

Greed is the Sickness of Runaway Wanting.

“Greed is good,” said a prominent American capitalist not long before the present series of greedy bubble-bursts, beginning with Enron. Considering its productivity of human goods and good, something is good in capitalist motivation – but greed is the excess, the sinful-ruinous hypertrophy, of that good.

The current “On Faith” question goes to the marrow of the matter:

“Greed, one of the seven deadly sins, is seen as a major factor in the housing market crash and the oil price spike. Can greed ever be justified morally or spiritually?”

1.....Almost ninety years ago in the city, our mother’s greatest fear for us children was runaway horses. We were never to sit on the curb, our feet in the street! Fire trucks, delivery wagons, peddlers all had horses, which sometimes would run wild. As my earliest fear of the world, the runaway horse is my most natural metaphor for the human tendency to destructive excess, which the Greeks called “hubris.”

2.....This destructive human tendency is easily activated when a person experiences any *expansion* of powers or possessions or possibilities. The sinful ego, centered on self, tends to expand to fill any new space of power/possession/possibility. Lord Acton’s bromide includes this sliding scale: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Saddam Hussein (and Stalin before him) had absolute power, with no conscience to constrain his destructive excess.

3....In light of this dark side of human nature as we know it, good government – in state or church or business or any other organized activity – is *improbable*. In calling us all to repentance, the Bible is straightforward about our condition: we are “sinners,” self-interestedly violating our duties to our Creator, our fellow-creatures, and even ourselves.

(The other half-truth about us is our bright side, our tendency to love God and others and the whole creation as well as ourselves. As it calls us from the former half-truth, the Bible calls us to this half-truth, and shows us the way from that vice to this virtue.)

4.....Before it became (historically) one of the Seven Deadly Sins, greed (covetousness) was one of the Ten Commandments (the only one on disposition rather than deed or word). We have needs and wants, and *our wanting exceeds our needing*. When our wanting includes our neighbor’s having, the Tenth Commandment calls it “coveting”: the Hebrew word in Exodus 20:14 emphasizes the pleasure and delight in this sinful desiring. The Greek word translating the Hebrew word here in the Old Testament is used in the New Testament for “greed,” and its root is the comparative meaning “more”: greed is runaway more-More-MORE!

5.....Any particular greed, if not checked, becomes obsessive: one becomes possessed by whatever/whoever one increasingly desires to possess. What gets our attention gets us, and what holds our attention is our idol, our god. The Bible (Colossians 3:5) puts it this way: “Put to death...greed, which is idolatry.” Irresponsible loaners in the sub-prime mortgage market, oil sellers, 9/11, Abu Ghraib, American nationalistic exceptionalism, Jeremiah Wright’s runaway sense of self-importance, lying or cheating to advantage oneself against others, lusting for one’s neighbor’s companion – the long sad list of *obsessive-destructive wanting* is endless, daily on the front page. And in it all, politics and religion and morality and business and education and entertainment-sports are existentially mixed.

6.....*Folk wisdom* addresses the sin of greed. “My *nose* ends where your nose begins” is literally true & an apt maxim. But my *hands* do not end where your hands end: I may grasp what is in your hands (grasping, Sanskrit “graha,” is the central sin in Hinduism). And even more dangerous, my *eyes* (my “desiring,” the central sin in Buddhism) do not end where your eyes begin. Worst of all, my *wanting to be in charge* does not end where your rights and even God’s rights begin: “pride,” playing God, is the central sin in the Bible (Judaism and Christianity). Here it all is as compacted in First John 2:16, King James Version: “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.”

7.....Greed – excessive wanting, in disregard of others – is the pathological form of the natural human yearning for having, for loving, for learning, for achieving, and for transcendence (as Browning put it, “a man’s reach must exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”). As pain in one’s physical body is symptomatic, signaling sickness or injury, malfunctioning in the social body – the family, politics, business, education, religion, entertainment-sports – tells us (sometimes violently) that together we need to attend to whatever is wrong. The time for “change” away from greed and its wreckages is always NOW.

8.....Greed, in its various manifestations, is a self-inflicted disease of the soul and of society. Says Jesus (Gospel of Luke 12:15), “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” And the cure he offers in summing up the point of the Bible (Gospel of Matthew 22:37-39, quoting two places in the Hebrew Scriptures / Old Testament) is this: “*You shall love the LORD your God,’ and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’*”

To answer the “On Faith” question: NO, greed can never be justified.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MAY 30, 2008; 1:10 PM ET

Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

Andother View said:

"What has science done for us?

It learned how to split the atom and release energy that would eliminate mankind"

That is not exactly right. "Science" is a process or a method, and does not do anything. But scientists, working through the methods of science, have discovered, or become aware of the existence of nuclear energy within the atoms that composes all of the material world, and which powers the sun and the stars, the same now, as it did 2,000 years ago, when its nature was just as real as it is now, only as yet, unknown to man.

Scientists did not invent nuclear energy; they merely found it out. Should we not seek to find things out about this world, into which we have been set?

POSTED BY: DANIEL IN THE LION'S DEN | JUNE 3, 2008 11:27 PM
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Religious sanctimony meet lefty worry over other's achievements. Maybe mom should have had you aspire to ride the horse someday, rather than fear it.

JerseyRomer

POSTED BY: JERSEYROMER | JUNE 2, 2008 11:23 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

What has science done for us?

It learned how to split the atom and release energy that would eliminate mankind.

What has theology/religion done for us?

Approx. two thousand years ago, the creator being who was the Word of God in the beginning ('a' beginning in the original Hebrew) and became flesh stated that if the last days of this age are not shortened, there would be no flesh saved (alive)..(original Greek).

With regard what either has 'done' for us...it is quite clear who really is in charge of the universe around us, not to mention who has our best interests at heart.

The emptiness of Dawkins/Darwin reasoning and who their god, mankind, has brought upon us.

POSTED BY: ANOTHER VIEW | JUNE 2, 2008 6:33 AM
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The Emptiness of Theology

by Richard Dawkins

A dismally unctuous editorial in the British newspaper The Independent recently asked for a reconciliation between science and "theology." It remarked that "People want to know as much as possible about about their origins." I certainly hope they do, but what on earth makes one think that theology has anything useful to say on the subject?

Science is responsible for the following knowledge about our origins. We know approximately when the universe began and why it is largely hydrogen. We know why stars form and what happens in their interiors to convert hydrogen to the other elements and hence give birth to chemistry in a world of physics. We know the fundamental principles of how a world of chemistry can become biology through the arising of self replicating molecules. We know how the principal of self replication gives rise, through Darwinian selection, to all life, including humans.

It is science and science alone that has given us this knowledge and given it, moreover, in fascinating, overwhelming, mutually confirming detail. On every one of these questions theology has held a view that has conclusively been proved wrong.

Science has eradicated smallpox, can immunize against most previously deadly viruses, can kill most previously deadly bacteria.

Theology has done nothing but talk of pestilence as the wages od sin. Science can predict when a particular comet will reappear and, to the second, when the next eclipse will appear. Science has put men on the moon and hurtled reconnaissance rockets around Saturn and Jupiter. Science can tell you the age of a particular fossil and that the Turin Shroud is a medieval fake. Science knows the precise DNA instructions of several viruses and will, in the lifetime of many present readers, do the same for the human genome.

What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? I have listened to theologians, read them, debated against them; I have never heard any of them say anything of the smallest use; anything that was not either platitudinously obvious or downright false. If all the achievements of scientists were wiped out tomorrow, there would be no doctors but witch doctors, no transport faster than horses, no computers, no printed books, no agriculture beyond subsistence peasant farming. If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference? The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't effect anything, don't mean anything. What makes anyone think that "theology" is a subject at all?

"The Emptiness of Theology" by Richard Dawkins published in "Free Inquiry" Spring 1998.

POSTED BY: AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY SENSIBLE | JUNE 1, 2008 10:11 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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POSTED BY: ANDNOWFORSOMETHINGCOMPLETELYSENSIBLE | JUNE 1, 2008 10:06 PM
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Anonymous, those who covet and steal must do it anonymous or go to jail. Only my hair dresser knows for sure and he's greedy, charges all the traffic will bear to get rid of unwanted hair.

Sincerely,
Anonymous

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | JUNE 1, 2008 1:16 PM
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At it's most basic greed is the inability to determine the difference between one's needs and one's wants. We all have a tendency towards greed on the small scale. If you are busily trying to keep up with the Jones' you suffer from small scale greed.

On the other hand if you are a 20 something and can't understand why it is that you haven't accumulated as much stuff in 5 years of adult life as your parents have in 40 you just aren't asking the right questions or thinking logically.

By the way I'm still waiting for a working definition of greed.

The leftist definition of greed is Anyone anywhere at anytime who makes more money than I think he ought to is by definition greedy without regard to how he came to make that money.

For the Christian greed is money and stuff is the most important thing in your life. Biblically greed is not so much a matter of what you have but your attitude towards what you have.

POSTED BY: GARYD | MAY 31, 2008 12:03 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Thou shalt not covet.

Thou shalt not steal.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | MAY 31, 2008 1:38 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

When oil passed 132 investors started shorting, selling oil they didn't own causing the price to fall. Now those greedy investors are covering, buying oil at 126. That nets a cool 6 million dollars per million barrels they sold they didn't and still don't own, less expenses.

We can expect them to feel very very guilty. To which candidate should they make a generous contribution? Which minister will take a share of those ill gotten dollars and pray them out of hell? Greed is such a deadly sin but it feels so good when it works.

POSTED BY: HORRORS!!! | MAY 29, 2008 1:50 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Willis, you left several folk out, (2.) including but not limited to Hitler, the pope and Billy Graham -absolute power absolutely.

What we need do is derive a test for greed. Then we can find out who is and who is not greedy. Burning at the stake is a tried and true method for dealing with other forms of sin so we can reasonably apply it and eliminate greed from the face of the earth,, as directed by Jesus, the Bible or some other source of absolute truth like the Quar'an and Book of Mormon -let Jehovah be my witness so help me Hanna.

Let me offer the following as first cut. Suppose there is an investor, and there is an investor who owns 1,000,000 barrels of light sweet crude. At market open today s/he could have sold it at \$128.43 per barrel yielding, \$128,430,000. However, if the investor waited for the "energy" report which shows Americans used 8,000,000+ more barrels of oil than they "imported" causing the price of oil to go to \$132.76 a barrel, sold then s/he would have gotten \$132,760,000, a difference of, \$3,670,000, a significant difference.

If the person waited for the higher price isn't that a sure sign of greed?

Noticing that only one cent a barrel amounts to \$10,000 return for the investor isn't every penny per barrel of profit a sign of greed?

Isn't "investing" all by itself a definite indicator of greed?

Investors are gamblers who risk what they have in hopes of "making it grow." Is gambling sinful? Must be the product of greed or is it the other way around in reverse?

POSTED BY: BGONE | MAY 29, 2008 12:00 PM
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"DML, you're trying to separate greed from want. Maybe. Should we leave desire out? Greed, want and desire are degrees of something or just different ways of saying the same thing?"

I will agree that greed includes wanting/desiring. Indeed, greed just is the selfish want/desire for whatever it is that one is greedy over. However, the way we use the latter terms does not, all things being equal, have any moral implications (unless the wants have as the end something which is immoral, the desire to have someone murdered for instance). As noted above, greed goes beyond mere wanting or desiring. It has the moral quality, or immoral as the case may be, of being for selfish ends.

As for the first point, while it is true that we do go about our lives making plans, fulfilling desires, etc. It does not follow, however that this is a necessary condition to human existence.

POSTED BY: DML | MAY 28, 2008 9:01 PM
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Life is what happens while plans are being made. Plans are made based upon what one wants biased by what one can expect to get. Plans can and often include doing things one would rather not do, go to work at a dead end job or, from a past generation, get drafted to fight in a bloody war. People never do anything they don't want to do. Point a gun and people immediately want to do whatever it is the one holding the gun wants them to do, greedily in many cases. Those who do not want to do what the gunman says are dead.

DML, you're trying to separate greed from want. Maybe. Should we leave desire out? Greed, want and desire are degrees of something or just different ways of saying the same thing? One is as good as the other to describe what I was saying. In a capitalistic economy it's easy to point at the successful and describe them as greedy but it's nothing more than their plans being good ones. And their plans are based upon what they want, to be rich. Rich is a desirable condition no doubt else why is it such a popular want.

POSTED BY: BGONE | MAY 28, 2008 7:58 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"Greed is simply wanting. We are all either greedy or suffer from some ailment where we, "may as well be dead.""

Well, I'm not sure it's quite that simple. For one thing, there is no reason to equate greed with mere wanting. Indeed, this is not how we use the term common parlance. For another, if the disjunction put forth really captures the full complexity of the human experience vis-a-vis our wanting and desiring, etc.

POSTED BY: DML | MAY 28, 2008 4:55 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

DML:

You shouldn't "accept it" and that applies to any it. You should give it some thought no matter what it is.

The fellow who said that is Muhammad Ali, the boxer. Not exactly in those words. What he said was, "I don't want anything any more so I may as well be dead." He was relating something that had happened to him he didn't understand. Turns out to be an illness one of the symptoms of which is losing a very important part of life itself, wanting.

Greed is simply wanting. We are all either greedy or suffer from some ailment where we, "may as well be dead."

Greed is the heart and soul of capitalism and the mortal enemy of Godless communism. Tell you anything? You don't need to accept that but can you avoid thinking about it?

POSTED BY: BGONE | MAY 28, 2008 4:27 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"To be alive is to want. Death is the absence of wanting."

Why should I accept this? It certain is not obviously true.

POSTED BY: DML | MAY 28, 2008 3:36 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I think therefore I am. What I think about is what I want. To be alive is to want. Death is the absence of wanting. How long have you been dead? Notice I didn't call you a liar for claiming to not be greedy.

POSTED BY: BGONE | MAY 28, 2008 11:30 AM
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