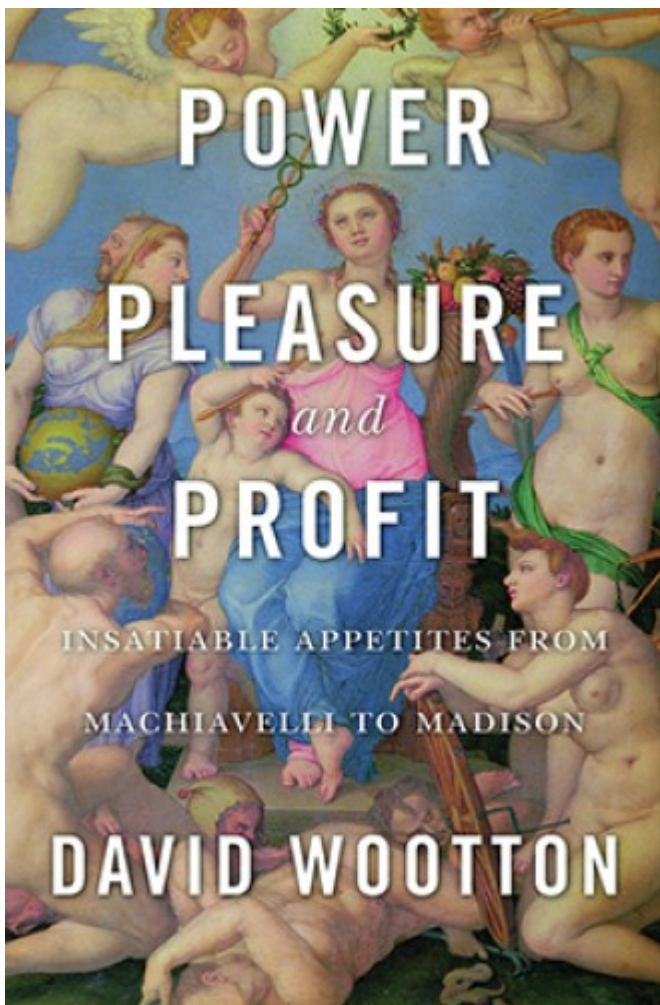


What greed looks like

The roots of our desire for money, pleasure, and power reach back to the Enlightenment.

by [Charles Scriven](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Power, Pleasure and Profit

Insatiable Appetites from Machiavelli to Madison

By David Wootton
Harvard University Press

David Wootton describes a moral world that would bewilder Aristotle and the biblical authors. If they knew the phrase, they might well exclaim: “This is from another planet!” Yet the world that Wootton portrays is the one in which we live.

Wootton’s ultra-exacting historical scholarship tells the story of the “cultural revolution” that took shape in the Anglophone West between the years 1500 and 1800. This revolution flowered forth as what he calls “the Enlightenment paradigm,” a still-dominant way of thinking that amounts, among other things, to the replacement of Aristotelian ethics and Christian morality.

Wootton gives fastidious attention to little-known writers and preachers, who provide context for his interpretation of the period’s defining figures. For example, the first quotation in the book comes from William Percey, author of *The Compleat Swimmer*, published in 1658. In a mere aside (the book really is about swimming), Percey remarks that “the only *inducements* to all *Actions* in the whole world . . . are *pleasure and profit*.”

Wootton’s point in quoting Percey isn’t about swimming. It’s that halfway into the period of his investigation, a writer of instructions on how to swim assumes that he is saying something uncontentious when he links all motivation with self-interest. In an earlier time, most thoughtful elites would have argued that what matters most is the sort of person you become, and so you’d set out to achieve “honor, self-respect, dignity, reputation, and a clear conscience.” Now, as Percey’s offhand comment shows, you’re expected to live and make decisions with a view to maximizing personal pleasure and advantage. Something new is happening.

The book’s story unfolds over nine substantive chapters, beginning with one called “Insatiable Appetites.” The phrase is from Machiavelli, and Wootton makes it a window into the sensibility he’s investigating. The “Enlightenment paradigm,” he says, “is the attempt to understand how selfish individuals can construct functioning societies” while more fully satisfying their “selfish appetites.” Under this paradigm, appetites rule; the traditional virtues are no longer worthwhile. Those things that Augustine considered to be sin are embraced by such figures as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume as true and legitimate clues to human well-being.

Power and profit matter because they provide security against threats to pleasure. After analyzing Machiavelli's account of power and political order, Wootton shows how the quest for pleasure plays out for various thinkers who followed Machiavelli. There is no single, highest good; happiness is a subjective condition, and we each determine for ourselves what it involves. But since everyone's desire is insatiable, everyone ends up (or so Hobbes says) competing, one way or another, against everyone else.

As he considers the development of the conviction that self-interest can express itself as concern for other people, Wootton shows how differences in degree of egoism influence attitudes toward others, including strangers. He traces the move from seeing happiness correlated with pleasure to the idea that concern for others consists precisely in making them happier. Thus, the sense of responsibility for "public happiness" develops, accompanied by the conviction that self-interest both drives and coheres with such responsibility.

Wootton continues with an account of the growth of the "elephantine state," which gave rise to ideas meant to protect the public from its excesses. Here a now-familiar premise comes into play again. The dominant thinkers regarded self-interest as "the sole principle on the basis of which governments must be constructed," assuming that duty and interest would somehow coincide.

Wootton builds the groundwork for his explicit critique by investigating Adam Smith's "invisible hand" metaphor, in which individual acts of self-interest benefit society as a whole. By a kind of secular providence, Smith wrote in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, even the "natural selfishness and rapacity" of the rich advances everyone's interests, including the interests of the poor. Social betterment does not require any strategies beyond noninterference with the natural workings of the marketplace.

Does this, Wootton wonders, make generosity irrelevant? No, because some people are still pressed by hunger, and when the rich assist them, they are admired for it. But you can't be assisting the poor while, at the same moment, focusing on your own financial advancement. There is tension, it turns out, between the market and morality.

Another example of the tensions: success requires readiness to drive hard bargains, which would seem to erase a place for the virtue of mercy.

Wootton treats at great length the case of the famine in Ireland, something Smith would certainly have known about. Despite several subpar harvests, food remained available, even as its price was lurching upward. The shortages affected the wage-price relationship in such a way that the poor could no longer pay for food.

In Smith's view, the wage-price relationship has to work itself out automatically, without governmental interference to create jobs, say, or raise wages. Meanwhile, as Smith is known to have thought, the poor could forage for "nettles" or roast "seagulls" and "moles."

In light of this ideology, Wootton suggests (following the social historian Edward Thompson) that the market needs to be supplemented by a "moral economy" that includes "mutually acknowledged moral obligations." Markets are more efficient, Wootton would allow, than other methods of distributing society's resources, but they are morally insufficient. People of a certain character, one that includes generosity, are still necessary.

During the period of Wootton's investigations, some writers, of course, resisted the reign of self-interest. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has famously emphasized, the world "after virtue" needs to bring virtue back. But how? Surely Christian witness must play a role, even if some of society's main megaphones would dismiss it as the carping of scolds.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What greed looks like."