

## Money *Can* Buy Happiness

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Money is underrated.

That claim may seem ridiculous, in an era of conspicuous consumption. One hardly need belong to the superrich to drive an imposing SUV, dine out frequently at ever better restaurants, shovel grunt work to a housekeeper, pamper oneself with pick-me-ups (facials, massages) once reserved for the upper echelons, or have one's daily routine facilitated by technological conveniences undreamed of a few decades ago. Shopping—and charging—have become national addictions.

At the same time that the appetite for material goods seems insatiable, people are commonly plagued by clouds of guilt. Some part of them views material desires as a vice. Students identifying themselves as business majors characteristically inject a self-deprecating remark to pre-empt others' anticipated criticism of their <sup>1</sup>interest in money. The familiar analysis is that people today are too materialistic, that thirst for “stuff” has crowded out more worthy pursuits. Our obsession with material goods has created imbalances; workaholics complain of inadequate time to enjoy their riches. The very term “consumer society” is usually a derisive rather than a neutral description of modern life<sup>1</sup>. Money—at least at the theoretical level—is persistently attacked from left and right alike. Witness recent protests at World Trade Organization meetings and complaints against pharmaceutical companies, lamenting the power of the rich. Or listen to rightwing social commentators (such as William Bennett, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hilton Cramer) who warn that “having it too easy” corrupts our virtue, makes us soft, and spoils our children.<sup>2</sup> Across the political spectrum, all agree that the materially successful bear a responsibility to give back to their communities, implying that prosperity means that one has “taken” too much.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hacker speaks for many when he disparages personal purchases and writes that “being the leader in consumption is not necessarily cause for congratulation.” *Money—Who Has How Much and Why* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 19. The Voluntary Simplicity movement of recent years seeks to restore less materialistic priorities, urging people to cut back on both work and possessions. See Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life* (New York: Viking, 1992); Sarah Ban Breathnach, *Simple Abundance* (New York: Warner Books, 1995); or, for a brief description of the movement, Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 187 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 2000) 39-48. D'Souza also tells of a friend who maintains that the country was “saved” by the Great Depression. Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 7-20. Copyright © 2000

Religion has long warned against the lure of material goods. Christian Scripture is explicit in several places. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” To merit eternal life, Jesus instructs us to sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor. Timothy writes that the desire for riches plunges men into “ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.”<sup>3</sup>

Church fathers since have remained, at best, suspicious of money, often condemning usury and “luxurious living,” warning against money as a distraction from God and a temptation to sin.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, economists have added to this spiritual assault the weight of social science data, concluding from studies of people’s income and life-satisfaction levels that the truism “money can’t buy happiness” really is true.<sup>5</sup>

I beg to differ. In an important sense, money can buy happiness.

Money can be misspent, to be sure. The relationship between money and happiness is not one of simple, seamless cause and effect. Conventional wisdom woefully minimizes the value of money, however. And in doing so, it sabotages people’s capacity to be happy.

For this reason, my aim in this paper is to clarify the relationship between money and happiness. To do that, I shall first sketch the basic nature of money and the basic nature of happiness. I will then explain the manner in which money contributes to happiness, adding some clarifications before concluding.

## 1. Money

Money is a token of exchange that facilitates trade. The use of money marks a monumental improvement over barter because of money’s flexibility. This is elementary economics, but it will be useful to refresh ourselves, so as to isolate money’s value.

Since a monetary currency can be traded for all manner of goods and services, its employment liberates an individual from trading exclusively with those who not only offer the things that he would like, but who are simultaneously seeking the very products that he has to offer. (Under a barter system, for instance, the baker must need a haircut in order to have incentive to sell bread to the barber). The convertibility of money into an array of goods and services astronomically expands the value of an individual’s products. By extending the range of other people with whom a person can advantageously

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10: 23-27; Mark 10: 17-22; 1 Timothy 6: 8-11, *New American Standard Bible* (Carol Stream, Ill: Creation House, 1973). Among other relevant passages, see Luke 6: 21-25, and Luke 12: 16-35.

<sup>4</sup> For a good account of Christianity’s historical attitudes toward money, see Jacob Viner, *Religious Thought and Economic Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Such studies are reported in Frank, 6, 65; Robert E. Lane, “Does Money Buy Happiness?” *The Public Interest* (no. 113, Fall 1993): 56-65; David Leonhardt, “If Richer Isn’t Happier, What Is?” *New York Times* May 15, 2001, national edition: A15 & 17.

trade, money multiplies his options; it multiplies the purposes to which his wealth can be put. As Georg Simmel observed, “the value of a given quantity of money exceeds the value of the particular object for which it is exchanged, because it makes possible the choice of any other object in an unlimited area... the choice that it offers is a bonus which increases its value.”<sup>6</sup> In short, thanks to the adoption of a common currency, a person’s own productive output acquires a greatly enhanced power to bring him satisfaction.

Money in a person’s wallet signifies his ability to acquire goods that he wants (from others who are willing to trade them). The most basic reason that people seek money, correspondingly, is their wish to be able to satisfy their desires.

Where does money come from? What is the source of a person’s wealth? At the most fundamental level, money arises from the production of goods and services, from the creation of something valuable. More strictly: from the creation of something that other people deem sufficiently valuable to trade for. If a person produces something that is not in demand by others, he will not be able to acquire money for it. His product may still be of value to him; it might serve some definite, constructive purpose in his life and in this way constitute a part of his wealth. Yet if others do not desire it, he will not be able to exchange it for money. A person’s output will be of greater monetary value the greater the number of people who desire it and the more keenly that other people desire it.

Obviously, a given individual might acquire money by means of theft or gift. Yet at root, even this money stems from someone’s creation of goods. Coins and bills stand for the actual objects (including services, specific processes, programs, techniques, formulas, compositions and the like) that people have brought into being.<sup>7</sup>

(Note that we use the terms “money” and “wealth” sometimes to refer to holdings of a currency (e.g., dollars) and sometimes to refer to the actual products (e.g., house, car, jewelry, capital equipment) that a currency can be traded for. I shall use “wealth” in this broader sense, and “financial” or “monetary” wealth to designate wealth in the form of currency.)

## **2. Happiness**

Happiness is the psychological condition that results from the achievement of one’s values. Values are ends that a person acts to gain and/or keep.<sup>8</sup> They are those things that a person cares about having or doing—“cares” in the robust sense that he is willing to act to secure them. Values can be material or spiritual. Food, clothes, eyeglasses, a car or a CD player would be material values. “Spiritual” values are those that pertain to a person’s

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<sup>6</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* ed. David Frisby, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1990) 212.

<sup>7</sup> I am leaving aside the distortions introduced by a fiat currency.

<sup>8</sup> Both characterizations are from Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964) 31, 16.

consciousness (and thus entail nothing mystical or supernatural). Spiritual values encompass such things as knowledge, beauty, a stimulating book, a challenging chess match, rewarding work, mental health, self-esteem, character traits (e.g., honesty, optimism, initiative), a friend or a husband. While spiritual values may take material form (a friend has a body; a book has pages), their value depends primarily on their relation to the needs of a person's consciousness.

Happiness is essentially the satisfaction that arises when a value has been realized. A person might be happy to purchase a week's groceries, save time on his commute home, or get his new computer set up and ready to run. Typically, the more precious the value or the more difficult to attain, the greater the correlative satisfaction. Thus we expect a person to be significantly happier when he has completed a college degree, won a coveted promotion, or married the love of his life. But whatever the value and whatever the intensity of gratification, the principle is the same: achieving values is what makes us happy.

It is useful to distinguish particular incidents of happiness from a more pervasive condition. While happiness results from the achievement of specific goals, when a person seeks happiness itself, he is after a more global kind of satisfaction with his life—with his daily activities, as he is engaged in them, as well as with what they all add up to, when he steps back to survey the totality. This more encompassing happiness requires knowledge that his time and energy are being spent in worthwhile ways and that he is efficacious in acting for the things that he cares about.

Correspondingly, happiness as the overarching goal for one's life refers not merely to an assortment of occasions of feeling satisfied. Rather, global happiness denotes a person's ongoing awareness that he has realized values and will continue to realize values, that value-achievement is a regular feature of his days. This is not to deny that the happy person may struggle, fail, or feel frustration. It is not to suggest that happiness demands a 100% success rate or that the happy person will, in every moment, experience the heady heights of ecstasy. It is to say, however, that happiness refers to more than feeling good about things five or six times a week. This broader, deeper life-happiness consists not simply in isolated episodes of success (even a good number of episodes), but in a more grounded sense of efficacy and success that permeates a person's entire sense of living. The happy person comes to see his life *as* value-achievement; the experience of satisfaction becomes characteristic.

This sort of success requires rational values and rational action in pursuit of them. To attain happiness, a person must clearly identify ends that are mutually compatible and that genuinely advance his well-being, and he must act thoughtfully and logically to realize these ends. While serendipity may occasionally turn up sought-for goods, neither happenstance nor randomly "doing something" can sustain value-achievement, long-term.

It is also important not to equate happiness with the pleasure that results from the satisfaction of *any* desire. The objects of a person's desires are not uniformly good for him (as most of us know from experience). The strong desire for a certain narcotic does not mean that having it would be, all things considered, beneficial. The same applies to all desires.

Consequently, I shall use "values" to refer to ends whose attainment would in fact enhance a person's life. Obviously, the determination of what is good for a person can be an intricate enterprise, as it must take into account all the peculiarities of an individual's context—his unique abilities, needs, resources, knowledge, etc. For our purposes, I simply wish to stress that understanding happiness as a function of value achievement does not entail hedonism. Elsewhere, I have argued at length that it is the quest for life that gives rise to the very phenomenon of values.<sup>9</sup> Only against the background of that overarching objective can we legitimately distinguish some things as good for a person (valuable) and others as bad. Life, correspondingly, provides the objective yardstick by which we can identify bona fide values (ends that do constructively contribute to a person's well-being).<sup>10</sup>

One further feature of happiness is significant for our larger concern. Happiness must be self-generated. Both a person's ends and his means of attaining his ends must be selected by his independent judgment and pursued through his own actions.

Aristotle was right to observe that certain external goods are necessary for eudaimonia.<sup>11</sup> A person cannot flourish in the absence of minimal material goods. Yet the heart of happiness resides in how a person leads his life rather than in what he possesses.

Correspondingly, happiness is not the sort of thing that can be transferred from one person to another. It cannot be borrowed, stolen, shared or forced. Well-wishers can lend all sorts of material and moral support, and these can help a person in substantial ways. Money, time off, or an understanding listener can strengthen a person's ability to accomplish a difficult goal. In the end, however, one person, however loving and generous, cannot make another person happy. He cannot *achieve* on behalf of another, and he consequently cannot supply the type of satisfaction that happiness consists in. The way to achieve values is through a person's own exertion of

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<sup>9</sup> See my *Viable Values—A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), especially chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>10</sup> The objectivity of values permits considerable variety in the specific things that a person might legitimately pursue as values in his life. Scores of careers are legitimate values, as are scores of hobbies and recreational pursuits, tastes in fashion, furniture, film, food, music and men. The point is not to restrict human pursuits to a narrow band of robotic conformity. The point is that values must be genuinely constructive to a person's overall and long-term well-being. For further discussion of discretion in selection of values, see *Viable Values*, pp 97-103. And for a deeper exploration of the nature of happiness, see chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 8, 1099b.

will. Thus the ability to exercise one's will—autonomy—is a prerequisite of happiness.

(A sense of efficacy seems to be part of what fuels happiness. When a person does achieve a value, it is not exclusively attainment of the particular end that makes him feel good. It is also the knowledge that he was able to attain it. That is, his specific achievement sends a wider message to his subconscious: "I am the kind of person who is able to achieve my ends; I am competent to succeed in the world." This sense of efficacy can only arise from the person's having selected his ends and means for himself, however.)

### **3. How Money "Buys" Happiness**

So where does money shine in? How does money contribute to happiness?

In two principal ways. Both directly and indirectly, money facilitates a person's achievement of values.

#### ***A. Material Beings Have Material Needs***

Human beings are not brains in vats. We are physical as well as spiritual beings, bodies as well as consciousnesses. As such, we have material needs. Money is instrumental in meeting these needs. It provides the ability to trade for the requisite goods.

This does not underestimate the spiritual dimension of life. For many people, it is precisely certain spiritual values that make life worth living.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, what keeps us going, at the most biologically fundamental level, is the fulfillment of physical needs. Certain material basics are indispensable. It is ludicrous to minimize this fact or to proceed as if it somehow shouldn't be the case. Even the missionary or the ascetic requires a place to rest his body, food to nourish him, medicine to heal his illnesses.

The tenet that money can't buy happiness often manifests a broader hostility toward human beings' physical nature. To a considerable extent, disdain for money reflects Platonic snobbery against the sensory "realm of particulars." It is the legacy of a mind-body dichotomy that pits the mind as morally superior and our material nature as base.

In fact, however, the spiritual is empty apart from the material. A person cannot experience or enjoy anything as a disembodied being. He must satisfy his material needs. Money is his means of doing that. It is his claim to the goods and services required for the maintenance of his life. It is wealth—whether in the form of the currency that a person possesses or in the goods that he produces and can convert into currency—that enables a person to acquire the things without which he could not survive.

The misuse of material goods is, regrettably, widespread. People often exaggerate the power of wealth. They expect more of material goods than they can deliver, investing emotionally in wealth *per se* rather than in the ends that make wealth meaningful. These misconceptions foster the

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<sup>12</sup> I highlight this in *Viable Values*, pp. 136-143.

assumption that the problem rests in money itself. Yet the misuse is just that—an error on our part. Material goods are vital to happiness.

My contention is not that money or material goods are inherently valuable. They are not valuable regardless of the reasons for which they are sought, the means by which they are sought, or the uses to which they are put. Nothing is good independently of an individual's context.<sup>13</sup> Material objects become good only when they offer a positive contribution to a person's survival and flourishing. Material stuff remains morally neutral until it carries some palpable impact on a person's well-being.

Money can, however, be a passkey to all manner of values—mundane or modest, rare or extravagant, offering immediate gratification or longer-lasting fulfillment. Money can buy hamburger or caviar, wool or sable, busfare or a cruise, a wheelchair or a new nose, electric service or a hyper-fast wireless Web access. Money can help a person to obtain any of the ever-expanding range of goods and services that others have created and offer for sale. Its potential in this regard is limited only by individuals' productive ingenuity.

### **B. Money Is Time**

We all understand the saying that “time is money.” While people dawdle, the opportunity to earn money—to make something valuable of their time—is lost. What is equally true, although far less appreciated, is that the reverse is true: money is time. And this observation provides still greater illumination of money's contribution to happiness.

This point is well made by a character in Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Ellis Wyatt explains to a visitor the benefits of his oil drilling operation's advanced production methods:

“What's wealth but the means of expanding one's life? There's two ways one can do it: either by producing more or by producing it faster. And that's what I'm doing: manufacturing time... I'm producing everything I need, I'm working to improve my methods, and every hour I save is an hour added to my life. It used to take me five hours to fill that tank. It now takes three. The two I saved are mine—as pricelessly mine as if I moved my grave two further hours away for every five I've got. It's two hours released from one task, to be invested in another—two more hours in which to work, to grow, to move forward. That's the saving account I'm hoarding...”<sup>14</sup>

The core idea is elegantly simple. Why do we labor to make money in the first place? To sustain ourselves. Each of us requires a certain amount of

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<sup>13</sup> I have argued against anything's having intrinsic value in “Intrinsic Value: Look-Say Ethics,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (December 1998), pp. 539-553 as well as in *Viable Values*, chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Dutton, 1957) 721-722.

stuff to live. Even minimal subsistence demands fuel. We are thus obliged to produce the things that we need in order to survive.

The easier it is to produce those things, the less effort and energy required, the better. For that frees time to devote to more enjoyable activities. The more that a person has produced (which is what his wealth signifies), the less he needs to produce in the future. And the greater his ability to make his productive work work that he finds rewarding.

Without money, a person must concentrate on those tasks that he must perform in order to make it through another day; bare necessities preoccupy him. With money, a person can contemplate what he would *like* to do and indulge more of his preferences. Money allows a person to customize his days more to his taste (e.g., by grabbing breakfast at McDonald's rather than making coffee at home, by buying a car rather than relying on buses, by working as a gardener rather than a programmer).

In short, money empowers autonomy. Greater independence from the demands of necessity means greater discretion over one's activities, enabling a person to exert more control over the shape of his days. Autonomy, we saw earlier, is the scaffolding for happiness.

Consider a slight variation on Wyatt's scenario. Suppose that Ron needs to work eight hours a day to make enough money to keep him and his family going (housed, fed, clothed, entertained, etc.) at level *x*. Now suppose that, due to greater demand or more efficient production on his part, he needs to work only six hours a day to sustain that standard of living.

What happens to those extra two hours? It's up to Ron, of course, how he uses them. But that's the point. And that is the value of wealth. Those hours now become available for Ron to spend however he likes. He does not need to work during that time in order to maintain his existing standard of living, although he can seek a higher standard of living and work in those hours to attain that aim. But he can also use the time for different types of rewards: he can go to the park, go to the movies, be with his wife, play with his kids, play the piano, write, read, run, paint. He can prepare himself to pursue a different line of work that he finds more enjoyable (obtaining the appropriate education or training, sending out resumes). He can do whatever he finds most conducive to his overall happiness.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the time that Ron previously had to "pay" for life (laboring to secure a certain standard of living) is now liberated. In that way, just as Wyatt described, more money means more time. And more time to devote to one's well-being—or to elevating one's well-being in substantive ways—directly allows more happiness.

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<sup>15</sup> To speak of a person's pursuing such values *rather* than seeking a higher standard of living is somewhat misleading, but accords with the conventional usage, which measures standard of living exclusively in monetary terms reflected in such things as income or housing costs. In fact, of course, in pursuing these other activities, Ron is elevating his quality of life and thereby raising his actual standard of living.

The economist Robert Frank, hardly an unqualified enthusiast of money, essentially acknowledges as much when he writes:

“...becoming more productive is a good thing, if only because it gives us more options. It enables us to earn more and buy more if we choose to, but it also enables us to earn the same amount by working fewer hours, or to spend more on environmental cleanup. Other things being equal, the more productive a society is, the greater is each citizen’s ability to pursue his vision of the good life.”<sup>16</sup>

Money’s power to expand a person’s options is the heart of its contribution to happiness. A given individual might value spending his life as a novelist, but be unable to sustain an acceptable standard of living through writing. More money—and the time it buys him—makes that pursuit a greater possibility. An academic might value greater concentration on research and less on teaching; more money makes that a greater possibility. A person might value being engaged with his children while they are young, or peace of mind about his retirement; more money makes these greater possibilities.

One of the things these examples make plain is that money is important not only to fulfill physical desires or to acquire material goods. It is also critical for the achievement of many spiritual values. Earlier, I stressed human beings’ material needs so as to affirm the legitimacy of the material values that money helps a person to obtain. Moralists commonly give these short shrift. Yet money’s value does not rest exclusively in its service to material goods. Money facilitates the achievement of *all* values, spiritual as well as material.

It is also important to recognize that the value of labor does not consist entirely in labor’s ultimate products. My emphasis on the goods that money makes available to a person (spiritual as well as material) should not lead us to suppose that work is a painful, regrettable duty and the payoff is reserved until after the work is finished. Some of the spiritual values that money facilitates should help us to appreciate this. Production is valuable not only for the sake of eventual consumption; work itself can be one of the things that a person finds most deeply rewarding.

Much value can be reaped in the *process* of creating wealth, in the activities of making goods and services: conceiving of a new product or convenience or qualitative enhancement that consumers will welcome; devising a more efficient manufacturing method or delivery system; designing and engineering buildings and bridges; treating illnesses; conducting chemical research; teaching history; directing a play; giving a recital; raising capital; writing a book. Productive work itself can be profoundly gratifying. Witness many wealthy people who continue working long after they’ve attained

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<sup>16</sup> Frank, 97.

sufficient wealth to accommodate their needs quite luxuriously. Or consider the 77-year-old professor who keeps postponing retirement, despite the fact that he could retire quite comfortably. It is the fulfillment from the activity, not just the snappy things that money buys, that keeps Warren Buffett, Michael Dell and countless others hard at work, doing what they love. People do not work simply so that they can enjoy happiness *later*.

Understanding, then, that both the production of money and the consumption of money can enhance a person's happiness, my basic point remains. Money buys the material goods that are prerequisite for life and happiness and money buys the time to pursue whatever spiritual ends a person finds most essential to his happiness. Money enhances a person's ability to achieve his values. The achievement of values is the path to happiness.

#### 4. Clarifications

Please observe my exact claim: money *can* buy happiness. I have not contended that it does—always, necessarily, in every case. Happiness is not readymade, available on the rack as long as one offers the advertised price. Money can equally buy rubbish, addictions, shallow people, misery. I am not proposing money as a psychological panacea: “Anyone struggling with depression: forget therapy, forget Prozac, just get money.” More goes into happiness than material possessions.

As noted earlier, money is not intrinsically good. Correspondingly, it is not unconditionally good. The wealth that an individual acquires is a tool. To enhance his happiness, he must use the tool wisely.

Rand, elsewhere, offered a helpful distinction between money makers and money appropriators. The money appropriator, she explained, does not create anything of value, but obtains his money by manipulating other people. Such a person might become rich without literally *making* any money, without adding to the world's stock of valuable goods and services. The money maker, by contrast, creates genuine value; he brings into being new and worthwhile products. The important point for us is that it is only the wealth of the money maker that can truly contribute to a person's happiness. It can do so precisely because the money maker “does not care for money *as such*.” For him, money is a means to an end: a means of “expanding the range of his activity,” strengthening his ability to chart the course of his life.<sup>17</sup>

The larger lesson is that while money can buy happiness, money does not guarantee happiness, since a person might mispend his money or his time. Money does not furnish a person with a worthwhile direction in which to steer his activities, nor with the virtues necessary to steer effectively. Money *can* buy happiness, however, when a person's goals are rational and when his means of pursuing them are rational. (Money cannot insulate a person from

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<sup>17</sup> “The Money Making Personality,” *Why Businessmen Need Philosophy*, ed. Richard E. Ralston (Marina Del Rey, CA: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1999) 29, 36, emphasis mine. For discussion of money as a tool whose value depends on the character of its owner, see *Atlas Shrugged*, 410, 412.

misfortune, of course, but it can make many misfortunes less likely and many others, more easily withstood.)

Can poor people be happy? Yes. And rich people can be unhappy. We all know this from personal observation. Neither fact jeopardizes my thesis, however.

Economists' reports that a rise in income does not always precipitate a rise in life-satisfaction only testify to the fact that money is not a sufficient condition for happiness.<sup>18</sup> That wealthy people can suffer from "affluenza" underscores the fact that money is not an adequate philosophy of life. As Aristotle observed, wealth is not the highest good, since it is sought for the sake of something else.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, we should not expect it to function in people's lives as if it were the highest good.

A bit more unsettling, at least initially, is the fact that poor people can be happy. For this suggests that money is not even necessary for happiness. More precisely, however, it indicates that large quantities of money are not necessary. And that is true.

My claim has not been that happiness demands that everyone own the same amount of money or that cash occupy an identical position in everyone's hierarchy of values. I have not urged people to pursue the greatest number of dollars possible. Because money is a means, such a view would distort money's role, converting it into an end. Individuals often choose, quite rationally, to forego a higher income so as to enjoy other things they prize more.

Nonetheless, the poorer a person is, the more precarious his life and happiness. Lower depths of poverty mean greater vulnerability, greater likelihood of being pulled away from preferred pursuits to tame threats to minimal well-being. A poor person might have to take a second job to pay for a needed medical procedure, for example. The less wealth one has to draw on, the larger an ongoing concern fulfilling life's basic requirements (such as paying the rent) must be—which leaves less time and tranquility for more agreeable activities. A modicum of money is necessary for happiness simply because, like it or not, human beings have physical needs. If we do not satisfy those needs, we perish. The reality is: even poor people can only be so poor; beneath a certain threshold, we will not survive.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See note # 5.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, Book I, chapter 5, 1096a5. Aristotle's method in evaluating candidates for highest good was subjective, based on the ways that most people treated these things, but his conclusion about money happened to be correct.

<sup>20</sup> Note that some of the touted economic studies are based on money's impact on people's sense of well-being "once a threshold level of affluence is reached." Frank, 65.

One might object that my thesis has been diluted since we started. If all I want to say is that money *can* buy happiness, with heavy emphasis on the qualifications, isn't that a pretty unremarkable claim?

I think not. For I am contesting what passes for a truism. I needn't embrace the false thesis that money assures happiness in order to be saying something significant. Money, intelligently pursued and intelligently spent, can buy happiness in the ways I have shown. Money buys goods and money buys time. Money buys the autonomy to mold one's life in the image of one's ideal. Money nourishes happiness by helping a person to achieve the values that happiness is made of. Like many things, money can be put to poor uses. Yet money can also be put to wonderful uses, including the greatest: experiencing joy in living. That fact has got to be forthrightly acknowledged if people are to embrace money unapologetically, as they must if they are to attain sufficient control over their lives to realize their ends and fulfill their dreams.

### **Conclusion**

The truth in the cliché that “money can't buy happiness” is that happiness isn't easy. Money does not offer a shortcut around this fact. It is important to appreciate the danger of the drumbeat that “money can't buy happiness,” however.

On one level, it is simply—but disastrously—bad advice, counterproductive to individuals' actually attaining happiness. If money can contribute to happiness, as I have argued—if it is necessary for certain of happiness's minimal ingredients and preconditions—then to insist that it cannot is to close off the route to happiness. It blocks the path that could, if properly followed, allow individuals to achieve their values. To counsel people away from money cripples their ability to be happy.

On a deeper level, to discourage the pursuit of money, *knowing* what money makes possible—the fulfillment of individuals' desires for a better life—would be to discourage the very quest for happiness. That is worse than bad advice.

Some might worry about encouraging more money-chasing in an already overly-materialistic society. “Aren't our children spoiled enough?” Yet my aim is hardly money “chasing,” mindless acquisition for its own sake. While there's plenty to lament in contemporary society's prevalent priorities, money is not the fundamental problem. In our eagerness to teach that money is not the most important thing in life, we have swung too far in the opposite direction, denigrating money as if it were worthless. While money and material goods are not inherently good, it is equally mistaken to dismiss them as inherently bad.

Considering the role of money in happiness forces us to confront the nature of happiness itself, a huge subject to which we could hardly do justice in a brief essay. In its essence, however, happiness is a function of success. It results from achieving values. We have seen that money facilitates value-achievement in crucial respects. Making money (in the literal sense of creating

wealth) is the very process of achieving values. Spending money is a means of acquiring other goods and services that are one's values or that will enhance one's ability to realize one's values. Whether by directly trading for goods or by buying time to devote to those ends that a person finds most worthwhile, money fortifies a person's ability to get what he wants and to do what he wants. As such, it is to be celebrated, cheered—and pursued.

This paper is intended to liberate us from the tyranny of kneejerk condemnations of money—from the reticence that people often feel about pursuing wealth and from the guilt that frequently accompanies their doing so. Why extend such a blessing on money? Because money most definitely can contribute to happiness. And because happiness is the most important thing in life.