

Debt to Society

by Theodore Dalrymple



Just over twenty years ago I published a short, fictional self-justification of a serial killer. Shortly thereafter, Ian Brady (who died recently as one of the most unlamented men in the world) published his autobiography. I was asked to review it by the *Sunday Telegraph*.

I was surprised, gratified and horrified to discover how closely Brady's book and mine coincided. I had intuited his thought processes. Brady didn't like what I wrote about him and wrote to complain. Who was this Dalrymple, he wanted to know? Everyone understood that prison doctors were the dregs of the profession. And what had I ever done for humanity, while he, Brady, spent much of his time making Braille books

for the blind?

It was an astonishing performance, demonstrating a genuine inability to grasp why he was so abominated.

His associate in his abominable crimes, Myra Hindley, later agitated for her own release, seconded (or put up to it) by some well-known people who were eager to display their compassion by forgiving the crimes of others. The editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* at the time, Dominic Lawson, pointed out that if Hindley had been truly remorseful, and had truly grasped the heinousness of what she had done, she would have remained silent.

She claimed that, after many years in prison, she had *paid her debt to society*. This odd locution, of course, did not originate with her, but is quite often heard. Normally one lets it go without thinking very clearly about what it means.

In the most literal sense, a prisoner does not *pay* his debt to society but incurs another: for to keep someone in prison costs a small fortune (I have never fully understood why, but I suppose there must be a good reason). In the case of Hindley, this debt must have run into the millions.

But in any case, justice is not the same as double-entry book-keeping, with crime (debt) on one side and punishment (payment) on the other. You can't pay in advance to commit a crime, or commit it on hire-purchase, such that if you agree to go to prison for a certain length of time you are entitled after release to commit an 'equivalent' crime valued at the time you have spent in prison. It is true that a person who leaves prison should be given every chance to go straight: but this is not because he has paid a debt. Let us get our metaphors straight.

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