



Jay Phelan

When members of Congress asked Ford CEO Alan Mulally if, as a symbolic gesture, he would be willing to take a \$1 salary in return for federal aid, his notorious response was, “I think I’m OK where I am.” (Mulally’s compensation in 2007 was \$21.7 million.) As the economy slides deeper into recession, the rapacity of corporate executives—and their apparent immunity to shame—has brought greed to the fore as the most topical of mortal sins. While moderator **David Kirkpatrick** noted that the namesake of the October 26 roundtable, *Greed*, is “a subject we all have personal experience with,” current events betray levels of acquisitiveness far beyond the imaginings of the average consumer. Citing greed as a “primordial topic” and seeking to contextualize it in the present “frightening” financial moment, Kirkpatrick, Senior Editor for Internet and Technology at *Fortune* magazine, asked his fellow panelists, “When does wanting become excessive?”

Laurence Tancredi, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine, offered a broad definition of greed as “a kind of selfish, compelling desire for goods, mostly money, power, food,” adding the important qualification that such desire be “at the detriment of another person ... as opposed to, for example, someone who would just want to collect clams.” **Robert Frank**, Visiting Professor of Business Ethics at New York University Stern School of Business, countered with a more benign interpretation of greed, referencing Adam Smith’s premise that “greed often leads to good outcomes.” Drawing on Smith’s seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Frank explained that when producers who are competing for a market share create innovations to advance their business, they often benefit society and create a downward movement in prices. He went on to note, however, that when the economy goes sour, it is a challenge to figure out whom to blame, suggesting that the fault may in fact lie not with wolfish CEOs, but with those who fail to implement sensible regulation.

But what are the biological roots of greed, and how do we discern the drive to acquire in surfeit from the impulse for simple human comforts? **Jay Phelan**, Professor of Biology at UCLA and co-author of the best-selling *Mean Genes*, pointed out that greed and seeking out happiness are two behaviors that are closely intertwined. **Rabbi Philip Hiat**, scholar in residence at Central Synagogue, responded by proposing that there are good forms of greed and bad forms of greed. “I’m a greedy person,” he announced. “I don’t want a lot of money. I don’t care about the stock market. But I’m greedy for knowledge. When I see someone who has a lot of knowledge, I am jealous of that person.” He went on to define the truly rich person as one who is satisfied with his or her own lot, but quickly added that people always want to advance

themselves in some way. Professor Phelan interjected that our acquisitive nature is rooted in the fact that we are descended from people who were acquisitive and who reproduced a lot at a time when those impulses were necessary for survival.

The panelists then addressed the question of whether impulses towards greed can be curbed. Professor Phelan noted that while animals have strong taste preferences, if a certain food is closer and easier to retrieve, they modify their tastes. One of the evolutionary strengths of humans, he explained, is that part of the brain allows us to override certain genetic impulses, adding, “I’m constantly overriding a craving for Krispy Kreme donuts and In-and-Out Burger.” Kirkpatrick observed that we continue to struggle with our survival drive and our drive for social harmony, and when to allow one or the other to prevail. Professor Frank commented on the relevance of this struggle in the realm of sexuality, pointing out that in early societies, high-ranking males took more than one mate, an arrangement later subverted by the convention of monogamous marriage.

While the panelists agreed that the desire for individual gain is one of the more deeply ingrained impulses in human behavior, they described numerous scenarios in which altruistic acts rendered advantage not only for groups, but for individuals as well. Rabbi Hiat reminded the audience that the New York cab driver who last April returned a lost Stradivarius gained a great deal from his apparently selfless act. Professors Frank and Phelan agreed that there are benefits, both material and social, for those who surround themselves with a loyal, trustworthy cadre of associates. Professor Tancredi discussed experiments with monkeys using a token economy that point to a biological basis for the notion of fairness. While the panelists questioned whether the turmoil on Wall St. stemmed from natural, competitive human drive or pathological, addictive impulses, there was some consensus that what goes around comes around and, more optimistically, that one good turn begets another. *A.L.*

Caché

Moderator **Brigitte Peucker**, Elias Leavenworth Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures and Professor of Film Studies at Yale University, remarked on the “sharp intake of breath” that accompanied one of the more shocking moments in *Caché*, the centerpiece of the November 8 film screening and roundtable at the Philoctetes Center. She noted that this is the kind of startling effect that filmmaker Michael Haneke is known for creating. *Caché* follows the story of Georges, a French television personality who is tormented by a series of mysterious videotapes left anonymously on his doorstep. The film hinges in part on the technique of blurring the distinction between events that occur in actuality, and events that are replayed on video.

Roy Grundman, Associate Professor of Film Studies at Boston University and curator of the 2007 MoMA retrospective, “Michael Haneke: A Cinema of Provocation,” noted that *Caché* is one of Haneke’s most complex films, in particular because it incites viewers to question what they are seeing. He said he noticed many things the second time he saw the film that he hadn’t noticed the first time, a sign for him of the film’s allure and complexity. While the fallibility of perception is a theme found in other Haneke films, Grundman pointed out that *Caché* is unique in that it incorporates questions of the “ethnic other,” i.e. non-white residents of France. He noted that this element had added poignancy because the film was released at the time of the race riots in the Paris suburbs. In response, ►►