

Student Exemplar

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### Greasy Greed: How Greed Slipped into the Modern Day after Years of Antagonization

French renaissance philosopher, Michael de Montaigne once said, "I am afraid that our eyes are bigger than our stomachs, and that we have more curiosity than understanding. We grasp at everything but catch nothing except wind." Human nature drives people in the most basic ways, yet it can cause the complicated action we see across the world. Many of these seemingly instinctual actions have been denounced by people as being immoral. We, as a society, call some these drives evil or sinful, yet it is unprecedented the seeming turn around by society when discussing greed. Greed is one of, if not the most decisive primordial sins. It seems that less and less people will claim greed is evil, or even bad at all. This turnaround is what makes greed an interesting phenomenon to see its cause, and effects on people in the modern era. Greed is caused by biological and sociological factors, has been stigmatized by religion, though, after the creation of capitalism, it is becoming more accepted today.

Greed can be explained by the biology and surroundings of an individual. People have become more introspective of their feelings and are able to clearly identify the science behind these feelings. This has led to more people discovering the variables that cultivate greed. Within people, there are physiological urges that everyone has at a base level. This is shown through fundamental actions such as flight or fight, or a human's basic want for self-preservation. Even if someone does not care to live, their body will still want to persist. It is human nature. For some, the only way to guarantee survival is to become rich. Stress from surroundings like pressure to

make money, the consequences from not making enough money, and the threat of death from such could also be a factor. At a point greed is inherent to the human psyche. Greed is a psychological instinct “from the human need of self-preservation and the instinct to ensure individual survival. Accumulating wealth is one way of assuring that one will have the means to survive” (Sheposh). If human nature demands that a person finds the means to survive, to live life most comfortably, then a person will do it subconsciously. From these feelings of self-preservation, people who cannot meet the expectations become afraid of death from inadequate resources. And since humans can fully able to comprehend the subject of death, it is always a lurking presence. Greed could manifest from worry about one’s inevitable death since “it conflicts with our strong survival instincts giving rise to anxiety...[It] manifests in the form of compensatory behaviors, and, of course, greed” (Burton). Since humans can understand the concept of death on a deeper level, it becomes an underlying thought that haunts us. Some people deal with the resulting anxiety by attempting to hold on to as much as they can. This feeling to want to hoard is an attempt to find meaning in life. In the pursuit to find the reason behind greed’s increasing popularity, one must understand the intricacies of greed’s purpose in the sense of an individual.

Simultaneously with the human comprehension of greed, religions around the world created a stigma behind it to where people deemed greedy were considered abnormal and sinful. Religion, and more extensively the Christian church, have claimed greed to be a primordial sin, which lead to its increased negative press from society. Greed was pointed out through religious texts like the Bible as being a reason for the wealthy being obstructed from heaven. Other religions such as Buddhism have also advocated the idea of giving up wealth and mortal pleasures in favor of spiritual awakening. Unfortunately, since greed is inherent, it is much more

difficult to abstain from unlike other sins, like murder, which is comparably easy to not do. Since sin is described as something that makes God seem lesser in the eyes of an individual, stereotypically greedy people, who care very little about others, will not care about an omniscient force that can not appear to detract from their wealth. Then above all else, in a religious society that is based on the kind actions of the individual in the benefit of the society, greed would be a taboo on the level of murder and anger. Religion conflicts with greed since greed “is good for the individual, but perhaps not [for] the society in which that individual lives” (Taflinger). Using social shunning and antagonization under penalty for possible eternal penance helps keep a more community-based mindset for people in the religion. Of course, religious leaders would need to contribute to the narrative of evil greed, and one of the biggest contributors to the concept of greed as a sin, was Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius Ponticus was a fourth century monk that listed eight sins as being the root of all evil. In the year “590, Pope Gregory I further classified them as the seven deadly sins. These sins-pride envy, anger, sadness, greed, gluttony, and lust- were considered the most serious threats to spiritual salvation” (Sheposh). With the help of Evagrius Ponticus and a prominent Pope, greed as an innocent human action comparable to eating, was considered as evil to taking another life. By using religious persecution against those deemed greedy, religions were able to curb a wide population from hoarding and fighting over wealth by using God as a reason. Without this era of greed suppression, the world would not see this high curve of greed acceptance.

As the scope of the world began to shrink, and money was more easily traded, capitalism began to grow and spread. It now meant that, to an extent, it was socially acceptable to be greedy. With the creation of small business and wealth being just a hop, skip, and jump away, plenty of people began to accumulate money at a rapid extent. As corporations began to rise,

there was plenty of money, real or otherwise, flowing around. This surplus of wealth gave people a small sense of entitlement. Following that, greed within people began to grow and with it, a defense of its purpose in society. As more people have defended greed's position in society, it has been somewhat institutionalized within many. With uncertainty among individuals about greed and its position in daily lives, a debate has been riled up between its opposition and supporters. People have debated greed's purpose and importance. Defenders have said greed is what "makes people want to do things, since they will be rewarded for their efforts" but many denounce greed for causing "callousness, arrogance, and even megalomania" (Taflinger). People have found discussion in the effects of greed on people and if there is any truth to greed being good. The fact that there are open defenders is a stark contrast from thousands of years ago. Corporations have found themselves at the forefront of this debate over the years. Although corporate greed is shunned and considered immoral, "institutionalized greed" is even more prevalent, yet less pointed out. People who participate in this type of greed have similar "socially sanctioned ambitions. They want to be successful and enjoy the recognition of others for their success. Or they want to accumulate resources to pursue a dream that has, often, some social value" (Akhtar 90). This shows that even if there is a large disapproval of greed as previously seen, then there will still be an underlying greed association with a capitalistic society. The large societal reversal of a previously taboo subject is nearly unheard of unless talking about human rights. This has helped lead greed back into society like a lost pet.

Greed has impacted society by causing varied effects on humanity. Greed can warp an individual's mindset into a materialistic one. This impacts how that person interacts with other. Greed can cause changes in how a person will interact with society. They will be more focused on gaining more of what they want. It will exceed more than what is necessary. The behaviors of

greed are very clearly shown through a person's actions. Greed is easily identifiable as the "primary manifestation of greed is an excessive and unrelenting desire to acquire and possess goods. Its 'excessive' nature is revealed by the fact that the quantity of goods desired far surpasses actual need as well as by its exaggerated quality when compared to the desires of others" (Akhtar 131). The negative impacts of greed are undeniable as someone desires to have more and more. This is unhealthy for any person, but there is truth to the claim that people will not work for absolutely nothing, so there is some goodness under the name of greed. Eventually a greedy person will stop being content with what they already have. Greed warps how we feel satisfaction, or lack thereof. Once people get "one thing, they immediately ready to desire the next thing... Today the object of desire is no longer satisfaction but desire itself" (Burton). People will eventually tire out from what they have received. This will lead a person into a feeling of constant desire. At a point, a person should feel satisfied with what they have, but alas some still need more. Greed in check can be a tool of economic prosperity, but greed unchecked can lead to the mad spiral of a human being. In the new age of accepting greed as an unmovable facet of people's lives, it is important to know its consequences, positive and negative.

In summary, the main causes of greed are divided by the factors of biological, and societal issues, the concept of greed as a sin was created by early Christian figures, and despite millennia of disapproval, it is beginning to get accepted as a way of life today. Whether the inherent desire for wealth is hardwired into individuals, or if it is instilled within people from the society they are raised in, greed's true source can still be debated. Even though people have called greed evil for years, citing religious text claiming it was created by The Devil to lead man into temptation, many begin to claim greed is just how the world works. A concept of denouncing and shunning those who accumulate wealth won't survive in a world where

capitalism is a way of life. People could begin to think of greed as an old concept, keep its negative connotation for the rest of time, or the two sides could compromise. Despite any new feelings towards it, greed will always be a part of human nature.

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