

Rethinking Greed

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Greed is often thought to be a particularly common and troubling vice in contemporary, market-driven societies.¹ The negative effects of greed seem wide-ranging and severe: environmental harms afflicting current generations of humans (and nonhumans), exploitation of workers across the world, weakened communities, a turning away of the greedy themselves from genuine self-improvement and well-being, and, perhaps most important for present purposes, potentially devastating impacts upon future generations. With climate change—largely driven by growing human consumption—future generations face drastically changing ecosystems, massive species loss, radically changing regional climates, extreme weather systems, coastal flooding and erosion, and still further adverse impacts. Moral burdens are being placed on future generations that will need to make difficult, possibly tragic decisions in the face of a radically changed world.

Those wealthy by global standards, in particular, may seem to exhibit greed in their ongoing demand for a wide range of goods. They seem to be key drivers of the consumption that is fuelling potentially devastating environmental changes. Yet we might wonder whether the majority of the globally wealthy are, in fact, greedy; after all, the common image of the greedy person is of one who is obsessed with getting more material goods, or of the miser counting his coins. Are we really like this?

In what follows I attempt to clarify the nature of the vice of greed, focusing on what can be called “modest greed.” Agents who are modestly greedy do not long for material goods or wealth with intense desires. Rather, they have quite modest desires, but ones whose satisfaction they pursue excessively relative to other goods. Modest greed will emerge as a particularly troubling vice for those facing a changing world—one that will require us to reassess our actions, our beliefs, and our understanding of the virtues.

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Defining Greed

Greed is a vice of *disproportionality*: greedy agents pursue objects to a degree that is *disproportionate* to their value relative to other goods that the agents could be pursuing, or to the harms associated with their pursuit.² For example, there is pleasure and value in enjoying a doughnut, but the greedy person desires doughnuts disproportionately to other valuable goods, such as his health. Similarly, a pursuit of wealth in itself need not be greedy, for wealth has positive instrumental value. But when an agent pursues wealth to the detriment of the goods of friendship, the development of other interests and talents, or even moral constraints, her pursuit becomes greedy.

There can be greed for most any good. Thus, we could speak of being greedy for praise or for knowledge insofar as we can pursue such goods excessively relative to other goods. But our discussion will focus on paradigmatic cases of greed, those with material goods or wealth as their objects.

Consider, then, the following account of greed with respect to a given good. Intuitively, the account can be seen as divided into two parts: clauses (1) through (3) capture the excessive pursuit of objects definitive of greed, while clauses (4) and (5) capture greed's broader manifestations in our attitudes and actions:

One is greedy with respect to a good or set of goods to the extent that one (1) excessively pursues this good or set of goods, or would do so in relevant conditions, due to either (2a) a vicious overvaluation of, or excessive desire for, these goods, or (2b) a vicious lack of concern with, or undervaluation of other goods or harms, and (3) to the degree that this pursuit is aimed at securing these goods for oneself; one is also greedy to the extent that one (4) possesses inappropriate attitudes that manifest a vicious overvaluation of (or excessive desire for) these goods, and (5) acts or would act in relevant conditions on the attitudes in (4).

Take clauses (1) and (2). With respect to clause (1), pursuit of a good can involve devoting time, money, and other resources toward acquisition of a good or set of goods, and would include successful acquisition itself.³ Clauses (2a) and (2b) focus on the factors that lead to the excessive pursuit described in (1). Intuitively, greed involves irresponsibly overestimating the value of the good pursued, or downplaying/ignoring alternative goods, or the harms associated with pursuing the good.

For example, an agent may tend in general to enjoy material goods of some particular kind, and thus tend to form beliefs that—conveniently enough—suggest that such goods are of greater value than they actually are. Other cases may involve envy, as when an agent sees others possessing a good, and comes to value this good excessively precisely because others possess it. In each case, the greedy overvaluation is a result of a culpably irresponsible judgment of a material good's value. The other possibility is that one ignores or undervalues other goods or harms in an epistemically irresponsible fashion. Thus, out of sloth one might fail to investigate the negative impacts of one's consumption on the environment, or only engage in a superficial assessment. Apathy might lead one to fail to evaluate the value of rival goods, or to ignore important harms associated with pursuing a given material good, leaving one with a comparatively excessive valuation of the material good as a default.⁴

Now take clause (3). Greed involves excessively pursuing goods for oneself. Imagine a person who devotes herself to acquiring material goods, but simply in order to give them all away to friends and charities while she lives in a tiny, rundown apartment. Such an agent may excessively pursue material goods, and underestimate the value of her own well-being, but certainly this does not seem to be a matter of greed. Greed requires self-centeredness.

With respect to the second half of the definition, in clause (4) we are concerned with an agent's tendencies toward inappropriate attitudes that manifest greed, where an attitude toward an object manifests greed to the extent that it is a result of vicious overvaluations of or excessive desires for given goods or sets of goods.⁵ Thus a thief in prison might exhibit greed in constantly thinking about various goods he wants, even if he cannot take effective steps to acquire them. One's excessively strong desires for a good might lead to a slight—but still inappropriate—downplaying of the importance of one's community, of helping others, and so on. Greed manifests itself in our attitudes toward other objects, not only the immediate objects of our desires.

The final clause, (5), concerns the extent to which an agent acts on the attitudes described in (4), or would so act in relevant circumstances. Thus we might have two greedy agents who have come to resent demands of charitable giving, given their overvaluation of some material good. One agent still gives, even if grudgingly. But the other begins to reduce or even stop giving—and would do so in a wide range of similar circumstances. It seems that the latter agent is greedier than the former. Or similarly, agents could be greedy to the extent that they resent paying

taxes (insofar as this detracts from their excessive pursuit of various goods)—they are greedier still when this would lead them to cheat on their taxes.

With this in hand, we can characterize an agent's overall greediness as follows:

The extent to which one is *greedy* (overall) is a function of (1) the number of goods or sets of goods with respect to which one is greedy, (2) the depth or extent of one's greed with respect to these goods, and also (3) the extent to which one possesses inappropriate attitudinal dispositions that manifest greed, and (4) the extent to which one acts upon (or would act upon in relevant circumstances) the attitudes in (3).

The first two clauses are straightforward, and capture the idea that one's overall greed is largely a function of one's greed toward various goods. The more goods with respect to which you are greedy, and the greater the depth of your greed for these goods, the greedier you are, overall. The third and fourth clauses reflect the fact that an agent's greed with respect to various goods can manifest itself in attitudes and actions toward rival goods. Again, for example, a person might begin to resent charitable giving because it takes away money that she wishes to use for her excessive pursuits. Finally, being greedy is a matter of degree, and in its weakest forms it is best understood as simply a limitation to one's temperance or overall virtue. In its more severe forms it becomes a full-fledged vice.⁶

To summarize this discussion, we can consider in table 11.1 an extended example of a man who is greedy for an SUV, indicating how each of the criteria (1) through (5) for greed might be satisfied.

Note that all of the preceding factors are matters of degree (and so the man's level of greediness with respect to the SUV would also vary), and that the precise sources and manifestations of his greed could vary; this is simply one example.⁷

Modest Greed

Where does the definition lead us? I hope to a subtler picture of greed, one that illuminates both why the globally wealthy may in fact be greedy even when not obsessive about wealth or status, and why greed will be an especially problematic vice for future generations.

A common assumption about greed is that greedy individuals experience desires that are excessive with respect to their felt intensity. Thus in

Table 11.1

Clause	Example (of a man who is greedy with respect to an SUV)
(1)	He begins working overtime, cutting back on family activities and spending, and so on, in order to pursue the purchase of an SUV.
(2a)	He excessively desires this SUV because he lets himself be swept away by advertisements, and is jealous of his neighbor who recently bought a similar new vehicle.
(2b)	He never really questions whether his family actually needs this new SUV, or whether a smaller, more efficient vehicle would be viable.
(3)	While he sometimes tries to rationalize his desire for the SUV in terms of looking after his family, what ultimately drives him is his desire to be seen in a top-of-the line new vehicle—it's for him.
(4)	He comes to resent spending time with his child when he is exhausted after his long workdays, and questions whether he really needs to contribute “so much” to charities—money that could instead go toward the SUV purchase.
(5)	Finally, he might actually start giving less to charities because he now sees them simply as wasting money, and also spend much less time with his child due to his changed attitudes in (4).

dictionary definitions we find such terms as “inordinate or insatiate,” “intense,” and “rapacious.”⁸ And for many obvious instances of greed, this may well be true. Even so, with this assumption it becomes far too easy for most of us to brush worries aside. “I care far more about my family than I do about material things, fame, or wealth. I mean sure, they’re nice, but I have things in proper perspective. I’m glad I’m not one of these materialistic, greedy people.” But, as our definition makes clear, we can desire and strive for what is excessive for us, even if the felt intensity is quite *modest*. We might set ourselves a goal of buying a large house in the suburbs without our desire being aptly described as “intense” or “rapacious.” Yet this could still be greedy behavior on our part.

A second common assumption about greed is that it involves desires for, and a pursuit of, objects that are themselves inherently excessively luxurious or expensive. Thus when some think of greedy individuals, they think of people set on SUVs, mansions, jewelry, money, and so on. While the first common assumption posits excessively intense desires, the second assumption posits excessive *objects* of desire. And again, with closer examination we find that this needs to be reconsidered. Peter Wenz writes: “Consumer society cultivates *greed*, the unlimited desire for more. Without greed consumer demand would flag, the economy would slump, and people would lose their jobs. *Avarice*, an inordinate desire for wealth,

is implied by greed. People who want more and more of what money can buy desire unlimited amounts of money” (2005, 206).

Wenz presumably does not intend this statement as a strict definition, but still it reflects and reinforces the image of greed as involving unlimited desires for *excessive items*;⁹ similarly with his characterization of avaricious people desiring unlimited amounts of money. But greed is typically far more modest than having unlimited wants (in any strong sense) for material goods and wealth; to think in these terms might lead us to overlook most instances of greed. One could be greedy for a yacht and endlessly more, but one could equally be greedy with respect to such things as clothes, shoes, or the latest electronics (and even when the relevant desires are limited or finite).

A person’s life can be shaped by excessively pursuing goods that seem quite modest in themselves. Such a pursuit can result in lost opportunities—to instead give the money involved to environmental groups or other organizations, to spend time engaged in other rewarding activities, and so on. That is, the pursuit might not cause harm in itself, but can still be problematic by leading an agent to miss out on much better uses of the same resources. Beyond this, such excessive pursuit often causes harms—the production and disposal of most electronics involve significant amounts of toxic chemicals, there are environmental costs to shipping goods around the world, and so forth.

A person’s overall pursuit or desire for material goods can be relevantly excessive even if each individual desire or pursuit of a good (and each good), taken in isolation, seems modest. Consider a middle-class American who regularly drives to the mall, and buys a shirt here, a DVD there, foods imported from around the world, and so on. Each individual desire and pursuit seems mild enough, but when we look at the *cumulative* effect, it is what we would expect of a greedy person. This agent is still having comparatively large impacts on the environment. She is still encouraging ongoing shipping of goods across the world (with the associated carbon emissions and other impacts), devoting more land to growing cash crops (with the associated loss of habitat or local subsistence crops), and so on. Indeed, her environmental impacts could well be worse than those of the person who lives an otherwise ascetic life while saving for a yacht. Much of the consumption of the globally wealthy seems to arise out of such apparently mild desires, often as a mere habit, a diversion.

Notice that people who attempt to be frugal (voluntarily) can often be greedy in this seemingly modest way. They may buy the cheapest goods they can find, even if they do not buy much. While they might not

be spending much money and are not concerned with luxuries, they still cannot be bothered with how various products came to be so cheap. Some of them may suspect that workers have been exploited in some developing nation, or that poor environmental practices were involved, but this does not stop them; they may never investigate fully, or instead conveniently downplay their impacts. They are more concerned with acquiring goods cheaply than with moral or other concerns. *This is a form of greed.* Of course this is not to hold that those who cannot afford better alternatives are necessarily greedy (i.e., there is a difference between a voluntary cheapness and an imposed poverty).¹⁰ Rather, and particularly for those who are wealthy, one must take responsibility for one's purchases and investments, and the place that they hold in one's life. If we focus only on instances of greed involving intensely felt desires for extreme wealth or obviously luxurious material goods we will overlook these far more common—and to that extent, far more troubling—forms of greed.

Must the alternative to such behaviors (and way of life, more broadly) be a life of comparative squalor and misery? We cannot enter into this issue in detail here, but note two important points. First, the citizens of many other wealthy nations have much smaller environmental impacts, and are hardly models of poverty. For example, as of 2009, the total ecological footprint per capita (in global hectares) for the United States has been estimated to be 9.02gha, while for Norway it is 4.20gha, for Germany it is 4.03gha, and for Sweden it is just 2.84gha (Ewing et al. 2009, 57, 73). A significant reduction in environmental impacts for Americans thus seems viable, without a slide into poverty. Second, there is a growing literature in psychology (and related disciplines) suggesting that we tend to significantly overestimate how happy we will be made by acquiring material goods for ourselves, compared to pursuing other goods (see, e.g., Kasser 2002; Cafaro 2005; and Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008). To the extent that this literature is correct, a plausible case can be made that those excessively pursuing material goods are less happy than those pursuing other ends, and that a reduced pursuit of material goods need not adversely impact the happiness of the globally wealthy.¹¹

Modest Greed in a World of Billions

We have seen that an agent's pursuit of satisfying a set of desires can be greedy, even if the individual desires and pursuits seem quite modest.

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These problems are compounded when multiple agents are acting, particularly with respect to justice. To mildly desire a second doughnut at a meeting and to take one may not seem excessive, but the situation changes if there are only a few doughnuts left and many colleagues who have not yet had anything to eat. A person who insists on taking a second doughnut in such circumstances is (barring some unusual justification) being greedy.

Now, note: in terms of felt *intensity*, the desire for a doughnut is likely to be quite mild; and a doughnut seems a modest *object*. But still, for example, if an agent culpably downplays his impacts (“They probably don’t want anything; and anyway, other people were taking doughnuts, too”), selfishly inflates his own claim to the good relative to others (“I’m hungry, and it’s not my fault they were too slow”), or simply never even so much as thinks of the others (a limiting case of irresponsibly ignoring harms and rival goods while focusing on satisfying our desire for a good), we have an instance of a greedy action.

An obvious analogy emerges here with our actions and our collective impact upon future generations in terms of species loss, resource depletion, using up sinks for carbon emissions, and so on. The cumulative impact of large numbers of people—billions of us—satisfying apparently mild desires for apparently modest goods can be devastating.¹² What may not be greedy in other circumstances (of low overall consumption, low population, and enlightened technology) is now greedy, given current global conditions of growing populations and consumption. Sometimes we culpably downplay our harmful impacts (“I’m sure there are lots of people who are environmentally far worse than I am—they’re the real problem”), we selfishly overemphasize our claim to various goods while ignoring the well-being of others (“I’ve worked for what I’ve got, and no one has the right to tell me how to live”), and so on; much more common still is simply for no thoughts of impacts on future generations to even cross our minds (see Bendik-Keymer, this volume, on the vice of wantonness). This again qualifies as greedy behavior.

To properly understand and address greed, we need to recognize that we are on a world with billions of other people, and that there will be billions more after us. There are also billions of fellow mammals, birds, and other living things that share this planet with us, and those that will share the planet in the future (See Schlosberg, this volume, for an effort to extend a theory of climate justice to nonhuman entities). This is true for current generations, but will take on still greater importance over

decades to come as the human population reaches (and will likely remain close to) its peak on this planet. If each human thinks only in terms of her individual desires and pursuits of goods, each in isolation, she falls into a trap of self-centeredness, one that sustains greed. Instead we must look at our overall patterns of consumption as individuals and as communities within the broader context of a massively consuming human population.

Derek Parfit writes:

Until this century, most of mankind lived in small communities. What each did could affect only a few others. But conditions have now changed. Each of us can now, in countless ways, affect countless other people. We can have real though small effects on thousands or millions of people. When these effects are widely dispersed, they may be either trivial, or imperceptible. It now makes a great difference whether we continue to believe that we cannot have greatly harmed or benefited others unless there are people with grounds for a serious complaint, or for gratitude. . . . For the sake of small benefits to ourselves, or our families, we may deny others much greater total benefits, or impose on others much greater total harms. We may think this permissible because the effects on each of the others will be either trivial or imperceptible. If this is what we think, what we do will often be much worse for all of us. (1984, 86; cited in Attfield 2009, 229)

Parfit's claims here are of a piece with the current proposal. But notice more explicitly the inverse of what Parfit stresses: when we act, we need to bear in mind that billions of other people are also acting, making trade-offs, and so forth. To act virtuously in a changed and changing world requires awareness of such broader contexts. (Compare Hirsch and Norton, chapter 16, this volume.)

Greed and Collective Action in a Changing World

For all this, we might wonder whether vices such as greed are truly at stake when we examine cases focusing on the presence and behaviors of others. Dale Jamieson raises the issue:

We should remind ourselves that while a great deal of environmentally destructive human behaviour can rightly be denounced as greedy or vicious, much is humdrum and ordinary. [. . .] Many of our environmental problems have the structure of collective action problems. These involve many people making small contributions to very large problems. They do not intend to cause these problems, and in many cases feel quite powerless to prevent them. The "soccer mom" driving her kids to school, sporting events, and music lessons does not intend to change the climate. Yet, in a small way, that is exactly what she is doing. (2008, 91–92)

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There is a worry, then, that many cases that we have treated as involving modest greed might instead be better understood as collective action problems.

The obvious immediate response here is that modest vices and virtues can be relevant to collective action problems. The more people pay attention to such problems, acknowledge their roles in contributing to them, are willing to cooperate, to act as needed, and so on, the better off we will be in trying to address them (compare Thompson, this volume, on a virtue of environmental responsibility). And of course to the extent that our values are skewed, that we downplay the importance of others, that we overvalue material goods, are reluctant to take action (or lack the willpower to do so), and so on, it will be more difficult to address collective action problems.

Still, the worry persists—might our individual actions ultimately be ineffectual, and would this give us reason not to worry about modest greed? For example, should Claire boycott cheap products produced in environmentally unsound fashions, given that her actions alone are hardly likely to cause the manufacturers to cease production of such goods, or even to modify their procedures? Perhaps Claire would simply be making her own life more difficult while contributing almost nothing to solving the problems she is hoping to address; perhaps acting in a modestly greedy fashion would not be so problematic, after all.

There have been several compelling recent discussions of such questions concerning the effectiveness of individual actions, and whether we are obligated to engage in them.¹³ Broad themes that emerge from these discussions are that (1) individuals need to engage in social and political activity directed toward solving the problems they are seeking to address—purely private actions will typically have only smaller impacts (e.g., influencing friends and neighbors, perhaps helping to avoid charges of hypocrisy in calling for broader political changes), and (2) it is best for people to have characters that lead to appropriate actions (e.g., reducing misguided consumption, etc.) even if in isolation the individual actions do not seem to have significant impacts; an emphasis on the virtues is warranted.¹⁴

We can add several important considerations here. First, and perhaps most crucially, note that in morally assessing a person's character and behaviors, far more is relevant than simply the effects of her actions. For example, we can properly negatively assess the character of a racist, even if his attitudes never manifest themselves in overt actions. Or suppose that the racist attempts to promote his views by regularly handing out

crude, simple-minded pamphlets that influence almost no one. We do not treat him or his actions as morally nonproblematic even if he has almost no impact in his efforts to promote hatred. Similarly, the character and actions of the mildly greedy can be seen as morally problematic, even if their actions have little overall impact.

Yet we can positively appraise an agent's character and actions, even if the impacts of her actions seem quite modest. We can admire the generosity of a person living in poverty, even if she can only make very small contributions, given her circumstances. We can positively assess those who embrace and exhibit temperance and simplicity, even while their actions as individuals may have little impact on global problems.

To be virtuous requires a mindfulness of the larger context in which we live and act.¹⁵ That certain actions seem common and accepted in our society does not yet show them to be justified. When we reflect upon the demands of justice and benevolence, we see that, for many of us, our pursuit of many goods is excessive and greedy. Virtue requires recognizing changing circumstances; we are now in a world with a rapidly peaking population and growing consumption and waste. We cannot justify our actions by simply declaring that they are widely embraced, and individually seem to have little impact, any more than we can justify the actions and attitudes of a racist, even if his actions in isolation seem to have little adverse impact.

And second: when assessing our possible actions and their impacts, we should focus on those alternatives realistically available to us. For most of our actions there will be only small impacts, but within this range we can make choices. If we consume appropriately, locally grown food, for example, we encourage local producers and cut back on the distance at least some of our food must be transported. One way or another we must eat. But we often exhibit modest greed in buying cheaper products (with dubious origins) when we could viably make wiser, less harmful choices.

Modesty is required in assessing our actions. If we concern ourselves only with actions that are likely to have a direct, significant impact in solving large-scale collective action problems, it might seem that nothing is viable for us as ordinary people. Suppose you were, somehow, to obtain \$10 million—an apparently large and significant sum. Even if you were to apply all of this money, it likely would have little direct impact on solving a global problem. Perhaps you could start influencing a few lawmakers in a few countries—but even here, this only goes so far, and it would depend on what other people were doing with other

lawmakers. Even the leaders of powerful nations will have only limited influence over other countries and international agreements. With such an approach, only a few people with extraordinary political, economic, or military power would have any reason to concern themselves with their impacts, as they would be the only ones with the direct power to effectively hope to address global collective action problems as individuals. But surely something has gone wrong if our understanding of ethics tells us that only a powerful few bear any responsibility for action in the face of large-scale problems in which we are all implicated, and that the rest of us can revel in greed, ignorance, and complacency as we see fit.

I think these points help to address a worry raised by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (chapter 13, this volume): that most globally wealthy people seem to be reasonably decent people, yet they are not terribly concerned with the current mass extinction event, or with climate change. Is it too demanding to ask decent people who are already focused on other good projects (and with limited time and money) to address climate change also? This is a difficult question, but the following seems fair. Even given current institutional structures and human limitations (of time, ability, and so on), most globally wealthy people should be more concerned with climate change than they are. While there are limits to what they can do, they can take much better advantage of the opportunities realistically available to them. This might require shifting at least some time and effort away from other projects, but given the potential scale of the harms at stake, a realignment of projects is surely in order. There are many exemplary individuals who are able to pursue a range of worthwhile projects while doing much more than others to attempt to address significant environmental issues. While we cannot know everything and cannot act on behalf of every good cause, there is significant scope for most of us to make better decisions.¹⁶

More broadly, if we suspect that policy change at national and international levels will take significant time to achieve, we can at least take the local steps available to us. If we wait for change to come from international agreements, we (as individuals) will simply continue to “help” worsen the problems we face for years, in those small ways that are viable to ordinary people as we continue with our modest greed, waiting for change to come. If we worry about crossing various climate thresholds in the decades ahead, it seems foolish to continue to act as we do while waiting for agreements to be reached. Again: we can either try to do our best, or we can rest in modest greed.

Some thinkers will return here to the importance of institutional and political factors while downplaying individual behaviors and character. Both Bendik-Keymer (chapter 13, this volume) and Vogel (chapter 15, this volume) seem tempted to do so. Vogel stresses that, with respect to many environmental issues, individuals are trapped in a “tragedy of the commons” scenario (see Hardin 1968) where any actions they take in isolation will do nothing to solve overall problems; if they consume less, others will consume more, and so on. To be sure, on the one hand, simply having individuals addressing their own modest greed will not be sufficient for solving these problems. But on the other hand, if we do not address the character and actions of individual persons, from where do we expect political or institutional change to come? If there are no exemplars, will others believe that reduced consumption and other green changes are desirable or even viable? There seems to be an assumption that most of us tend to have good values, but cannot act on them viably, given current circumstances. But then why do people vote for politicians who deny the existence of climate change? Why do we fail so often to engage even in easily accessible green behaviors? It is not so obvious that we are simply good people trapped by bad institutions.

The globally wealthy (and others) may mean well, and be decent in some weak sense, but if we are still modestly greedy, apathetic, uninformed, and so on, there is little hope of political change. Even if a group of environmental lobbyists manages to have green legislation passed, if the public does not embrace these values or understand the importance of the issues, they can more than happily elect politicians who will weaken or repeal it. Certainly, institutional change is ultimately needed, but without informed, concerned, and virtuous individuals, such reform is unlikely to occur or to last. Here there can be a spiraling effect—if a large enough group manages to create institutional change, the attitudes of other individuals may change in response; with the new, broader support and change in attitudes, further institutional and political change may become viable, and so on. But individual character and action cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to such change.

A third consideration is relevant: we cannot be perfect, and our circumstances will shape the options open to us; as noted already, trade-offs will be necessary. Suppose a person needs to drive to work, given her particular circumstances. If so, she may need to think about compensating for this—to do so would reflect a recognition of the full costs of her actions (while a modestly greedy person would continue to enjoy the benefits of cheap gasoline while culpably ignoring or downplaying the

harms at stake). So she might buy local produce to cut back on other transportation required to sustain her existence, or she might give more time and money to environmental groups. We can allow ourselves some trade-offs in our actions, precisely because the individual impacts are typically so small (though we must keep in mind that billions of others are also acting and making trade-offs). But to be truly decent people, we need to reevaluate our projects and activities from time to time, to ensure that we are helping to address important issues.

And a fourth consideration: how then do we balance all of this—how do we choose acceptable trade-offs without allowing ourselves to slide into modest greed and other vices? Here no simple rules can be given—but one plausible move involves an appeal to our integrity and ideals. Most of us strive to be certain kinds of people; we typically have ideals of compassion, justice, and so on that we can successfully express through our actions. So, for example, while it may be inconvenient to buy environmentally sound goods, there are benefits to such actions—we will have at least some impact, even if minimal, and such actions would be in accordance with our ideals; we could also question whether we even need the goods at all. To ignore our ideals and values as we find them to be inconvenient will both lead to and reflect a lack of integrity and a drift into mild vice; these ideals are typically far more important than many of the other things with which we allow ourselves to become pre-occupied in day-to-day life.

Conclusion

Given foreseeable global conditions, we need to shift from thinking of greed in terms of the objects pursued, or even the intensity of the desires for them, to instead looking at the costs of the pursuit in terms of justice and other goods—this is where the excessiveness lies. We each must ask: what are the impacts of my pursuit of various goods in current global conditions—what harms and benefits result, and what could I do otherwise, what alternatives are there? What kind of person and character do my actions reflect? Recognition that now, and for generations to come, each of us will be one among several billion or more humans each shaping the world in small ways, will be crucial to our avoiding greed and other vices. We will need to think in terms of justice, both within and across generations, moving away from a narrow concern with our immediate neighbors and ourselves. It is our thoughtless consumption, our ignoring of alternatives, and our willingness to pass off costs that are now the potentially most worrying drivers of greed.

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Notes

1. Recent popular books pointing to greed as the source of significant harms include Hamilton and Micklethwait 2006, and Huffington 2004, among many others.
2. I draw this classification from Hurka 2001, chaps. 3 and 4.
3. Note that one could be greedy with respect to a single good (perhaps a mansion), or with respect to a set of goods (perhaps more and more shoes, or home electronics).
4. How would Kawall understand what Vogel (chapter 15, this volume) calls “alienation”? Is it the result of an “epistemic vice”?—eds.
5. What if one were to feel ashamed of one’s excessive desires for some material good—would this qualify as an attitude that manifests greed? We can distinguish between attitudes that manifest greed and those that are reactions to it; one’s shame would be a reaction to greed, rather than a manifestation.
6. We need not provide a firm dividing line for current purposes. A further question that cannot be addressed fully here concerns how the value of various goods for an agent is determined. But notice that on any plausible theory of value there will be a potential gap between how an agent currently values and pursues an object, and the value that she ought to attribute to it. So long as there is such a possibility of error on the part of an agent, there is a possibility of greed on the current account.
7. Do these nuanced and expanded criteria of greed explain the structural wantonness or inaction that Bendik-Keymer (chapter 13, this volume) or Vogel (chapter 15, this volume) designate?—eds.
8. Take, for example, the OED’s entry on “greedy”: “1. Having an intense desire or inordinate appetite for food or drink; ravenous, voracious, gluttonous. 2. Eager for gain, wealth, and the like; avaricious, covetous, rapacious” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “greedy”). Or on “greed”: “Inordinate or insatiate longing, esp. for wealth; avaricious or covetous desire” (*ibid.*, s.v. “greed”).

9. In judging whether an object is excessive, considerations of justice often play a key role. For example, a king's building of a palace is excessive when his subjects are starving, and the resources could instead have been used to improve their lives. (Compare this comment with the implications of internalizing ecological integrity into justice as Schlosberg (chapter 8, this volume) proposes.)

10. On the other hand, poverty does not preclude the possibility of greed—an agent living in poverty could still exploit others, or overly value and pursue goods that are best seen as luxuries in her circumstances.

11. Note that Kasser (2002) includes the pursuit of fame and of a good image in his overall account of material goods. On the other hand, many of the studies that he discusses focus on material goods or wealth, more narrowly construed (as is our focus here), and provide a plausible basis for the claims just presented.

12. Of course in the original doughnut case the results are far less devastating, but we still arrive at an unjust distribution of goods, and an unjustified thwarting of desires (i.e., the colleagues' desires for something to eat).

13. For example, see Iris Marion Young's work (2004) on a conception of political responsibility and the discussion of her view in Thompson, chapter 10, this volume.—eds.

14. See Jamieson, chapter 9, this volume; Johnson 2003; and Sandler 2010. For discussions focusing on vegetarianism, see, for example, Nobis 2002 and Hudson 1993.

15. Consider the issues of virtue in context discussed in the introduction and especially in part IV, both of this volume.—eds.

16. I attempt to consider some of these issues—of how to divide our attention and information gathering across morally important issues—in Kawall 2010.

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