

### F 3. MATERIALISM, GREED, POWER, STATUS

Modern industrial economies are sometimes criticized as being excessively materialistic, among other things. Is there any warrant for this criticism? Those who make it have no difficulty pointing out that Americans are a very materialistic bunch. While there are still people living in poverty in this relatively affluent land, most of us do not lack the real necessities, enough food being most important to keep us alive (and now perhaps even too heavy). Yet most of us feel that we do not have enough money to buy all the things that we really want to buy. Advertisers seem to pull us around by the nose to keep up with the latest fashions in clothing and frequent new car models. Anyone reading this can illustrate our materialism further.

So we are materialistic, seldom really satisfied that we possess all the material things we might like to have. But is there anything wrong with this? Isn't it harmless, and even if claimed to be excessive, isn't it perhaps better than being greedy in any other way? Maybe so.

But the criticism still has some validity if it means, or results in, our failing to pay enough attention to the things that are really important in life. If our overriding concern is over what more we hope to be able to have, or even over what we already possess in the way of material things, we may not fully realize that our happiness depends much more upon really good relations with other people. We all need the respect of at least some other people. It has been shown that people who never get any respect from anyone else have difficulty maintaining their own self respect because they think there may be something serious wrong with themselves. Those who lose their self respect can seldom experience much happiness. And of course humans need affection from at least someone else for whom they also have affection to be very happy about anything. The happiest people are those lucky enough to have some good friendships and enjoy mutual love with at least somebody else. There are other things about life that can add much to our happiness, but neither this one essay, nor all essays on this Web site try to outline everything that can or should properly contribute to human happiness.

Granted that materialism is excessive if it distorts our view of what is of more importance in life than material abundance, I want to try to figure out why materialism may have become more of a problem for many people just when it seemed that it did not need to be as much of a problem as it was when few people had affluence.

The maintenance of life itself depends upon an adequate material base, starting with food. I imagine that the first inter-tribal warfare in pre-history was when tribal populations grew beyond what could survive on their

own hunting grounds. They had to enlarge their hunting grounds to survive. If one tribe fought another over hunting grounds, the loser either had to flee and try to find new hunting grounds, or the winners of the battle killed off many of the losers so all those remaining of both tribes could survive. No wars since those days has been caused solely by economic necessity.

But another factor besides material need has always been a factor in human life. We are social animals that have very important need of each other as has already been mentioned, and we are also egoists that protect and promote our self interests. All that is very proper and not subject to any legitimate criticism. But egoism can also become excessive, and then it can be called greed. That was never considered a human virtue in the past. Over the centuries it has taken different forms. What interests me here is that one present form might be excessive desire for material things.

In prehistoric inter-tribal wars one form greed took could be called ethical progress and also simple rationality, namely when victors, instead of killing the survivors of the wars, simply enslaved them and made them serve their conquerors, or at least the leaders of the conquering tribes. That was the probable origin of slavery. Whether the defeated preferred slavery to death might have depended upon how they were treated as slaves.

Whether tribal leadership depended only on physical strength or upon other factors such as success in battle however achieved no one can know now. But another factor probably played a part, itself also a form that egoism takes for some people and not for others, namely a thirst for power. Any social order has always had the problem of limiting and controlling the use of power so it does not exploit others but instead serves the common good. Some people just enjoy having power over not only things but over other people, and the more such power the better they like it. Much history has been written in terms of what such people did with their power. Some other people shrink from the responsibility they feel when they have any power over other people. When tribal leaders enjoyed the power they had over slaves, even their greed took the form not so much in enjoying more material things, for their economies were not producing much beyond the group's material needs, but in having the personal services of their slaves. Historians may be able to tell about the earliest known forms of class structures based upon the power of some people over all others. In Feudal societies, the ruling classes used their power and status similarly although they also gave vent to their greed in exploiting all others to furnish them more material goods as well as more personal servants.

Status was mentioned. It is another thing that is very important to many people. It is more than just acceptance and respect. It is superior respect and ranking in others eyes that only a few can obtain. Some people

are greedy for higher status than had even by those who are in some sense their peers. Some sociologists rate status as more important for some people than power or wealth (success in obtaining excess claims on material goods), although those also raise status in our America today.

In a sense, excess greed for any of the other three (material things, power or status) can be considered the root problem. In America today (and perhaps only a little less in some other countries), greed has for the first time in history come to be considered almost a virtue. Indeed the only reason to qualify the statement at all is because we no longer call it greed. We call it rational behavior, and what the smart person does. That is, "look out for number one" (for oneself) because no one else will. And get as much of whatever one is after as possible, while giving up only what one must to get it. That can be called greed. This attitude comes quite naturally to anyone running a business for oneself or managing it for others in hopes of thus doing best for oneself also. And economics teaches that it is only rational to run a business so as to maximize net profits, and conduct our personal lives so as to maximize net satisfaction from our purchases. Another essay (see K 1.) shows that this ignores the effects on everyone else, and so can lead to very unethical results to say the least, and can become subversive of most potentially good human relationships.

Where does this all come out? Very briefly put in conclusion, all three things (materialism, greed, desire for power), are interrelated, all are part of most human nature but in different degrees. Each can, especially if excessive, divert our attention from the things that really matter most for the quality of our individual lives and for their genuine happiness. Some genuine happiness can be had by almost everyone if they understand the things that contribute to it and avoid things that can interfere with those things. The qualification "almost everyone" is needed primarily because some people find themselves in circumstances where they are either racked with pain or denied one way or another the opportunities to develop the sort of human relationships that are so basic to happiness.