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Ryan K. Balot: Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens

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Introduction

GREED is central to ancient Athenian history, ideology, and political thought. It motivated political action and occupied the attention of contemporary analysts of civic conflict and imperialism. I want to explore various facets of greed in Athenian society and political discourse from roughly 600 to 300 B.C. I use the term *greed* to refer to acquisitiveness or an excessive desire to get more. Greed is a primarily materialistic type of desire, which is characteristically expressed by the attempt to satisfy bodily urges through the acquisition of money, material goods, and power. Occasionally, materialistic acquisitiveness shades off into an excessive desire to get power for its own sake. But, for reasons that will become clear, I do not focus in the first instance on ambition, that is, the excessive desire for honor or status.¹

The most important observation we can make is that greed is rarely something an agent predicates of himself. Rather, members of a moral community use the concept to criticize others, and classical Athenians developed a wide array of terms for precisely this purpose. In archaic and classical Athens, this critique tended to take one of two basic forms. The first is more important from the perspective of society and hence more important for the present book: the idea that greedy agents violated canons of fair distribution among equal individuals or groups. As a violation of equality and fairness, greed was inevitably linked to injustice and therefore identified as a leading cause of civic strife. Perceptions of greed thereby became a primary stimulus to political action, and greed itself became a dominant feature of political thought. The second form of critique focused on the greedy individual himself, rather than his violation of the just claims of others. Here the critique is that greedy desires reveal an impoverished conception of what it means to live as a human being. They diminish the person as such and detract from his genuine happiness and well-being. This is the ethical perspective on greed and it tends to

¹ Robertson 2000 offers an excellent and highly stimulating account of the materialism involved in greed in contemporary America. As Plato (*Rep.* 558e–559d) saw, there are, of course, natural and necessary desires to get more, but greed by definition is an *excessive* form of desire. By contrast with materialistic greed, seeking honor was seen as being the proper aim of political life; see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b22–23.

focus on individuals apart from their social setting. Because the second critique tends to occupy philosophers rather than practical political agents, it is less important than the first for understanding the relationship between ideas and history.

Greed not only featured in the contemporary *perceptions* of politics but also motivated individuals and groups—and even Athens itself—throughout Athenian history in the archaic and classical periods. Greed does not respect the scholar's distinction between social history and literary representation. As Greenblatt has said, "Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text."² My working hypothesis is that as political events influenced literary and philosophical condemnations of greed, so too did key texts help stimulate certain types of political action.³ Accusations of greed inspired radical attempts at self-justification; they unified the self-proclaimed "oppressed" and motivated them to seek justice; they led to philosophical defenses of self-aggrandizement and critiques of conventional morality. Finally, as I argue in the epilogue, traditional critiques of greed stimulated Plato to conceive of justice in a distinctive way and to develop a hierarchical opposition between material appetites and other, "higher," forms of desire.

To substantiate and complicate this account of greed, I first analyze Aristotle's treatment of greed in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 5 and in his analysis of human nature, commercial trade, and civic strife in the *Politics*. This chapter, by far the most technical discussion in the book, deals with questions of the psychology of action and the difficult Aristotelian schema of the virtues and vices. Having elicited from Aristotle a working concept of greed and its place in Greek moral evaluation, I then turn to the heart of the book—the evolving role of greed in Athenian history and political thought.

The complexity of Aristotle's account, I argue, results from the long Athenian discourse on greed, which began in the sixth century, when Solon adapted traditional ethical models in order to censure the greed and injustice he witnessed among both the upper and lower classes. Solon articulated a civic definition of the individual according to which self-restraint and distributive fairness are the core features of proper political participation. In the fifth century, Herodotus and Thucydides realigned the terms of Solon's discourse. They proposed that Athenian democracy

² Greenblatt 1980, 5.

³ In interpreting the relationship between text and context, I have been most influenced by LaCapra 1983; 1985; Chartier 1990; Baker 1990; Kramer 1989.

created ideological harmony between the elite and the demos, which enabled Athenians to solve the problem of greed within the polis by channeling their acquisitive impulses outward against other Greeks. The greed that had once characterized competing groups within Athens now became the prevailing attribute of the city as a unified whole. But this ideological consensus was destroyed in the late fifth century, when members of the elite, resentful over the demos's greed in managing the empire, initiated two oligarchic revolutions. Their conduct justified the contemporary interpretation of the oligarchic coups of 411 and 404 as exemplifying elite greed in action. In the post-revolutionary period, Lysias used the Athenian experience of elite greed as a democratic rhetorical weapon, while Xenophon rehabilitated the aristocratic ideal by showing that civic worth was the exclusive prerogative of the traditional aristocracy. In the *Republic*, Plato confronted the legacy of aristocratic greed by designing a polis that was specifically free from greed and injustice and ruled by self-controlled, fair-minded aristocrats.

Although I trace the history of and discourse on greed from Homer through Plato, my analysis is selective rather than comprehensive. I focus on turning points in the archaic and classical periods—the Solonian crisis, the advent of imperialism, the oligarchic revolutions in the late fifth century, and the early fourth-century recollection of those revolutions. I have excluded material that would naturally figure in an encyclopedic study. In particular, I do not offer an account of the Peisistratid tyranny, because our sources on the contemporary discourse in that period are basically non-existent. I also forgo treatment of the Attic orators, because my specific focus is on how the discourse on greed was made practically effective in the oligarchic revolutions of the late fifth century, and on how Plato's philosophical account of justice constituted a response to those revolutions.⁴

My focus on greed, I am aware, runs the risk of anachronistically inventing a category of investigation that the Greeks themselves would not have recognized. A more familiar approach, no doubt, would be to conduct a semantic study of the Greek term *pleonexia* (greediness), and to footnote passages where other words seem to mean the same thing; Weber did exactly this in a Bonn dissertation of 1967.⁵ The past decade, in fact, has witnessed the publication of two wide-ranging semantic studies, Fisher's *Hybris* and Cairns's *Aidōs*. Both aim to identify the precise meaning and semantic range of their key words. Both employ a rigorous philological method that scrutinizes the usage of these important

⁴ In future work, however, I plan to approach Isocrates' treatment of the Athenians' imperialistic greed.

⁵ Weber 1967.

terms in an extraordinary range of texts in the archaic and classical periods. Both are fundamentally similar to North's excellent study *Sophrosyne* in 1966. The result, in each case, is a comprehensive account that illuminates the meaning of the targeted words and, secondarily, the meaning of passages in which they are found. In their scope and discipline these works are the worthy fruits of classical philology and demonstrate its formidable powers to clarify meaning.⁶

Still, I have chosen to call this a book about greed, rather than *pleonexia*, for several reasons. First, although greed provoked criticism in the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Solon, none of them used the term *pleonexia*. Barring one exception, this term is found only in extant prose literature.⁷ Hence, focusing on the term *pleonexia* runs the risk, in its own right, of artificially hiving off entire domains of culture that are relevant to the concept of greed. The enabling assumption of this project is the possibility of expressing the concept of greed in other words. Thus, even though *pleonexia* is the most important single term for my history,⁸ I also discuss passages where the concept of greed is being discussed in other words. Among the more significant of these synonyms are *koros* (greed or satiety), *philochrēmata* (love of money), *aischrokerdeia* (base covetousness), and *epithumia chrēmātōn* (desire for money), along with a variety of periphrastic expressions suggesting the idea of grasping for more in excess of what is needed, useful, or just.

Second, a more straightforwardly lexical method would itself construct arbitrary categories of analysis. The semantic range of key cultural abstractions—such as *hubris*, *aidōs*, and *sōphrosunē*—is wide enough that tracing instances of a particular term and its associated forms sometimes involves discussing passages that have little in common with each other, apart from the presence of the term in question. The lexical method usually makes no attempt to clarify the connections between apparently disparate passages, or to show what intervening events and thoughts brought about a transformation.⁹ The method depends on the desired

⁶ Fisher 1992, Cairns 1993, North 1966. The English translations of their titles are, roughly, “Arrogance,” “Sense of Shame, Modesty,” and “Temperance.”

⁷ The term *pleonexia* occurs only once in extant classical poetry, in Euripides *Iphigeneia at Aulis* 509, while its associated noun (*pleonektēs*) and verb (*pleonektein*) do not appear at all; see Weber 1967, 77. See Weber 1967, 16–25, for an account of roughly equivalent terms in the era before Herodotus.

⁸ Of *pleonexia* the philosopher Gregory Vlastos once said, “I despair of an adequate English translation,” though he fell back on “greed” or “covetousness” as the best rough equivalents (Vlastos 1973, 116n16).

⁹ Cairns 1993 does engage with other terms, such as *aischros* (shameful, ugly) and *sebas* (reverence), but generally focuses on *aidōs* (shame, modesty) and grammatically related forms of *aidōs*. As Adkins 1994 points out, however, major social changes, such as the Athenian Empire, “come and go without leaving a ripple” (182) on the surface of the study

goal, and my goal here is to explain how the social practices of greed gave rise to a sophisticated discourse and how, in turn, that discourse shaped and stimulated cultural practices, self-representations, and political behavior in a particularly important period of Athenian history.

Before I turn to Aristotle, a variety of specifically Greek concepts about ethics and politics must be set in relation to one another. The most straightforward way to erect a framework is to examine a paradigmatic figure, who reappears throughout this book—the Callicles of Plato’s *Gorgias*.¹⁰ Callicles, I stress, is a useful paradigm, but, like all paradigms, he fails to capture the specificity of many cases that must be understood on their own terms. Callicles is best known for his attack on conventional justice, and his assertion of another, in his view more genuine, conception of justice based on what he calls the “law of nature.” Callicles disparages conventional morality as a self-interested tool of power. The craven masses, he argues, “frighten the stronger and those able to have more [*pleon echein*], so that they do not have more [*pleon echōsin*] than themselves, and they say that the desire to get more [*to pleonektein*] is shameful and unjust, and that injustice [*to adikein*] consists in seeking to have more than others [*to pleon tōn allōn zētein echein*]” (483c1–5). The ordinary mass of humanity, in other words, has set up a self-regarding system of law and morality in order to prevent the powerful from taking whatever they happen to desire.

Callicles’ representation of conventional justice already invokes the key terms of the first critique of greed—that it is unjust. Even before describing his own desires, he begins by contesting the notions of justice and injustice promoted by the masses of ordinary citizens. His formulation must be understood against the background of the Greek conception of citizenship as a form of sharing in the political, economic, and religious life of the community.¹¹ The usual Greek expression for this “sharing” is *metechlein tēs politeias* (to share in the political community).¹² Citizens perceive themselves as possessing in common all the divisible goods of the community, in particular power (*kratos*), political office or honor (*timē*), and material goods (*chrēmata*). The simplest formulation we can offer is that citizens view justice as having an “equal share” (*to ison*), or a “just share” (*to dikaion*)—notions that are given content by an agreed-

of *aidōs*, which poses problems for the book’s attempt to place *aidōs* at the center of Greek ethics.

¹⁰ Following Dodds 1959, 12–15 (cf. Kerferd 1981, 52), I believe that Callicles was a real person in the late fifth century who held views similar to those attributed to him in the *Gorgias*.

¹¹ Ostwald 1996; Schofield 1999, 141–49.

¹² See, e.g., Aristotle *Politics* 1268a24, 1268a27–28, 1302b26–27, 1306b10–11.

upon principle of distribution.¹³ Consequently, citizens are opposed to those who want to have “more,” or to have a “greater share” (*to pleon*), and they therefore construe “injustice” as meaning “having more than a fair share.”¹⁴ Callicles’ argument, then, is that through defining appropriate “shares” in collective goods and through convincing others of the justice of their definitions, the weak masses keep the intelligent and powerful from seeking to have more than their share.

To conventional justice, Callicles opposes his own conception of “natural justice,” according to which powerful individuals follow their innate instincts to get more and more. He thus embraces greed and injustice, as they are conventionally understood: as the excessive desire to get more—more than one has, more than others have, and especially more than one deserves as a matter of *distributive* fairness. In his words, “Nature itself, I think, shows that it is just [*dikaion*] that the better man should have more [*pleon echein*] than the worse and the stronger more than the weaker. Nature shows that this is so in many areas—among other animals, and in whole cities and races of men, that the just share [*to dikaion*] is decided in this way: the stronger rules over [*archein*] the weaker and has more [*pleon echein*]” (483c9–d6).¹⁵ He considers the attempts by the powerful to gratify their desires to be a law of nature. Following the law of nature is Callicles’ recommendation for how it is best to live a human life—with disregard for conventional strictures, and in pursuit of power and the satisfactions of one’s natural desire to get more.¹⁶ Thus he contests the notion of distributive fairness to which he is subjected in conventional society, on the grounds that the powerful and intelligent deserve more than a conventionally determined “equal share”; they deserve, he imagines, as much as they can get.

¹³ The notion of having “equal shares” can derive from a principle of simple equality (often called “arithmetic equality”) or from a principle of “proportional equality” (or “geometric equality”). The first of these, characteristic of democracy, means simply that everyone is equal and therefore deserves an equal share; the second, characteristic of democracy’s critics, that in some morally relevant respect, such as the respective contributions they make to group projects, individuals are unequal and therefore deserve a correspondingly unequal (or proportional) share in collective distributions. On the idea of “two equalities,” see Harvey 1965, 1966; Vlastos 1973, 183–96.

¹⁴ Gutglueck 1988, 25–26, offers a brief consideration of some of these issues.

¹⁵ If understood generously, Callicles is offering a conception not simply of self-interest but of justice, which ultimately appeals to impartial notions that are independent of the aims of any given individual: see Cooper 1999d, 52–53; Irwin 1995, 102–4; Dodds 1959, 15. The principle of charity is crucial here, since Callicles’ initial claims point only to the self-interest of those able to employ brute force. Furthermore, even if Callicles sometimes suggests that he could fulfill his ideals as a democratic orator, his impulse is the tyrannical one, and he is an absolute elitist; see Dodds 1959, 13; Kahn 1983, 100.

¹⁶ Callicles’ notion of happiness is discussed by Irwin 1995, 104–6; Kahn 1983, 97–102; Cooper 1999d, 51–57; North 1966, 161–62.

This contest over what counts as *fair* distribution is a central part of the history I trace. Because all citizens “share in” the collective goods of their respective communities, a question of distributive justice immediately arises: according to what principle are such “shares” to be distributed to members of the community? In the *Politics*, Aristotle says that every polis lays claim to a sort of justice (1280a9–10), but the particular principle of distributive fairness in any given polis depends on the prevailing notion of proportional equality (*to kat’ analogian ison*), according to which citizens receive differential shares in collective goods depending on their relative worth and merit in promoting the common good.¹⁷ If distributive fairness is based on a concept of “the equal share” (*to ison*), then injustice in distribution means taking “the greater share” (*to pleon*), that is, taking more than one’s fair share of a community’s divisible goods. Through constructing unorthodox arguments about what counts as fair, Callicles attempts to justify his bitter rejection of equality and his repeated emphasis on getting “the greater share.” The ways in which such arguments were made is itself a crucial feature of Athenian history in our period.

Arguments must be made in the first place because the distributing community does not enforce its values by means of an “invisible hand,” nor does the power to enforce values emanate from any single or particular source, such as a tyrant, or the elite, or those in political power at a given moment. Rather, the members of a community enforce and maintain collective sentiments through their private and public relations with one another and, in particular, through their use of shared evaluative language.¹⁸ Hence, in the chapters that follow, I consider greed within a constellation of other values by which the members of a community enforce their shared notions of distributive fairness and of appropriate individual desires and deserts. Greed itself should be considered one of the most powerful evaluative tools in the arsenal of Athenian rhetoric. Those who invoked greed were by implication placing themselves on the side of the community and its interests, against those who were, through their excessive acquisitiveness, allegedly violating shared communal standards of fair distribution. But when is “enough” enough? And, conversely, when is “too much” too much?

As Aristotle recognized in his discussions of justice in the polis, in *Politics* 3 and 5, these questions cannot be answered on any abstract, a priori basis.¹⁹ But that does not mean they can be treated idiosyn-

¹⁷ *Politics* 1280a25–34, 1281a4–8, 1282b14–24, 1301a25–28.

¹⁸ On the capacity of language to enforce values, see the suggestive account of punishment found in Foucault 1979; within classical history, see Cohen 1992.

¹⁹ Of course, such questions *can* be answered aprioristically, as they were by Plato and Aristotle himself. But theorists’ answers hold relatively little weight in practical political

cratically. Instead, they are answered by arguments explicitly made within the prevailing conventions and ethos of particular political cultures in force at a given time. These conventions define the ethical framework within which particular answers are made possible.²⁰ Given the undoubted fact of social conflict, however, is it legitimate to say that Athenian standards of distribution, for example, were prevalent or shared? The archaic and classical discourse on greed offers prima facie evidence to the contrary: it is the reality of social conflict that lies behind the use of greed as a pejorative ideological label. Put simply, what one person calls just and fair distribution may look, to someone from a different socioeconomic group or evaluative perspective, like outrageous exploitation. How are such disputes to be adjudicated? Should we be saying that one group of people is *really* greedy according to prevailing standards, while another is *really* acting justly, however its ideological rivals describe it? Or does the devil lie not in the details but rather in the description?

To pose the issue differently, the problem lies not in discovering the meanings of words—everyone essentially knew the *meaning* of the vocabulary used to express the idea of greed—but rather in understanding or arguing about the criteria of applying the terms correctly in specific contexts.²¹ This problem is at least as old as Thucydides (cf. 3.83): especially in times of crisis, evaluative terms are peculiarly susceptible to reinvention and revaluation in the light of changing sensibilities and the breakdown of traditional order. Even so, reevaluated moral expressions or ideas must be presented in terms of familiar and widely acceptable notions of morality, social relations, and collective commitments. Otherwise, they look like bizarre neologisms or the ravings of heterodox fringe groups and, as such, they have no purchase in the community to which they are meant to appeal. In other words, they lack evaluative or ideological force because they cannot tap into the community's deepest, preexisting beliefs about politics, economics, and society. Writing the history of greed as an ideological and theoretical concept means coming to terms with the different ancient attempts to use greed in political argument by

situations, where everything depends on rational arguments made within the framework of preexisting conventions and beliefs.

²⁰ That only certain sets of arguments and moral claims are possible in given social circumstances underlies Foucault's helpful formulation of the "problematic": "But the work of a history of thought would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of problematization that has made them possible—even in their very opposition; or what has made possible the transformations of the difficulties and obstacles of a practice into a general problem for which one proposes diverse practical solutions. . . . [Problematization] develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to" (Foucault 1984, 389).

²¹ Skinner (1988b, 121–23) offers a neat formulation of this distinction.

fitting it into the prevailing framework of other generally accepted moral sentiments.

Having attained some clarity about the context of Callicles' critique, we can now ask what Callicles wants for himself in the first place.²² His conception of human flourishing depends on a close connection between power and desire. In his view, natural justice entails "that the man who is going to live as a man ought, must allow his appetites [*epithumias*] to be as great as possible instead of repressing [*kolazein*] them, and be able by means of his courage and intelligence to satisfy them in all their intensity by providing them with whatever they happen to desire" (491e8–492a4). To Callicles, power is the coefficient force that connects desire and possession, whereas desire is the meaningful directing spirit behind power. In practice this means that strong men will rule states and use their power to "have more" than their subjects; Callicles always connects ruling (*archein*) and having more (*pleon echein*) as the twin facets of justice according to nature (cf. 488b4–5, 490a1–5, 491c6–d2). He has difficulty conceiving of someone with power who chooses not to exploit that power for his own material advantage, unless that someone has been so benighted by conventional morality as to lose touch with his natural instincts. Callicles' desire, then, is twofold: he desires power as an instrumental good, and he desires other unspecified material pleasures that his power will enable him to enjoy.

As for these other pleasures, Callicles emphasizes satisfying his "appetites" (*epithumias*, e.g., 491e9, 492a2–3),²³ and he shows a strong tendency to idealize "intemperance" (*akolasia*)—both of which suggest a materialistic, bodily focus.²⁴ As Aristotle later pointed out, temperance (*sōphrosunē*) and intemperance (*akolasia*) have to do with pleasures of the body, particularly those pleasures, such as touch and taste, that human beings share with other animals and which, therefore, appear "slavish" (*andrapodōdeis*)

²² On Callicles' notion of happiness, see n.16.

²³ In his note on 491a4, Dodds (1959, 292) rightly points out that there are two questions involved here: Socrates asks Callicles to explain who is he talking about and what they desire; Dodds rightly says that the answer to the second question "is never formally given but is implicit in the tirade which begins at 491e5" (292).

²⁴ Callicles himself, under pressure from Socrates' interrogation, comes to identify his conception of happiness, the gratification of appetites, with indiscriminate hedonism. Kahn (1983, 102–5) rightly points out that "Plato makes Callicles an indiscriminate hedonist rather than a more selective pursuer of preferred passions, like the timocratic or plutocratic man of *Republic VIII*" (104). But then he more plausibly withdraws that admission (499b6–8), so that in the end the status and objects of his own appetites are left unclear. Cooper (1999d, 69–75) offers a compelling analysis of Callicles' withdrawal and the ways it can improve his position. As Kahn (1983, 104–5) points out, if Callicles had focused on "the pursuit of power and wealth," then his position would be more defensible.

and “bestial” (*thēriōdeis*) (*EN* 1118a1–3, 1118a23–26).²⁵ Concluding his account of temperance and intemperance, Aristotle says that the temperate individual must harmonize his “appetitive part” (*to epithumētikon*) with reason (*EN* 1119b15–16). Hence, Callicles desires power for the sake of materialistic, probably bodily, pleasures, which will satisfy the enlarged appetites that he considers a part of any good human life.

In Plato’s *Republic*, the “appetitive part” (*to epithumētikon*) of the soul is one of three constitutive parts, the others being reason and aspiration. Plato describes the appetitive part as follows: “We have called it the appetitive [*epithumētikon*] part, because of the intensity of its appetites [*epithumiōn*] for food, drink, sex, and all the things associated with them, but we have also called it the money-loving [*philochrēmaton*] part, because such appetites [*epithumiai*] are most easily satisfied by means of money” (580e2–581a1). Immediately thereafter, Plato reiterates that this part is money-loving (*philochrēmaton*) and profit-loving (*philokerdes*) (581a6–7).²⁶ Money, as the paramount instrumental good, is the means to gratify physical urges, and thus is grouped together with such gratification in a single part of the soul. Earlier Plato had said that the appetitive part was “by nature most insatiable for money” (*chrēmatōn phusei aplēstotaton*) (442a6–7) and most apt to attempt “to enslave and rule over the classes it is not fitted to rule” (442b1–2). It attempts, in other words, to rule over reason and aspiration, even though, according to Plato, it is harmful to the individual if it does so. The appetitive part of the soul is in many ways analogous to Callicles, the individual who is dominated by his appetites. Like Callicles, the appetitive part of the soul desires power over the other parts, along with materialistic satisfactions and pleasures.²⁷

Central to Callicles’ own self-understanding is his greed to get more—more bodily pleasures and more of the means, such as power and wealth, to satisfy them. We have seen that it is nearly impossible to mention such uninhibited desires without also arguing with the conventional belief that they are unjust. Society criticizes individuals like Callicles for their violation of fairness. In the *Gorgias*, though, Socrates opens up another line of

²⁵ With Aristotle’s connection between the intemperate pleasures and bestiality, one may compare Callicles’ invocation of the animal world to explain the truth of his view of natural right (483d3); cf. Kahn 1983, 99.

²⁶ On the apparent complexity of this part of the soul, see Annas 1981, 128–30; Cooper (1999b, 126–30) demonstrates the essential unity of the appetitive part, which is rooted in its relation to the body and bodily pleasure.

²⁷ At the end of the *Republic* (588b–590b), Plato finally represents this appetitive part as a many-headed beast—like the Chimera, Scylla, or Cerberus—that wants to enslave the other parts. This image anticipates Aristotle’s claim that the appetites are what we share with animals. Our reason, by contrast, which is represented by the human being, is what makes us distinctively human. This is a powerful and, as we shall see, persistent type of attack on those who share Callicles’ ideals.

critique by subjecting Callicles' notion of happiness to scrutiny. He poses an apparently simple question: will Callicles' "strong man" be self-controlled (*sōphrona*)? Will he be master of himself (*enkratē*) (491d7–e1)? Callicles thinks the very idea conventional and dim-witted; self-control and moderation are for him the virtues of the weak.²⁸ In order to limit the appeal of Callicles' enlarged appetites, Socrates compares Callicles' ideal to the repellent life-style of a bird called the *charadrios*, which, an ancient commentator says, eats while it excretes.²⁹ Needless to say, this is a filthy and disgusting conception of happiness.³⁰ Socrates' argument is typical of an entire tradition of discourse about greed, ranging from Solon to Herodotus to the Anonymus Iamblichi, all of whom question the conception of happiness that drives those who pursue the ideals of greed. Their arguments are all designed to show that excessive desires are unworthy of the greedy agent's humanity, and that they do not ring true to his genuine aspirations—if only he could see what those aspirations are.³¹ After further arguments, Socrates seems to win the debate, though Callicles remains unconvinced. Callicles' response, too, is typical of an entire tradition of stubbornly greedy agents: they simply do not care to hear, and certainly do not believe, that they are impoverished by their greed.³² Quite the opposite.

At this point it is necessary to complicate my picture in two ways. First, I have focused on the excessive materialism that is a central object of criticism, but the desire to get more material goods is usually linked to the desire for other types of socially constructed goods. Herein lies another contest over the moral significance of desires to get more. Wealth

²⁸ North (1966, 96–97, 159–65) discusses the opposition between *sōphrosunē* (self-control) and *pleonexia* in the *Gorgias*.

²⁹ On the nature of this bird, see Dodds 1959, 306; it has been identified with the stone curlew.

³⁰ As Cooper (1999d, 69n60) shows, this argument does not deter Callicles from maintaining his viewpoint, although he is annoyed at having to talk about such things. Socrates must make further arguments in order to exploit the weaknesses of Callicles' position; on the quality of these arguments, see Cooper 1999d, 69–75.

³¹ The attack on impoverished conceptions of happiness and humanity does not, of course, necessarily undermine all possible attacks on justice as a social virtue; it merely illustrates the difficulty of conjuring up a feasible conception of happiness while also rejecting justice. I return to these issues in the epilogue, where I discuss Plato's *Republic*. Often attacks on the impoverished conceptions of happiness of individual agents use the image of gluttony, which is closely allied to greed; cf. *Gorgias* 518e–519b and chapter 4.

³² This explains the emphasis on Callicles' lack of shame compared with Socrates' other interlocutors (e.g., 482e6–483a2; 487b1–2; 494c5): he must be able to say what he really thinks despite conventional disapproval. On shame in the *Gorgias*, see Irwin 1995, 122–24. Another way of putting this is to say that Callicles pays little attention to the "spirited part" of his soul (*thumos* or *thumoeides*), as Plato defines it in the *Republic*, which is honor-loving (*philotimon*); on the "spirited" part, see Cooper 1999b, 130–36.

has a socially constituted meaning in specific cultures: it creates power for the rich, and it makes them prestigious. As the sociologist Viviana Zelizer has demonstrated, money is not an absolutely fungible, uniquely rationalizing, and universally abstract medium. Instead, people employ material “goods simultaneously as markers of their social rank, as indicators of other shared collective identities, and as signals of their individuality.”³³ As a result, their desires for such goods are defined not only with reference to the goods themselves, but also with reference to the symbolic and cultural associations of those goods in specific contexts. By extension, the possession of certain culturally situated goods helps to define an individual’s identity and his relationship to the wider society.

In the *Iliad*, for example, Agamemnon robbed Achilles of his captive girlfriend Briseis because he wanted a material sign of his own status. In response, Achilles accused him of base greed and condemned him as a leader who “feeds fat” on his people (2.231). Such disputes involving accusations of greed could also be contests over the social and moral significance of the desire to get more. Critics who exploited the rhetoric of greed, such as Achilles, tended to emphasize the base corporeality of desires in order to deflate the opponents’ pretensions to honor. Those, on the other hand, who tried to satisfy their desires, such as Agamemnon, might well view themselves as noble and their desires as honorably motivated. Furthermore, they might, like Agamemnon, view their eventual possession of the desired goods as a mark of status and honor—rather than something to be ashamed of. The historical interest lies in the conflict and in the kinds of arguments that could be made on either side. It is necessary to try to understand the psychology of the desiring agent himself as much as the arguments of those who labeled him, critically, “greedy.”

The second complication concerns the individual’s role within society. Because of its location at the intersection of the discourses on injustice and excessive desire, the classical discourse on greed illuminates one of the deepest conflicts of Greek civilization generally. As many have seen, Greek culture highly valued the agonistic “virtues” of competition, the individual striving for more, and the promotion of the self as opposed to, and even at the expense of, the common good.³⁴ At the same time, the Greeks, like other ancient Mediterranean peoples, lived in a culture defined by scarcity of resources and the continual threat of famine, shortage, and economic breakdown. Consequently, Greek culture had to devise sophisticated mechanisms of social control whereby the communally sanctioned striving for more would also be sufficiently limited to permit

³³ Zelizer 1994, 212; Parry and Bloch 1989.

³⁴ See Adkins 1960; 1972, with references to older discussions; Irwin 1995, 102–4.

the community as such to flourish. A key feature of Greek moral thinking was precisely the attempt to place limits on excessive behavior; language and morality, the mechanisms of communal censure, operated with laws and other strictures to limit individual self-aggrandizement. Still, there is an obvious tension between the individualistic virtues of competition and the communal framework within which those virtues became meaningful—between what Adkins has called the “competitive” and the “cooperative” virtues of Greek culture.³⁵

The key issue in resolving that conflict is the collective education of the individual. MacIntyre has shown that the greedy agent, driven to acquire more unjustly, subjectively experiences competition differently from those who abide by the prevailing ethics of their communities:

For those possessed by *pleonexia* the *agōn*, the contest, becomes something quite other than it was in the games or for Pindar. It becomes an instrument of the individual will in grasping after success in satisfying its desires. Of course in any society where contests are central to activity, the victor will achieve the prizes of success and will at least appear to be and will probably in fact be nearer than others to satisfying his desires. But the achievement and the excellence recognized by himself, by the community and by such people as the poet whose task it is to praise that achievement and that excellence are what is valued primarily; it is because they are valued that prizes and satisfactions attach to them; *not vice versa*.³⁶

Prizes, pleasure, and satisfaction are, in other words, the second effects of outstanding achievement and the exemplification of excellence. They should be an afterthought, not what is valued in the first instance. Greedy agents like Callicles have it the wrong way round; they subordinate their intelligence and courage, their proper virtues, to getting more for themselves. They can be taught to do this by their culture. Thus, the tempering of desire remains an individual problem, but must also be viewed within the framework of a society called upon to educate individual desires as it participates in the formation of moral consciousness. As it must appropriately limit individual acquisitiveness, so too must society, in urging individuals to compete, promote a proper understanding of the values that underlie competition from the start. Plato saw this clearly in his critique of contemporary society’s education of its citizens:

Or do you agree with the general opinion that certain young men are corrupted by sophists—that there are certain sophists with significant influence on the young who corrupt them through private teaching? Isn’t it rather the very people who say this who are the greatest sophists of all, since they educate

³⁵ The classic treatment is Adkins 1960; Adkins 1972, 8–9.

³⁶ MacIntyre 1984, 137.

them most completely and make young and old, men and women, into precisely the kind of people they want them to be?

When do they do that? he asked.

When many of them are sitting together in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or in some other public gathering of the crowd, they object very loudly and excessively to some of the things that are said or done and approve others in the same way, shouting and clapping, so that the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame and double it. (Plato *Rep.* 492a5–c2)

It is right and proper that a community should criticize individuals for excessively desiring more, on the grounds that their greed leads to injustice, and perhaps that it diminishes the individuals themselves. In making such critiques, though, the community as such—here, with Plato, I am thinking of classical Athens—opens itself to the criticism that, through its own excessive desires (e.g., its imperialism), it has taught its individual citizens to be greedy from the start. If individual greed leads to civic conflict, then the greed of a polis like Athens leads to strife within the international community of Greek states. My hope is to show that greed was a nodal point in the arguments and behaviors of classical Athenians, who considered themselves, simultaneously, to be individuals, members of a polis, and members of an international community.

To clarify the historical distinctiveness of ancient Greek greed as well as its similarities to later conceptions, one can examine the role of greed in theoretical and cultural analysis in later texts and systems of thought. A vice of individual psychology and social relations, greed figures in a variety of modern cultural representations. The richness of the discourse derives in part from greed's role as a central dialectic in political thought since the time of the ancient Greeks. Space permits only the most schematic representation of greed's role in Rome, the Middle Ages, and modernity, but even a sketch of the long, complex history of greed illustrates its potential as a force of moral destabilization and its elasticity as a category of social disapproval. Highlighting key changes in the conception and theoretical use of greed provides a provocative background against which to understand the ancient Athenian discourse on greed.

Roman authors censured greed because it leads to an inappropriately luxurious life-style (*luxuria*), moral turpitude, and forgetfulness of Rome's ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*).³⁷ The Roman discourse on greed (*avaritia*) suggested that the individual lust for riches gradually eroded the social and personal values that had made the Republic great in the first place: values like simplicity, frugality, and moderation. Describing the

³⁷ See, e.g., Livy 34.4.3, 36.17.4–5, 37.54.18–23, with Luce 1977, 230–97.

early Romans, Sallust invokes a key opposition between glory and greed: “They desired glory, but were liberal with their money; they wanted unbounded glory, but riches won honorably [*gloriam ingentem, divitias honestas volebant*]” (*Bell. Cat.* 7.6). Like his Greek predecessors, Sallust positioned greed in a clear hierarchy of value according to which greed represented base, materialistic desires, the converse of the praiseworthy pursuit of honor and glory. Sallust argues that ambition is not very different from virtue (11.2), but that “Avarice [*avaritia*] implies a desire for money [*pecuniae*], which no wise man covets. It is a kind of deadly poison, which renders the most manly body and soul effeminate. It knows no bounds and can never be satisfied: nor can either abundance or want make it less” (11.3).³⁸ Avarice, the paramount materialistic desire, poisons and weakens the body; Greek authors, too, linked the discourse on greed with that on masculinity and expressed anxiety over the destructive insatiability of acquisitive desires.

Sallust’s notion of avarice takes money as its object, but his description of the influx of wealth into Rome shows that greed to get more quickly assumed a wider focus: “As soon as wealth [*divitiae*] came to be a mark of distinction and an easy way to win renown, military commands, and political power, virtue began to decline. . . . Riches [*divitiis*] made the younger generation a prey to luxury [*luxuria*], avarice [*avaritia*], and pride [*superbia*]” (*Bell. Cat.* 12.1–2). In other words, wealth had come to be desirable not only in itself, but also because it was the means to status in the form of conspicuous display, as well as to political power. This is a common triad in theoretical discussions of greed at Rome: wealth, status, and power are clustered together in the diverse understandings of greed’s role in causing Rome’s decline.

Starting in the middle Republic, the discussion of avarice was conditioned by Rome’s acquisition of a Mediterranean empire, which made enormous reserves of wealth available to any Roman leaders willing to fight for it, and thereby catalyzed the elite’s preexisting ethic of competition in disastrous ways. Elite competition for money and prestige ultimately destroyed the institutional framework that had made that competition meaningful in the first place. In his famous preface, Livy wrote, “The less wealth there was, the less greed [*cupiditatis*]; recently riches have brought in avarice [*avaritiam*], and self-indulgence has brought us, through every form of sensual excess, to be in love with death both individual and collective” (*Preface* 12). Livy regards greed as the product, rather than the cause, of Rome’s initial acquisition of wealth. The swarm of desires created by the influx of wealth harmed the state by destroying Rome’s collective ideals in favor of a newly individualistic ethic. As Feld-

³⁸ On Sallust’s concept of *avaritia*, see Earl 1961, 13–14, 34–39.

herr explains, “*Luxuria*, the force that has corroded the Roman state, shuts off the individual from the collective life of the state.”³⁹ Roman political thinkers and historians embedded greed deeply within their analyses of social unrest, individual competition, and the wide framework of characteristically Roman desires to get more prestige and power. As we shall see, the Greek discourse also embeds greed within wider frames of reference that included honor and social esteem, but greed was always a term of contamination, a way of destroying the “purity” of a desire to win honor or prestige.

The Roman discourse was appropriated by the late antique and medieval discussions of avarice, which concentrated on the destructive moral consequences of avarice when it operated in the soul of a single individual. The “goods” that people get by successfully satisfying their greed stop being good for the individual after a certain limit; avarice is a disordered desire that makes the individual less than he should be. Avarice also drives people to violate proper social relations among members of their own communities or, in the Christian conception, among all human beings.⁴⁰ The hierarchy of value, codified late in the classical period by Plato, was Christianized; the two basic Athenian critiques of greed continued to exert influence but now with more emphasis on the welfare of the individual.

As one of the seven deadly sins, avarice occupied a place of particular prominence in medieval reflections upon sin and humanity. Much of the discussion of greed in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages was concerned to reconcile two biblical statements about the priority of pride and avarice in the classification of vices. According to Ecclesiasticus 10:13, “Pride is the beginning of all sin,” whereas Saint Paul held that “Cupidity is the root of all evil things” (1 Tim. 6:10). Little has argued that pride held primacy of place among the vices in the early medieval period, usually through the explicit subordination or subsuming of avarice within it; later, however, avarice rose in importance in tandem with the rise of a mercantile, as opposed to an agrarian, economy.⁴¹ Throughout the medieval period, different authors tried to reconcile the apparent biblical contradiction by offering a broader interpretation of avarice. Saint Augustine, for example, “juxtaposed the two texts and urged the

³⁹ Feldherr 1998, 115. Rome’s tendency to fall prey to greed can of course be documented in much earlier periods, as when the people’s greed caused internal strife because of their dissatisfaction over the distribution of booty from Veii in ca. 390 B.C. For discussion of this episode in Livy, see Miles 1995, 82–87, and esp. Livy 5.20.1–4, 5.24.4–8.

⁴⁰ Sacks (1998, 267–311) traces how medieval and early modern thinkers played out the predominantly Aristotelian themes of *pleonexia* and injustice in their own distinctive social and political contexts.

⁴¹ See Little 1971; 1978.

reader to adopt a broad understanding of avarice, that is, as an inordinate desire for anything and not simply for money. . . . The devil had been made to fall by avarice, and everyone knows that this avarice consisted not in a love of money but in a love of power.”⁴² My reconstruction of the Greek discourse on greed makes Augustine’s interpretation more comprehensible, because power, like money, is often the instrumental means to satisfy shameful, even fundamentally destructive, appetites. Similarly, Hugh of Saint-Victor, the twelfth-century theologian, defined avarice as an immoderate desire for “having,” without clarifying the objects of that desire. In the fourteenth century, John Wyclif has his allegorical character Phronesis remark that “the true opposite of avarice is *ordinatus amor temporalia* [well-ordered love of temporal things], because that vice is really *inordinatus amor temporalia* [disordered love of temporal things],” again a wide-ranging and excessive desire for a variety of earthly goods.⁴³ Avarice thus proved suitably elastic for thinkers who wanted to illustrate the underlying relationship between excessive acquisitiveness and pride. Under the pressure of biblical interpretation, Augustine and others devised a notion of greed that linked its materiality with desires for other goods such as power.

Greed’s elasticity also set it up as the habitual bedfellow of other vices in diverse theories about the root causes of social instability. As Hirschman has remarked, “The major passions had long been solidly linked to one another in literature and thought, often in some unholy trinity, from Dante’s ‘Superbia, invidia e avarizia sono / le tre faville ch’anno i cuori accesi (Pride, envy, and greed are / the three sparks which have inflamed hearts)’ to ‘Ehrsucht, Herrschsucht, und Habsucht (ambition, thirst for power, and greed)’ in Kant’s *Idea for a General History*.”⁴⁴ In a wide-ranging study of the Aristotelian and medieval roots of the sixteenth-century condemnation of monopoly, Sacks has shown that greed for material goods usually leads outward to the harsh exploitation of and control over others.⁴⁵ Much of the discourse against monopolistic greed is directed against upper-class lords who allegedly want to get possession of power, wealth, and everything else in exorbitant degree. Of a variety of rebellious tracts written from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, Sacks notes, “Recurring is the image of ‘these gorgeous Gentlemen’ acting with ‘crueltie and covetousnesse,’ as well as injustice, against their tenants, treating them ‘slavishly,’ enclosing pastures, ditching and hedging, taking ‘by violence all away,’ not content ‘except that they may also sucke . . .

⁴² Little 1971, 20.

⁴³ Bloomfield 1952, 189; this remains the classic work on the seven deadly sins in medieval literature.

⁴⁴ Hirschman 1977, 20–21.

⁴⁵ Sacks 1998.

our blood and marrow, out of our veins and bones’.⁴⁶ Both in the Greek context and in these later discourses, such all-encompassing greed is particularly associated with aristocrats, especially those with tyrannical ambitions. Such ambitions often involve enslaving others, gluttonously consuming their livelihoods, and using violence liberally to achieve unjust aims.

In late medieval Europe, as a profit economy became more prominent, reactions to money were ambivalent: on the one hand, money facilitated the development of urbanism, commerce, and manufacture, but it also inspired graphic denunciations because of its morally corrosive effects. In particular, it was envisioned as a form of filthy refuse: speaking of gothic manuscripts, Little writes, “In one of these drawings a worried looking ape, with his right paw under his chin and his left paw under his knee, defecates three coins into a golden bowl. Another shows a hybrid man defecating coins into a bowl held by an ape.”⁴⁷ Avarice was thus explicitly and unambiguously tied to a disgusting form of materiality. Money was gross because it changed hands constantly, touched everyone, and thereby became filthy. Gross materiality, as we saw in Socrates’ critique of Callicles, was also an integral element of the Greek rhetoric of condemning greed.

In an altogether different way, the connection between money and feces survives even today: a recent television commercial advertising the online investment firm E-trade begins with doctors surveying the anus of a patient and concluding, “This man has money coming out of the ‘wazoo!’”⁴⁸ By investing with E-trade, the idea must be, we can all manufacture wealth in an act of literal intestinal fortitude. This is disgusting but obviously meant to be funny and strangely appealing—and that appeal in itself points to the transformation that has occurred in the modern period. Historians have long held that a central transformation in views of avarice came about especially in the Scottish Enlightenment. By contrast with the radical denunciations of avarice in the Middle Ages, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers rechristened greed as “rational self-interest,” and gave it the job, as Hirschman has shown, of countervailing other, even more destructive passions, such as the lust for glory and power.⁴⁹ Different thinkers conjured up different ways in which that countervailing was possible, but one of the best known, Mandeville, proposed in his *Fable of the Bees* that the “Skilful Management of the Dex-

⁴⁶ Sacks 1998, 287.

⁴⁷ Little 1978, 34.

⁴⁸ This television commercial aired during the National Football League’s Super Bowl 2000 (January 30, 2000).

⁴⁹ Hirschman 1977, esp. part 2; Parry and Bloch 1989, 17–19.

trous Politician” could turn “private vices” into “public benefits.”⁵⁰ If greed as “avarice” was considered responsible for *countervailing* ambition and hunger for power, then, by definition, greed—that is, cupidity for money—must be differentiated from ambitious self-aggrandizement. As greed became a morally agreeable feature of society, it was also more narrowly focused on money, rather than explicitly connected to other social vices like the hunger for power. The conception of one’s narrow self-interests as “private vice, public benefit” gradually became a central tenet of Anglo-American philosophical liberalism and an ideological mainstay of market capitalism. By pursuing our own narrowly defined self-interests, the theory goes, we create economic surplus, reduce prices, and learn to deal peacefully with others in the rationally driven marketplace.

In contemporary society, it stands to reason, “greed” is a massively overdetermined concept. The ethical critique of the greedy individual prevails: he demeans himself as a human being by taking more than he needs or could use; he has a narrow, impoverished conception of himself and his life. At the level of social evaluation, however, we have inherited sharply conflicting traditions. On the one hand, greed is considered a politically destructive and socially divisive desire, which must be restrained within strict limits if society is to flourish. In Wimbledon’s view, for example, “covetousness prompted men not only to oppress widows and motherless children, to bear false witness, and to turn free men into bondmen, but even to deny their own kin and to break faith with their friends.”⁵¹ We will see many of the same themes—enslavement, oath breaking, and deceit—in the classical Greek discourse on greed.

On the other hand, as many now suppose, the “invisible hand” of the marketplace so arranges individual activity, however self-interested and vicious, that society as a whole capitalizes on individual greed, winning advantages for itself that are otherwise unattainable. Thus greed, in the guise of rational self-interest, contributes to social and economic flourishing through the production of ever expanding surplus.⁵² Despite powerful, especially Marxist, critiques of market capitalism, the system and its underlying ideology have shown remarkable staying power in the contemporary Western world.⁵³ Even as late as 1936, Keynes wrote that

⁵⁰ See Hirschman 1977, 18.

⁵¹ Sacks 1998, 283.

⁵² A recent popular sociology of greed, that of Shames 1989, emphasizes that excessive acquisitiveness has had negative consequences for greedy individuals and their families, but it is striking that the term “justice” does not appear in the index and has not entered into the author’s thinking about greed in contemporary American society. Greed today is a matter of excess; much less, however, a matter of justice.

⁵³ Indeed, despite formidable critiques from a Marxist perspective and elsewhere, the no-

Dangerous human proclivities can be canalized into comparatively harmless channels by the existence of opportunities for money-making and private wealth, which, if they cannot be satisfied in this way, may find their outlet in cruelty, the reckless pursuit of personal power and authority, and other forms of self-aggrandizement. It is better that a man should tyrannise over his bank balance than over his fellow-citizens.⁵⁴

The following chapters show that Keynes's fundamental distinction between power and wealth as objects of the acquisitive appetite is impossible in classical and archaic Athens. They also suggest that Keynes provides a deeply inaccurate picture of desiring agents in any period.

The activities of corporate America in recent decades show that the lust for money is deeply entrenched in the culture, and recent cultural discourse illustrates clearly the enduring legacy left by the Scottish Enlightenment. To quote Gordon Gecko, the classic corporate raider in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*: "Greed—for lack of a better word—is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, it captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms: greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed—you mark my words—will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA."⁵⁵ Gecko himself is a highly unappealing character, but he captures the underlying materialism of even the most wide-ranging form of greed he can imagine.

Over the course of two millennia, greed underwent contextual variations in scope, standard objects, and ethical evaluation. The same is true in the ancient Greek world: Callicles exhibits the widest possible range of immoral desires to get more, but the scope and standard objects of ancient Greek greed are subject to change depending on the specific context under examination. To take one example among many, the Athenian elite in Solon's day differed from Thucydides' imperialists in wanting land, not empire, and in wanting an exclusive hold on power within the city, rather than dominance over other Greeks. In the chapters that follow, I chart and explain the transformations in greed—in how it was understood as such, in what political contexts it assumed importance, and in

tion that individual greed is good for society at large has had remarkable staying-power in our culture. A recent television documentary (*Greed—with John Stossel*, a one-hour ABC-TV program aired Tuesday, February 3, 1998), set out to show that, despite what people think at first glance, even outrageous examples of individual accumulation actually serve our financial interests and well-being at all levels of society.

⁵⁴ Keynes 1973, 7:374; cf. Hirschman 1977, 134.

⁵⁵ *Wall Street*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1987, directed by Oliver Stone, screenplay by Stanley Weiser and Oliver Stone.

how it became socially meaningful to individual agents.⁵⁶ Tracing that history will, I hope, have implications for our current evaluation of greed, both through illustrating that greed has a fundamental relationship to power as well as money, and through offering a historical perspective on the potential for greed to undermine social cohesion.

⁵⁶ Cf. Parry and Bloch 1989, 23: “What money means is not only situationally defined but also constantly re-negotiated.” This applies, as I argue, not only to money but also to other forms of wealth, and to the desires that drive agents to seek wealth.