



WRONG DESIRES

Pleasure, Money, Fame and Power

Mortimer Adler

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The biblical statement that the love of money is the root of all evil does not assert that money is undesirable or that, desired for its purchasing power, it cannot be properly esteemed as a useful means. What, then, is the message? What is the root from which all wrong desires stem?

The fault common to all wrong desires is the mistake of treating as an end desired for its own sake and for nothing beyond or outside itself that which, for any one of three reasons, cannot legitimately serve as the end of all human striving.

The root from which all wrong desires spring is three-pronged: either (a) the wrong desire is for something that, while really good and needed, is only a partial good (a component part of the *totum bonum*), yet is desired inordinately as if it were the only good, the whole good; or (b) something that, while good as a means, is a limitless good for those who desire it as an ultimate end; or (c) something that, though it may appear to be good when actually desired, is an apparent good that is noxious rather than innocuous. The

prime examples of this threefold classification of the objects of wrong desires are (a) pleasure, (b) money, and (c) fame and power. What is true of pleasure as a real but only partial and limited good is true of other partial goods, such as health, wealth, freedom, and even knowledge, none of which can be rightly desired inordinately as if it were by itself the ultimate or complete good. But pleasure, much more frequently than any of these other partial goods, is the object of wrong desire when it is desired as the only good, and as the ultimate goal of one's striving.

Another summary account of wrong desires stresses placing one's happiness—that which leaves nothing more to be desired—in something that, while really good as a component of happiness, is not the *totum bonum*; or placing it in something that, if sought and attained, will impede or frustrate the pursuit of happiness.

Pleasure, money, and fame and power are goods, real or apparent, that can be attained and possessed by knaves and villains as well as by the virtuous. That by itself indicates that they can all be wrongly desired. It also shows, at least in the case of pleasure and money, that they can sometimes be rightly desired. However, that is not the case when we come to fame and power, especially when they are desired for their own sake.

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Let us begin our consideration of wrong desires with pleasure.

The understanding of pleasure as a physiological and psychological phenomenon is much more complicated and difficult than the consideration of the grounds that determine whether our desires for pleasure are right or wrong; or, since a desire for pleasure can be right as well as wrong, the criteria for telling which, in any case, it is.

In the physiology of sensation, the organs of the different and distinct sensory faculties are plotted corporeally. Along with the organs of sight, hearing, and smell, there are the four organs of the cutaneous senses—the sensitive apparatus for being aware of heat, cold, pressure, and pain. These organs are mainly to be found in the epidermis of the body, though some are also found in the viscera. What will come as a surprise to many readers is that there are no sensitive nerve endings for pleasure.

Speaking in neurological terms, there is no *sense* of pleasure. Yet, most of us speak and think of pleasure and pain as opposites, in the

same way that the senses of heat and cold are opposites. A moment's further consideration will remind us that we often use the word "pain" to refer to the feeling that results from the deprivation or loss of something we desire, and not for a sensory experience of the sort we have when a sharp point is inflicted on the surface of our bodies. That IS purely sensory pain, as the pain of loss is not. Thus it may be that when we think of pleasure and pain as contrary opposites, that contrariety, which is not in the sphere of sense, must be assigned to another psychological sphere.

We may have to use the loose and ambiguous word "feeling" for that other sphere of experience, which is strictly not sensory. Psychologists sometimes use the technical word "affect" and sometimes use the phrase "affective tone or quality" for this element in our experience. They speak of certain sensations as having a *pleasant* or an *unpleasant* affective tone.

This consideration of the affects may account for our incorrect attribution of pleasure to the sphere of sense, for certain cutaneous sensations of pleasure, such as tickling the skin, or of hot and cold, when they are not too extreme, are experienced by many as pleasant. Though it may be regarded as pathological, the experience even of sensory pain may be felt by some persons as pleasant. When we say that the masochist gets pleasure from the suffering of pain, the pain referred to is sensory but the pleasure referred to is not; instead, it is pleasurable only in respect to its pleasantness as an affect or feeling.

This leads us to the most important distinction with regard to pleasures and pains. When we say we are pleased or displeased, or that we take pleasure or find pleasure in something, we are using the word "pleasure" for the experience of satisfaction that we have when a desire is fulfilled or requited. So, too, we use the word "pain" for the dissatisfaction or frustration we experience when we do not succeed in getting something that we desire. Here pleasure and pain do not signify objects of desire, but rather the satisfaction or frustration of desire.

It would be confusingly redundant to refer to the satisfaction of a desire as if it were also an object of desire. For example, when, parched on a hot day, we desire a cool drink to slake our thirst, the cool drink may give us a sensation that has a pleasant affective tone, but the satisfaction that results from slaking our thirst is not itself an object of our desire. That was the cool drink itself; and the experienced pleasantness of that cool drink is not the same as the experienced satisfaction of our getting it.

The reason why all of these distinctions, however cumbersome they may be, are of such great importance is that the moral problems concerning pleasure must always focus on pleasure—or for that matter pain—solely as objects of desire, and never on pleasure and pain as the experienced satisfaction or frustration of desire. The latter accompanies all our desires—the desires that we have for the widest variety of objects, among which pleasure and pain will be found.

The Epicureans or hedonists in moral philosophy, who make the serious mistake of asserting that pleasure is the only good, make this mistake by failing to distinguish between pleasure as object of desire and pleasure as satisfaction of desire. It is true that pleasure is attendant upon all desires when they are satisfied, but not all desires have pleasure as their sole object.

Both Plato and Aristotle refute the error of hedonism by asking whether it is better—and wiser—to desire both pleasure and wisdom (as objects) than to seek pleasure as the only desirable object. The wiser man does, of course, realize more pleasure when he succeeds with both objects than the person who succeeds only with pleasure as an object of desire, but the greater pleasure of the wiser man is pleasure as the satisfaction of desire.

When this is clearly understood, it solves John Stuart Mill's problem about the pleasures of Socrates as being greater than and preferable to the pleasures of a pig. The greater amount of pleasure here is the satisfaction of more right desires, the desire for both wisdom and pleasure, not just for pleasure alone as the only object of desire.

In addition, it helps to understand the fact that successful criminals may, during the period of their success, be thoroughly pleased by their achievements, though their immoral conduct is motivated by wrong desires—desires for objects that they either ought not desire or ought not seek in the way that they do. If pleasure were the only object of desire, or if pleasure as object of desire were not distinguished from pleasure as satisfaction of desire, it would be impossible to say that there are good and bad pleasures, or that morally virtuous and morally vicious human beings can both experience pleasure.

Epicurus may have been a hedonist, thinking that pleasure is the only good and pain the only evil, but John Stuart Mill, in his essay *Utilitarianism*, is not an Epicurean. Though he explicitly calls him-

self one, he tries at the same time to ameliorate the individious connotations that attach to the term Epicureanism.

Mill does this by using the word “pleasure” only sometimes for an object of desire, but much more frequently as signifying the satisfaction of morally approved desires, including the benevolent desire for the welfare of others as well as selfish desires for one’s own well-being. He also does this without explicitly acknowledging the basic distinction between pleasure as object and pleasure as satisfaction of desire.

In consequence, Mill’s conception of happiness as the maximization of pleasure conceals his agreement with Aristotle’s conception of happiness as the *totum bonum* (a whole life enriched by the possession of all real goods, including pleasure among them). In addition, if he had understood pleasure as an object of desire distinct from pleasure as the satisfaction of desire, he would not have been confronted with the insoluble problem of a conflict between two ultimate ends—the happiness of the individual and the general happiness of all mankind.

When Saint Augustine summarizes his conception of happiness as a whole life in which all desires are satisfied, he adds the provision that nothing be desired amiss; in other words, that none of the satisfactions involved be attendant upon success in achieving objects wrongly desired.

This brings us back to the main point we must consider (in fact, the only point to be considered) with respect to the desire for pleasure: By what criteria should we judge certain pleasures as objects of wrong desires or as objects desired in a wrong way? In other words, when are we rightly and when are we wrongly pleased to attain the pleasures we seek as objects of desire?

In everyday speech, when we say we are pleased or that something gives us pleasure, we are referring to the satisfaction experienced in the possession of the objects desired. Similarly, when we say we are pained in the sense of being displeased, we are referring to our deprivation, lack, or loss of objects desired. Pleasures and pains in this sense of possession or deprivation may, of course, be morally good or bad according to the goodness or badness of the objects desired or the way in which they are desired. This explains how morally vicious persons can be as thoroughly pleased with their successes as morally virtuous persons.

From this point on, let us confine our attention to pleasure as an object of desire. With this restriction, pain as an object of desire is always sensual pain, but pleasure as an object of desire is never a sensation of any sort. It is always the affective tone or quality of some sensual experience, such as the sensual experience of tickling or rubbing, the sensual experience of hot and cold, or the sensual experiences in other spheres, such as our experience of taste, smell, or sexual activity. When we find ourselves speaking of higher and lower pleasures, let us remember that we have shifted our attention from pleasure as an object of desire to pleasure as the satisfaction of desire, the higher pleasures being aesthetic or intellectual pleasures—the enjoyment of beauty or the enjoyment of learning in the process of knowing and understanding.

When pleasure is a sensual object (not as a sensation, but as the pleasant affective tone or quality of some sensual experience), it can be rightly desired only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) if it is desired as one among the real goods that human beings naturally need and not as the only good; (2) if it is desired with moderation and not inordinately, that is, neither too much nor too little, but just enough; and (3) if the pursuit of such pleasure does not involve any injury to others. In other words, an individual's pursuit of pleasure as an object of desire must not impede or in any other way detract from the pursuit of other real goods needed for his or her happiness or deprive others of the real goods needed for the pursuit of their happiness.

These three criteria tell us at once the conditions under which pleasure is wrongly desired as a sensual object: (1) when it is desired as if it were the sole object, or as if it were the total content of a happy life; (2) when it is inordinately or immoderately desired, in other words, when more than enough pleasure is desired; and (3) when the desire for pleasure results in the deprivation, for oneself or others, of real goods they need to constitute the *totum bonum* which is the common human good—the happiness that is the same for all human beings.

Most of the wrong desires for sensual pleasure fall into the sphere of eating, drinking, sleeping, playing, and sexual activity. It is with respect to such pleasures that the aspect of moral virtue called temperance is concerned. Habitual gluttony, drunkenness, sloth, brutality in the treatment of other human beings, and lasciviousness or unrestrained concupiscence are the vicious dispositions that lead to intemperance in the desire for sensual pleasure.

Intemperance is not limited to habitual overindulgence in sensual pleasure. It includes the opposite excess—abstemiousness with respect to pleasure as an object of desire, too little or none as opposed to too much or all. Asceticism may be advocated by moral theology, but even on that plane it cannot be accomplished except supernaturally—with the help of God’s grace. On the purely natural plane, the abstemiousness of the person who shuns the pleasure of food, drink, sleep, play, or sex is as intemperate as the overindulgence of the drunkard, the playboy, or the libertine.

On the natural plane, moral theology does not command asceticism in the spheres of food, drink, or play. But a problem is raised by certain moral theologians in the realm of Christianity with respect to sex. They conceive chastity as the engagement by married persons in connubial sexual activity for only one purpose—the procreation and care of offspring. They exclude, as unchaste, sexual activity for the sensual pleasure that is thereby enjoyed.

Any sexual activity that is not reproductive in aim, they regard as perverse, because unnatural. While it is true that nonhuman animals generally or for the most part engage instinctively in copulation only when that sexual act works for the reproduction of the species, there are grounds for questioning whether, in this respect, human beings do not differ remarkably from all other animals.

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Let us turn next to money and to that with which it is often incorrectly identified, wealth.

Clearly, money as an object of desire is not something that is naturally needed, such as food and drink, clothing and shelter. It is, therefore, not a real, but only an apparent good—something deemed good simply because it is in fact desired. Yet that desire may be a permissible, even if it is not a right, desire—even if it is not something that ought to be desired.

Money is wrongly desired when it is desired as an end in itself and not purely as a means. In the myth of Midas, we have the classic example of a person who wished everything he touched to be turned into gold, only to discover too late how lethally wrong that desire was.

Consider the pathological case of the miser who deprives himself of economic goods that ensure the comforts and conveniences of life. He takes inordinate pleasure in fondling the gold he has accu-

mulated. For the sake of that pleasure in the touch of money, he does not spend it for things that human beings need.

Money may be desired as the economic equivalent of real wealth, which means desired for its purchasing power. Real wealth, in contrast, consists in consumable goods and services and also in all the instrumentalities which, with the exception of human labor, can implement the production of goods and services.

When we recognize that money is valuable only for its purchasing power—to pay rent, insurance premiums, and other forms of debt, and to buy things that are either necessary for subsistence, or that provide life's comforts and conveniences, its amenities and luxuries—we are then confronted with the problem of right and wrong desire for real wealth.

Aristotle's summary formulation of the condition of living well—that *living well consists in a life lived in accordance with virtue and accompanied by a moderate possession of wealth*—indicates that, in his view, wealth is an indispensable component of the *totum bonum*. It is one of the real goods to which every human has a natural right.

It follows that wealth can be rightly desired, but only if it is desired in moderation and not to excess or inordinately. Why should there be a limit to the amount of wealth that can be rightly desired? There are many answers to this question. Let us consider some of them.

The first and most obvious reason for a limitation on the amount of wealth that can be rightly desired is that desire for wealth without limit, as if it were the only real good or the supreme good, interferes with, impedes, or frustrates the attainment of other real goods that are not only needed components of the *totum bonum*, but also much more valuable for a good life than wealth is.

Wealth is good only as a means, but knowledge and understanding, for example, or friendships and freedom, are good in themselves as well as constituent means to a good life. Hence, when the desire for wealth is inordinate or without limit, it tends to defeat the pursuit of happiness. It undermines the effort to lead a good life. It thus becomes a prototype of wrong desire, in the same way that the desire for excessive sensual pleasure is a prototype of wrong desire.

John Locke gives us other reasons for limiting the desire for wealth. He contends that no one should appropriate more real wealth than he can consume or put away for later consumption. He should not hoard that which, not used, will perish and be wasted. Another limitation that Locke places on the accumulation of wealth is that no one should appropriate so much of it that not enough is left for others to appropriate what they need.

Both of these limitations, in Locke's view, are rendered inapplicable when money is introduced into any economy. For money can be hoarded greedily without violating the injunction that spoilage and waste should be avoided; and, though natural resources are limited in their amount, there would appear to be no limit to the amount of money that can be made available for appropriation.

Aristotle made the same observation centuries earlier in antiquity. "Men seek after a better notion of riches and of the art of getting wealth than the mere acquisition of coin, and they are right . . . for there is no bound to the riches which spring from this art of wealth-getting." The wrong desire for more houses than one can put to use, more shoes than one can wear, more food than one can eat and remain healthy, is obvious to most reasonable persons; but since money can be hoarded for a future (often unspecified) use, it is more difficult to set limits to the amount that can be rightly desired.

Nevertheless, for most of us, the word "greed" is disapprobative, even though we cannot condemn greed as easily in relation to the accumulation of money as we can in the case of those whose desires appear to us to be excessive with respect to the acquisition of consumable goods—more than anyone needs or can put away unused without spoilage or waste.

The misuse of money is the root of wrong desire with regard to wealth. This becomes evident by considering a barter economy conducted without money as an instrument of exchange. Inordinate desire for the possession of consumable goods, beyond the limits of usefulness set by nature, would be readily recognized as pathological motivation.

In such an economy, it would be easy to draw the line between greedy persons and those who virtuously sought a limited amount of wealth as an indispensable condition of living a good life. Only when money enters the picture does that line become hazy or obfuscated. That results from the accumulation of money without the limitation imposed by converting an amount of money into the

amount of consumable goods and services that are needed for a good life.

The matter is further complicated by the consideration of what is enough in the sphere of real wealth. Is that middle ground between excess and defect relative to the individual, and so different for different persons? Or can we say that there is an amount of real wealth that is too little for any human being to be able to lead a good life; or an amount that is too much for anyone?

Money can be spent in the wrong pursuit of sensual pleasures to excess. To lead the life of a playboy involves an undue expenditure of money. Thus one wrong desire leads to another. Similarly, those who wrongly desire fame and power may seek an excess of money to spend for the satisfaction of that aim.

In the catalogue of human vices, greed and avarice should be as clearly recognizable as gluttony and insobriety. That, I think, would be the case were it not for the way in which the accumulation of money evades the limitations that most human beings for the most part accept when it comes to food and drink.

4

In this ignominious triad of pleasure, money, and fame and power, only fame and power are, for the most part, objects of wrong desires. There may be one or two exceptions to this statement, but in the main fame and power are only apparent goods and ought not to be desired for their own sake or as a means to happiness. They are not components of the *totum bonum*.

In contrast, pleasure is a real good and can be desired rightly in moderation and as a constituent of happiness. The same is true of wealth. As for money, which is, like fame and power, only an apparent good, it falls within the class of apparent goods permissible to desire, if the desire for money does not conflict with attaining real goods that ought to be desired.

In dealing with fame, we must bear in mind the distinction between fame and honor. A virtuous person is an honorable person, a person who ought to be honored by the community in which he or she lives. But the virtuous person does not seek honor, being secure in his or her own self-respect. Lack of honor does not in any way detract from the efficacy of moral virtue as an indispensable operative means in the pursuit of happiness.

Virtuous persons may be considered fortunate if their virtue is recognized and publicly applauded. Being honored for one's virtue is a gift of good fortune and like other gifts of fortune it may be an ingredient in the good life. But the misfortune of not being honored is not a major obstacle to living well, as are poverty, the lack of liberty, or the loss of health.

These other goods of fortune are rightly desired by virtuous persons who recognize them to be goods not entirely within their power to achieve. While this is true of honor also, virtuous persons may enjoy being honored, but they are under no moral obligation to seek it. They may think themselves dishonored if others do not pay them the respect that accords with their self-respect.

The distribution of honor raises questions of justice; in fact, it is thought to be one of the chief problems of distributive justice. For those who hold that honor and fame are distinct in principle, this is the clear mark of their difference. Justice does not require that fame be proportionate to virtue.

Those totally lacking in virtue may achieve fame as readily as, perhaps even more easily than, those who are virtuous. Fame belongs to the great, the outstanding, the exceptional, without regard to virtue or vice. Infamy is fame no less than good repute. The great scoundrel can be as famous as the great hero; there can be famous villains as well as famous saints. Existing in the reputation a person has regardless of his or her accomplishments, fame does not tarnish as honor does when it is unmerited.

We normally desire the esteem of our fellow human beings, but is not this wish for the esteem of others a desire for fame rather than for honor? Virtuous persons will not seek fame or be unhappy lacking it, for fame can be enjoyed by bad men as well as good. When it is enjoyed by good men without being sought by them, it is indistinguishable from honor for then it is deserved.

In a constitutional government, those who hold public office exercise more political power than other citizens who are not elected or appointed to administer government. But such power is vested constitutionally in the offices they hold, not in their persons. It is only personal power over others in all the worldly ventures in which they compete for power that is the object of wrong desire.

It is this wrong desire for the realization of which Machiavelli's *Prince* sets forth the rules, all of which can be summarized in the maxim of expediency. That maxim admonishes individuals who

wrongly desire personal power over others to act virtuously if they can succeed by doing so, but if that cannot be done, then the maxim of expediency calls upon them to forsake virtue and to use, without scruple, foul means as well as fair in order to gain and to retain the power sought.

Machiavelli advises persons seeking power to be both lion and fox—to have both cunning and guile at their disposal as well as brute force—to have a reputation for virtue even when they abandon virtue as not expedient. “It is not necessary for a prince,” he writes, to have the qualities of the virtuous person, but “it is very necessary to seem to have them”—to have the reputation for virtue; in other words, to be undeservedly famous. Machiavelli goes on as follows:

I would even be bold to say that to possess [the qualities of virtue] and always to observe them is dangerous, but to appear to possess them is useful. . . . You must have a mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise, you may be able to change to the opposite qualities. And it must be understood that a prince . . . cannot observe all those things which are considered good in men. . . . [You] must have a mind disposed to adapt itself according to the wind, and as the variations of fortune dictate . . . not deviate from what is good, if possible, but be able to do evil if constrained.

This maxim of expediency is often stated in the phrase “the end justifies the means.” But those who appeal to that maxim usually misunderstand its true significance. A morally good end, such as the *totum bonum*, cannot be served by any means that are not themselves morally good—means that ought to be sought by right desires in the pursuit of happiness. But good means do not need justification. It is only immoral means, wrongly desired, that need justification; and they can only be justified when they are judged to be expedient for the purpose of succeeding in the achievement of a morally wrong end—personal power over others, to be gained and retained by the unscrupulous recourse to unjust means.

Fame and power are thus linked together as objects of wrong desire. The reputation for virtue when that is a means to be sought by persons seeking personal power in the rat race of worldly ventures is the fame that is wrongly desired as expedient for success in striving for an objective that is itself wrongly desired as an end. 📖

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