

**The 21st Benjamin Oluwakayode Osuntokun
Memorial Lecture**

06 January 2020

**The Psychology of Greed
and the Principles of Conflict:
A Marriage Made in...**

by

Akintunde Akinkunmi

MBBS, LLM, FRCPsych, FRCP (Glasg), psc VRSM(+),
Maj. Gen (rtd), former Chief Medical Officer (Reserves)
Royal Army Medical Corps, British Army

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ISBN: 978 978 921 203

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The Benjamin Oluwakayode Osuntokun Trust, Ibadan
c/o Professor O. Osuntokun
U.I. Post Office Box 9388
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Published in Nigeria by
BookBuilders • Editions Africa
2 Awosika Avenue, Bodija, Ibadan
email: bookbuildersafrica@yahoo.com
mobile: 0805 662 9266; 0809 920 9106

Printed in Ibadan
Oluben Printers, Oke-Ado
mobile: 0805 522 0209

INTRODUCTION

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What is Greed?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines greed as “a strong desire for more wealth, possessions, powers, etc., than a person needs.” Its counterpart, the Cambridge English Dictionary, puts it thus: “a strong desire to continually get more of something, especially money.” Another definition of greed is that it is “the excessive desire to acquire or possess more than one needs or deserves, especially material wealth.” All these definitions of greed could be reasonably described as involving a diminution, if not the complete absence of satiety, and this might be an opportune moment to look into our brains in search of a possible causative explanation of greed.

Neuroscientific Theories of Greed

The hypothalamus, a structure about the size of an almond, is located at the base of the brain. And, for something so small, it exerts a significant effect on several of the functions of a living human being. These include regulating a number of metabolic processes, linking the nervous system to the endocrine system via its near neighbour (the pituitary gland) and, crucially for the purposes of this lecture, forming a

major part of the limbic system, which is involved in the key functions of emotions, motivation, learning and memory.

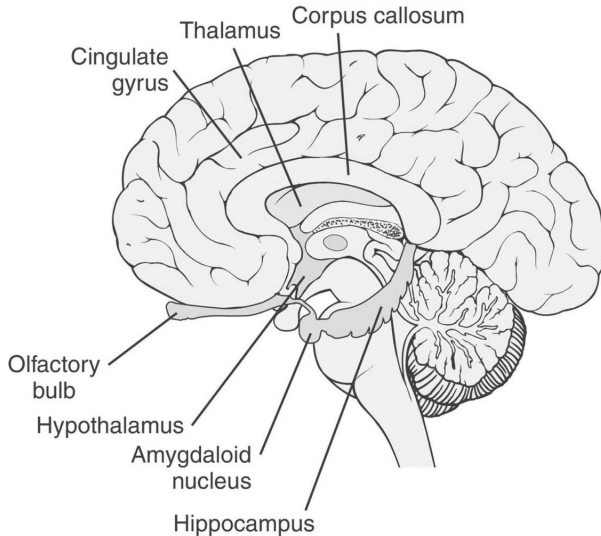


Figure 1. The limbic system.

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have its origins in the malfunctioning neuroanatomy or physiology? In order to address this question, it is necessary to consider other potential causative factors, and to do this I move from the brain to the mind.

Psychological and Philosophical Theories of Greed

The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tsu, in 500BC, wrote that: "There is no calamity greater than lavish desires, no greater guilt than discontentment, and no greater disaster than greed." The ancient Greeks described the concept of pleonexia, defined as the **insatiable** (that word satiety again!) desire to have what rightfully belongs to others. This was modified by John Ritenbaugh in 1988 as "ruthless self-seeking and an arrogant assumption that others and things exist for one's own benefit." According to the ancient Greeks, pleonexia was both immature

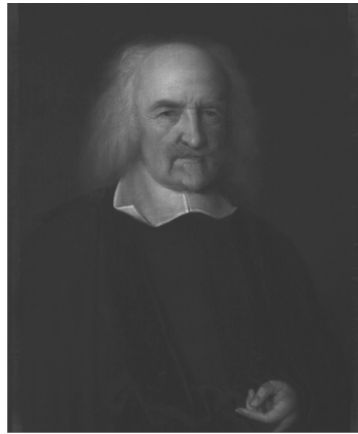


Figure 2. Thomas Hobbes.

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If in this case, at the making of peace, men require for themselves that which they would not have to be granted to others, they do contrary to the precedent law that commandeth the acknowledgment of natural

equality, and therefore also against the law of nature. The observers of this law are those we call modest, and the breakers arrogant men.

It will come as no surprise to anyone in this distinguished audience that there are divergent views on the subject of greed. At around the same time that Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*, the English physician and philosopher, John Locke, took exception to the idea that there was such a thing as

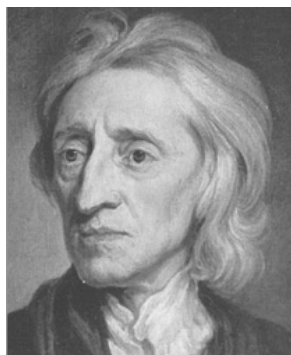


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greed, preferring to regard it as ‘enlightened self-interest’. Writing in the *Capitalism Magazine* 19 years ago, Walter Williams, Professor of Economics at the George Mason University in the United States, opined that:

... without greed, our current economic and social structures would implode... greed produces profitable economic outcomes most times and under most conditions.

So... is greed innate, or do we learn it?

One theory holds that, in addition to the obvious nutritional benefit of an infant suckling at its mother’s breast, there is also an additional element of pleasure involved, and that this pleasure is replicated in acquisitiveness, where possessions are acquired not just for need, but for the pleasure involved in taking, holding and hoarding. This theory, however, has

the obvious flaw that, while the vast majority of us have at one time suckled on our mothers' breasts, not all of us (hopefully!)

. . . have an excessive desire for more than is needed or deserved, not for the greater good, but for one's own selfish interest, and at the detriment of others and society at large (Burton, 2014).

So, what sets the greedy folks amongst us apart? We have already referred to the possibility of a flawed neuroanatomical structure or neurophysiological function. Neel Burton suggests that greed may also arise from:

Early negative experiences such as parental inconsistency, neglect or abuse. In later life, feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, often combined with low self-esteem, lead the person to fixate on a particular substitute for what he or she once needed but could not find.

He goes on to point out that, as human beings, we have a unique capacity to project ourselves into the future, up to and beyond our death, and that we are all, to varying degrees, haunted by our own mortality. This, when taken in combination with our strong survival instincts, generates anxiety about our purpose, meaning and value. This existential anxiety, although mostly subconscious, occasionally intrudes into our consciousness, prompting us to seek comfort through compensatory behaviours, of which greed is but one.

And then there is the factor of our culture. Where, as I would argue, is the case in Nigeria, our culture places a premium on materialism, is it possible that we could become immune to satisfaction? If so, is that aided and abetted by the complex interplay between possible structural abnormalities and impaired physiological functioning in our brains, as well as early and on-going negative life experiences? Or is Nikelly right when, in 2006, he averred that greed is nothing more than “cultivated behaviour fuelled by economic or cultural values, and is neither inherited nor universal. “

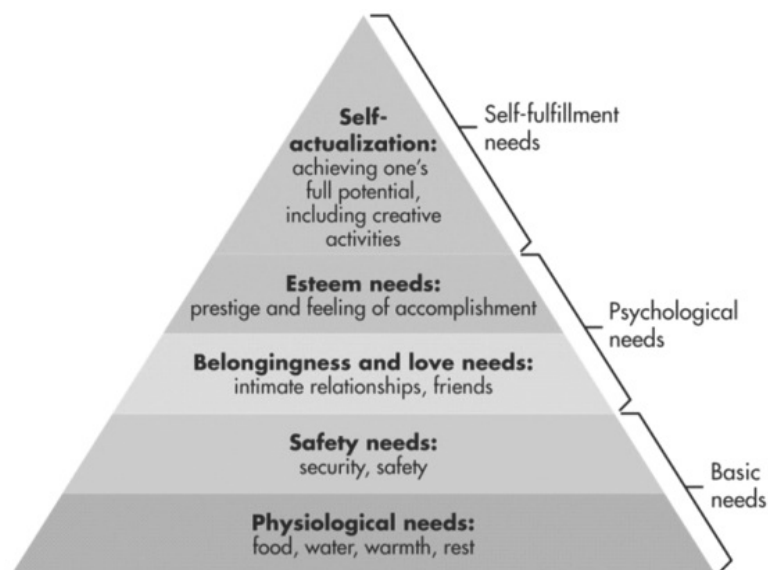


Figure 4. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Whatever its parentage, greed often spawns other problems like deception, spite, envy and theft. Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs is often presented as a five-level

pyramid, with needs at the higher levels of the pyramid coming into focus only when the needs at the lower, more basic levels of the pyramid have been met. Maslow described the top level of the pyramid as a growth need, because it enables the individual to reach their fullest potential as a human being. The problem with greed in this context is that it gets the individual stuck on one of the four lower levels and thus unable to 'self-actualise', as Maslow puts it.

Again, I strongly doubt that anybody in this distinguished audience would dissent from the suggestion that we live in an increasingly religious and religiously polarized society in Nigeria (and, in my humble opinion, also an increasingly Godless one). And yet, I know not of a single major religious faith that does not explicitly and strongly disapprove of greed, for the obvious reason that it not only exalts self above whichever deity one happens to believe in, but also because, as mentioned earlier, deprives one's fellow man of what belongs to them. In summary, therefore, greed may be the result of a multitude of factors (neuroanatomical and neurophysiological defects, attachment theories, adverse life experiences, existential anxieties, learned behaviour fuelled by cultural or economic values), and its harvest (bitter or sweet, depending on one's particular perspective), include innovation and economic growth on the one hand, and deception, envy, theft and spite on the other. I invite you all now, at this point, to consider substituting the word 'greed' for the word

‘corruption’ in the context of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 2020.

You might well question the validity of what appears on the face of it to be a bold suggestion that greed and corruption are synonymous. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that corruption would neither exist or thrive without greed, and that not all greedy people are necessarily corrupt. So, while it may not be strictly true to portray them both as being synonymous, there is nevertheless a strong association between both.

Corruption in Nigeria, 2020 – Nature and its Consequences

We have already looked at some possible causative factors for the existence of greed and corruption, and we now turn to the nature and consequences of this veritable pestilence in the Nigeria of today. The simplest and best definition of corruption I have ever come across is that it is “the misuse of entrusted power and resources (by heritage, education, marriage, election, appointment or usurpation) for private gain.” The great virtue of this definition is that it encompasses the public and private sectors, and the entire hierarchy of society, from the top echelons to the humblest levels of society. The examples which follow are not strictly limited to Nigeria, but I am sure they will strike a chord for all of us:

- In politics, it undermines good governance by flouting or subverting formal processes and procedures.

- In elections and in legislatures, it distorts representation in policy and law-making.
- In the judiciary and in law enforcement agencies, it undermines the rule of law
- In public administration, it undermines the efficient provision of services.
- In government, it reduces the strength of the institutions of the state through the siphoning off of resources and the buying and selling of public office. It also undermines the legitimacy of government, and the levels of the people's trust in their government.
- In the private sector, it increases the costs of doing business, costs which are passed on to the consumer.

In 2004, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that between 1960 and 1999, \$400 billion dollars were lost to corruption in Nigeria. At today's exchange rate, this amounts to ₦144 trillion. By comparison, the federal budget for 2020 is ₦10.33 trillion. Put another way, if you laid 400 billion one dollar bills end to end, you would have enough to make 75 round trips to the moon. These are funds that could have provided hundreds of thousands of kilometres of good roads, hundreds of thousands of equipped and functioning schools and hospitals, and millions of public servants and pensioners who receive their salaries and pensions in a timely manner. This is, therefore, not an inconsequential problem, neither in scope or consequences, and I submit that a problem of this magnitude requires a systemic approach that involves a

concise, coherent and focussed application of overwhelming force in order to disrupt and ultimately defeat it.

The Principles of Conflict



Figure5. Akintunde Akinkunmi armed and in battledress

Having now painted a picture of where greed and corruption come from, what they look like and, as we know too well in Nigeria, what their pernicious consequences are, I turn now to the principles of conflict, and how those principles could form a conceptual framework by which this problem can be decisively dealt with.

First, a brief lesson on military doctrine.

NATO defines military doctrine as “the fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of objectives.” Since the central reason for the existence of any military force is to fight and defeat its enemy, the creation of effective fighting power is therefore key to this.

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ISBN: 978 978 921

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Published in Nigeria by

BookBuilders • Editions Africa

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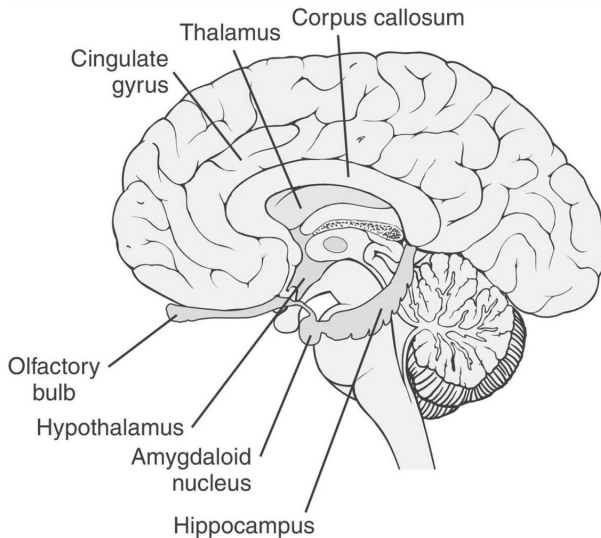


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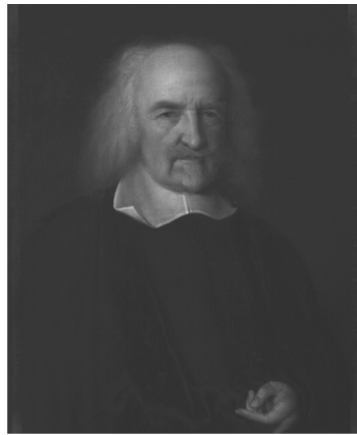


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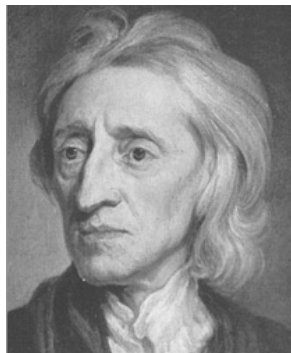


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and defeat its enemy, the creation of effective fighting power is therefore key to this.

There are components of fighting power, namely:

- Physical component: the weaponry and other hardware required to do the job.



Figure 6. Napoleon Bonaparte.

- Moral component: the rules that govern what we do, and include concrete things like the laws of armed conflict, and less tangible things like motivation and morale. According to Napoleon Bonaparte, in conflict, “the moral is to the physical as three is to one”.
- Conceptual component: doctrine.

It is these I intend to focus on. Having, for the purpose of this discussion, identified greed and corruption as our adversaries, it would be good at this point to quote from the British Army’s Doctrine Publication:

Whether the belligerents are states or other entities, all conflict is essentially adversarial, **human** (involving friction, uncertainty, violence and stress) and political. Conflict is a reciprocal contest of will, in which multiple adversaries and actors act and react to each other, often unpredictably, in a struggle to succeed. Adversaries seek constantly to **mitigate their own weaknesses, avoid opponents’ strengths and focus instead on aligning their own strengths against weaknesses**. As human beings, we are not immune to the influence of our emotions and will continue to be influenced by and represent the entire spectrum of human **behaviour, emotion** and capability... our physiology limits what we can do physically... our psychology means that our **decisions** and behaviour are informed by our **perceptions** of what is happening.

It should be apparent to you all by now that there are some parallels between some of the highlighted words in this publication, and our previous discussions on the subject of

greed. Let us now acquaint ourselves with the principles of conflict. The British Defence Doctrine describes these principles as being:

...enduring, but not immutable, absolute or prescriptive, and provide an appropriate foundation for all military activity. The relative importance of each may vary according to context; their application requires judgment, common sense and intelligent interpretation. Commanders also need to take into account the legitimacy of their actions, based on the **legal**, moral, **political**, diplomatic and **ethical** propriety of military forces, once committed.

- **Selection and maintenance of the aim:** This is, quite rightly, in my humble opinion, regarded as the master principle of conflict.
- **Maintenance of morale:** A positive state of mind derived from inspired political and military leadership, a shared sense of purpose and values, well-being, perceptions of worth and group cohesion.
- **Offensive action:** The practical way in which a commander seeks to gain advantage, sustain momentum and seize the initiative.
- **Security:** The provision and maintenance of an operating environment that affords the necessary freedom of action, when and where required, to achieve objectives.

- **Surprise:** The consequence of shock and confusion induced by the deliberate or incidental introduction of the unexpected.
- **Concentration of force:** The decisive, synchronized application of superior fighting power (conceptual, physical and moral) to realize intended effects, when and where required.
- **Economy of effort:** The judicious exploitation of manpower, materiel and time in relation to the achievement of the objectives.
- **Flexibility:** The ability to change readily to meet new circumstances. This includes agility, responsiveness, resilience and adaptability.
- **Cooperation:** Teamwork and a sharing of dangers, burdens, risks and opportunities.
- **Sustainability:** The ability to generate the means by which the fighting power and freedom action of the force are maintained.

So, having defined our adversary, consider what gives rise to, drives and motivates him, and clarified what his aim is, how can we apply the principles set out above to combat him?

Our starting point must be the careful selection of our aim: What are we trying to achieve? It would be a mistake, in my opinion, to try and achieve the total elimination of greed/corruption, for the simple reason that it is simply not possible. As long as human beings are involved, there will always be corruption. That said, is it possible to mitigate the limit of corruption, and if so, how? The words of General

Colin Powell, a former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (and later Secretary of State), talking about the plan to expel the invading Iraqi army from Kuwait in the first Gulf War, readily come to mind: "First we're going to cut it off, and then we're going to kill it."

Elegantly simple and easily understood by everyone from a general down to a private. For our purpose, we can rephrase our aim thus:

First we're going to cut off as far as possible the avenues by which greed can mutate into corruption, and then we're going to kill it by making the consequences of being caught as unbearable as we possibly can.

Talk, however, is cheap, and has to be followed up by action. The Iraqi army was not expelled from Kuwait simply by General Powell's elegant prose. It was expelled by the focussed and relentless application of overwhelming force to back up his words. And we must maintain our aim by being relentless, as to fail to do so gives the adversary the breathing space to regroup. In our case, we must ensure the vigorous application of existing laws and processes, and I would suggest that the first step is to overhaul, radically, if necessary, the instruments of law and order, especially the police and the judiciary. None of this is likely to happen in the absence of determined and visionary leadership, because changing the culture that engenders and sustains greed is likely to be much more difficult in the absence of this key factor.

The maintenance of our selected aim implies the need for offensive action, as set out above, for our chances of victory will be increased by knocking and keeping our adversary off balance, overwhelming his capability to decide and act, and eroding his will to continue the fight. In so doing, we impair his ability to maintain his morale, whilst increasing our ability to do that as our own forces begin to see progress in overwhelming the adversary. Catching our adversary by surprise means he is likely to be unprepared for our offensive action, and this in turn further impairs his ability to fight back. But in order to surprise him, we must make plans within a bubble of security that gives us the freedom of action to strike at a time and in the manner of our own choice.

There is, however, little point in spreading ourselves so thin that in trying to attack everywhere, we are effective nowhere. We must therefore concentrate our forces and fighting power, preferably pitting our strength against the adversary's weaknesses, in order to further degrade his ability to effectively respond to our onslaught. Given that our resources are unlikely to be limitless, we must shepherd what we have, applying it where we get, as it were, the biggest bang-for-our-buck, thereby applying the principle of economy of effort. Our adversary, however, is unlikely to simply roll over and let us walk right through him. He is much more likely to fight back with every weapon in his armoury. We must therefore be prepared to be flexible in our response to his inevitable counterattack. Both our attack on our adversary, and our response to his inevitable counterattacks, are more likely to be successful if we identify, seek out and cooperate

with allies with whom we can share the dangers, burdens, risks and opportunities. And, finally, we must ensure that our efforts to combat this adversary are sustainable, and not just a one-day wonder, by laying the foundation for, and building enduring institutions that will ensure that our fighting power, and our freedom to manoeuvre in deploying that fighting power is maintained.

What is Our Desired End State?

A few minutes ago, we spoke of the consequences of greed and corruption in our society, and the end state of this battle must be to disrupt, dislocate and defeat our enemy, shattering his cohesion and his will to continue the fight. The end state, framed in the context of the ubiquitous 'common man', must ensure that he can freely and without hindrance or coercion, exercise his civic right to vote for whomsoever he pleases, and be confident that his vote will count; that he and his family have access to adequate health care and good basic education; that his security and that of his family is regarded as the first duty of his state; that if those in authority fail to live up to his expectations, they are accountable to him and his peers by being at risk of being voted out of office; that the basic infrastructure that ensures he is able to function as an economically productive unit of society is provided, and that he is paid the wages and pension that he has worked and saved for in a timely fashion. Then, and only then, can this war be said to have been successfully prosecuted.

Conclusion

We have, in the course of the last forty minutes or so, been on a voyage that has taken us from a moving walkway at Geneva Airport, via the limbic system in our brains and through a number of psychological, philosophical and cultural theories of greed, until we arrived, via a slight detour into the military doctrine, on the principles of conflict, and how these might be applied in confronting our adversary – corruption. We are now back where we started, at the beginning of this lecture, when I invited you all to consider the nature of any potential matrimonial relationship between the Psychology of Greed and the Principles of Conflict.

§ § §

The chairman of today's occasion, the chair and the Board of Trustees of the Benjamin Oluwakayode Osuntokun Memorial Trust, the provost and principal officers of the College of Medicine, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I was long ago cured of any delusions of grandeur that I may have had when it comes to my standing as an expert on matters related to marriage, whether actual or conceptual. On the other hand, I am under no illusion as to the enormity of the intellectual firepower present in this lecture theatre today, and to you all, therefore, I must respectfully defer as to what the answer is to the question I have posed. Once again, I thank the Board of Trustees for the opportunity to deliver this lecture, and I thank you all for your kind attention.

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