

Greed or Compassion?

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(Short Shorts)

You achieve nothing with compassion, but everything with greed. That sums up the plea of Arnon Grunberg in a recent column of his in *De Volkskrant*, a Dutch daily. With this notion he repeated a classic idea he had formerly expressed by quoting from the Dutch-Anglo physician and author Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733). When everybody thinks only of her/himself, then at least no one is forgotten! Mandeville wrote--....²

But it is strange that people need to be encouraged to be greedy. Is it possible to forget to be greedy? What could possibly be the reason for that?

If someone says, "I have bought a new car out of greed," you will not mistrust him. Your unspoken reaction may be something like, "Sure, nice story, but there's probably another reason. Your old car broke down or became too small, or your wife did not feel safe in it, but he doesn't dare to admit any of that." The reference greed is obviously spontaneous without any deep thought behind it. If someone were to say, "I believe in eternal life out of greed," he will not quickly be accused of hypocrisy. One can admire that kind of greedy person, not because of the vice of his greed so much as the virtue of the honesty of his self-knowledge.

Is greed the opposite of compassion? I can imagine situations where greed is preferable. For example, I prefer that you subscribe to this magazine, *Beweging*, out of greed, because you can then show it to your friends, you can participate in

¹*Beweging*, Fall 2010, p. 13. Transl. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "'Hebzucht of genade?'"

²Here Deddens reproduces part of a Mandeville poem in Dutch. Though Deddens does not say it, but I believe this is a quote from Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bee*. He was a philosophical ancestor of Adam Smith. The spirit of the quoted poem is expressed in the URL below. So far, I have not been able to find the original English of the quote and I am not about to retranslate it from the Dutch translation!

<http://adamsmithslostlegacy.blogspot.ca/2007/09/mandeville-is-not-safe-guide-to-adam.html>

the conversation or whatever, than that you subscribe out of compassion or pity for these poor souls of Reformational Philosophy. Hopefully, though, that is not your dilemma. If, as Mandeville advocates, a thriving society is the goal, then the way to it is not the vice of greed, but, as Kuyper counters, compassionate restraint of that vice, or in his famous phrase, “common grace.” Again according to Mandeville, our embarrassment over this vice is indeed an obstacle, but one that is nevertheless one for our benefit. Compassion is, after all, one of the virtues by which we find grace, but it is not practical as a pillar under our capitalist economy.

What a moralistic column this has turned out to be! But Grunberg asks for it. And so do Alan Greenspan and Premier Mark Rutte.