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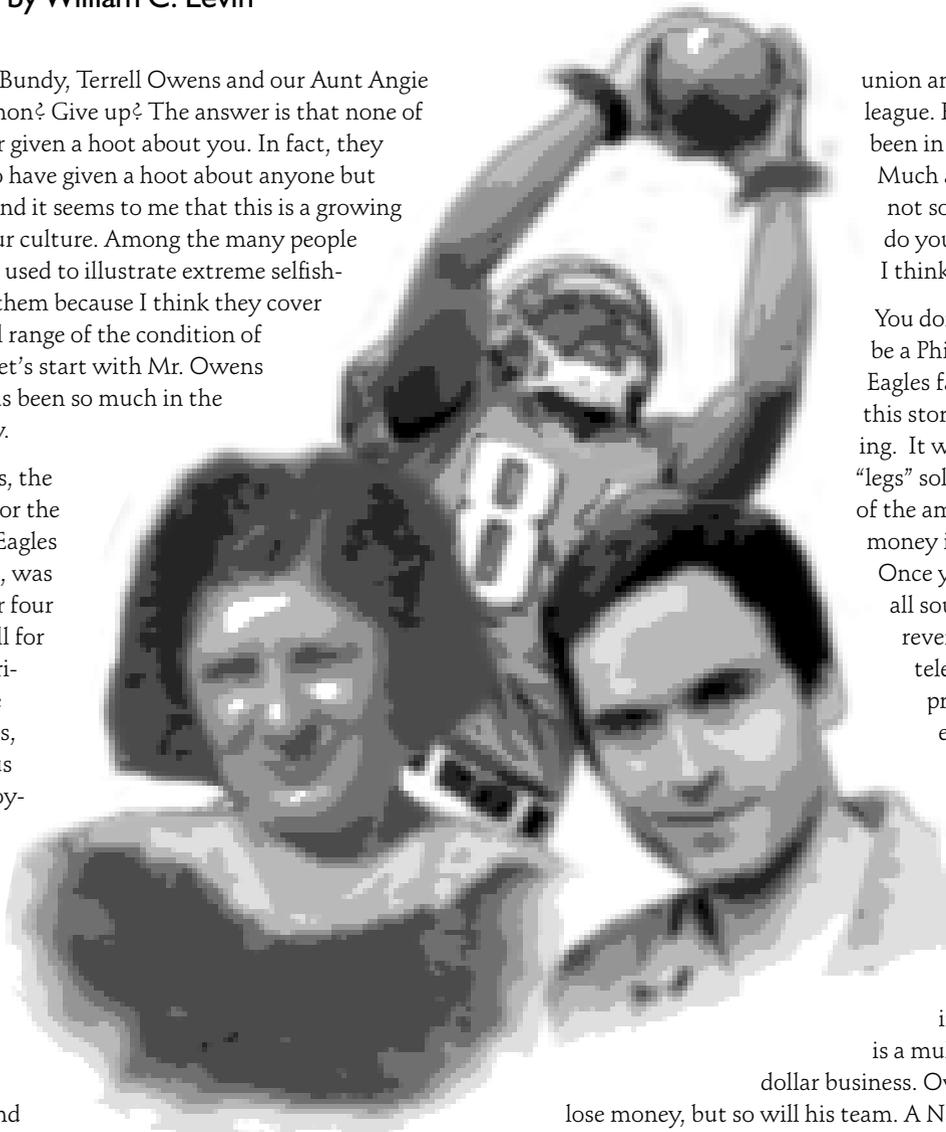
Cultural Commentary

Ted, Terrell and Angie and The Limits of Sociopathy

by William C. Levin

What do Ted Bundy, Terrell Owens and our Aunt Angie have in common? Give up? The answer is that none of them has ever given a hoot about you. In fact, they seem never to have given a hoot about anyone but themselves, and it seems to me that this is a growing problem in our culture. Among the many people who could be used to illustrate extreme selfishness, I chose them because I think they cover nicely the full range of the condition of sociopathy. Let's start with Mr. Owens because he has been so much in the news recently.

Terrell Owens, the star receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles football team, was suspended for four games this fall for "conduct detrimental to the team." Owens, who is famous for his flamboyant celebrations on the field of his own catches, had apparently put the spotlight on himself once too often for his coaches and teammates. The tipping point was reached when Owens said that the Eagles showed "a lack of class" for not publicly recognizing his 100th career touchdown catch in a game he played in on October 23rd. Given Owens' salary level, his suspension for four games will cost him about \$800,000. Since then the newspapers and sports broadcasts have been filled with stories about Owens's subsequent apologies to his teammates, the team's decision not to play him for the rest of the season and the hearings on the case between the players'



union and the league. Fans have been in an uproar. Much ado about not so much, do you think? I think not.

You don't have to be a Philadelphia Eagles fan to find this story fascinating. It would have "legs" solely because of the amount of money involved.

Once you include all sources of revenue, from television and product endorsements to concessions and stadium construction, professional football in America

is a multibillion dollar business. Owens will

lose money, but so will his team. A National Football League team with a winning record can count on much more income from a range of these sources than one that does not make the playoffs. But I want to make the case that the story here is much bigger than sports fanaticism or even big bucks can justify. This is a story of the individual versus the group.

Here is an athlete of exceptional talent and accomplishments who could well make the difference between a successful or failed season for his team. Everyone who cares about the sport agrees that he is that good. But his coaches, teammates and team owners have said publicly that they will be better off without him. The team's quarterback put it in terms that coaches use all the

time. “For the guys in the locker room, we win together and we lose together” In short, the good of the group was put in jeopardy by this guy’s selfishness.

A team sport like football can provide us with an especially good laboratory for understanding individual versus group needs. But the operation of these forces in the larger society are a great deal more important to the way we live our real lives. (I use the term “real lives” here in the full recognition that many football fans consider their devotion to team to be their “real lives.” For them, I can only say goodbye as this article continues into areas in which they will have no interest.) We already have a term to describe the behavior of a person like Owens. The term is sociopathy.

Sociopaths care only about satisfying their own needs or desires. They don’t, or can’t, consider the needs of others. Among the traits listed for sociopaths in a variety of sources on the subject, including the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, are: grandiose sense of self, lack of remorse or guilt, glibness and superficial charm, pathological lying, shallow emotions, risk taking and inability to form bonds with others. The professionals in psychology and sociology have for some years been engaging in the usual amount of debate about what to call such a condition, with the terms sociopath, psychopath and antisocial personality disorder at the center of the discussion. For the purposes of this article, I prefer the term sociopath because it puts the emphasis on the consequences for the group rather than the individual. I am, after all, a sociologist.

So, a sociopath is a person who pursues his or her own interests without concern for the consequences of those actions for others. But don’t we all do things that put our interests first? In fact, isn’t the pursuit of happiness, at the individual level, a core American value? If this is the case, then the decision about what is excessive selfishness is a matter of judgment. We should look at the limits of selfishness if we are to decide who is a sociopath.

In finding the boundaries of a concept, it is necessary to go to the extremes. Consider the mass murderer Ted Bundy, an individual to whom all the professional analysts apply the term sociopath. Between 1974 and 1978 Bundy killed numerous young women in four American states. Though his total number of victims is unknown, Bundy confessed to 30 murders. He was by all accounts intelligent, handsome and charming. He also seemed totally without remorse for his crimes, nor concerned in the least about the women he killed. In fact, his lack of concern for the well being of others was remarkable for its lack of animosity. Robert D. Hare, a researcher in psychopathology at the University of British Columbia, and author of, *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us*, has described the behavior of people like Bundy as follows. “For them, violence and threats are handy tools to be used when they are angered, defied or frustrated, and they give little thought to the pain and humiliation experienced by the victims. Their violence is callous and instrumental—used to satisfy a simple need, such as sex, or to obtain something he or she wants—and the individual’s reactions to the event are much more likely to be indifference, a sense of power, pleasure, or smug satisfaction than regret at the damage done. Certainly nothing to lose any sleep over.” Notice that this sort of criminal is, in an odd way, not “crazy” in the sense that most of us use the term. Here is where the distinction between a psychopath and sociopath becomes critical. We often use the term psychopath to refer to a criminal who commits a crime not knowing the difference between right and wrong, nor what the consequences of an action might be. American courts do allow such a defense against criminal charges, though the defense rarely succeeds. The logic is that a psychopath may lack the ability to form intent, and cannot, therefore, be held responsible for his or her actions in the same way that a sane person should. By contrast, a sociopath is a person who does recognize the difference between right and wrong, but doesn’t care and so commits the crime anyway. This is what makes the crimes of a sociopath especially offensive to us. A person who understands the damage he or she does to others, but does not care, threatens our fundamental assumptions about the effect that normal socialization should have on our behavior. If we teach our children that what they do has consequences for others, they should, as a consequence, become responsible citizens. But this doesn’t hold for sociopaths.

Bundy and Owens are famous for their selfishness. They serve as symbols of sociopathy. But does this problem threaten your ordinary life? I contend that we Americans increasingly suffer from what I think of as everyday sociopathy, and that it threatens the stability and quality of our social lives. This brings me to Aunt Angie.

Angie was a relative in the family who was infamous for behavior that I now classify as sociopathic. I have chosen just a few of the countless stories that still run around the Thanksgiving table when we remember her semi-fondly. There was the time she became irritated at the long wait in a line at the bank and loudly complained to others in the line that "This place is terrible. Someone should bomb it." Before she knew what was happening, she was lifted by the elbows by two armed guards and carried to the street. At her court hearing on the charges, Angie is reported to have so loudly and harshly berated the judge for her bad treatment that she was released with only a warning. Then there was the time she was attending a World's Fair and saw Lee Iacocca, then Chairman of Chrysler Corporation, who was attending the fair with a large contingent of local big-wigs and dignitaries. "Lemon," Angie screamed at him. "You sold me a lemon." She was so loud, repetitive and disruptive that she stopped all normal behavior around her. Poor Mr. Iacocca had no chance for a normal day, and Angie got a new car out of it. Angie's favorite activity was watching daytime soap operas. After her husband died of a heart attack, (at quite a young age, curiously) Angie had a way of settling in with family members for long stretches. During one such visit, the "host" family had had enough. The dad in the family disconnected the antenna inside the television, reducing the soaps to a screen of snow and garble. Angie was furious. Every family member claimed incompetence in the matter of repair of such a problem, so Angie stalked out to the sidewalk in front of the house and stopped the first male walking past. "Come fix the television," she demanded. The first poor guy pulled away from the grip she had on his upper arm, but the second was cowed. His insistence that he knew nothing about televisions had no effect. He was "Angied" by then. He actually came into the house and tried to fix the thing. Angie eventually gave up and walked to the home of another relative to take up residence.

Nothing would deter Angie in her pursuit of what she wanted at the moment, and that certainly included the needs of others. I believe I see more and more of Aunt Angie in the everyday behavior around us. Here's my best, and scariest illustration. In defense of his recent purchase of a massive SUV, an acquaintance of mine recently told me that "My wife is not the best driver in the world, and if she gets into an accident with our kids in the car, I want her to be the one to walk away." This is more than bad manners. It is a murderous form of selfishness. The giant SUV's parked in two spaces, the full-volume cell phone conversations at the table next to yours in even upscale restaurants and the thousand other selfish behaviors in our daily lives seem to be increasing in both frequency and intensity. Worse, they seem to have become more acceptable, even normative. If there is more everyday sociopathy in our normal lives in public, we face a threat to the civility and cohesiveness of our social world. As a sociologist I understand that the struggle is not new. I assume that it is as old as the first formation of a social group in which the individual liberties of its members were limited in the interest of the social benefits of membership. However, every group of people must constantly test and readjust its tolerance for selfishness in the culture, or the social glue that holds us will be weakened. We should continue to punish the behavior of famous sociopaths, but we should also act against its milder forms in our everyday lives.

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and Associate Editor of the *Bridgewater Review*.