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Dædalus

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The Academy was chartered in 1780. Its seal depicts Minerva flanked by a quadrant and a telescope in a field of Indian corn. The sun above the cloud represents the nation's rising state "in regard to empire, and the arts and sciences," while the motto, *Sub libertate florent*, conveys the idea that arts and sciences flourish best in free states. *Dædalus* was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal's namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a labyrinth seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to "lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness."

Orlando Patterson

Beyond compassion: selfish reasons for being unselfish

America has developed an unusual class system. It is a highly competitive society in which the majority of players are winners, but in which the winners to an increasing degree take all, or nearly all. This is the best of all possible worlds for the majority of winners. But for the losers, especially those at the bottom, it is the worst of all possible worlds. It means that, even as inequality grows, the dominant value legitimizing, as well as driving, America's enormously successful social economy – the conviction that anyone can make it if they only try hard enough, and that failure is a reflec-

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tion of character – is believed by the majority, which has its own successes to prove it.

Paradoxically, the great majority of Americans continue to espouse the ideal of equality. Surveys indicate that the commitment is genuine and plays an important role in the struggle of disadvantaged groups to improve their lot.¹ Still, as Sidney Verba and Gary Orren concluded fifteen years ago, "The United States ranks among the most open and participatory of modern democracies when it comes to politics and among the least egalitarian when it comes to economic matters."²

How do Americans reconcile their egalitarianism with the realities of extreme inequality and rampant poverty in the midst of affluence? Partly by separating economic life from egalitarian ideals, confining the latter to the domain of the personal and political; and partly through widespread denial about the realities of inequality. As Jennifer Hochschild found, "almost all [Ameri-

1 Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), chap. 3.

2 Sidney Verba and Gary Orren, *Equality in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), chap. 1.

cans] define themselves as members of the middle class, no matter how poor or rich they are."³

Above all, Americans seem to be confused about the notion of equality, and either naive or hypocritical about the relationship between equity and the economic system. It is hard to know what else to make of findings such as the following: "Although few Americans are willing to blame the poor for their plight, even fewer blame the economic system for making them poor."⁴ The problem, I want to argue, lies in the very idea of equality itself, and in our failure to find ways of reconciling modern American conceptions of it with the individualist indeterminism that is the foundation of America's successful capitalist system.

For Aristotle, equality meant equal treatment for equals and unequal treatment for unequals with respect to given qualities, a conception of fairness that virtually requires a very unequal society. It is obvious that human beings differ greatly in their capacities: some are stronger than others; some are more beautiful; some can do math better; some can sing better; and some are clearly better athletes. These qualities are nonassociative. Cognitively smart people are not necessarily beautiful or physically agile. Indeed, they may not even be very smart in areas of cognition outside of their special fields of competence. We have all met the great scientist who is hopelessly naive in social or political matters. And there are good reasons for distinguishing people good

3 Jennifer Hochschild, *What's Fair? American Beliefs about Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 143 and chap. 5 passim.

4 McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*, 125.

at soldiering from those competent at political and civic leadership.

One difficulty with America's approach to inequalities like this is that we reward different kinds of competence at different rates – and there is no rationale or fairness to how we do this. In a capitalist society, people are paid in relation to the market value of their productive activities. But as a justification for the distribution of income prevailing at any given time, the market is a moral nonstarter. Is a good manager really worth over 150 times the earnings of a good worker, not to mention thousands of times the latter's wealth? Is the work of nude dancers and *Playboy* pinups really hundreds of times more valuable than what homemakers do? Is an actress playing Mother Teresa millions of times more worthwhile than the relatively poor saint she plays? Clearly not. Market logic dictates that a diligent nude lap-dancer earning \$250,000 per year is ten times more productive than a dedicated day-care teacher earning \$25,000, but no economist still in his moral senses would ever argue that this is a fair or socially reasonable outcome.

But if the market cannot function as a moral yardstick, what can? All attempts by social scientists to come up with some kind of general standard for assessing the relative worth of qualities have failed, most notably the various functionalist theories of competence – arguments that the worth of qualities is proportionate to their contribution to society at large. As John Rawls has cogently argued, the standard meritocratic argument also fails, for the reason that native endowments (such as high intelligence, beauty, and athletic talent) are qualities that we did nothing to deserve, and therefore it is unjust to reward them unduly.

Alas, we live in a very imperfect world, and given the trends toward growing inequality, it is one that daily becomes more imperfect. In America today, it is also true that appeals to justice, or general moral principles, such as those enunciated by Rawls, carry little weight in practice. Ours is a harsh moral universe. Apart from a few "deserving" exceptions such as the badly crippled or otherwise disabled, most highly successful Americans see the poor and disadvantaged as self-made failures. Under these circumstances, we have to ask not how we can change the terms of moral judgment, but how we can remedy the worst inequities of the system despite the currently prevailing terms of moral judgment. We also need to know how to defend such remedies in a manner that might appeal to the most morally insensitive "winners."

Is there any way of analyzing the consequences of inequality that will have persuasive power in our winner-take-all world?

Only one kind of argument seems likely to succeed: an argument based on self-interest, or, to put it more bluntly, on selfishness. If it can be shown that too brutal a disregard for losers undermines the interests of the winners, then it may be possible to salvage some of what remains of the welfare state. In what follows, I will ignore the "standpoint of justice" defended by Rawls. Instead, I will rehearse three sociologically pragmatic – and morally ignoble – lines of reasoning: what I will call the Degradation argument; the Acts of Man argument; and the Acts of History argument.

Few deny any longer that a market regime will, in some circumstances, fail to prevent the physical degradation of

the environment by private firms. If the state does not intervene to regulate and forestall such degradation, society as a whole will suffer. Even the winners suffer in a city where the air is not fit to breathe.

A similar argument holds for the social and cultural degradation that comes as a result of pursuing a totally selfish, uncaring social policy. Chronic poverty and unemployment in the midst of plenty is directly related to chronic drug use, criminality, the desolation of communities both urban and, increasingly, rural, and growing violence in all aspects of life. A semilliterate and alienated lower class wastes much of America's potential manpower.

Worse, a discouraged, angry, and alienated lower class is directly related to the growing debasement of our popular culture. The mass media, driven by advertising revenues, increasingly panders to the lowest common denominator. This accounts for the decline in public-interest programming and in the shrinking amount of time devoted to serious news on TV, as well as the growing reliance on the banalities of survivor shows and on gruesomely violent dramas. Accompanying these developments has been the well-documented and frequently lamented degradation of popular music.

What is true of the weather is equally true of the moral climate we share: the rich winners, and their children, can no more escape cultural pollution than they can escape air pollution. As distinguished economists Robert Frank and Philip Cook have argued at length in their landmark study of *The Winner-Take-All Society*, "activities that affect our preferences affect the well-being of others, just as activities that generate pollution affect the well-being of others."

There is growing evidence that America's lowest-common-denominator popular culture is having a damaging effect on middle- and upper-class children, even as early as kindergarten. It has not gone unnoticed that the perpetrators of mass murder in our high schools have all been children from the families of privileged winners. And it is now well known that the major audience for the most brutally misogynistic and violent of rap lyrics is composed of upper-middle-class Euro-American youngsters.

As the sociologist David Riesman argued over a half century ago, untrammelled individualism ultimately undermines individualism itself: "People can become deeply attached only to a society which takes account of longings for connection with each other," he wrote, and "to the degree that capitalist individualism has fostered an ethic of callousness,

5 Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 202 and chap. 10 passim. Frank and Cook have vigorously argued that there is a close relationship between the spectacular rise in inequality in recent decades and the spread of winner-take-all markets. There has been a change in the distribution of opportunities, rather than talents, and in the ability of those at the top to leverage their relative standing into disproportionately higher earnings (*The Winner-Take-All Society*, 61–84; 86–89). While I am in general sympathy with Frank and Cook's argument, we differ in one important emphasis. While they emphasize an elite of winners, it seems to me that what has emerged is a society in which the majority are winners and, of equal importance, are smug in their belief that they are successful middle-class winners. Surveys repeatedly show that over three-quarters of Americans believe that "in a capitalist society, every individual has an opportunity to develop his/her own special abilities." See, for example, Robert Peterson, Gerald Alba, and George Kozmetsky, *Modern American Capitalism: Understanding Public Attitudes and Perceptions* (New York: Quorum Books, 1990), 43.

the result has been to undermine all forms of individualism, good and bad."

As is well known, Adam Smith was acutely aware of such problems. So, to a degree, are some modern American conservatives. However, their preferred solutions seem unable to address the kinds of cultural degradation that inequality breeds. There are clear limits to what voluntary organizations can do to remedy the fissiparous tendencies of an inherently selfish capitalism. And there are equally clear limits to what a mass incarceration of the most violent of the degraded classes can accomplish: rather than deterring crime, jail time in many of our largest cities is now seen by many potential gang leaders as a necessary rite of passage, a period of hardening and a badge of "honor" that lends prestige on the outside.

Since voluntary associations and the so-called prison-industrial complex have evidently failed to counteract the cultural degradation wrought by growing inequality, perhaps it is time for our elites, out of pure self-interest, including an interest in their most vulnerable children, to shift gears and reconsider the need for a more humane set of social policies aimed at reconnecting those who lose to their societies. At the very least, such policies might produce a larger body of literate, more pliant workers.

My Acts of Man argument is also modeled on an existing approach to remedial action acceptable to the greediest and most atomistically individualistic among us. No one denies that people who have suffered catastrophic losses as a result of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other "Acts of God" deserve rapid help from their government. If we can justify such help on the grounds that those who suffer are not at fault, it seems only reasonable that an otherwise implacably

individualistic society can justify remedies aimed at injuries suffered as an unintended consequence of manmade changes in the social environment. Indeed, precisely because others are responsible for Acts of Man, there is all the more reason why any untoward consequences of such acts should be attended to with even greater urgency than we respond to Acts of God. Thus, when the chairman of a company decides, with the stroke of a pen, to relocate a factory in another part of the country or another nation, thereby devastating the lives of a whole town, some remedial action seems justified. There is no more moral hazard here – to use the peculiar language of economics – than that which goes with helping those who suffer Acts of God. (And there is a lot less spiritual hazard, since we are never sure whether our efforts to remedy Acts of God may not amount to a hubristic defiance of His divine judgment.)

What I have called Acts of History may similarly justify extending aid to victims. By Acts of History I mean the injuries that come from systematic patterns of oppression and exclusion in the past and from continuing discrimination in the present. Ethnic, gender, and class discrimination are typical of what I have in mind. One of the extraordinary ironies of contemporary America is that many of its most successful large corporations are more amenable than the state to remedying such Acts of History. The strongest opposition to affirmative action has come from noncorporate interest groups and politicians. Furthermore, while there is apparently strong opposition to affirmative action in the abstract among ordinary American workers, the number who oppose affirmative-action programs at their own workplaces slumps to under 8 percent.

The data suggest that the controversy surrounding affirmative action has been largely generated by vocal elites concerned about its fairness for themselves and their friends and family.⁶

Remedying Acts of History nevertheless poses special problems. Since many of the relevant issues have been aired in the ongoing debate over affirmative action, there is no need to rehash them here.⁷

What I propose to do in the remainder of this essay is address some of the other problems generated by Acts of History. How should we think about evaluating the injuries caused by historic discrimination? To what extent should those injured be treated as responsible moral agents in their own right?

In our selfish, winner-take-all world, we need some way of determining those aspects of a losing group's problems for which they are not liable, and those for which they must be held responsible. But before sketching a framework for doing this, it is necessary briefly to say something about what may be called the moral sociology of human agency.

As human beings we experience long years of socialization and are clearly the products of our upbringing and our circumstances. In purely objective terms, we are utterly determined – by our social, economic, and physical environment, by our genes, and by the interac-

6 For an analysis of the survey data, see Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1977), 147–158.

7 Ibid., 158–169. See also Derek Bok and William Bowen, *The Shape of the River: Long-term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), and John Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

tions between and within our genes and environments, in ways that are still largely indecipherable and may remain so.

Nonetheless, it is sociologically impossible to behave in terms of this objective deterministic truth. For society to be possible, and for individuals to be successful, it is necessary that we believe, and act as if, we are free of such conditioning. The more complex and advanced a society, the greater the forces that constrain and determine us, but the greater the need to deny the truth of determinism and assert the necessary belief in personal agency. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, a totalitarian tyrant determined to create a world consistent with the scientifically true dictates of determinism would have to invent the myth of agency. Determinism is perhaps the only truth that requires a belief in its denial for its realization.⁸ The sociologically necessary myth of agency – made real by the intensity of our belief in it – is a *sine qua non* of any kind of successful modern society.⁹

A major drawback of liberal social science is the failure to recognize the contradiction in determinism. As a result,

8 It was Epicurus who first recognized this contradiction in determinism and the implied sociological necessity for human agency. Indeed, he went further and showed that the very terms in which any possible defense of determinism may be argued will always assume a contradiction. I have argued elsewhere that sociological pragmatism originates in his work. See Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, eds., *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For a more detailed discussion, see Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 187–190.

9 I made this point many years ago in my paper "The Moral Crisis of the Black American," *The Public Interest* 32 (Summer 1973): 43–69.

some of the policies advocated by liberal social scientists assume an oversocialized view of human beings. The pervasiveness of liberal social science policy has, in turn, legitimized a crudely deterministic approach to the problems of the unfortunate minority of the poor. One consequence has been a devastating embrace by America's disadvantaged of a view of themselves as purely passive victims.

At the same time, one must beware the even greater danger in upholding an undersocialized view of human beings that simply denies the overwhelming evidence of objective determinism. This view was given perhaps its most famous recent expression in the inane declaration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that there "is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women and their families." This is the same Margaret Thatcher who fervently appealed to some *thing* called the British nation during her war with Argentina, which was clearly meant to be more than the sum of individuals and their families claiming British citizenship. The necessary ideology of human agency can be, and has been, taken too far by some in conservative Anglo-American circles, all of whom contradict themselves in their deep commitment to clearly extra-individual entities such as business corporations, church, army, and nation. There is no need to waste time arguing against such obvious contradictions.¹⁰

A commitment to a vigorous ideology of human agency is not inconsistent with recognition of the fact that some

10 For more on the problems of undersocialized and oversocialized conceptions of human agency, see Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure," in Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, eds., *The Sociology of Economic Life* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 53–81.

people will fail for reasons that are not primarily their own and are clearly societal in origin.

How do we avoid these two extremes? This is a difficult question, and I have no easy answers. But it may be helpful to map out some of the different possibilities, using a simple framework. We may begin with a basic distinction in the problems that people face: between those with internal causes, and those with external causes.

External causes include both Acts of God and Acts of Man: a person is obviously not responsible for being born blind, or for being discriminated against because of his religion or the way she looks.

Internal causes include acts or predispositions of an individual or a group (when this is the unit of interest). If a person loses his job because of alcoholism or for sexually harassing colleagues, this would seem to be an internal cause for which he is wholly responsible. When we are speaking on the level of groups of persons, internal problems are those cultural patterns or typical predispositions that increase the probability of failure. Traditions of masculinity or notions of ethnic pride that disdain schoolwork as geeky, negative attitudes toward working for others, early marriage for girls, extravagant and wasteful expenditure on rite-of-passage ceremonies – all these may be examples of internally caused problems.¹¹

11. These examples will immediately raise the hackles of many, since there is a dogmatic tradition in social science that rejects all cultural explanations of problems. I say "may" to signal my own position that cultural effects always operate interactively. A cultural pattern may be a real source of failure in one context, yet be harmless in another. See my chapter, "Taking Culture Seriously," in Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington, eds., *Culture Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chap. 15.

This distinction, however, is unsatisfactory as it stands, and the reason becomes apparent as soon as we ask: what are the origins of internal and external problems? It happens that many internal problems (both individually and collectively) originate in external circumstances, and it is also the case that many external problems originate in internal conditions.

We can produce, then, a fourfold matrix of the sources of social problems, which I will review here only in the broadest outline.

The first type of problems involves *external outcomes with external origins*. Such problems have clear-cut external causes both in current circumstances and in past conditions. Racial discrimination in employment is perhaps the best example; gender discrimination is another. African Americans and women continue to experience discrimination at the workplace on the basis of their ethnicity or gender, or both. Such discrimination has a long history and grows out of previous patterns of discrimination both in and out of the workplace. One important consequence of this is that current discrimination is of two types: continuing direct discrimination, and what has been called institutional discrimination. Direct discrimination is on the decline, due to recent laws against it and changing attitudes resulting from vigorous political action on the part of African Americans, women, and other groups who have suffered some form of discrimination. In many areas, it is reasonable to say that it has been largely eliminated. However, it is incorrect to point solely to the decline of such direct discrimination as evidence of improvement. Institutional discrimination persists in those inherited prejudices, many of them unintended, that still constrain

women and minorities. Thus, the isolation of African Americans in segregated communities is largely a product of previous racial prejudice and discrimination in housing. But this isolation cuts them off from social networks and cultural capital that are indispensable for survival and success at all levels of the workplace. Similarly, women's exclusion from male bonding practices seriously impedes their access to vital tacit knowledge for successful entrepreneurial activity. In addition, cultural assumptions by caregivers and role models during child-rearing and schooling create biases that lead women and minorities away from successful paths.

A second category of problems may be described as *internal outcomes with external causes*. Many problems faced by disadvantaged groups are, on the surface, internal and hence would seem to be of their own making. However, on closer scrutiny, such problems are seen to be the direct outcome of externalities for which the persons involved cannot be held wholly responsible. A good example of this is the condition of unemployment that comes from chronic long periods of unemployment. Economists who measure unemployment know that the rate is often flawed by the fact that a substantial number of persons have simply removed themselves from the workforce. Some of these people may be simply shiftless – that is, unwilling to do regular work in the first place. But many studies – including studies by me of Kingston, Jamaica – indicate that most persons who remove themselves from the workforce are discouraged workers. After seeking work for years and not finding adequate employment or employment that offers a living wage, such workers may become unemployed in that they have lost the basic dis-

cipline of working in a modern workplace. Their incapacity is conditioned, in the sense that external circumstances clearly help to explain their characteristic behavior. A near-experimental demonstration of this is seen in those cases in which the environment of a seemingly work-incapacitated person is changed. Just such a case is found among Jamaicans who are brought to the United States to work as contracted farm laborers during the harvest season. The same people who, in Jamaica, seem shiftless become such prized workers in America that in the apple growing areas of New Hampshire they earn more money than native workers do.

A third type of problems involves *external outcomes with internal causes*. An extreme example, on the individual level, is the condition of agoraphobia. On the social level, these are the kinds of problems that more conservative analysts and leaders like to point to. For example, it is now well established that single parenting greatly increases the likelihood of a woman and her children living in poverty, and, since the 1960s, it has become a major cause of poverty in the United States. Such families have a poverty rate several times greater than families headed by married couples. While the issue is still controversial, I have concluded from my own review of the historical and contemporary data that the pattern of single parenting among African Americans, combined with the abandonment of children and families by men, is predominantly cultural, although its behavioral expressions have to be understood in terms of the interaction of these cultural propensities with structural factors. Poverty, of course, has several major causes. Still, being a single mother has other important external consequences for one's children, such as the greater risk of juve-

nile delinquency, teen pregnancy, single parenting, lower educational attainment, and poverty. Other, perhaps less controversial examples of internal cultural sources of external problems are religious and other values that lead to behaviors that increase the risk of poverty. In many Third World countries such as India, for example, the rural poor have a strong tradition of having large numbers of children, often due to the bias in favor of boys; such behavior reinforces their impoverishment.

The fourth and final category of problems involves *internal outcomes with internal causes*. This cluster of problematic outcomes is usually what we have in mind when we think of patterns of behavior that are the result of a person's socialization or, on the collective level, when we think of the secondary cultural consequences of highly institutionalized cultural patterns. On the individual level, tragic cases in point are the tendency for child abusers to have been themselves abused as children, or of alcoholics and wife batterers to be the children of alcoholic fathers who battered their mothers. Collectively, a good example is the extremely fraught pattern of gender relations among some groups that come from wholly internal patterns of inherited gender attitudes and behavioral models.

These four types of problems and their causes are by no means exhaustive, even within the terms explored here. For example, it will have already occurred to some that the internal causes of external outcomes may themselves have originated at an earlier period in external causes. Individually, this is the classic Freudian model of neurotic behavior. On the group level, I myself have attempted to demonstrate just such a more complicated causal path in my discussion of cur-

rent African American familial problems by showing that the far greater internal propensity of poor African American men to abandon their children and the mothers of their progeny originated in the very external conditions of slavery and, later, the sharecropping regime. Nonetheless – and this point is critical – while we can always trace the origins of internal causes back to external roots in the past, all that this demonstrates is that in the final analysis our lives and our behaviors are ultimately conditioned. Indeed, given perfect knowledge, it would be possible to show how every behavior, right down to our most intimate gestures, is the result of some previous condition. This, however, takes us back to the point made earlier – that we cannot allow this fact of ultimate, objective determinism (assuming omniscience) to dominate or frame our personal morality or view of others, including the disadvantaged, or our public policies aimed at helping them. The practical necessity of the belief in human agency – not to mention the impossible assumption of omniscience required by outright determinism – puts limits on the degree to which we can explain away internal sources of our actions. As historians and social scientists, it is our task to pursue causal regresses as far back as they can meaningfully explain present problems. But to explain is not to justify. The social logic of human agency requires a shorter leash on justification than on explanation.

How much shorter? Where do we draw the line and say “Enough! Here the explanatory buck stops – however forceful and valid the historical and socioeconomic arguments – and agency begins”?

One cannot be precise, for the simple reason that what may be called the buck-stops-here point is often the product of negotiation, struggle, and sometimes

conflict between individuals and groups. Just such a process is taking place in the heated, largely middle-class national debate over affirmative action. With regard to the real losers (William Julius Wilson’s “truly disadvantaged” and Cynthia Duncan’s “worlds apart” Appalachians), as violent collective action becomes less and less feasible in America – with the state’s security agencies, legal system, and prison-industrial complex becoming more efficient and draconian in protecting the majority of “winners” – this increasingly aggrieved minority may well resort to the only weapon it has in its relation with the winner-take-all majority. This is what I have called elsewhere their counter-leviathan power – their ability to subvert prevailing social and cultural norms by acting in often self-destructive ways that degrade the quality of life for all: through drug addiction, personal violence, petty criminality, bad attitudes, and widespread vandalism.

Despite its limitations, our fourfold matrix of the sources of social problems may help convince the selfish skeptic that *some* measure of social justice requires redressing the unfair consequences of Acts of Man and Acts of History. By clarifying the social logic of human agency, the fourfold matrix may help to indicate where government intervention is not simply justified but necessary.

In brief: problems involving external outcomes with external origins all require vigorous intervention and a combination of strongly enforced laws and compensatory affirmative action on behalf of those who have been, and continue to be, injured and excluded from social, economic, and cultural resources. Problems involving internal outcomes with external causes require a combina-

tion of external intervention and, if necessary, forceful prevention; but they primarily require rehabilitative measures. Here, however, America has failed badly, due to the undersocialized approach of its leaders and most successful citizens to this kind of problem. A substantial proportion of persons in the nation’s exploding prison population are drug addicts who are clearly suffering from this class of problems. Incarceration has worsened the problem, not only turning nonviolent offenders into hardened criminals, but also making drugs far more expensive and the drug trade far more lucrative than it would be under a decriminalized regime (such as that in Holland).

The third type of problems, involving external outcomes with internal causes, is complex, and calls for very nuanced and intricate responses. In extreme cases of incapacitation, such as social problems resulting from chronic mental illness, there is clearly a need for substantial intervention, although, even here, it is important not to regress to Victorian systems of institutionalization. The story of the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in America is very instructive. Up to the early 1970s, as Christopher Jencks has shown in his study *The Homeless*, this was a successful process, one that nicely balanced respect for individual autonomy with concern for the public interest. But after the mid-1970s, this balance collapsed, with disastrous consequences – a worst-case scenario of liberal and conservative blunders reinforcing each other. In most problems of this sort, the challenge is to find ways to support individuals in their efforts to reform themselves. If single parenting and paternal abandonment are major causes of poverty, especially childhood poverty, then it is clear that government intervention has serious

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limitations. Of course, the state has a responsibility to the children who are innocently trapped in this internally driven disaster. Still, there can be little doubt now that the nation's welfare system before its recent reform created serious moral hazards for certain groups. Change was imperative. The more than moderate success of these reform measures, however many transitional problems have accompanied them, indicates so far that the changes were justified and reinforces our view that the primary responsibility for problems involving external outcomes with internal causes lies with the individuals involved. No one forces a single woman or man, or a poor couple, to have more children than their resources permit, certainly not in an advanced society with readily available birth-control facilities; in overextending themselves, such people are freely exercising their God-given right to reproduce as much as they like. And as human agents fully aware of the consequences of their actions, they – though emphatically not their children, for whom the most radical interventions are necessary – must pay the price of lowered income when that is the outcome of their choices.

The tragic case of AIDS infection also falls into this third category of problems. Here, however, internal attitudes and patterns of behavior have external consequences for the innocent or unwary – and this justifies vigorous intervention by the government. One extreme kind of conservative response, which is as cruel as it is myopic, is that AIDS is the result of high-risk internal choices and practices and that its victims have only themselves to blame. One suspects that the tragic neglect of the pandemic spread of the disease in Africa also springs from such thinking. It was fear of such attitudes that led early activists and advo-

cates to exaggerate the risk and spread of the disease in the United States, which, we now know, never came close to being the mass epidemic that was warned. AIDS, in the vast majority of cases, is undoubtedly the consequence of internally problematic behavior. Its recent spread among poor, rural African American women is without doubt the result of a combination of predatory male sexual behavior and unthinking, high-risk sexual conduct by women. In the final analysis, the disease will only be halted, barring a vaccine, by a change of such high-risk behavior, although recent research suggests that even persons fully aware of the risks nonetheless take them. As a public-health menace with dire implications for some innocent persons, especially the children of victims, AIDS requires substantial intervention, regardless of the level of personal responsibility involved.

The same cannot be said, however, for external problems resulting from internal choices and cultural predispositions that have no public-health or urgent social implications. A person who drops out of school and later refuses to take advantage of the many compensatory educational facilities available in the United States can hardly complain about receiving a low wage for his or her labor. In a capitalist society it is high-risk behavior to remain unqualified. Beyond preventing its citizens from falling beneath an absolute floor of poverty, a government has no responsibility to supplement the income of sane persons who choose – and it is a choice, however self-destructive – not to educate themselves in what they know to be a knowledge-intensive, high-technology society. Liberal advocates, in irrational denial of this simple fact, insist on blaming bad schools rather than bad choices for these outcomes, even though nearly all the

best studies on the nation's schools (usually done by scholars with impeccable liberal credentials) indicate that poor schooling and inadequate school opportunities explain only a very small part of low educational attainments.

The fourth type of problem, involving internal outcomes with internal causes, is the sole responsibility of the individuals and groups involved. Only Native Americans can change the eating and drinking habits that lead to chronic diabetes, obesity, and alcoholism among them. Only Appalachian poor whites can overcome the chronic patterns of false pride, dysfunctional familial and gender attitudes, obsessive regional and communal loyalties, and corrupt local politics that have proved resistant to countless well-meaning, and often counterproductive, interventions by government and private groups alike. And only African Americans can heal the sad and deeply fraught state of gender relations that have long beset them, accounting for the fact that they have the smallest network of close, supportive ties of all Americans (the compensatory rhetoric of "sisterhood" and "brotherhood" notwithstanding).

It is time to go beyond moral principles and political rhetoric in our approach to social policy in regard to the poor and disadvantaged. We have to begin by accepting the fact that America is an advanced capitalist society, the most successful and the most purely capitalist system that has ever existed. We have to accept as well the fact that it is the most unequal of all advanced modern societies and becoming ever more unequal with each passing day. We have finally to accept the fact that greed and selfishness are not just the dominant values of its most successful citizens, but may well be the necessary source of its

enormous dynamism and affluence.

Nowhere has this been made more obvious than in the wholly contradictory messages being sent out by the nation's leaders since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One reaction to the national tragedy has been an all-too-rare tendency for citizens to think in national, almost solidaristic terms, as well as to turn inward and reflect on what is valuable beyond the purely materialistic and selfish pursuit of affluence. This collective soul-searching has led to an unusual increase in confidence in the government and a turn to the nation's politicians, usually a despised group, for leadership and guidance.¹² The national leadership has greatly welcomed this attention and the high poll ratings that come with it. And the new mood has made it easier to garner support for war and to make appeals for alertness in the fight against terrorism.

However, the leadership is also increasingly worried that the turn from the selfish pursuit of affluence, especially by the majority of winners, is bad for the economy – hence the utterly contradictory calls for ostentatious displays of consumer confidence and for a rapid return to business as usual, even as the politicians try to implement tax policies that will shift even more wealth from

12 A recent study by the National Opinion Research Center of public responses to the terrorist attack of September 11 found the percentage of Americans expressing "great confidence" in the executive branch of government increasing from 13.5 percent prior to the attack to 51.5 percent in the weeks afterwards. There was a similar increase from 12.7 percent to 43.8 percent of persons having "great confidence" in Congress. Tom W. Smith, Kenneth A. Rasinski, and Marianna Toce, *America Rebounds: A National Study of Public Response to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks* (Chicago: NORC, October 2001), Table 1.

the poorest bottom fifth of losers to the top 1 percent of winners. This being so, it is a waste of time to keep calling for policies and programs that are completely at variance with the self-interested, highly individualistic ethic of the society and the selfish pursuit of riches that is as often as not driven by pure greed. Even in the days after September 11, one would be hard put to find any willingness among Americans to share John Rawls's noble egalitarian concern with "the goodness of the settled desire to take up the standpoint of justice."

To be sure, Rawls's first principle of "justice as fairness" is alive and well among all winners and even most losers who are citizens. This is the principle that "[E]ach person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all."¹³ While not fully realized in practice, a similar view is strongly held by all but the bottom 10 percent of citizens, as demonstrated in my own recent survey on Americans' views of freedom.¹⁴

However, Rawls's second principle of justice is honored largely in the breach in the United States. According to Rawls, "social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advan-

tagged members of society."¹⁵ Nothing like such conditions currently obtain in America – and they are not likely to obtain any time soon. Even though most Americans ruefully disagree with the statement that they are "very proud" of the country's "fair and equal treatment of all groups in society," fully 85 percent of them, nonetheless, are of the view that "generally speaking" America is a better country than most other countries, and less than 3 percent would wish to be a citizen of any other country in the world.¹⁶

In this essay I have attempted to offer arguments for intervention on behalf of those who lose that are premised on the ethic of extreme individualism and chronic selfishness. In essence, I have argued that it is bad for business to neglect those who lose. The continued selfish pursuit of affluence requires a minimal commitment to a handful of unselfish social policies.

If my arguments have not appealed to our noblest motives, that is only because such appeals have repeatedly failed. I have not tried to show how to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people – but rather how to secure the least possible unhappiness for the minority of losers in the winner-take-all society that most Americans now enjoy.

13 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 5. Note this is the revised version of the principle. Compare the earlier version in Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 302.

14 Orlando Patterson, "The American View of Freedom: What They Say; What They Mean," *Society* 38 (4) (Spring 2001): 34–45.

15 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 6.

16 Smith et al., *America Rebounds*, Table 1.