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FROM PLEONEXIA TO ATARAXIA

An Essay on Coming to Terms with Human Greed

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Plato viewed greed as a product of an irrational soul, arguing in "The Republic" that greed leads directly to personal immortality, civil strife, and war. When greed is the primary lead of decisions it suffocates the rational aspect of decision-making and uses the object of the greed to pursue those ambitions to the detriment of society. In many cases that may be viewed favorably because success is determined by achievement and the acquisition of the material. Aristotle considered greed and ambition to be primary drivers of calculated, voluntary crime. He maintained that when endless acquisition and material desire overrule human reason, justice and social harmony are inevitably corrupted. This can be seen in the way we navigate society on matters concerning how humans and sovereign states relate with each other on limited resources. Limited resources have a way of revealing greed, whether that is making more money to meet one's needs, seeking more land by stealing it from others and the erasure of a group of people, or the achievement of intentional objectives regardless of the impact it may wield against those standing in the way of those objectives.

Epicurus linked greed to a fundamental misunderstanding of happiness. He taught that true peace (ataraxia) comes from limiting one's desires to what is natural and necessary, rather than pursuing endless accumulation. However, what is natural and necessary shifts constantly in today's society and what may be natural and necessary to you may fundamentally differ from what is natural and necessary to another. It would be worth while, in every case, to give an instance, in which the action may be indifferent: if good as well as bad actions may result from the same motive, it is easy to conceive, that too may be indifferent. Thomas Hobbes characterized greed as a core driver of human nature that forces individuals to selfishly claim shared resources for private use. He argued that a strong social contract and state control are necessary to prevent this innate competitiveness from leading to a destructive "war of all against all." David Hume described greed as a powerful irreclaimable vice that hardens human character and damages social trust. He noted that the obsession with hoarding wealth is ultimately futile since accumulators cannot take riches with them. Individual character built on damaged social trust is like lighting a fire with a spark from the friction of stones doused with kerosene: society gets what it wants, but the damage is also immediate to the individual.

Who wouldn't want to be wealthy? The pleasures of wealth correspond to pecuniary interest in a neutral sense. In a bad sense, as avarice, covetousness, rapacity, or lucre. In good sense, but only in particular cases, economic and frugal, and in some cases the word industry may be generously applied to it. Indifferently, and only in particular cases, it may be referred to as parsimony. Adam Smith acknowledged that self-interest drives economic activity, but he explicitly warned that it must be balanced with moral sentiments and human sympathy to prevent destructive outcomes. Nancy Folbre points out that classical economic frameworks assume a "moral division of labor." Men are expected and encouraged to pursue hyper-competitive self-interest (greed) in the marketplace, while women are expected to operate out of pure, uncompensated altruism in the home. If a man maximizes his financial gain, it is labeled "market efficiency." If a woman demands economic returns or prioritizes her own financial ambition, she has historically been labeled greedy, selfish, or unnatural. A conversation between Smith and Folbre might conclude that perhaps remapping our moral boundaries to demand a less gendered balance between self-interest and caring for others could be ideal depending on the circumstance.

A circumstance may be considered to be material, when it bears a visible relation to point of causality to the consequences; immaterial, when it bears no such visible relation. Ayn Rand would have taken taken issue with the word "greed." She explicitly rejected the colloquial term "greed" when it implied fraud or stepping on others, she fiercely defended the underlying mechanics of greed as unregulated, laissez-faire capitalism and the pursuit of personal profit. To Rand, forcing individuals to give up their wealth for altruistic or collective goals was the ultimate moral failure. Mary Midgley targeted evolutionary accounts that attempted to frame selfishness and greed as the primary, inescapable drivers of nature. She argued that reducing human behavior to competitive self-interest was a lazy philosophical oversimplification. Midgley countered that compassion, community, and mutual aid are just as deeply rooted in biology and human psychology as the desire to accumulate resources.

These men and women did not live in our times, yet their words can be used to accurately describe our current condition. This philosophical and historical review combined with what are witnessing unfolding in international affairs at present, have hardly gone farther than making greed a matter of indifference. Greed is subjective, it is objective, it is good, it is bad, it is circumstantial, it is controversial. In our totality as a civilization, we have frequently and fervently reprobated greed. Yet this, however, does not begin to cleanse the word from the depths of its impurity. It has developed to become something much more commonplace. The honorable, the glorious, the reputable, the acceptable, the becoming, the honestum, the decorum. In short, any thing but greed itself.