

Towards a Humanistic Definition of Greed

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Abstract

Human greed and rapacious self-interest are deleterious influences not only on the individual, but to society and the environment as a whole. The influence human greed and its consequences have on both self and society has been a topic of philosophical, sociological, and political debate since antiquity. Classical arguments, as well as tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition, point to aggressive pursuit of cupid nous wants and materialistic self-interest as both an underlying cause of human suffering and an impediment to a truly flourishing society throughout recorded history. This article enlists Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and integrates seminal psychological theories and research to define fundamental human needs and drafts a framework to demarcate the boundary between human needs, and wants that go beyond reason and temperance. Some suggestions to prevent the condition of human greed are also discussed.

Keywords: Greed, narcissism, avarice, hierarchy of needs, self-interest

One visceral, fundamental, and universal tenant of life is self-sustenance. The need to survive and prosper inherently leads to an organism's expression of needs and desires. Some argue the impossibility of separating sustainable life and organism desire for all forms of life from bacteria to modern man. Living organisms undergo metabolism, grow, respond to stimuli, reproduce, signal, evolve and adapt to their environment (Koshland, 2002). In order to perform these fundamental tasks, organisms are driven to use resources from the environment to satisfy innate needs. As organisms get more biologically complex, so do these processes. As the most evolved and complex organisms in the evolutionary chain, humans have extremely complex biological processes. In addition to complex biological processes and desires, the human brain is capable of a wide range of advanced cognitive functions (Frackowiak, 2004). Some of these functions include complex emotions, self-consciousness, critical thinking, language learning, moral reasoning, and attributing meaning to life. These cognitive abilities also enable humans to express a wide range of desires, needs, and wants. However, life inherently thrives on satisfying desires and needs, having inordinate desires, needs and wants beyond what is needed for basic survival and comfort is defined as greed (Robertson, 2013).

Human greed is arguably the fundamental reason for many of the problems we face today (D'Souza, 2015). Some arguable outcomes of human greed are obesity, hoarding, substance abuse, failed relationships, domestic violence, theft, murder, incest, rape, and other crimes, wars, invasions, massacres, extreme poverty, social instability, overpopulation, climate change and economic crises. Greed and self-interest have been the topic of debate and discussion in academic and political circles ever since antiquity and have given rise to several modern political and economic ideologies. Historical commentary on the precept of greed centered on cupidity and self-interest poses it as an immoral impediment to personal and societal flourishing (Nikelly, 2006). This classical definition of greed was germane to many humanistic traditions defining self, the overarching role of civic institutions, and the purpose of economic activity. Debate anent greed and morality was part of the regular discourse of defining needs and wants in terms of building responsible, healthy citizenry and a flourishing community with insidious consequences to self and society.

Needs were defined in terms of temperance, relieving suffering, and moderation in sustenance. Unbridled wants, what the Greeks termed plexonexia, were considered deleterious and their manifestation in society bred injustice and inequality (Nikelly, 2006).

The onset of market driven societies building on the tenets of Smith, Locke, and Hobbes brought a shift in the role of greed in individual influence and civic behavior. Forgoing the classical ideal of an individual's place in society, possessive individualism became the basis of the market driven world. Wants are created and defined in part by societal values. A society using market driven tenets to define cultural values, will soon find a change in acceptable social roles and cultural acquisitiveness (Nikelly, 2006). In spite of the long history of debate, and enormous literary work in the humanities, not much literature exists in scientifically analyzing and defining greed in an effective manner due to its highly subjective nature (Wang, & Murnighan, 2011). This article uses one of the most prominent psychological human need theories formulated by (Maslow, 1943) and other seminal psychological and economic theories to attempt to define the boundaries between healthy human cravings and inordinate greed.

Defining Human Needs and Greed

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) is one of the preeminent motivational needs theories. Originally, Maslow theory classified human needs into five categories: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Later modifications sub-divided self-actualization into four disparate categories: cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1967; Maslow, 1969; Maslow, Frager & Cox, 1970). Physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs are denoted as deficiency needs or "D-needs". Cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualization and self-transcendence needs are denoted as being needs or "B-needs" (Maslow & Lowry, 1968). Examples of activities that satisfy D-needs include: eating and drinking for sustenance, buying a house for shelter, investing money, earning money, falling in love, getting married, having children, desiring power and respect, having sexual intercourse, and living in a safe environment. D-needs can be satisfied not only through an individual's personal action but through available charity, social services and welfare. Examples of activities that satisfy B-needs include reading, learning, self-reflection, introspection, meditation, appreciating true beauty and art, dedicating oneself to a cause, and performing austerities.

D-need satisfaction typically manifests in self-interest, acquisition of physical resources, accumulation of wealth and power, and love or social appreciation. Excesses in D-need fulfillment manifest into traditional definitions of greed, social injustice, and materialistic self-interest, especially in cultures valuing wealth, power, and accumulation. In contrast, B-need satisfaction is typically an internal manifestation showcasing acts of insight and altruism with little occasion for satiety and excess. For example, B-need satisfaction manifests characteristics like spontaneity, autonomy, comfort with solitude, non-hostile sense of humor, fellowship with humanity, and the ability to have peak experiences (Maslow, 1967). Individuals working to satisfy B-needs tend to lead more fulfilled, enriched, caring, altruistic, contented, meaningful, and purposeful lives since they are more likely to discover their real self and strive to reach their full potential (Maslow, Frager & Cox, 1970). Evinced through behavior, these individuals tend to care about causes outside of themselves and in turn strive for the betterment of society.

Maslow outlined how an individual's unsatisfied needs, wants, and desires in terms of both D-needs and B-needs influence behavior (Maslow, 1969). According to (Maslow, 1972), unsatisfied D-needs prompt visible action to satiate a physiological or psychological imbalance. Once D-needs are satisfied, unsatisfied B-needs prompt action to fulfill an individual's true potential and realization of an individual's real inner self. Maslow called this evolutionary process "self-actualization". In effect, "self-actualized" individuals have lower order D-needs generally satisfied, enabling action to satisfy higher order B-needs (Maslow, 1969). In addition, B-need satisfaction is correlated to flourishing, happiness, eudemonia, and subjective well-being.

As individuals strive to satisfy B-needs, they pay less attention to personal deficient needs and more attention to needs and causes outside themselves. Since many categories of D-needs are visceral, physiological, and life-sustaining, they are a necessary part of the natural order for human existence when exhibited within reasonable limits. According to Maslow, an individual evolves towards B-need satisfaction once most D-needs are satisfied. Due to the innate nature of D-needs and B-needs, it can be argued that inordinate desire for D-need satisfaction could lead to manifestations of greed, while a strong desire for B-need satisfaction has little or no correlation to traditional definitions of greed.

In order to draft a framework to demarcate the boundary between basic human needs and wants that go excessively beyond temperance and reason, Table 1 displays both common D-needs categorized by type and approximate levels for acceptable healthy cravings.

Cravings going considerably beyond those of a healthy craving would be an indication of excessive greed and avarice. Healthy levels are estimates; the actual ranges being situation ally dependent. For example, a healthy craving for food and water would be dependent on parameters such as the size of the individual and the environment in which they exist. These guidelines help define the limits at which wants become plexonexia; where material self-indulgence and desire exceed reasonable limits.

Discussion

In today's modern western society, most physiological needs can be met through spending earned income on food, shelter and safety concerns or supplementing incomewithsocial services and welfare. A middle class income should be sufficient to satisfy the level of healthy cravings for the physiological needs shown in Table 1 (Diener, 2000; Diener & Oishi, 2000; Easterlin, 1995). If well-conceived, quality social servicesare not guaranteed by the state,lower income and working class individuals could find it impossible to meet even the most basic physiological safety and security D-needs for themselves and their families. This pressure, especially in a culture that values material wealth and power, could motivate an individualto strive to perpetually increase income or acquire unlimited resources (Sumner, 1996; Bronsteen, Buccafusco & Masur, 2009).Positive ontogenesis is also important when considering love and esteem needs.

This is especially true regarding instances of child abuse, neglect, incest, rape, and over-controlling parenting. If these D-needsare not met throughout, the early stages of human development, narcissistic fixations, and fears could develop in an individual. These have shown tomanifest as self-absorption, material self-interest, and a general over-indulgence in other D-needs categories (Erikson, 1980; Freud, 1914). Facilitating and supporting parents in creating atmospheres conducive to healthy child ontogenesis will help individuals satisfy healthy human love and esteem needs and avoid substance abuse disorders (Furnham & Lowick, 1984; Bukstein,1995).While an individual could develop an addiction for any D-need, excesses in relation to power, respect, admiration, and material self-interest traditionally evince adverse effects on society (Nikelly, 2006).Addiction to power, respect, and admiration is often inordinately rapacious and maladaptive. Craving disproportionate power and admiration propel cupidity. This drive for limitless increase in personal wealthand powerhas the potential to galvanize economic and social inequality andfoment social instability (Furnham & Argyle, 1998; Oishi, Kesebir & Diener, 2011).

Human greed is considered a fundamental, underlying cause for both human suffering and the prevailing crises facing our world today (D'Souza, 2015). As such, greed looms as one of the greatest threats to our existence as a species. Counteraction to greed requires multi-faceted, coordinated action fromboth individuals and society. Global leaders and policy makers should take measures to curb this ruinous psychosocial condition and evince decisive change.Providing well-conceived quality welfare services,fostering an egalitarian society to minimize the inculcated effect of an acquisitive culture,increasing civil liberties, and creating atmospheres conducive to healthy child ontogenesis are some dialectic suggestions that could help reduce the effects of runaway greed in both individuals and society.This article aims to instigate future research in the area of human greed and enable policy makers to create better strategies to builda more flourishing society.

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Table 1: D-needs and healthy cravings

D-Need	Type	Healthy Craving	Source(s)
Food	Physiological	2000-3000 calories/day	(Waxman, 2005)
Water	Physiological	Approximately 1 gallon/day	(Waxman, 2005)
Alcohol	Physiological	None to minimal	(Cloninger, 1987; Furnham&Lowick, 1984)
Controlled and addictive substances	Physiological	None to minimal	(Bukstein, 1995; Abadinsky, 1997)
Housing	Physiological	Moderate dwelling with basic amenities and furnishing.	(Wilson & Boehland, 2005; Frank, 2004)
Personal belongings	Physiological	Sufficient for the purpose of satisfying basic human comfort	(Busch, 2008; Lane, 1994; Frank, 2005)
Social services*	Safety	Free or reasonably affordable quality services	(Sumner, 1996; Bronsteen, Buccafusco&Masur, 2009)
Love, friendship and community	Love & Belonging	A combination of romantic partner, family, colleagues, friends, or membership in a group	(Maslow, 1943; Baumeister& Sommer, 1997)
Recognition, power, acceptance, status, and appreciation	Esteem	Moderate recognition from self, family, peers and friends	(Maslow, 1943; Mruk, 2006)

* Social services include healthcare, education, police force, fire department, human rights protection, unemployment benefits, retirement benefits, disability benefits, & childcare benefits