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MEDVL 1101

18 November 2022

Greed: The Double-Edged Sword and the Powerful Turnip

Throughout the centuries, greed has been hidden beneath the surface across all areas of society. And it hasn't been hidden by a select few, but by countless individuals worldwide daily. Greed refers to the incessant need for wealth and riches but can also be seen in small everyday actions, whether the person at fault recognizes it or not. It could even be something as small as the urge to take one more cookie from the cookie jar that signifies the presence of greed. But if greed has been so common throughout history and nearly impossible to get rid of, how important have the effects been in dictating what people have agreed to be a relatively good person in society?

The Middle Ages is the perfect period to find examples of the presence of greed at all societal levels and relate their ideas and themes to the quality of a person's character. In this essay, I will compare and contrast definitions of greed and examine its presence from different perspectives to see how impactful the double-sidedness of the greedy actions of individuals is in determining whether or not they are a 'good person'.

To better understand how I refer to 'greed', it is important to take a step back and look at some of the contexts behind what it is by looking at some of its history and definitions. In *The Early History of Greed*, Richard Newhauser describes greed as it evolved throughout the ages and lays out some of its overarching themes. Of the many definitions and associations he discusses, Newhauser has found that "*Philargyria* and *pleonexia* are the two most common"

(Newhauser 6). While there are countless ways to perceive greed, these two encapsulate the most and are the easiest to comprehend and recognize. The first and more narrowly defined, *Philargyria*, "[depicts] a literal love of money as the most material of worldly goods" (Newhauser 7). Money is deeply ingrained in our society because it is what we give and acquire through goods and services. The world runs on money, so it makes sense that it would be the material possession most commonly associated with greed and the desire for more. The second and broader definition is precisely that: *Pleonexia* - "The 'desire to have more'[,] which can be identified in its etymology is somewhat open-ended" (Newhauser 7). 'Having more' generally means possessing more things of value. And since money is usually the best way to attain those things and give them value, it tends to be the most sought-after possession. The only difference between the two definitions is that Pleonexia is "regardless of its object" (Newhauser 92) and does not favor one specific thing. Rather than the love of money, it could be more relative to jealousy, with the desire instead to have more than someone else. These two definitions can be seen in nearly every greedy action, where a person is doing whatever they can to acquire more.

The first story on the first day of *The Decameron* offers a glimpse at how greed, among other things, is often only relevant to how society views a person's goodness as it relates to one's reputation. This tends to make people desire more while going after their prize without others finding out. In this short story, Ser Ciappelletto, "perhaps the worst man ever born" (Boccacio 26), does quite the opposite, not caring what people think of his desire to do more evil. The true story begins when he falls ill shortly after arriving in a town where his reputation and deeds are less known. Before his death, he is given the chance to meet with "an ancient friar of good and holy ways" (Bocaccio 28) with the goal of portraying his life as a good one before his death. He accomplishes this by lying in any way possible, eventually convincing the friar that he was not

only good enough for a proper ritual but worthy of saintly recognition after death. When the ‘worst man’ and an ‘ancient friar’ come together, there would normally either be a large disagreement in beliefs or, in avoidance, one would play to the other’s side of the coin, which is exactly what Ciappelletto did. He had no intention of coming clean with any sort of truth, so he instead played to what the friar most liked to hear. He told numerous false stories with pleasant endings, each with a theme to the friar’s liking.

Rather than the desire for something new and not in his possession, this tale shows greed as Ciappelletto’s need for more of something he already had in abundance. Ciappelletto was certainly greedy with material possessions and money, but even more so when it came to performing evil deeds. Going into the conversation with the friar, his mindset was one of not caring about one final trick before his death. As he described his situation in terms of sin and God’s watching; “I have done our good Lord so many injuries whilst I lived, that to do Him another now that I am dying will be neither here nor there” (Boccacio 28). Ciappelletto’s complete lack of care for committing yet another sin even on the brink of death shows that there was never a question of whether or not he would do something evil. For the average person, there is a conversation that goes on in their head when faced with a choice. For Ciappelletto, that voice became a bit quieter with each vile decision he made until eventually, it became nonexistent. As a result, it became easy for him to “[make] up his mind without delay” (Bocaccio 27) when asked to commit another sin. Greed became so deeply rooted in his character and in his need to do bad things that his life became completely revolved around it. He always desired to do one more evil. But in the context of the story, it didn’t matter who he was in the past when he arrived in the new city. Since people had no idea who he was and his reputation only existed elsewhere, it was simple for him to become a good person in the eyes of society. Rather than

showing his true greedy dark side, he created a false greedy good side. While to those who knew him well he was a terrible man, to those who heard of him in the new city he became a saint. By simply switching the allegiance of his greed from his past evil ways to the insane desire to only do the right things as told through his stories, he created an entirely new person. While this can mostly be attributed to the role of reputation, it also shows the power of the double-sidedness of greed. A few simple stories of great desire were the only thing needed to completely flip Ciappelletto's character from the 'worst man' to a saint.

Even though Ciappelletto was given the chance to resolve his old failures and redeem himself as something of a better man, greed had taken such deep roots in his decision-making that goodness became an impossibility. I would argue that this comes as a result of greed playing a major role in determining the quality of a person's life and also in leading them towards good or evil. Greed at its best could be the desire to do good, which would be impossible to argue as a weakening trait. To connect the two definitions of greed, I would also argue that having Philargyria but with the desire to do good with possessions acquired could be a possibility. The main disagreement with this claim would come from those with the mindset of a monk. They believed that greed in any form remained a sin. In their "combat against avarice, the chief means to be used by the monk were charity (*agape*) and an almost complete poverty, or state of 'possessionlessness'" (Newhauser 52). The monks fought the desire for possessions by giving away anything that wasn't essential for their survival. They held this belief for most kinds of sin, thinking that avoiding them completely would be the most surefire way to lead a good life and become a person worthy of heaven. While I respect their commitment to holding so firmly to their truths, I disagree with the idea that avoiding something completely will lead to the best outcome in every situation. A view contrasting the monks in *The Early History of Greed* was the

idea that “one could legitimately seek worldly power if one performed good deeds through it” (Newhauser 88-89). While I agree with this way of thinking, I can see some of the potential risks involved. The goal of acquiring and giving more is ideal, but it also remains common knowledge that power can be corruptible, so striving for more would also come with the risk of becoming greedier with more achievements. That said, I would still say that if a person had strong enough character to dedicate themselves to good while also having the drive to both acquire and give more, it could mean the opposite of greed with poor intentions. Poor intentions matched with greed can result in an even worse person, even if the person tries to get rid of everything. As Newhauser described this issue: “The sinner has not rid himself of what is truly contemptible, that is, the *desire* for wealth; he has merely ‘ignited his inborn raw material of evil through the want of external goods’” (Newhauser 12). The ‘inborn raw material’ can go either way, determined by whether a person is good or bad to start. ‘Igniting’ the good or evil of a person with greed will ultimately result in a better or worse person. In this way, desire can truly be bittersweet, heavily multiplying either the good or evil of a person.

Another story from the Middle Ages examining desire from multiple perspectives is *The Rapularius*, the story of two brothers and a turnip. The story is of two brothers of different societal standings, one a farmer and fallen noble and the other a rich noble with close ties to the royal family of the kingdom. One day, the farmer is lucky enough to pull up a turnip of astonishing size, unlike anything seen before. He brings it to the king with hopes of reward and is indeed rewarded with gold and numerous other riches. When the rich brother learns of what occurred, he decides to give a gift of his own to the king with the hope of profit. And so he gives the king all of his wealth, to which the king is impressed and thankful. So thankful in fact, that he decides to give the rich brother a rare gift: the turnip. Letting his anger get the better of him, the

no-longer rich brother schemes to kill the farmer. He tells of a mountain of riches waiting nearby, which the farmer hurries to find, only to become trapped. Before the scheming brother can return to kill him, the farmer manages to trick a passing scholar by convincing him that the trap contains all manners of knowledge and wisdom. They swap places and the story ends.

In her examination of *The Rapularius*, Sally Livingston found three predominant themes, each looking at a different perspective of greed. The first theme, she claims, "teaches that it is not greedy to expect a return gift; rather it is the expectation for profit, a multiplication of one's own gift, that is problematic" (296). This comes from the brothers both giving to the king and expecting something in return. I agree that expecting profit is a greedy action, but I would also disagree with Livingston's first point that expecting a return gift is not greedy. I think that the expectation of a return gift, whatever the value, is greedy in and of itself. When I give something to someone, I believe that since it was my choice to give, it shouldn't be required that they give back, even though it is common courtesy. Livingston goes on to say something along these lines: "It is not the gift but the act of giving that is important" (298). This statement I fully agree with, as I believe that the destination is not what matters, but rather what happens on the journey.

The second theme comes from the farmer's hopes of finding even more riches, which is that "once received, wealth can turn into greed, provoking the desire for more" (298). I partially agree with this statement because I do understand that a newfound wealth could make someone more greedy. However, I think that newfound wealth will only bring out more of what is inside a person before they attain it. If they have strong morals and character before attaining wealth, I strongly believe that rather than simply desiring more straight away, they will do with it what they think is best. This goes back to the argument against the monks' beliefs. I believe that a person will have similar character before and after attaining wealth, and greed is only there to

bring out more of who they truly are as a person. While it may seem that the farmer could have been a good man before attaining wealth, the actions he takes would say otherwise. Not only does he go to the king in hopes of a return gift, but then desires even more riches shortly after. The rich brother's response to the king's gift is enough evidence of his weak character. The role of greed throughout all of these actions is to multiply the power of their desire, which starts with the farmer simply wanting a small gift and ends with his brother wanting nothing more than to see him dead.

The third and final theme is simply the definition of Pleonexia. At the end of the story, the passing scholar can't be tempted by any amount of money, showing his strong will against Philargyria. While this is the case, he falls for the temptations of attaining knowledge and wisdom instead. Livingston summarizes this by saying; "greed extends beyond the desire for riches into non-tangible assets, as well" (296). This shows that while money is tempting for plenty of people, it is not what everyone wants. Greed has a stronger bond to something when there is more attachment to it, rather than the thing simply being of high value to society. People will naturally be more drawn and awaken their inner greed more when tempted by something that they want specifically rather than something that everyone is supposed to want. Similar to before, I think this is also double-sided, and if a person is driven to do good, with more accomplishment would come more desire to do even more good.

Greed by itself is incapable of completely determining whether a person is good or bad, but as I have proven, it can very powerfully multiply and bring out a person's essence and morality. While it can't stand alone, a person's desire to accomplish something can reveal important characteristics classifying them as someone with good or poor intentions. So the next

time you get the urge to stick your hand in the cookie jar one too many times, consider those around you to whom you'll be revealing a piece of your character.

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