

What is something important, about which nearly everybody is wrong?

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The Meaning of Money

Money is a concept unique to human society and has drawn attention from thinkers due to its role and importance. However, misconceptions often surround the interpretation of wealth. It could be argued that many individuals mistakenly perceive the accumulation of wealth as the ultimate goal, believing that more money equates to higher personal value and increased happiness. This essay challenges such misconceptions and argues that money should be viewed as a means and tool to achieve goals, rather than an end in itself.

Despite many individuals claiming to understand that money should serve as a means rather than an end, their actions often contradict this belief as they continue to prioritize financial gain. The Chinese philosopher Yangming Wang posits that true knowledge necessitates corresponding action. In this context, individuals who primarily pursue financial acquisition fundamentally regard money as an end in itself, rather than a mere tool. Regrettably, such a mindset prevails within our society, contributing to a proliferation of misfortunes and criminal activities. The widespread misconception about the nature of money perpetuates these negative consequences.

Meaning of Money

According to Friedman(1988) money is universally accepted as a commodity that serves as a medium for economic transactions. It functions as a means through which prices and values are communicated, circulating anonymously between individuals and across nations. By enabling trade, money plays a crucial role in facilitating economic transactions and serves as the primary metric for assessing wealth. However, Oswald Spengler (1923) highlights that many money theories often err by starting their analysis with the value-token or material aspects of the payment medium, rather than recognizing money as a conceptual category of thought, similar to numbers and laws (Skidelsky, 2017). Karl Marx expands on the role of money as an intermediary between human needs and the objects that satisfy them, as well as between one's existence and the means by which it is sustained (Marx, 1844). Furthermore, Marx emphasizes the distinct nature of currency as a "perpetual motion machine," signifying its unique status as a universal commodity capable of facilitating uninterrupted exchange of goods (Marx, 1844). By functioning as a medium of exchange for all commodities, money ensures the ceaseless circulation of goods within an economic system. In modern society, with the development of capitalism and consumerism, many individuals perceive money as the ultimate purpose of life, fostering a desire for the acquisition and accumulation of wealth, and even the propensity for exploitation or plundering—a phenomenon known as monetization, which aligns with Marx's theory.

Money assumes a significant role as a fundamental measure of value and wealth in contemporary society. Nearly everything within the social fabric possesses an inherent quantifiable value. The accumulation of substantial monetary resources grants individuals enhanced access to a myriad of social opportunities, including superior educational prospects, improved healthcare, and an overall better quality of life. Moreover, individuals endowed with substantial financial means have the capacity to employ the labor of others, thereby yielding augmented monetary returns for both themselves and those whom they employ. Consequently, money serves a dual role, acting not only as a potent facilitator of economic "infrastructure" but also as an instrument of "domination" (Mann, 1986, as cited in Ingham, 2004). However, it is important to acknowledge that such power can be appropriated by specific interest groups, fueling widespread aspirations for greater control over financial resources and fostering the belief that the acquisition of money represents a lifelong goal.

Common Misconception: Money As The Final Goal

People naturally tend to want more, often comparing their wealth with others and feeling like they don't have enough. This innate characteristic has been significantly reinforced by the principles of capitalism, becoming a fundamental psychological aspect of civilization as a whole (Skidelsky, 2013). The pervasive influence of capitalist consumerist ideology further intensifies the insatiable nature of human desire. Individuals consistently pursue possessions and experiences with higher monetary value, often without fully comprehending the underlying motivations behind these desires. Consequently, money becomes the primary focus, with individuals mistakenly believing that accumulating more wealth equates to progress in terms of happiness. Paradoxically, upon reflection, individuals may come to realize that their relentless pursuit of money has led them to overlook numerous sources of

happiness and contentment. In essence, money is unconsciously established as the ultimate goal, overshadowing other aspects of a fulfilling life. Keynes predicted in 1930 that over the next century, per capita income would steadily rise, meeting people's basic needs, and resulting in a reduced work week of no more than fifteen hours (Skidelsky, 2013). However, in contemporary society, individuals find themselves working longer hours instead. A free market economy grants workers the autonomy to determine their labor hours while simultaneously stimulating our inherent inclination to compete and engage in status consumption.

Consequently, people may attain affluence, but capitalism instills habits that render them incapable of deriving satisfaction from their wealth, compelling them to continuously pursue more riches. It is challenging for individuals to recognize that their obsession should not lie solely in money itself but rather in the realization of their own life goals.

Distinguishing between a genuine concern for money and an unhealthy obsession with it lies in whether individuals are willing to forsake moral values in pursuit of financial gain or if they have lost sight of their original life goals, treating money as a mere means to achieve those objectives. This can be exemplified by instances of crime, where many individuals exhibit a misguided understanding of money, leading to an unhealthy fixation on it. Lane's (1954) investigation into the root causes of white-collar crime found that the pursuit of financial gain emerged as the predominant motive behind such illicit activities. Businessmen and government officials surveyed overwhelmingly believed that economic motives drove individuals to engage in unlawful practices, primarily motivated by the desire to quickly amass profit (p. 90). Undoubtedly, this yearning for immediate monetary gain also significantly influences more commonplace criminal acts, including thefts, robberies, and burglaries (Coleman, 1992). In reality, money has transformed society into an "arithmetic problem" (Simmel, 1978), where people gradually cease to contemplate the meaning behind the numbers and instead become fixated on the numbers themselves. This can be observed in the case of Michael Milken. During the 1980s, Milken constructed a vast business empire by selling high-risk, high-interest bonds. His financial success reached extraordinary heights, reportedly earning him over \$500 million in personal income within a single year. However, achieving such immense wealth came at a cost, as Milken engaged in numerous illegal activities. At the time of writing, he had pleaded guilty to six felonies and was serving a federal prison sentence (Paltrow, 1990). Interestingly, despite his substantial riches, Milken resided in the less fashionable area of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley and drove an outdated car (Bruck, 1988). Thus, it becomes evident that money assumes a significance in human society that extends beyond its mere exchange value, transforming into a goal in and of itself (Coleman, 1992).

The pursuit of wealth can drive individuals to engage in immoral actions, as evidenced by the presence of clinical psychopaths in the financial industry and the correlation between wealth and dishonest behavior. A recent study revealed that 10 percent of individuals working on Wall Street exhibit psychopathic traits, lacking empathy and displaying exceptional manipulative abilities. Furthermore, research indicates that individuals of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to engage in lying, cheating, and illegal activities (Deresiewicz). In their relentless quest for money, these individuals lose sight of their true desires and aspirations, risking their freedom and moral compass. It is crucial for society to recognize the potential consequences of such obsession with wealth and to reevaluate the values and priorities that guide individual pursuits.

Money As a Means And Tool

It is crucial to raise awareness among individuals that money serves as a means rather than an end. It is important for people to always keep in mind their life goals and aspirations. Money holds no intrinsic value unless we assign significance to it. In contemporary society, the realization of life's value is closely intertwined with monetary considerations. Having a strong economic foundation facilitates the attainment of personal goals and the realization of life values. However, if individuals lack their own aspirations and life values, money becomes a mere abstract symbol devoid of concrete meaning. Hence, money can only serve as a tool and a means, and should not become an ultimate objective in itself, as it would be rendered meaningless. This viewpoint aligns with Weber's perspective (1946) that money is "the most abstract and impersonal element that exists in human life" (Coleman, 1992).

According to Aristotle, the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate purpose in life, signifying that all human actions are driven by the pursuit of happiness. Nevertheless, as Whillans (2020) argues, the pursuit of money solely for the sake of happiness may result in accumulating more wealth but not necessarily greater happiness. Over time, this pursuit may even diminish one's happiness, as individuals begin to compare themselves to wealthier individuals and find themselves with less time. Conversely, perceiving money as a means to achieve goals allows for wiser financial decisions. In reality, all human desires and aspirations are fundamentally oriented towards the pursuit of "happiness." While a sense of self-worth is essential for attaining genuine happiness, money itself does not provide such a sense. However, it can be utilized as a tool within the capital market to exchange elements that fulfill one's sense of self-worth.

Deci and Ryan (year) posit that self-efficacy serves as the foundation of human happiness. They propose three fundamental psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which drive human behavior and contribute to psychological well-being and a sense of happiness. These needs are universally inherent and when fulfilled, individuals exhibit increased intrinsic motivation in pursuing their goals. In alignment with self-efficacy theory, Seligman (2002) asserts that pursuing authentic happiness generates the strongest motivation and highest satisfaction. Similarly, when individuals have the autonomy to choose their own goals, they experience heightened motivation and increased satisfaction. Extensive research conducted by psychologists consistently demonstrates that individuals supported by a sense of autonomy exhibit greater creativity, resilience in the face of challenges, pursuit of self-determined goals, and overall well-being.

However, the presence of extrinsic factors such as rewards and money tends to diminish intrinsic motivation. While rewards are commonly perceived as effective in reinforcing motivation, Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett's (year) drawing experiments with children reveal an intriguing phenomenon. Although the children who received rewards initially spent more time drawing with markers compared to those who did not, when the rewards were later removed, the previously rewarded children lost interest in drawing. The reward had undermined their intrinsic motivation, transforming the marker into a mere object of desire when a reward was available.

This outcome arises from perceiving the reward as an end in itself, where behavior and motivation become externally driven by the reward. Similarly, in society, if individuals mistakenly view money as an ultimate goal, life can lose its meaning and purpose.

According to Barbon's Nominal Theory of Money, money is merely a symbol, a ticket, a nominal presence, and a tool facilitating exchange. In modern society, physical currency constitutes a minor portion, prompting a deeper inquiry into the nature of money. MacLeod's (1844) work, *The Elements of Political Economy*, emphasizes that the primary purpose of money is to measure and record debts, facilitating their transfer from one individual to another. Money retains its essence as long as it serves this purpose, regardless of the form it takes, be it gold, silver, paper, or any other material. Therefore, we can establish the fundamental concept that money and negotiable debt are interchangeable terms, signifying that anything representing a negotiable debt qualifies as money. Money can consist of any material representing a negotiable debt and holds no intrinsic meaning beyond its function in facilitating social transactions, as substantiated in the field of economics.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the essence of money and the intricate relationship between humans and money within contemporary society, drawing insights from the realms of philosophy, psychology, and economics. It reveals that with the growing influence of capitalism, an increasing number of individuals mistakenly perceive money as an end in itself, disregarding its inherent meaninglessness as a mere abstract concept. Instead, money should be understood as transferable debt, devoid of intrinsic value.

It is essential for individuals to recognize that the pursuit of money is, in reality, a pursuit of the happiness and sense of worth that money can potentially provide. The true objective should be the accomplishment of personal life goals, leading to genuine happiness. Money can serve as a vital tool in this pursuit, owing to its substitutive nature within the free economic market. It enables individuals to fulfill certain material and even spiritual needs. However, individuals must always remain mindful of their ultimate life purpose and refrain from engaging in morally and socially detrimental activities solely driven by monetary gain.

The wider society must also grasp this fundamental understanding; otherwise, all endeavors that prioritize money as the ultimate goal will ultimately yield nothingness and lose their significance. Moreover, if the notion of "money as the ultimate goal" continues to be reinforced, crime rates will persistently surge, and the moral boundaries of humanity will progressively deteriorate. Socioeconomic conditions will stagnate, hindering true human liberation since money will cease to serve as a means to fulfill human needs.

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