



C. S. Lewis, Greed, and Self-Interest

Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

It is said that a half-truth taken as the whole truth becomes an untruth. Recent protest signs saying, “Capitalism is Greed” perfectly illustrate this saying. The half-truth is that capitalists can be greedy. But are all capitalists always and everywhere greedy? Certainly not. There are greedy socialists, Marxists, Democrats, Republicans, rich people, and poor people. Greed is an equal opportunity employer. We are all capable of being greedy. But is there something in capitalism that intrinsically makes greed more likely? Is greed encouraged? Adam Smith famously said that our dinner comes not from the butcher or baker’s benevolence but from their own self-interest (“self-love” or “interest”).¹ Is pursuing our self-interest necessarily selfish or greedy? Can you have self-interest without selfishness?

C. S. Lewis wrote much about selfishness, greed and self-interest. Perhaps he can help us clarify our understanding on these issues. We will look at Lewis on selfishness and greed, then Lewis on self-interest, and finally, come back to this charge that “Capitalism is Greed” with (hopefully) renewed clarity.

C. S. Lewis on Selfishness and Greed

C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* has been a best-seller in the category of children’s stories, having sold 120 million copies in 47 different languages. The seven books are adventures in the magical land of Narnia. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* was recently made into a film, the third in the series following *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and *Prince Caspian*.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Edmund and Lucy are drawn into Narnia with their cousin Eustace on board a ship called the *Dawn Treader*. Eustace is a new character. In many ways, his transformation is a centerpiece of the book. The book’s first line is, “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”² Eustace acts from the beginning as a spoiled, selfish brat. Edmund calls him a “record stinker.”³ Eustace chooses to be a bully, dominating others—putting himself at the center. Eustace needs to be saved from his self-centered life so that he can save others.

The scene where Eustace is saved from himself (undragoned) is called by Michael Ward the “microcosm of the whole novel.”⁴ Eustace (on Dragon Island) sneaks away from the crew in order to avoid work and take a nap. He comes on an old dragon who is dying and takes refuge in the dragon’s cave because of the downpour. He falls asleep on a bed of crowns, coins, rings, bracelets, diamonds, gems, and gold ingots. He turns into a dragon while he takes a nap: “Sleeping on a dragon’s hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he has become a dragon himself.”⁵

When Eustace awakes and discovers that he had become a dragon, he first thinks of how he could get even with Caspian and Edmund (for their rebukes), but he immediately realizes he doesn't want to. Later, as he is lying awake, wondering in his loneliness how he can deal with the dilemma, he sees a lion and follows it to a well. The lion tells him to undress (Eustace was not wearing any clothes). Eustace thinks that perhaps, like a snake, he could peel off his outer layer of skin and get to a deeper layer. After trying this three times, he realizes that it is a failure. He is still a dragon. Then, Aslan the Lion says, "Let me undress you." The lion's claws were painful: "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything ever felt."⁶ The effect was that he was undragoned.

C. S. Lewis understood the layers of selfishness and pride that were present in his own life (and ours). He wrote in a letter: "And will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration ... I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I'm going to be and how he will admire me ... And when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It's like fighting the hydra."⁷

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis compares this process to removing armor or like a snowman beginning to melt.⁸ We all have layers of selfishness, pride, and greed that take more than self-examination and moral reform to address. We, like Eustace, need a deeper cure. Lewis, in these and other passages, showed a profound understanding of selfishness and greed. But he also strongly maintained that there was a proper place for self-interest in our lives. Self-interest was not necessary selfishness.

Lewis on Self-Interest

Lewis reflected often on the tension between legitimate self-interest and selfishness. When Lewis first came to faith, he did not think about eternal life, but focused on enjoying God in this life. He paralleled his experience with Old Testament people who did not have a clear understanding of heaven. They recognized that "He [God] and nothing else is their goal and the satisfaction of their needs, and that he has a claim on them simply by being what He is, quite apart from anything He can bestow or deny."⁹ Lewis later said that the years he spent without the focus on heavenly rewards, "always seem to me to have been of great value," because they taught delight in God above any prospect or reward. It would be certainly wrong to desire from God solely what he could give you, without delighting in God Himself.

However, Lewis never disparaged the place of heavenly rewards; later, He delighted in them. But he saw that the paradox of reward might be a stumbling block for some. On the one hand, the purest faith in God believes in Him for "nothing" and is not primarily interested in any benefits to follow. On the other hand, the concept that we are rewarded for what we do is taught in numerous biblical passages and presumably can thus be a positive motivation for doing what is good. Certainly, a sole focus on rewards might pander to selfishness and greed. Lewis discusses this paradox in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*:

"Tyndale, as regards the natural condition of humanity, holds that by nature we can do no good works without respect of some profit either in this world or in the world to come....That the profit

should be located in another world means, as Tyndale clearly sees, no difference. Theological hedonism is still hedonism. Whether the man is seeking heaven or a hundred pounds, he can still but seek himself, of freedom in the true sense—of spontaneity or disinterestedness—nature knows nothing. And yet by a terrible paradox, such disinterestedness is precisely what the moral law demands.”¹⁰

What Lewis seems to implicitly endorse in Tyndale, he explicitly endorses in other writings (This “theological hedonism” is also upheld by Augustine, Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, and expounded in John Piper’s *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*).

One way to resolve the tension between disinterestedness (doing it for nothing) and reward is to realize that self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness. Some maintain that Mark 8:35-36 is Lewis’ most quoted passage in Scripture. Jesus appeals to self-interest as a motive for self-denial, saying, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel shall save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” We are being encouraged to truly “save” our lives and not “lose” our lives or “forfeit” our soul. The appeal is to our own self-interest.

Unless we have a sufficient reason to sacrifice something we love, the cost will always be too great. Jesus gives us sufficient reason to pay the cost. First, if we try to “save” our lives by seeking our own selfish pleasures in our own way, we will lose (what is in our self-interest) our eternal life and the fullness of life right now. Second, if we “lose” our lives—give them away to Christ and others—we will gain not only eternal life, but fullness of life in the present. Lewis expresses this dilemma and the way out of it in the last paragraph of *Mere Christianity*:

“The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and the death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”¹¹

In other words, if you want to “save” then “lose”. If you are selfish, it will not be in your self-interest. Self-denial is in your self-interest.

Lewis argues elsewhere that self-interest does not necessarily make our motives impure. He says in *The Problem of Pain*:

“We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man’s love for a woman is not mercenary because he wants to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love of exercise less

disinterested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love, by its very nature, seeks to enjoy its object."¹²

When we are lost in wonder, awe and praise of God, we are the happiest we can become, but also the least self-conscious. When we are focused on God, we are not focused on self. The same dynamic shows up in a close friendship. With people we do not know well, we may feel self-conscious and worry about how they perceive us. But with a good friend, we can lose ourselves in a conversation, conveying deep feelings with no self-centeredness or self-focus. Lewis summarizes this un-self-conscious experience: "The happiest moments are when we forget our precious selves...but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, the animals, the garden and the sky) instead."¹³ In this experience, we are pursuing our own joy (self-interest), but not selfishly.

Towards the beginning of Lewis' classic sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis articulates this same dilemma between selfishness and self-interest ("disinterestedness"). In that context, he gives what has become my favorite C. S. Lewis quote:

*"Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink, sex, and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*¹⁴

In other words, we don't pursue our own self-interest strongly enough. We settle for selfish desire and deprive ourselves of "infinite joy". We are all too pleased with the meager pleasures we get and say "NO" to greater, higher, infinite pleasure. The more we pursue our own true self-interest the more we will glorify God and give up lesser pleasures that may satisfy for a while, but sooner or later lead to "hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay."

Perhaps this is enough to indicate that for Lewis (and for us), selfishness is not in your self-interest. In fact, if we pursue our own self-interest, we will deny ourselves and choose eternal life and true life in the present. To condemn selfishness (greed) is not to outlaw legitimate self-interest.

Back to Capitalism

Let's circle back to Adam Smith's appeal to the self-interest of the butcher or baker. Their self-interest could (and should) be motivated by a desire to serve and provide the best meat or bread for the customer. It could (and should) be motivated by a love of neighbor. Of course, there needs to be profit (income). Profit is one of the most misunderstood terms in economics. Profit is the reward for serving the needs of your customers. If you don't serve your customers well, you will experience financial loss. Profit tells the producer how well he or she is serving the customer. The desire to serve and love should be primary and the desire for profit secondary. The profit then is the means to an end (love and service). Without profit, you will not be able to continue loving and serving. The profit acts as fuel for the engine. It is indispensable, but not the primary thing. The fuel allows the engine to power your car to reach your destination.

It is of course possible to be primarily motivated by greed. However, if the butcher and baker fail to provide a quality product or fail to serve the customer or charge more than the customer wants to pay, they will eventually lose business. Whether the motive is love or greed, they still have to serve the customer. But simply note that the primary motive for business (capitalism) need not be greed. In fact, it can be primarily motivated by service and love for neighbor. So the next time you hear that “Capitalism is Greed,” you might ask: Can’t you have “self-interest” without “selfishness” or “greed”? In fact, is self-interest not at the heart of faith? Piper maintains that “God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.” God’s glory and our own satisfaction (self-interest) meet at the exact same place. Jesus argues, “What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?” (Mark 8:36). Jim Elliot, martyred missionary, famously echoes this eternal choice: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”¹⁵ Who wouldn’t make that kind of deal? “Lose” your life and gain abundant life now (John 10:10) and eternal life later. Another ancient saying holds that “an argument against abuse (greed) is not an argument against use (self-interest).” Capitalists can be greedy, but if they pursue their own true self-interest, they need not be.

Art Lindsley, Ph.D. is Vice President of Theological Initiatives at the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics. He is the author of True Truth, C.S. Lewis’ Case for Christ, and Love, the Ultimate Apologetic.

¹ Adam Smith. *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 2a*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), pp. 26-27.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952, reprint. New York: Harper-Collins, 1980), p. 3.

³ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁴ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 108.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 91.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 109.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Collier, 1986), p. 309.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harvest, 1955), p. 225.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), p. 40.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 188.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2001), pp. 226-227.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 145.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988), p. 438.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, “Weight of Glory” in *Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Elliott, *In the Shadow of the Almighty* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) p. 108.