Greed Straddles
The Moral Ground
Between Avarice
And Gluttony

By John Langan, S.J.

On the cover of its first issue of 1988, Newsweek magazine informed its readers that “The 80’s Are Over: Greed Goes Out of Style.” The weekly linked negative public reactions to the insider-trading scandals and to “Black Monday” (Oct. 19, 1987, the day the Dow dropped 500 points) with the approaching end of the Reagan presidency and a variety of cultural shifts (declining interest in aerobics and marathon running, increasing numbers of social work degrees, the replacement of “Dallas” at the head of the television ratings by “The Cosby Show,” and the disgrace of Jim and Tammy Bakker). Newsweek concluded that all the shifts taken together somehow constituted “a significant change.” While the argument was silly, the conclusion was neatly put—“Greed Goes Out of Style.” That, I would argue, is precisely the point—greed goes out of style, but it does not go away.

Like the poor in the Gospel saying, the greedy, it seems, will always be with us. Whereas the poor carry the burdens of scarcity and ignorance and denial of opportunity that are found in all societies, the greedy are marked by an unreflective urgency in their haste to satisfy their appetites and by a disregard for the rights and needs of others. Greed seems to straddle the territory between avarice on one side and gluttony on the other. But unlike the avaricious, the greedy are ready to enjoy consumption. And unlike the gluttonous, the greedy are ready to control consumption and to save. They do financial planning as well as three-star lunches.

Like the capital sins of traditional moral theology, greed is an expression of human selfishness, a motivating attitude that, as Aristotle saw, is particularly likely to lead to violations of justice. If this is so, the interesting question is not whether greed is going out of style, but how it ever came into fashion.

There are three ever-present reasons for the appeal of greed. The first is that it is an inflation of desires that we all have for comforts and conveniences, for luxuries and signs of success, for more better faster and easier. These desires are not eliminable, but are always in need of control, a control that at times can seem gray and life-denying. Second, greed can be an intensification of an avid and energetic pursuit of the goods of this life. This pursuit is understandable in the young, as well as in the middle and upper classes of a country that expects prosperity as its natural condition; and it is valued and even honored as a way of moving forward in a competitive society. As Gordon Gekko, the fictional counterpart to Ivan Boesky in the recent movie, “Wall Street,” put it, “Greed is good. Greed motivates. Greed clarifies.” Third, greed is linked in the minds of many people with capitalism. It can be imagined as the impelling motor or as the exhaust from the mighty engines of financial and industrial capitalism. That is, it can be the essential motivation or an unintended but unavoidable result of capitalism.

The link between greed and capitalism can be used either to criticize capitalism or to defend greed. But both moves seem to me to be mistaken: While it is true that capitalism gives considerable scope to greedy people, it actually works in a much more interesting way. Contemporary capitalism requires complex networks of organization and collaboration, and it subjects its participants to a three-fold discipline of social organization, market competition and legal regulation. It relies on a sense of self-interest that actually requires that we control greed, because greed threatens to replace stable collaboration with naked exploitation and impels the greedy to defy the network of legal regulations. Unchecked greed is both socially destructive and destructive of the self, a point that a “morality play” like “Wall Street” makes clearly. The idea of a society of greed populated by creatures with the appetites of piranhas, the plumage of birds of paradise, and the musculature of grizzly bears is a fantasy of immature and distorted imaginations.

The merit of capitalism is not that it satisfies greed, which is impossible, but that it directs our desires for meaningful work for material goods, and for financial security, toward forms of competition and collaboration that have preserved freedom and encouraged productivity. Its characteristic vices are that it allows a proliferation of base desires and a degeneration into greed among its successful practitioners and that it leaves so many individuals and peoples outside its charmed circles of production and acquisition.

So we find ourselves in the paradoxical position of both needing more capitalism so that the needs of the poor and the downcast can be met, and less capitalism so that the lives of the rich and the ambitious may not be corrupted by greed.
Books

Recent Acquisitions

(New additions to collection of the National Reference Center for Bioethics Literature.)


Bopp, James, ed. HUMAN LIFE AND HEALTH CARE ETHICS. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985. 320 p. (Shriver Collection of Christian Ethics.) Seventeen essays are gathered from papers presented at the Human Life and Health Care Ethics Conference at Marquette University, April 1983, discussing the beginning of individual human life, ethical standards for the health care community, and medical procedures affecting the unborn and the born.

Meinke, Sue A. SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD: ETHICAL AND LEGAL ISSUES. Washington, DC: Kennedy Institute of Ethics, 1988. 11 p. (Scope Note 6.) Revised since its publication in 1986, Scope Note 6 includes 37 annotated documents and lists 19 other relevant citations. The introductory essay has also been updated to describe the latest bioethical and legal issues of surrogate motherhood.

Monagle, John F. and Thomasma, David C., eds. MEDICAL ETHICS: A GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS. Rockville, MD: Aspen, 1988. 522 p. Basic issues in ethics such as controversies in reproductive technology, informed consent, care of the dying, health care delivery, etc., are discussed by major authors in the field.


New York State Task Force on Life and the Law. LIFE-SUSTAINING TREATMENT: MAKING DECISIONS AND APPOINTING A HEALTH CARE AGENT. Albany, NY: The Task Force, 1987. 190 p. The rights of patients to make their own health care decisions, including refusing treatment, as well as the need for legislation authorizing advance directives are examined.

(By Marlene Fine)
Human Rights Absent From Policy Debate In 1988 Campaigns

By J. Bryan Hehir

There are several ways to view the presidential campaign debates that consume the media in an election year. One method is to look at issues that stand little chance of getting attention, but which will undoubtedly face a new administration. Among the unexamined issues of the 1988 campaign thus far is the role of human rights in United States foreign policy. No candidate has taken the human rights issue as a theme, perhaps because of the conflicted history it has in the last decade. That history is worth reviewing.

The present lack of interest in human rights reflects much of the post-war era. From the 1940s through the 1960s human rights questions were not central in the U.S. foreign policy debate. Even though the United States was instrumental in the founding of the United Nations, and supported in principle the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights, this involvement did not translate into serious consideration of how human rights standards should be incorporated into the U.S. policy process. Even John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, with its expansive rhetoric about the U.S. role in the world, did not focus on the human rights theme.

The catalyst that propelled human rights into the center of the policy debate was Congressional initiatives of the early 1970s that were motivated by a reaction to Vietnam policy and a dissatisfaction with the Realpolitik style of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Beginning with the early 1970s, it is possible to trace four stages of the human rights debate. The congressional initiative began in the House of Representatives with a series of extensive hearings conducted in 1973 by Rep. Donald Fraser (D-MN). Fraser focused on how to apply internationally recognized human rights standards to U.S. policy. Much of the substance of the Fraser initiative is reviewed in an anthology recently published by Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy titled “The Diplomacy of Human Rights (University Publications of America)." Three specific achievements emerged from the Fraser hearings: the creation of an office for human rights in the State Department; the requirement that the department produce a detailed annual Human Rights Report for the Congress; and legislation requiring that human rights criteria be used to determine whether U.S. economic and military assistance should be provided to other countries. These solid accomplishments have set the framework for much of the human rights debate of the last 15 years.

The congressional actions were not enthusiastically received by Kissinger. But a second stage of the human rights debate opened with the Carter Administration. Rather than in-principled resistance from the executive branch, congressional human rights activists found in-principled support from the White House and the State Department. This convergence at the level of principle did not resolve specific issues about how fast or how far human rights concerns should be pursued in specific instances, but the context of the policy debate shifted significantly under Carter. The Carter Administration lacked a well-defined human rights policy. The rhetoric was impressive, the intent was real, but a coherent policy design relating principles to specific cases and balancing human rights concerns against other policy priorities was absent. At the same time, the emphasis placed on human rights drew others into the policy debate. The analytic attention given to the subject of human rights inside the government and in the wider policy community was unprecedented.

The Carter advocacy of human rights provoked the third stage of the policy debate. The initiative now came from the critics of the human rights policy, who argued that the legislation of the 1970s and the use made of it by Carter systemically weighed against U.S. allies (in Latin America or East Asia) and did not sufficiently expose the human rights abuses of Marxist regimes. Symbolic of this critique was the 1979 article by Dr. Jeane Kirkpatrick in Commentary magazine titled “Dictatorships and Double Standards.”

The critique of the Carter policy carried over into the Reagan Administration of the 1980s. The Reagan policy’s direction was set when Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced that the previous emphasis placed on human rights (continued on page 4)
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would be replaced by an emphasis on opposition to terrorism. There followed in the 1980s a clear devaluation of the human rights factor in the policy process. The congressional-executive struggle that ensued was reminiscent of the Kissinger period. Partly because of congressional pressure and partly because of events in the Philippines, Haiti and Korea, the Reagan Administration in its second term shifted to a more visible posture on human rights. Enough of a change occurred to generate an article in Foreign Affairs by Tamar Jacoby titled “Reagan’s Turnaround on Human Rights” (Summer, 1986). Critics would continue to argue that the attention paid was selective and sporadic, but human rights had surfaced again as a policy theme.

A new administration could give human rights a more systematic role in U.S. policy. It could promote the human rights theme as Carter did, but it would also be able to draw on the lessons of the last 15 years and the significant body of literature generated during this period. The academic literature followed the policy initiatives, it did not produce them.

But there is now a solid body of political, legal and ethical analysis available to help shape a coherent, effective human rights policy. The literature addresses the philosophical foundations of human rights, the role of human rights criteria in the policy process, and methods for relating human rights to other policy goals. A framework for policy exists in this literature, but any dramatic change in policy will have to await leadership that is convinced that human rights should play a significant role in foreign affairs.

Roundup

- Robert Veatch and Stephen Klaidman of the Kennedy Institute will participate in a workshop March 6-8 on “Communicating the Risks and Benefits of Prescription Drugs.” Veatch will serve on a panel dealing with social and ethical issues relating to communication about these drugs and Klaidman will moderate a panel on mass communications issues. The meeting is being held on the Isle of Palms off Charleston, SC.
- A conference titled “Baby M: Ethical Issues in New Reproductive Technologies,” will be held in Minneapolis on April 15. The conference, which is sponsored by the University of Minnesota's Center for Biomedical Ethics, will provide an overview of the technologies and the implications of new methods of creating life. It will highlight ethical, theological, sociological and public policy concerns. Speakers will include Arthur L. Caplan, director of the center, and Baruch Brody, director of the Center for Ethics, Medicine, and Public Issues at Baylor College of Medicine.
- Abigail Rian Evans of the Kennedy Institute produced a 20-minute videotape in cooperation with Howard University Hospital’s audiovisual department on “Problems of Participation in the Life of the Church by Persons with Disabilities.” Evans was also elected a member of the first ethics committee for the Southeastern Organ Procurement Foundation, which coordinates organ-sharing activities for 50 member institutions in 21 states.