

## Philosophical reflections upon money

By Andreas Urs Sommer

*Doesn't any doubt burst on the hard fact of money? Money is something one either has or has not. No doubt is able to conjure up or away money.*

The magic art of governments and central banks to conjure up or away money is something of a miracle to the economic layman from time to time. But generally speaking, the individual being is denied this magical skill in dealing with money. The individual is concerned with the question of how much money one needs and how much one wants to have. The philosophers, in contrast, adhere to the wide-held belief that money doesn't matter. The Roman Epicurean Lucretius, for example, links the desire for wealth with the wish to block out the thought of one's own mortality as effective as possible. To Lucretius, the idea of money possessing a value that perhaps can even restrain the power of death is more than a regrettable misapprehension. Rather, it gives the entire life a wrong direction and prevents the robust tranquility as the only one thing of real importance.

Admittedly, it is true that neither ancient Egyptians nor Homer knew money in coined or documented form, hence that highly complex civilizations could well exist without any money. Once money was invented, on the other hand, it seems almost impossible for a civilization to get rid of it again – despite all relevant efforts in, for example, real socialism. That in the German language money (Geld) rhymes with world (Welt), as Georg Christoph Lichtenberg had noticed, is anything but a coincidence, since 'it is hard to imagine a more reasonable rhyme'. It is OUR world that rhymes with money.

On the other hand, money of course isn't part of a human being's natural basic equipment; it is no thing (if it is a real thing at all) so rational and necessary one might be inclined to assume in everyday life. Not even when the skills required for dealing with money are part of the basics a human being is taught in the process of its socialization. What makes money powerful is its capability to relate things to another. Money makes heterogeneous things compatible with each other, not without being the most abstract thing I deal with in day-to-day-life. The coins and banknotes I carry with me in my wallet are comparatively real, as money embodied. But how about the money on my bank account, or the money that is expressed in the figures of the gross national product?

Whether or not I possess money: the distrust of it seems ineradicable. Not only the distrust if certain money – like the euro the Germans often nickname 'teuro' (expensive euro) – is really worth what it pretends to be worth. But also the distrust if money truly achieves what it pretends to achieve, i.e. relate anything with everything. The great power of money, making things compatible and interchangeable, is apparently stretched to its limits. If one is inclined to believe Lucretius, death and the fear of death, for example, can't be balanced with money.

Meanwhile, money is a skeptical medium in itself since it has the power to relativize, to render all things available for purchase indifferent. Whatever is available for money might be converted into something different. I can sell my sports car for money, in order to treat myself to a trip to Tahiti or acquire photographic artworks of Marion Lastin and Art Ringger. Money has turned these possibilities to make my life full into goods that are interchangeable. None of these possibilities possess

an intrinsic value. Unless I give it that value because I have chosen to. Transferring these possibilities into monetary value makes it possible for me to distance me from them.

To the sceptic, money provides the chance – one that mustn't be underestimated – to face everything that can be transferred into monetary value with sobriety und full of reservations. Likewise to face money by visualizing what cannot be done with money. Like, as a case in point, being liberated from death and the fear of death.

How to train: Check on what power money has over you, and what power you have over money by grabbing a banknote and watching it slowly turn into ashes when you hold it above a candle flame. What do you feel inside? Destroying money means destroying options in life. You may have used that money for buying this and that. But what are these options in life worth when they were available for money?

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