundamentally new about these evasions. They flourished for instance in religion-soaked medieval London, which demonstrates that such evasions are not the product of the decline of morality under advanced capitalism. Instead evasions are likely to appear wherever exchanges become important and replace production by the household for its own use.

In general the economy appears to be that part of a modern social system where the sense of moral obligation is weakest. There the whole notion of obligation is cloudy and subject to conflicting obligations. Dishonesty appears to be rife wherever it is not plainly visible to the potential victim. But this image may be exaggerated because dishonesty makes interesting news, which honesty seldom does. No deal or business arrangement is possible, after all, unless one can trust a prior verbal agreement to do thus and so. Nor will a strictly worded contract, drawn up after a verbal agreement, be of much use in holding a dishonest person to his word.

On occasion one hears the claim that the central commandment of American business morality is to get as rich as possible as fast as possible by any means that succeed without getting caught. Were that really the case on a wide scale, all social obligations would dissolve. Nobody would have to do anything for anybody: spouse, children, employees, business
associates, or government officials. The successful plutocrat, male or fe-
male, would be a caricature of the Nietzschean hero, above and beyond
good and evil. But the plutocrat could only preside briefly over a society
disintegrated into chaos and anarchy. There have been tendencies in this
direction during the Age of the Robber Barons. It is by no means clear
that these tendencies have disappeared with the rise of the more imper-
sonal giant corporation. Yet it is quite plain that this particular form of
amoral and anti-social behavior does not dominate the American social
scenery. There must be powerful obstacles in its way and powerful social
forces arrayed against it.

I doubt that the preaching of the preachers, the plaints of the intellec-
tuals, the proliferation of courses on ethics in business schools and un-
dergraduate curricula, contribute much to the effective opposition. Vicious self-interest can break through such obstacles like a cannon ball
through a cobweb. The obstacle may lie in quite a different area. It is
extraordinarily difficult to act in a completely amoral and anti-social man-
ner, doing so with ever increasing success. Such behavior requires contin-
ual alertness, quick and accurate judgment. It is much easier to act in
accord with general social expectations. Furthermore, the more villainous
one’s behavior the more necessary it is to maintain a visible front of be-
nign amiability and good character. Otherwise there is a risk of disrepute
and even jail. To sum up, the risk of this particular form of potentially
dangerous anti-social behavior does seem to be a self-limiting one.

In addition to plain and fancy dishonesty there are a number of other
forms of economic behavior that at one time or another have been widely
regarded as anti-social. They include monopolies, tariff’s, smuggling, trade
unions, and black markets. The reason for regarding these arrangements
as anti-social is because they divert resources “unjustly” from one set of
people to another set. The arrangements are “unjust,” evidently, to the
extent that they produce distributive results different from those that
would occur under a free competitive market. In other words only such
a free market produces a morally acceptable distribution, a judgment that
has never commanded universal assent. Black markets put in an appear-
ance only under a command economy where goods and services are ra-
tioned according to political and ethical criteria. Under a free competitive
economy where goods and services exchange in accord with market prices
a black market cannot exist. When a black market comes into existence,
it withdraws goods and services from politically and ethically determined
purposes. Let us assume that these purposes are widely recognized as
legitimate. Then this withdrawal of goods and services from the legitimate
economic arena works only to the advantage of those who can patronize the black market because they are rich enough or have the right connections or both. In that case there is a net loss to the social order. Hence one can consider the black market as anti-social under these conditions.

But, as anyone familiar with the workings of socialist economies knows, that is not the only possibility. Frequent shortages and bottlenecks plague socialist industry. A socialist plant may be threatened with a prolonged shutdown if management cannot locate quickly a scarce part or a rare chemical essential to a complex manufacturing process. The usual procedure in such cases is to locate the missing part or ingredient through semilegal or illegal channels—in other words a black market. In this case the resort to a black market is necessary to keep the wheels of industry turning.

An illegal and presumably anti-social arrangement turns out to play an indispensable role in the workings of the whole society. This is a splendid illustration of the ambiguity of human social arrangements and a warning against premature and oversimplified assessments of these arrangements.

The third set of obligations we have to consider is the series connected with sex, marriage, and the family. Though elements of inequality certainly remain, these obligations are more among equals, especially in modern times, than is the case with political and economic institutions.

In western theory and practice from biblical times onward there has been a powerful attempt to channel the sexual drive into the service of procreation pure and simple. One fairly obvious reason for limiting sexual partners and pleasures has been the desire to keep clear the line of descent for property, that is to avoid suspicions about the fatherhood of the youngster who will inherit the family property. With high death rates there is also a strong social concern about continuing to renew the population.

Yet these explanations hardly seem adequate to account for the ferocity against all forms of nonprocreative sexuality. Two other explanations may clarify such ferocity. First of all in many individuals the sexual drive is so powerful as to be terrifying. It seems a power outside the individual. Whether the drive is more powerful in females or males has been an issue about which opposite opinions (nearly always male opinions) have prevailed during different epochs of western history. In turn the drive needs, or seems to need terrifying sanctions to control it. Second, sexual attachments and sexual pleasures are earthly pleasures, and, at least for a time, very intense pleasures. Hence they distract attention and energy from other affairs. That is especially true of religious affairs in a religion of
salvation. If this life on earth can present such joys, why should there be such a fuss about the life to come?1

The picture of a continuous and frequently frantic effort to channel the sexual drive into "legitimate" and purely reproductive acts does need a bit of shading and qualification. In classical antiquity there was an important relaxation of these controls in the form of Athenian toleration for homosexual attachments between an adolescent boy and a mature man. The relationship was tolerated rather than approved. If it lasted too long, and especially if the older man continued too long with such pleasure, the result was severe social disapproval. Likewise it seems probable, though by no means certain, that in Christian times ecclesiastical and secular forms of the prevailing Sittenpolizei were seldom able to impose strict standards on the very top or the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Finally in the early days of Christianity there was a movement against procreation in the form of asceticism that tried to banish sex altogether from human life. On the other hand, to my limited knowledge the abolition or suppression of sexual drives was never more than an ideal for those who felt capable of pursuing it. Abstinence was not for everybody.

Against this background we can now see clearly what anti-social behavior has meant for a long time in western societies. The only form of socially approved sexual behavior—and on occasion even this approval was grudging—has been intercourse in marriage for the purpose of having children. Everything else was prohibited and regarded as anti-social. (The term "anti-social" has not been used. Instead the behavior has been condemned as "evil," "against religion," "against nature" or "unnatural." The relatively weak "immoral" seems to have come into usage rather late.) The forms of prohibited or anti-social behavior were adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, anal sex, oral sex, and masturbation.2 Penalties for these acts varied in severity, in some cases including the death penalty, generally by burning. However, since there does not appear to have been any overall agreement on the penalties, there is nothing to be gained by examining this aspect further. One point, however, does deserve mention: lesbian behavior was almost socially invisible.3

1This joy and abandonment is quite apparent in Abelard's letters. Hence his abandonment of Heloise to the tune of lofty moral lectures impresses a modern reader as obnoxious irresponsibility. See The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, translated with an introduction by Betty Radice (New York, 1974).
2Both Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983) and The Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles (3rd ed. revised, 1955) give the year 1660 for the first known use of the word "immoral."
3Judith C. Brown, Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (New
These prohibitions lasted with little erosion right through the nineteenth century and beyond, until after the middle of the twentieth century. Then in the 1960s they disappeared, at least in wide sectors of the articulate middle class, as if an avalanche hovering on the cliffs of a mountain had been loosened by the spring sun and crashed down to bury everything in its wake. The reasons for this sudden destruction of traditional sexual morality are not easy to determine. One may have been the discovery of contraceptive devices for women that were easy to use and seemed harmless. Another may have been the general rejection of authority by the young that the war in Vietnam produced, or precipitated if one believes that it occurred when it did due to other deeper causes. This golden age of the sexual revolution lasted only for about twenty years, at which point AIDS, or Jehovah’s revenge, arose. Just what effect AIDS may have is uncertain. Many youngsters and people not so young display the attitude that disaster cannot strike me. Nevertheless AIDS will certainly impose some restraints on casual hedonism. But they will be self-imposed prudential restraints, not obedience to quasi-divine rules and superior moral authority.

This situation leaves us with the question of what kinds of sexual behavior, if any, may on objective grounds still be regarded as anti-social under present day conditions? The obvious candidate is promiscuity. Quite aside from its medical consequences promiscuity is potentially more damaging than the traditional sexual evils of adultery and so forth, or else includes one or more of these as a special form of promiscuity. If asceticism is anti-social because it imposes excessive restraint, promiscuity might be viewed as anti-social because it is the result of an undue lack of restraint.

However, it is hard to give an objective and unambiguous definition of promiscuity. How many different partners must a person have in order to be considered promiscuous? Putting down a specific number would just be funny. Likewise, how often must a change of partners take place? Obviously most of the answers come from that protean entity so dear to some contemporary lawyers: prevailing community standards. Still, one might be able to go a step further and risk a definition based on apparent anti-social consequences.

By this reasoning one might consider promiscuity to be a change of sexual partners so frequent as to rule out the possibility of a couple raising their own children. But why do we have to impose the obligation of

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raising children on everybody, especially when there are good reasons for regarding even the rich countries as overpopulated? Married couples are no longer subject to criticism if they do not or can not have children. If everybody decided to avoid the obligation of having children and just flitted from one partner to another in search of the latest pleasures, the consequences would of course be lethal for the human society. Since that situation is hardly the case, the threat to marriage—or equivalents to marriage—does not provide adequate grounds for treating promiscuity as anti-social.

There is, I suggest, a much stronger basis for this critical judgment. Promiscuous behavior sooner or later involves the neglect or outright rejection of responsibility for and obligations to a sexual partner. This rejection of responsibility is, I believe, the essential feature of promiscuity and belongs in any definition thereof. The responsibility is both material and emotional. At the very least each partner has an obligation to keep the household going with food and shelter, to cherish and support the other partner in sickness as well as health, stormy times as well as sunny ones. If all this sounds much like marriage, it should sound that way. Marriage is the social recognition of a couple’s mutual obligations. Males are probably the most guilty of neglecting these obligations. Many a male expects his female partner to produce a gourmet dinner and an intriguing sexual experience without having to make any returns himself. Clearly such behavior is both exploitative and anti-social. It is the woman who pays the freight in terms of lowered esteem and perhaps reduced earning power. For this and other reasons younger women—and some men—have observed that it must have been men who put across the sexual revolution of the 1960s because men were the only real winners from the change. For many women sexual liberation turned out to be serial bondage to male caprice.

The rejection of obligations to a sexual partner is the most obviously anti-social form of sexual behavior. This is an obligation for the most part among equals, at least in contemporary western society. It is a horizontal obligation in contrast to vertical obligations that are perceived to possess a more legitimate form of authority. Now we may look a little further at horizontal obligations by examining obligations to and among strangers.

The United States is historically and sociologically a long way from ancient Greece where the stranger had an element of divinity and could expect to be both protected and received as an honored guest. Nevertheless even now the stranger here still enjoys strongly enforced rights of protection in the sense that there is an obligation to rescue a person who
falls into danger even when such a person or persons is quite unknown to the rescuers. The plainest illustration of the obligation to rescue occurs in the case of a mishap or more serious accident at sea or in the mountains. There is a certain camaraderie among sailors and mountaineers because both the sea and the mountains can at times be dangerous, often enough with little warning, or a warning whose threat is apparent only to someone with extended experience. The obligation to attempt a rescue at sea has a legal sanction as well as a moral one. I am not aware of a legal one in the case of a mountaineering accident. But the moral obligation to try for a rescue, even at the risk of one’s own life, is equally strong. Anyone who fails to attempt a rescue where the need is obvious is subject to the most severe criticism. Anyone with a special license, such as mountain guide or master mariner, would lose the license for deliberate refusal to attempt a rescue where one was feasible. Actually such refusals are extremely rare. Conformity to expected behavior occurs not because the sanctions for failure are so strong but because the demand to render help has such force behind it.

Even without the camaraderie that comes from shared danger there can be an obligation to rescue. Familiar examples are attempts to rescue someone who has fallen through the ice, a child who has tumbled into a well or some other dangerous spot. Our “common humanity” acquires concrete meaning in the case of danger to one or a few persons. But not always. If there are numerous bystanders and witnesses to the accident, the responsibility for action may not fall clearly on any one individual. Then there is liable to be a period of confusion before the rescue starts.

In all these cases there is likely to be some inclination to call in the specialists to take over responsibility: the fire department, the police department, the coast guard, a rescue team of mountain guides, or in winter, the avalanche specialist. When it succeeds, this move relieves the ordinary bystander of any obligation to help. Presumably the specialists can do the job better. But only too often they cannot. They may be too far away to bring help in time. And even if they do come, they may, unfortunately, be grossly incompetent. Hence it is unlikely that the ordinary citizen can shed this obligation altogether.

Do ordinary citizens want to shed this burden? Probably there is a wide range of feelings about the obligation to help a stranger in crisis. There is such a thing as pity and identification with the victim. There is also the hope of acclaim for executing an heroic rescue. Alternatively there may be acute risk in any attempt to render assistance. In between, yet very important, are considerations about the expenditure of time, energy, and
resources on behalf of an unknown stranger. These considerations help us to understand the tragic fate of Kitty Genovese. On 13 March 1964 this young woman was stabbed to death on the street in a middle-class section of Queens amid unheeded cries for help. Later the police located thirty-eight people who watched the murder for about half an hour from the windows of their apartments. Only one called the police, but only after getting advice on what to do by first telephoning a friend. By then it was too late. Kitty was dead. Questioned by the police later about their refusal to intervene some witnesses said they did not want to get involved. Others said they were tired. (It was about 3:30 in the morning.) At least one or two others thought the whole episode was a lovers’ quarrel. All of them in effect claimed that it was none of their business. More accurately, they did not want this murder to be any of their business.4

In a big city middle-class individuals have to perceive acute human suffering and define it as none of their business if they are to continue earning their living and behaving in an otherwise “normal” fashion. The thirty-eight witnesses’ behavior was a pathological extension of this normal behavior. Another reason why Kitty Genovese’s cries for help found no answer is that she had no friends who could help in the apartment building where she lived. That is the usual structure of friendship in a city. Friendships arise at work and elsewhere, and friends may live all over the city. But one may not even know the telephone number of the person next door. (Although in really poor sections this is less true.) To sum up, this tragedy was the result of urban social organization and urban mentality. If a similar attack had occurred in a small rural community where everyone knew everybody else—even if they often hated each other—the result would have been very different.

The practice of calling upon society’s specialized and professional services has become almost universal in the case of a much more numerous group of strangers, those in economic distress. A person who finds it impossible to make a living, and has no resources on which to fall back, either goes on welfare or is put on welfare. The process of becoming a welfare recipient, often a rather complicated bureaucratic affair, generally takes place out of sight of those who must accept the obligation of supporting welfare through taxes. This is not an obligation the ordinary cit-

4A. M. Rosenthal, Thirty-Eight Witnesses (New York, 1964). The author was metropolitan editor of the New York Times when this event occurred and supervised the paper’s coverage of it. For an attempt to explain the witnesses’ failure to act, see also Stanley Milgram and Paul Hollander, “The Murder They Heard,” The Nation, 15 June 1964.
izen can accept or refuse. In fact the ordinary individual taxpayer has only a limited input into the level of taxes he or she must pay. Because taxes are mandatory and the benefits, if any, that they create through the welfare system are largely invisible, this particular social obligation creates a great deal of resentment. (Since taxes are hard to escape, particularly local taxes for such purposes, there is little evasion of this obligation.) This resentment takes the form of complaints about “welfare cheats” and about the creation of a large number of people who have become so dependent on welfare that they cannot or will not hold a job. These criticisms are by no means completely without foundation. To assess them here is neither possible nor necessary. For our purposes the significant point in these criticisms is their effort to claim that it is the welfare system itself that has anti-social consequences. From this standpoint “our common humanity” ceases to exist at the door of the tax collector’s office. Along with other currents of opinion these criticisms have led to a sharp reduction in funds for welfare. If these trends continue, there may be a serious political clash between the haves and have nots and a new surge of crime and personal tragedies among those living close to the margin. There is after all, not a great deal of living space left along the subway tracks. But welfare is not a real solution to the problem of unintentional poverty. There is a limit to the number of people on welfare that any society can tolerate and still produce enough to go around.

II

Having seen the variety of forms anti-social behavior may take, we are now ready to move toward an explanation. First let us look again at what anti-social behavior amounts to. Anti-social behavior is the rejection of obligations not only to figures of authority but also to equals and fellow members of society. It is a refusal of allegiance, obedience, and civic obligations in the area of politics. It is a rejection of the obligation to work and a refusal to join any form of social coordination with an element of command in the economic arena. It generalizes a refusal of responsibility to others in connection with sex, marriage, and the family. It fosters a relationship to neighbors, friends, and strangers in which they appear only as possible sources of gratification, not as persons whom one has an obligation to assist in cases of danger and distress.

From this little summary it is obvious that human society would disintegrate in any part of the world where this became the predominant
pattern of behavior. It is also obvious that this little summary is a caricature of that familiar figure, economic man. Since we all know reasonably well how economic man came into existence, we have taken a large step in the direction of the explanation we have been seeking. Before we try to decide where that step leads us, however, it will be wise to make some factual observations to put this caricature in perspective.

First of all selfishness and a reluctance to carry out a social obligation are not unique products of contemporary civilization. One is likely to find this behavior in any society, including the cooperative non-literate semi-utopias so appealing to modern romantics. Remember the Tikopian who stole fish for his private consumption from the nets used in the collective catch. Neither angels nor socialists, human beings are not well designed for living in society, without which, on the other hand, they would all rapidly die. A good deal of friction, evasion, and quarreling is inevitable even under the most favorable conditions.

Second, in periods of sustained structural change, such as that in Western society since the Middle Ages, old loyalties continually become obsolete as new ones take their place. There is nothing pathological in other words about the decay of “traditional” obligations. The problem lies in what replaces them, because society without obligation is impossible. We cannot have all rights and no duties. Here indeed is a major focus of concern about modern civilization. It is hard to discern any new system of obligations to replace those presently displaying serious signs of decay. There was a time not so long ago when socialism was expected to be the new ethical replacement for a moribund capitalism. No one can take that hope seriously any longer, even if fears for capitalism may turn out to be justified. An even more serious cause for worry is that none of the current contenders for a moral-social supremacy can speak in terms of pan-human concerns. They are all ethnic or nationalist doctrines, or else some form of religious fundamentalism.

Finally it is by no means altogether clear that social and moral disintegration is worse in our own time than it has been at some points in the past. Consider the big city as the center of decay. If one reads the New York Times for a couple of weeks focusing on the local news, one can easily come away with the sense that the situation is hopeless. The authorities cannot possibly cope with the “inner barbarians” or do anything about the social causes that produce them. But was not the threat to life and property just as great in eighteenth-century London?5

With these warnings against overemphasizing both the novelty and the intensity of our present evils, we may return to the problem of accounting for them in the form of economic man. If such a person ever could exist, it would be someone almost without social obligations and certainly without loyalties. The only obligations would be fleeting and changing social relationships entered into strictly on grounds of probable personal advantage. To repeat, this is a caricature. But it is a caricature of quite recognizable social trends. Stendahl’s Julien Sorel and Budd Schulberg’s Sammy Glick are two familiar fictional examples created roughly a century apart. At a more general level, and perhaps as a reaction against the “really existing economic man” manifested in the continental bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century, the completely amoral hero, the individual _moribus solutus_ became a favorite literary figure. Gide’s early novels contain striking examples. More recently Alberto Moravia’s novels treat women forced in that direction. It is highly likely that these fictional themes reflect wishes, hopes, and fears among their actual and potential readers.

Two related yet distinct trends that long antedate modern industrialism, while becoming an important part of it, go a long way toward explaining this erosion of social obligations. One is the demand for social equality that struck Tocqueville so forcibly when industrial society was still well over the historical horizon. It is hard to accept an obligation to someone when you are convinced that you are every bit as good as that person. The other trend passes under the name of secular rationalism. For our purposes its main effect was to demystify traditional forms of authority, both secular and religious. The corrosive effects of the market on older social relationships intensified these trends. In all these ways the sense of obligation to social superiors deteriorated.

None of these trends seem to have had any overpowering effect on horizontal obligations, those to neighbors and strangers. It is unlikely, however, that horizontal obligations can become the ground for a more general restoration of the sense of obligation. That has to come about in connection with a specific social function. In the workplace, for example, one has work to acceptable standards of quality—i.e., that faucets don’t leak when they are supposed to be fixed, and that one does not quit the job until it is done. “Love thy neighbor,” is not a useful injunction for that purpose. We need a sense of duty and pride in workmanship.

The intellectual current of secular rationalism has by now pretty much run out into the sand. Indeed a good many influential thinkers regard secular rationalism as the cause of our major ailments from big bureaucracy to big bombs. With the blunting of the rational thrust all the traditional nonsense of the past comes to the surface along with new forms.
Intellectual battles that appeared to be finished more than fifty years ago now have to be fought over again, very likely with more tired troops and fewer ones on the side of intelligence and decency. In this area, too, the opponents of “cold” rationality want to place some form of generalized and “warm” human love as the basis for their emotional, intellectual, and social constructions. I doubt very much that any workable set of social obligations can be constructed in this manner. These romantics are almost certainly correct in claiming that no human society or even a small part of one can be built on a basis of strict rationality. In order to work together human beings apparently need at the very least a good dose of emotion to keep the friction down. Yet no good is likely to come out of building obligations mainly out of love. The units that come out of such a process are liable to be too small. For this reason and others they would probably be at each other’s throats in short order. Groups whose members ostensibly love one another, such as small revolutionary groups, religious groups, governments in exile, ethnic political movements, often display vicious hostility to competing outsiders, as well as equally savage factionalism on the inside. There is enough of this in the world already without trying to make more under the banner of love versus “inhuman” rationality.

III

Is there then anything at all one can do about anti-social behavior? Can a social science informed by an historical perspective suggest any remedy? The answer depends heavily on the brand or brands of social sciences upon which one draws and, more specifically, on the kinds of causes one perceives through that particular intellectual lens. For instance a behaviorist would probably be quite sanguine about changing anti-social behavior. From this standpoint changing anti-social behavior is no more difficult than changing any other kind of behavior. All one has to do is set up the proper system of rewards for desired behavior and penalties for undesired behavior and the hoped for results will soon be evident. However, behaviorists are liable to run into trouble when they attempt to set up their system of rewards and penalties in the context of modern American society, or any other with its existing system of social classes, distribution of political power, interest groups and so forth, instead of in a laboratory where the experimenter controls the important variables.

The behaviorists’ difficulties lead us toward the other major type of
Social Sources of Anti-social Behavior

explanation, one based on long-term structural and moral changes in the social order. To abbreviate greatly, this explanation sees the combination of modernization, industrialism, and secularization pushing Western society toward the dissolution of obligations and the creation of an essentially asocial economic man. In and by itself no historical explanation is likely to yield a remedy because one would have to run the tape of history on a “fast rewind with erase” in order to get rid of the causes. As is well known, Marx tried to get around this difficulty by building into his account an inevitable revolutionary explosion that would enable a fresh start. Conceivably one could still write history with the aim of showing that the causes of evil and misery were weaker than commonly thought and historically limited. But doing that means demonstrating that much of one’s subject matter is ephemeral, a strategy unlikely to appeal to any serious historian.

With these obstacles in mind, in casting about for a remedy I shall try for an intermediate position between the omnipotence of behaviorism and the impotence of an extreme historicism. After all in reality, some people propel historical trends while others oppose them. It is this struggle in which we are really interested.

The first step is to recognize—and get others to recognize—anti-social behavior for what it is: a serious threat to civilized existence. That is not easy. Even a mild admonition is liable to elicit a “Mind your own god-damned business!” If the encounter lasts a bit longer there is likely to be a pyrotechnical display about this being a free country where the individual has Rights. Here “rights” means that the individual can do as he pleases no matter what happens to anybody else. The person who recognizes anti-social behavior and speaks up about it has to have just a hint of iron in the soul. It is no role for the person who seeks to be agreeable and keep peace in the neighborhood even to the point of letting ethnic slurs pass in silence.

From the critical actions of a few individuals it is a short step to the formation of a loosely organized movement or pressure group. The purpose and effect of such a movement is to change the cultural assumptions and intellectual atmosphere surrounding a particular form of behavior from positive or neutral to negative and condemnatory. There have been a great many such movements in the United States, and in recent times

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The best recent statement of this view known to me is Alan Wolfe, Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation (Berkeley, Calif., 1989). However, the diagnosis strikes me as far better than the remedy, a revival of community at the local level.
they have had notable successes. They range in content from civil rights movements to environmental ones, including those directed at smoking. In the case of anti-social behavior a movement probably would have to choose a specific form of anti-social behavior as its target rather than anti-social behavior in all its forms. In that sense some movements, like those against industrial dangers, already exist.

By no means are all movements socially desirable. (The Ku Klux Klan is a case in point.) The desirable ones mentioned in the preceding paragraph have by no means brought about fundamental changes in American culture and society. But they have produced some changes. That is all one can sensibly hope for. The only alternative to action based on modest hopes is to do nothing—to sit on one’s hands and complain without thinking. That is merely an uncomfortable road to perdition.