

# **The Role of Consciousness in Overcoming Greed – Humanity’s Tool for Combatting the Environmental Crisis**

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## INTRODUCTION

Climate change is increasingly being acknowledged as one of the greatest threats facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's no secret to scientists and the majority of the general public that we – humans – are the instigators of the current environmental crisis that faces the world. Many of the environmental issues plaguing the Earth today can be traced back to greed. Greed manipulates us to the point that we consume more than we need, and the materialistic desires of most people in the Western world require more and more to be satisfied. Greed is even identified as one of the seven deadly sins in Christian teachings. In today's society it is certainly deadly to future generations of people, but unfortunately greed is also becoming deadly to a large proportion of other living things on Earth as we are driving more and more species to extinction. It is now a widely accepted view among scientists that we are either on the brink of, or in the midst of, Earth's sixth mass extinction event (Barnosky et al. 2001). Despite our unmatched intelligence we should be concerned about this news as few large-bodied species ever survive mass extinctions. Scientists believe that as we continue to consume and deplete Earth's finite resources, we are driving ourselves to a major population crash (UCS 1992). In spite of all this, there is a tiny shred of hope for humans.

We have an ability that is unique among all species, a key element of ourselves that provides the foundation for our own subjective experiences of the world, the ability to be aware of our surroundings, and to reflect on them – consciousness. Consciousness is an important part of what it means to be human, and it may be the saving grace for our species. Because we have the ability to acknowledge the catastrophe that we have created, perhaps we can actually do something about it. Any other species faced with the same problem would not be able to solve it. In this essay, I will argue that human greediness is a fundamental cause of the environmental crisis, but that consciousness provides us with the capacity to subsume those innate greedy desires and adopt more sustainable livelihoods.

## THE ROOT OF THE CRISIS

Greed is an insatiable desire for things, it is a sin of excess. Guatama Buddha claimed that an overattachment to the material world and its pleasures is at the root of all human suffering. It's easy to see how greed could be the root cause of the environmental crisis that the Earth is currently facing. It is a driving force behind humanity's continual growth and expansion. Overconsumption of resources leads to famines, poverty, overuse of space, and world conflicts (Butler 1994). We are constantly overexploiting the Earth's resources, and as a result those resources are dwindling. Especially worrisome is our current trajectory of catastrophic climate change due to rising greenhouse gases (Hansen et al. 2013), agricultural production (particularly the meat industry) (Ripple et al. 2014), and deforestation (Keenan et al. 2015).

The environmental crisis has been modeled by a mathematical problem called "the tragedy of the commons". The overarching idea behind the tragedy of the commons is to describe what happens when the public shares a common resource. Each person can increase his or her own fitness by taking more of the common resource than everyone else. However, collectively everyone would be better off if each person took only their equitable portion of the resource, thus sustainably maintaining the resource for use by future generations (Hardin 1968). The western world holds the majority of the responsibility to reduce consumption. If everyone in the world had the same ecological footprint as the average Canadian, we would need 4.2 Earths to support the world's current population (Dwyer 2009). If everyone living in developed countries were to really think about the implications of their own overconsumption on the state of the world, many would realise they need to make an immediate change by significantly reducing their consumption. Unfortunately, each person benefits from their own greed and from their own ability to deny the truth of the impacts of overconsumption, while society as a whole suffers because of this.

## GREEDY GENES

The reason why we are greedy is simple: natural selection has made it so. Richard Dawkins proposed the idea of selfish genes in his book *The Selfish Gene*, although Darwin was the original mastermind behind the idea. Dawkins argues that, if we are to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good we can expect little help from our biological nature. Therefore, we should instead try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish (Dawkins 1976).

The underlying reason why selfishness and greed has spread throughout the population is also rather straightforward. Think about a population composed entirely of altruists, with altruism being a behaviour that benefits others at the expense of the individual performing the behaviour. Altruism is only stable in this kind of population if everyone in the population is altruistic. As soon as a selfish individual enters the population he/she will exploit the altruistic tendencies of everyone else to his/her own benefit. Because of this they are more likely to survive and reproduce, and their children will tend to inherit their selfish traits (Dawkins 1976). Thus, we can see that a population of altruists is unstable. As soon as one selfish individual arrives in the population, selfishness will then spread throughout the population. Once selfishness has spread through the population, it is impossible for altruism to come back because altruistic individuals will be at a disadvantage compared to the rest of the population, reducing their chance of successful reproduction. An individual can only benefit from an altruistic behaviour when everyone else in the community is also committed to a pattern of altruistic behaviours (Rachlin 2002). It is therefore unsurprising that greediness has overcome selflessness; it is simply the most effective way to ensure that your genetic information is passed on and represented in the next generation. However, with the present environmental crisis, selfish behaviour reduces the likelihood that the human race can continue to live on this planet for much longer without suffering a major population crash.

## MIND OVER NATURE

Lucky for us humans, there is an important tool that we have that most other species do not have – consciousness. Consciousness is a concept that has been extremely difficult for psychologists to define, but essentially it is an ability to respond to the environment, report mental states, focus attention, and deliberately control behaviour. Consciousness is profoundly important in what makes us human. It is what allows us to be aware of our surroundings and to make mindful decisions. Because we are conscious, we are able to make deliberate actions that may contradict our nature (Chalmers 2010).

In order to control innate behaviours we need to acknowledge them and raise them to consciousness (Rees 2010). This is our weapon for fighting what is written in the genes in every cell of our bodies. There is no question that it is difficult for humans to overcome the deepest of urges, quitting smoking for example, is something that is very difficult to do even if one really wants to achieve it. Fortunately, it is entirely possible for people to overcome temptations. Counteractive self-control theory describes proactive self-control strategies that individuals employ in order to overcome temptation (Fishbach and Trope 2005). The theory states that in order to overcome temptation, individuals tend to dampen their valuation of the temptation while increasing their valuation of the goals. The importance of the counteractive self-control theory is profound. It implies that even though we are sometimes drawn by short-term gratification, we are not slaves to it. It is possible for humans to surmount our temptations in order to guide us towards achieving our long-term interests (Gollwitzer and Moskowitz 1996).

Despite the fact that humans in the past may have been greedy, and that our genes have made it so that we are innately selfish, in the more recent centuries of human existence societies have begun to place more value on cooperation and selflessness within communities. When conducting studies on altruism, most scientists find that the majority of human subjects do tend to exhibit altruism, and have an aversion to inequality (Andreoni and Miller 2002). Perhaps this can be attributed to teachings of

selflessness and fairness in schools and many religions, and an increasing power of our consciousness to subsume our greedy desires. Even though we are innately selfish, because of the values taught by today's society, more often than not a spontaneously made decision will be a selfless one (Rand et al. 2012). Slowly but surely humans may be shifting away from absent-minded selfish actions, to deliberately made selfless actions that have been taught by society. Spontaneous and voluntary selflessness and an ability to resist temptations will be a huge asset when it comes to achieving sustainability and solving the environmental crisis.

### CONSCIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Some believe that there is no technical solution to the environmental crisis; a solution for climate change will require a change in human values or ideas of morality (Weisner and York 1964). The ability for humans to overcome temptations indicates a potential ability to achieve environmental sustainability by resisting the temptations that prevent sustainable behaviours. We can fight what is encoded in our genes with consciousness. A consciousness of environmental issues and a consciousness of our innate desires together can promote awareness of the environmental crisis and promote behaviours associated with attaining sustainable lifestyles.

Adam Smith wrote in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" that education for sustainable development should focus on helping people confront and combat their selfish desires, as well as to think and act responsibly, motivated by sympathy for future generations (Smith 2009). In order for individuals to be able to act sustainably they need a solid moral compass enabling them to appreciate that future generations are equally as important as the generations that are currently on this Earth. An appreciation of the value of future generations demands an active suppression of the selfish and greedy desires plaguing Western society. Consciousness can help us do just that, in fact the Deep Ecology movement and other similar environmental movements are founded on the basis that we are conscious and can make sustainable choices that oppose our greedy inner desires. If we were not conscious,

would not even be able to recognize that we are experiencing an environmental crisis, let alone that we have the capacity to do something about it.

In 1992, 1700 of the world's most reputable scientists, including many of the living Nobel prize winners, released a statement saying that a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided (UCS 1992). Humans are quick to proclaim that we are the most intelligent life on Earth, but we were somehow unable to heed the warning of the world's top scientists. Most environmental "fixes" today assume that we will be able to solve the environmental crisis with technology. However, completely sustainable living is going to require more than a new technology, we need a drastic shift in attitude. The current attitude of ignorance and self-interest will not be good enough for achieving environmental sustainability. Eventually we need to come to the realisation that the Earth's resources are finite, and that it is possible, and inevitable, that we will expend them through overconsumption and overexploitation.

Increasingly, environmental movements have been calling for active suppression of our selfish desires in order to achieve economic "degrowth". This is defined as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term (Schneider et al. 2010). Deliberate economic degrowth entails a re-distribution of the world's wealth in a more equitable way. Getting rid of our greedy behaviours in order to support this economic degrowth will necessitate constant conscious effort, particularly from Western societies. Throwing away our current trend of a steadily and constantly growing economy and accepting a non-growing one will not only allow us to achieve environmental sustainability, but also reduce unemployment, debt, and poverty (Klitgaard and Krall 2012). These are goals that many people are currently working towards.

## CONCLUSION

The human species is innately selfish and greedy. But just because our genes tell us to be that way does not mean that we can't teach ourselves to be selfless and cooperative instead. We have now reached a crossroads in terms of global development, and there are two ways in which we as a species can move forward. The first involves continuing to live the unsustainable livelihoods that most of us are currently leading. The consequence of this is that we will experience a major population crash in the near future. The second way in which we can move forward is to recognize the impacts that we are having on the natural world and how our innate greed is contributing to these impacts. Then we can make drastic changes in our lifestyles in order to prevent a crash of the human population, prevent the extinction of many other species, and slow down climate change.

An ignorance of the current environmental crisis is no longer an option. We have reached a critical point in human existence where the fate of all future generations is in the hands of those currently on Earth. Any other species would not be able to tackle the issues that we now face, they would only be able to continue living as they are, eventually driving themselves to extinction. However, humans have the unique ability to control our innate desires in order to live more sustainably. We have the ability to subsume the greedy desires ingrained in our genetic code that have lead us into the environmental crisis that we now face, and embrace values and attitudes that we will require to save ourselves, and our planet.



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