How We Conceptualize Money: Is it a Death Denying, Immortality Symbol

The cultural anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Becker wrote about money and how human beings treat it in modern society. Becker summarizes Norman Brown’s historical definition of money as representing a sacred, magical object human beings relish as their gateway to immortality. Becker basically believes that human beings assign great value to things that give life, that enable them to overcome what ordinary people cannot overcome. For Becker, money is sacred because it grants some power over others. Think about it: an enormous amount of money gives people freedom from responsibilities of caring for their home, parents, children, car and other responsibilities. More importantly, and, in a powerful and visible way, money separates the ordinary, routine life of Hank from the perversely wealthy Lance. Money makes Lance look quite different from Hank. Money enables Lance to distance his likeness to Hank.

Becker, asserts that money gives human beings a limitless ability to indulge in their every passion, especially material items. The connections both of these theorists make is the one between money, sacredness and power. So, for Becker, power is the medium man uses to deny his mortality. A great amount of money can keep me alive longer than it can you if you’ve got less of it. Becker puts it like this:

“Power means power to increase oneself, to change one’s natural situation from one of smallness, helplessness, finitude, to one of bigness, control, durability, importance. In its power to manipulate physical and social reality money in some ways secures one against contingency and accident; it buys bodyguards, bulletproof glass, and better medical care. Most of all, it can be accumulated and passed on, and so radiates its powers even after one’s death, giving one a semblance of immortality as he lives in the vicarious enjoyment of his heirs that his money continues to buy, or in the magnificence of the art works that he commissioned, or in the statues of himself and the majesty of his own mausoleum. In short, money is the human mode par excellence of coolly denying animal boundness, the determinism of nature.”

In talking about the items money can furnish for us, Becker writes that the house, car, and bank account represent one’s immortality symbols. I agree with Becker that immortality symbols, the visible, physical items, and their worth, are the only things one has to grant him/her eternal life. In the following passage Becker notes under what conditions one feels his or her immortality or significance in the world is threatened:

“Or, put another way, if a Black man moves next door, it is not merely that your house diminishes in real estate value, but that you diminish in fullness on the level of visible immortality—and so you die.”

Sadly enough, in sum, Becker concluded that human beings transformed from a social animal that gave and passed on to one that was principally interested in amassing and keeping things. The historical taking of objects and falsely believing that this motive represents self-determination and self-direction in life, and by calculating interest on money earned in the bank, one bought into the illusion that one was in total and absolute control of one’s destiny.

Money and Happiness

For some, happiness is associated with material, professional and financial success. Happiness may be equated with success—and although there’s nothing wrong with this, it can become harmful if you exclusively define or equate your level of happiness to your professional or financial success. If we define happiness as generally fleeting—then you’re under pressure to constantly chase opportunities that provide fleeting moments of happiness which can be difficult.

Two Types of Consumption: “Show You” type and the “Not Show You” type.

The “Show You” Type

For some individuals, consuming materials/objects and revealing them to others displays their success in life. Often times, these individuals are interested in the statement made by owning the object more than the utility of the object. For example if everyone in your department wears a modest watch, and one employee begins wearing a Rolex to work, then that employee would stand out among everyone until other employees purchased a Rolex. Invariably another employee purchases and wears a Rolex to work. The following month, another employee purchases a more expensive watch than a Rolex, and wears it to work. In the end, this endless chase for status through objects only devalues what others have. Further—money used to purchase expensive objects tends to also distance people from each other.

Not all Americans, however are driven to achieve material wealth; meaning it’s not the primary driving force in their lives. Materialism simply means assigning high value to material possessions because it shows one’s social status and success. Most of the time hard, disciplined work is the price we pay for material success. In America there is a tendency to think that differences in material possession reflects a difference in abilities. In other words, just because I’m not interested in attaining material possessions doesn’t mean I don’t have the ability to do so. I may be very successful and possess lots of ability however I’m not interested in showing my success through owning luxurious cars or living in a multi-million dollar home. I think some human beings have an insatiable desire for things, and regardless of how much human beings possess, some want more.  My explanation for this behavior is that these valued objects have enduring status value.  Individuals who obtain status symbols like to keep them, and desire to continue inheriting big, fancy expensive items that display their social status. Thus, our system of stratification evaluates people on factors such as wealth, power and prestige.  I’ve included a brief description of each of these factors.

The “Not Show You” Type

Individuals that purchase materials for their value and utility tend to do so more privately—and not for revealing their status and success in life. Purchasing a moderately priced toaster is nothing we’d brag about to friends.

What Creates More Happiness: A Material Object or an Experience?

If our happiness is often too fleeting or momentary—and we typically derive pleasure from the journey toward goal achievement—then doesn’t that suggest we should pursue experiences that create happiness and contentment? I think happiness and contentment comes from the journey more than the destination (goal). So—can we conclude that for some individuals, happiness and contentment results from a worthwhile experience rather than purchasing an expensive object.