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Greed and Avarice

Some thoughts on their nature and present-day significance

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Abstract

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We often hear the lament that our modern (or postmodern) era is marked by an obscene high level of Greed and/or Avarice. Greedy and avaricious dispositions and persons, so some are eager to tell us, rule the modern world and this, so they proclaim, accounts for a whole score of (other) disasters like, extreme selfishness, the erosion of solidarity, the withering away of social bonds, an instrumental attitude towards our fellow human beings and even to the natural world, etc. up to—according to some analysts—the recent breakdown of the financial system. Quick bucks, easy money, the allure of the city boys, money scams and the heartless and continuous rat race for more and more money—all this and more testifies to the all encompassing greed and avariciousness of modern man.

But is this really the case? Do we live in greedy times—or better put: greedier times than ever before? Have we become more avaricious? In this part of our paper I would like to explore and perhaps even provide a sensible start of an answer to these and other related questions. I will draw heavily on the insights of one of the most brilliant analysts of modern society, Georg Simmel. Simmel, who alongside with Weber, Durkheim and Marx is considered to be one of the founding fathers of sociology, is probably the most virtuoso analyst and theoretician of modernity and of its money-besotted character. (He certainly is my personal favourite—who can't but appreciate a sociologist who famously once said that society doesn't exist?) Following some of his observations in these matters will provide us with a possible answer to our starting questions—an answer that perhaps will startle the greed and avarice hardliner-critics. Perhaps the real dangers—or differently put: the most pernicious effects—are

not to be sought in a generalized Greed and Avarice, but in the ubiquity of its kin dispositions of Cynicism and Blasé. But I don't think we'll have time to go into that.

I will kick off with an expedition into the meanings of Greed and Avarice. Then I will comment on some observations Simmel made on how Greed and Avarice manifest themselves in a full-blown modern money-economy driven society. And to conclude, I will venture into the world of the modern Cynic and Blasé. But first: some terminology and definitions.

Avarice and Greed are often treated as synonyms. Some, however, try to fine tune the concepts so that they take on different shades of meaning. Greed and Avarice also have a close affinity with a whole score of other concepts, like, to name but a few, miserliness, cupidity, gluttony, voraciousness, etc. To complicate things even further, different languages allow for different semantic differentiations between all of these concepts.

Avarice and greed are no stand-alone concepts. They are intimately related, as we will see after our short review of some definitions of the concepts. But I think something important gets be lost when we use the terms as synonyms. Outlining the finer distinctions between the two concepts will allow us to develop some thoughts on the present-day significance and instantiation of both Avarice and Greed. I don't pretend to be an etymologist, nor am I a scholar of words, and I'm certainly not a native speaker of English or German. What follows, therefore, is a rather personal and perhaps even raptorial appropriation of some insights culled from some dictionaries and texts on Greed and Avarice.

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So, what do we mean when we use the words Greed and Avarice and what do they stand for? And how are they related? Since we're in Oxford, let's start with the *Oxford Dictionary* (the compact one...). Looking up Avarice, we find the following entry:

Avarice

Noun: extreme greed for wealth or material gain.

- Derivates: avaricious adjective.

- Origin: from Latin avarus 'greedy'.

Avarice, then, at least according to the *Compact Oxford Dictionary*, is a *form of greed*.

It is an *extreme* manifestation of it. Avarice differs from mere greed in its **intensity**.

That's probably why speaking about an 'avaricious greed' makes sense, but talking about a 'greedy form of avarice' does not.

But intensity is not the only distinctive aspect of Avarice as opposed to Greed.

Another difference between the two dispositions has to do with what one is greedy *for*.

The Oxford dictionary adds that Avarice is the extreme greed for a *specific* set of goods, namely *wealth or material gain*. Perhaps Greed and Avarice also differ in their *object* or direction? A look at the definition of Greed seems to confirm this. Here's the *Compact Oxford Dictionary* again:

Greed: noun: intense and selfish desire for food, wealth, or power.

What's interesting is the *wider scope* that in the definition is allowed for greed. Greed is characterised as an intense desire (let's ignore the selfish aspect for the moment) for *food*, wealth, or power. The food part is interesting. We usually don't label someone who has an intense desire for food as avaricious. When a plate with food is passed around and someone takes what is considered more than his appropriate share, we call this person greedy, but not avaricious (although we could attribute his taking the largest part from the plate to his voracious eating habits). So, apparently, the **direction** the greed takes, the object towards it is oriented, is important in order for some instance of greed to be *suitably* labelled as avarice. Things like food normally don't count as the right type of object, but wealth and power (and both usually have something to do with each other) apparently do.

This, I think, points towards yet another important difference between Greed and Avarice. Avarice has a **higher degree of psychological complexity or density** than mere greed. What do I mean by that and why is it important? In the definition of Greed just mentioned, Greed is characterised as a *desire*. We desire all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons, and as a result of all kinds of circumstances. The thought I would like you to consider is this. We can be greedy about what we want and what we need, but we're only justifiably considered avaricious when we have an intense, selfish, desire for (some of the) things we want. This refers, of course, to the well-known distinction between needs and wants, where our needs are taken to be these things, conditions, goods, services, etc. that are required, while wants are desires about some things without us 'really' needing them. When I'm thirsty I need some suitable liquid.

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Different kinds of liquids could suit my need, but some of us prefer champagne, or, in some strange cases, beer, above water.

Greed is so to speak the *generic* form or basis of Avarice. Greed is a more direct, or unmediated, psychological state. As such it is more closely connected to our needs. Or, to put this thought in hopelessly inaccurate wording: Greed is a psychological / emotional state that is (intimately) connected to the more *instinctual* aspects of our being, while Avarice is a psychological state associated with the more intentional and *purposeful* aspects of our being.

The direction our greediness takes—what we are greedy *for*—is important in this respect. Look at what is listed in the dictionary entries: wealth, material gain, power, ... These things surpass our basic needs. They are things we usually can do without, at least up to a certain level. We don't have to be extremely rich, powerful, etc. (They are also things that, on the whole, have been frowned upon in the history of our culture—albeit, not surprisingly perhaps, mostly by those who possess a great share of them, and want to teach those who don't have them a moral lesson.)

Here the notions of needs and wants and their relation to what I perceive as the higher degree of psychological complexity or density of the notion of avarice are important. As we have already seen, the improper character of avarice has something to do with its high degree of intensity. But this is only part of the story. It also has to do with the psychological *density* of the emotional or psychological stance and with the *direction* of our greediness. I offered the thought that avarice as a psychological state has something to do with our purposeful being, while greed seems to be connected to the instinctive aspects of our lives. Given the fact that people sometimes *need* some

things, we excuse them for being greedy in trying to fulfil these needs, but this becomes harder when our greed reaches out for those things we want over and beyond what we need. Normally, greediness, taken as the generic form of avarice, is considered a mental state that is less within our control. Avarice carries with it a *higher degree of controllability* and hence of *responsibility*. Avaricious people are more readily blamed because being avaricious is taken to be more a matter of choice than at least some instances of being greedy.

This leads me to a *next observation*. There is often, but certainly not always, a *difference in how greed and avarice are evaluated*. Greed can sometimes be excused, pardoned or condoned, while avarice is mostly condemned (except in some liberal interpretations of it, like in Mandeville's fable of private vices and public benefits...). Avarice, so we learn from the dictionaries, is an *improper* manifestation of Greed. It is an 'excessive' (*Wiki*), or 'inordinate' (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*) manifestation of greed. As such, avarice, oversteps the legitimate boundaries of socially and personally acceptable or condonable manifestations of greed. (This doesn't mean that Greed is always condoned. We can be *too* greedy for the things we want, and even for the things we need—more on this in a minute).

Both Avarice and Greed have, of course, has a long and intense history of public denunciation. Avarice, for example, the Catholic tradition takes its rank alongside 'Lust,' 'Gluttony,' 'Sloth,' 'Wrath,' 'Envy,' and 'Pride' as one of the seven deadly (?) sins in. Hundreds of years of theology can't have been all wasted, so there's a good chance that the Catholic tradition can tell us something worthwhile about avarice. Here's the way it is explained in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (dating from 1907):

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Avarice (from Latin *avarus*, "greedy"; "to crave") is the *inordinate love for riches*. Its special malice, broadly speaking, lies in that it makes the *getting and keeping* of money, possessions, and the like, a purpose in itself to live for. It does not see that these things are valuable only as instruments for the conduct of a rational and harmonious life, due regard being paid of course to the special social condition in which one is placed. It is called a capital vice because it has as its object that for the *gaining or holding* of which many other sins are committed. It is more to be dreaded in that it often cloaks itself as a virtue, or insinuates itself under the pretext of making a decent provision for the future. In so far as avarice is an incentive to injustice in *acquiring and retaining* of wealth, it is frequently a grievous sin. In itself, however, and in so far as it implies simply an excessive desire of, or pleasure in, riches, it is commonly not a mortal sin.

This *classic* definition of Avarice directs our attention to yet another defining characteristic of Avarice as distinct from mere Greed. In addition to its intensity, direction, psychological density and valuational characteristics, Avarice differs from mere Greed in its **extent** and **duration**. This also has something to do with the higher degree of psychological density of avarice. Not only *what* the avaricious person is greedy for is relevant, but also *how* and to what extent this specific type of greed permeates the avaricious person's total life and society is important. When we call someone avaricious, we normally mean that this person not only sometimes manifests avaricious behaviour—like in trying to accumulate wealth and power on such and such

an occasion—but that he or she is an avaricious *person*. It is used as a designation of a (stable) character or personality trait. In order for someone to be intelligibly labelled as avaricious, this person should normally exhibit the avaricious trait in a consistent manner. The avaricious person leads an avaricious *life*, meaning that he habitually acts avariciously. This, of course, heightens the moral culpability of the avarice. We normally don't blame people for having such and such negative disposition. We blame people when they act on them. Since avarice permeates the life of the avaricious man, he is morally reprehensible (I'll get back to this later in my talk and add some nuances). This, so to say, is a further aspect of the psychological density of avarice. All this, as we will see, will turn out to have important consequences for the present-day meaning and evaluation of avarice.

Now comes an important further distinction. Up till now we have contrasted Avarice with what we have called 'mere' or 'generic' Greed—the backbone of Avarice. All this does *not* mean that a *form* of Greed can develop that is highly intense, that has a high psychological density and is directed to wants and not merely at needs, a form of Greed that is *as* pervasive in our lives as Avarice, and that is generally morally condemned just as Avarice is condemned. What, then, one could ask, is the difference between *this* type of Greed and Avarice?

The simplest answer would be that there is none, that what we call Avarice is precisely this heightened form of 'generic' or 'mere' Greed. For the purpose of this paper, however, I would like to introduce a distinction between this intense type of Greed on the one hand and Avarice on the other hand. At the beginning of this part of the paper I suggested that although Greed and Avarice are intimately related, something

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important could get lost when we use the terms as synonyms and I suggested that developing the finer distinctions between the two concepts would allow us to develop some thoughts on the present-day significance and instantiation of both Avarice and Greed. What then is this difference between this developed type of Greed and Avarice?

The distinction between the two that I would like to put forth—again, not claiming originality, as we shall see—can be traced back to what seems to be a conflation of two distinct types of activities in the definition of Avarice in the Catholic Encyclopaedia. Avarice, in this definition, has to do with “the getting and keeping of money,” with “gaining or holding,” and with “acquiring and retaining.” I would suggest to reserve the term Greed for the getting, gaining and acquiring bit, and the term Avarice for the keeping, holding and retaining part. This distinction retains some of our basic intuitions about the meaning of the terms, and conforms to our earlier analysis. The avaricious man holds on to that what he greedily has acquired. Greedy people don’t necessarily have to be avaricious as well—although, of course, they often are—but avaricious people are always greedy. Avarice, remember, was a form of (mere) Greed. I think that the getting-part is the most basic or generic aspect of avarice. It is intimately connected to the fact that avarice is a form of greed.

Avarice and Greed, of course, have been with us for a long, long, long time. But some extra conditions have to be met before Avarice as a common characteristic of man and societies can fully take off. Some things lend themselves more easily to be avaricious for. Full-blown Avarice can only manifest itself when what is amassed can also be easily stored and hoarded. There’s little reason in being avaricious of perishable goods, although, of course, we can be very greedy in our trying to acquire them. And

here we have a link to the second part of this part of our paper. Earlier we saw that Avarice according to most definitions has to do with money. Could it be, then, that when the role, impact and essence of money changes, also Greed and Avarice change?

And here, at last, we come to what should be the main part of this part of our paper. The basic idea is the following. The way in which what we usually call Greed (in its highly developed form) and Avarice can and do manifest themselves, depends to a large extent on the *characteristics of the society* the avaricious or greedy man actually lives in. And as a correlate, we can say that the way Greed and Avarice are recognized as such, and evaluated accordingly, depends on the social and economical context as well. In the preceding paragraphs we have endeavoured an analytical exploration of the concepts. In this part I would like to develop and comment on some thoughts on the ways how avarice and greed are formed, shaped and transformed in and by modern-day society (and, as will turn out, economy) and how they have become transformed from religious and moral vices into defining characteristics of our lives and society.

I don't claim nor have the pretention of being completely original. In the following paragraphs I rely heavily on Georg Simmel's writings on money, psychology and culture. Money plays a central and crucial role in Simmel's oeuvre and his *magnum opus Philosophie des Geldes*, originally published in 1900, is without doubt one of the central and most interesting texts of contemporary philosophy *cum* sociology and psychology.

Georg Simmel analyses Greed (*Geldgier*) and Avarice (*Geiz*) within the context of the developing money economy and its impact on social and mental life—its impact on 'Der Stil des Lebens,' the Style of Life that is associated with and endemic in a

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culture that is thoroughly permeated and influenced by money and by the developed money economy. We will later get back to money and how Simmel sees its impact on personal and social life, but for now we just need to remember that Simmel in the following quotations refers to the ways in which greed and avarice in their money-infused forms are played out.

In the analytical first part of his *Philosophy of Money*—I use the translation by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby as can be found in the third enlarged edition edited by David Frisby and published in 2004—Simmel treats both Greed and Avarice in a chapter titled *Money in the sequence of purposes*.

Immediately Simmel notices the relativity, or perhaps more suitably put, the relationality, of Greed and Avarice to the level of social and economic development of the society in which they occur. Thus, he writes that he “specifically wish[es] to emphasize the *dependence* of these concepts on the (...) specific economic conditions.” (239) This is important to realize, because, according to Simmel, “the same degree of passion in acquiring and holding on to money may be quite normal for the particular importance of money in one context but may belong to the hypertrophied categories in another.” (239) Both the *content* (and its psychological effects) and the *evaluation* of Greed and Avarice are relative to the social context in which they are played out.

How do Greed and Avarice change when money is involved? Greed and Avarice, to be sure, are older than the fully developed, capitalistic money economy. There have been, after all, greedy and avaricious persons long before money reached the centrality it now has acquired in the modern world. But when money takes on this defining and central role in society, greed and avarice follow suit. The **content** and

effects of greed and avarice become moulded on a monetary template. This, according to Simmel, has some serious consequences. Money is not a trifle thing. Money is so much more than mere money. Money changes everything.

In earlier times, Avarice as a deadly sin was often linked to money in that it was characterised as an ‘inordinate love for riches’ and having money was an important form of riches. But when money starts to fundamentally alter and shape society and personal life, the very essence of money—more on this later—colours the ways in which Greed and Avarice are realised. This, I believe is what Simmel is after when he states that “[i]f the *character of money as an ultimate purpose* oversteps that intensity for an individual in which it is the appropriate expression of the economic culture of his circle, then greed and avarice emerge.” (239) Modern-day Greed and Avarice still have to do with riches, and more specifically with wealth in the sense of having (lots of) money—just as before—but money, now as so much more than a mere, or even the supreme, *means* for acquiring (other) worldly goods. Modern day Greed and Avarice are focussed on acquiring and holding on to money, not because it enables us to realize specific goals, but as a *goal in itself*—money as an ultimate *purpose*.

But not only have the content of Greed and Avarice have changed, also our **attitudes** towards them and our **evaluation** of them change, and this has to do with their visibility and invisibility in modern society.

Simmel formulates an intriguing observation—an observation that is crucial to a philosophical assessment of present-day Greed and Avarice. “Generally speaking,” so he writes, “the threshold for the beginning of a real greed for money will be relatively

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high in a developed and lively money economy, but relatively *low* at primitive economic levels, whereas the reverse is true for avarice.” (239, italics added)

In the modern world-crazy and world-driven world, it seems that we’re not (so) greedy anymore, but all the more avaricious. But isn’t this bizarre? Aren’t we living in the most avaricious but also most greedy of times? Well, perhaps not really when you look at it this way.

When greedily acquiring money and wealth becomes the norm, we’re no longer fully considered greedy, except in exceptional circumstances—except when the money-hamsters become so overactive (and hypertrophied) that their behaviour and disposition start to stand out. City boys and bankers, to name but two, are often cited as examples of Greedy persons, because their greed surpasses the ‘normal.’ But even then, most of us, if we ever had the chance, would do just the same. Does that mean that we, *hoi polloi*, are not greedy? I don’t think so. We all do what bankers do—at least in the sense that we all try to maximize our money acquisition as fully as possible. Look, e.g., at the frenzied reaction of the masses to the financial crisis. Do we care about people loosing their jobs—well, perhaps some of us do, but most of the people I spoke to on these issues were first and foremost interested in the plummeting interest rates of their savings accounts. And look at the risks the Kaupthing clients took when they gambled with their saving in order to have that extra percent of interest—something that at the time was considered a ‘sensible thing to do.’

No, we’re not greedy any more. But this is not because we don’t obsessively seek to acquire (more) money any more—on the contrary—but because in a fully developed money economy, this frenzied race for the accumulation of money becomes

all the more common and ‘normal.’ What once used to be considered as greedy behaviour or as a greedy disposition, now has become the standard and the norm. Greed—to put it poetically—*disappears into normality*.

This is related to another striking development. Because Greed becomes the norm, it can no longer be considered a vice—on pains of considering the normal inordinate (which is, of course, just what those who are critical of the money economy do). Doing things that used to be considered greedy are now considered sensible, normal, an instance of some personal and social *realpolitik*. Given the ‘conditions of a quick turnover and easy money’ Greed—or what was once regarded as Greed—is now *a-greed to*. Actions that once would have been frowned upon lose their character of immorality or are being moved out of the moral sphere altogether—‘hey, after all, it’s what people do, you know.’ We could call this the strange case of the ‘*demoralization*’ of Greed.

And what happens to Avarice? If Simmel is right, then, that what was once considered to be a ‘reasonable’ way of dealing with your money, is nowadays all the more readily seen as ‘avaricious.’ We live in Avaricious times, but not as we know it. We’re more often considered avaricious now, not because we hold on to our money more *now* than we used to do *then*, but precisely because this holding on to your money becomes the *abnormal* and being modest in spending is no longer seen as a virtue, but as a vice—precisely because not spending your money goes against the grain of society. Here’s Simmel again: “Whoever is considered thrifty and reasonable in spending money under restricted circumstances little affected by the money economy *will appear to be avaricious under conditions of a quick turnover and easy money.*”

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(239) Under ‘conditions of a quick turnover and easy money’ holding on to your money indeed becomes something foolish. Why lead a miserable life when cash is cheap? Avarice, and acts that used to be considered avaricious, in part still hold on to their negative moral appreciation. But *not* because Avarice is an “incentive to injustice in acquiring and retaining of wealth” (remember the *Catholic Encyclopedia*?), but rather because it seems to go against what is the rational thing to do in an economy and society ruled by ‘easy money,’ because extravagant spending has become the norm. (Don’t the British have the highest credit card debt per person in Europe?)

On the other hand, Avarice—or more accurately put: acts and dispositions that used to be called avaricious—gradually seems to shed its negative connotation. Holding on to your money seems to become *salonfähig*. We are even urged to ‘spend wisely’ and, as we all know by now: *Geiz ist Geil!* (In Germany and Austria, for example, until recently an ad for Saturn, an electronics chain, ran with this slogan)

Holding on to your money, then seems to have become both wise and foolish both at the same time. What to make of this double movement? We could call this the ‘*democratization*’ of Avarice in the sense that Avarice becomes more common, and the common become more Avaricious.

All this may seem paradoxical. We live in greedy times, but Greed, as the inappropriate manifestation of it, has all but disappeared. And the reverse is true for Avarice. We live in a time of extravagance and over-spending, yet at the same time being avaricious seems to have become one of the hallmarks of our times.

So this, then is my conclusion: we live in the greediest yet also most temperate of times. We live in the most avaricious, yet also most extravagant of times.