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The more you give away, the wealthier you are

Now I know you've all been reading Wittgenstein in the bath last night, so you ought to know that there's something he remarked about thinking philosophically, and he said that it is a matter of assembling reminders, which is just a rather posh way I suppose of saying "being told things you already know". But educational psychologists are very comforting on this point, as they say that people *like* to hear things that they already know. So providing I don't go on too long, you won't be bored by hearing some things you already know.

Because I'm going to talk if I may about wealth. And the theme of my discourse is that the more you give away, the wealthier you are. So as you can see this is designed specifically for those among you who are, as it were, on the donor side of the camp.

First of all of course, one of the reminders that must be assembled is to distinguish between wealth and money. As you know money is merely a record of debt, and certainly on the old one pound notes – and maybe it still does on the bank notes, but they go so fast these days that you can't read them any longer – it says "I promise to pay the bearer" and whatever it is it says on the note – one pound. And I used to think this meant a pound of silver, sterling – that's to say half a bag of sugar in volume, of silver. How lovely.

Well, I suppose the pound must have really meant something in the good old days when lumps of silver were in currency. But in fact of course, that note simply records the fact that somebody owes someone else something. So if you owe me something and you give me a note for a pound to that effect, I could use that note pound to go and buy myself a cow or a castle or something, using that, and it becomes something in its own right, a token of exchange in some way. And that's all that money is.

Now, people do tend to like money, or as my father used to say: "I despise money in small quantities". But people do like it, and when they have money in any quantity I suppose, what it represents is part of the transferability of the wealth that they have. But only part. Only part of what wealth consists in can be bought and sold, or can be represented by whatever happens to be the currency of the state in which you live.

Why is that? Well, it's because wealth is much much more than the assets you own. It's much more than the property you own, for example, or the money that you're going to be paid by your publisher for your memoirs (that is after all part of your assets!).

In fact most of what really matters in the way of wealth is something which is quite hard to buy and sell. Think about the etymology of the word "wealth". It comes from the Saxon word "weal", which you've met with often enough in the phrase "weal and woe" – good and bad – and "weal" means "being well", being well in all sorts of ways, not just in health, but health is included. But of course it means, as it were, "well set up", that is to say, so situated in life that you are, to some extent at any rate, immune from its pangs and the cold of the rain. That is, you have resources, you have assets, that provide a basis for being reasonably happy, in the old sense of happy, the sense that occurs in the United States constitution, where it says "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", where happiness means a state of being, not just a set of sensations.

Alas – and this is a footnote remark – in our own day and age today, happiness would be successfully acquired if we put enough Prozac in the public water supply, or at least that’s what people mean by happiness now.

But of course, if you were to go all the way back to classical antiquity and look at what Aristotle and others meant by *eudaimonia*, now translated as *happiness*, it meant something flourishing, a sense of wellbeing and well doing, of occupying one’s life in a way that is satisfying and productive. So in that sense of happiness the word “weal” or “well” in Saxon meant “happiness”. And from it we get “wealth”, that is “happiness-th!” – being happy, being situated well. And that of course is not simply a matter of the houses you own, the motorcars you own or the stuff that you would buy and sell – it means a place in life, a situation, a status, a set of relationships, a number of goals and objectives, a movement towards the realisation of goals that really feel worthwhile to live.

And you were probably – I knew you were – you must have been now I think of it, you were busy in the bath last night, because you were probably also reading Herodotus! So you will remember, there’s a story told early in Herodotus about the visit made by Solon, the great law-giver of Athens, to the court of King Croesus of Lydia. Now King Croesus was by far the richest individual of ancient times – indeed we still use the phrase today “as rich as Croesus”. And Croesus used to like his visitors to be taken down by his servants to the treasury where they could see the great mass of wealth that he had, and when the visitor came up to dine with him he would say “Who in your opinion is the happiest man in the world?”. And his guest would say “You, because you’re the king and you’re so rich!”.

Solon said, when asked that question, he said “Ooh, well I know somebody back in the suburbs of Athens...” And the king was rather put out: “What! You’d choose a commoner over me!”. And Solon said “Yes!”. I don’t know whether you’re happy in this Aristotelian sense of flourishing, but I do know that it’s tremendously important to think about what would make you happy, what would give you that sense of *weal*.

“Because,” he said, “of the brevity of human life. Human life,” he said, “is less than 1,000 months long.” Do your maths. If you live until you’re 80, what are 12 times 80, well it’s 960, this is a very dismaying thought. So, you have less than 1,000 months to live. 300 of them you’re asleep, unless you party a lot – we sleep eight hours a day, so that means you’re asleep for 300 months. Another 300 months you’re in Tesco, or if you’re lucky Waitrose, and you have all the practicalities of life to deal with – leaving you 300 months to live with all the vividness and passion that human life should be full of. And this does seem to be a rather dismaying thought.

I have to tell you some years ago when I was teaching in Oxford but living in London, I was driving home one night, and thinking to myself “I wonder how much time I’ve got left?”, and I used this method and I thought “My god, I’m nearly dead! I haven’t read any [Smollett](#)!” I got home and I said to my wife “I’m nearly dead and I haven’t read any Smollett” and she said “Well fortunately there’s some Smollett on the bookcase”, so I began to read him in the bath, and after about four pages I tossed the volume out and said “Thanks heavens I don’t have to read that!”. The next morning I got back to Oxford and I said to a colleague “I was rather worried and I started reading Smollett, and I found myself relieved that I don’t have to read him.” And my colleague, a literature don, said “Smollett? Smollett is wonderful! You *must* read Smollett!”, and I thought “I’m nearly dead and I *must* read Smollett?!” – the pressure, the pressure!

So you can see that when you really begin to reflect on the brevity of life as Solon was getting King Croesus to do, you can get anxious. Now that, however, you can stop worrying about immediately because I speak now in my ‘proper person’, as the French would say, as someone whose day job is the teaching of philosophy, as I’m a Professor of Philosophy, so I can reassure you that there is no such thing as time. This is a deep metaphysical concept.

There is no such thing as time – there is only experience. All of this by the way is relevant to wealth as you’ll see in a minute. There’s only experience. You can prove this very easily. You’re in Paris for the weekend, while you’re there you’re there forever. When you get home again, it’s gone, in a flash. This shows you that experience makes time a very elastic thing. The more richly you live, the more experience you have, the more you enjoy your life, the longer you live. You live not 300 months but 300 lifetimes, if you live with experience.



Remember what the narrator in Proust says: he says "When I was a little boy and my nanny used to take me to play in the Champs Elysées, and I hated it, a great big wide road and lots of dust and traffic. But if only I'd known all the lovers who'd strolled up and down underneath the trees, and those who'd sat on the benches and wept with grief, or the riots and revolutions that had taken place here; suddenly it would have burst into life, and it would have been a place of wonder, a great theatre of enjoyment." And if one experiences with that kind of richness, then, of course, life is very very long and wonderful in a satisfying way.

Now what does this have to do with wealth? Well, precisely this: that those bits of the wealth one has that cannot be bought and sold, that is the wealth that comes from experience. From relationships, from the enjoyment of life. From the great sense of belonging to a world which, for all its tragedies and disasters and mayhems, is also a place of extraordinary beauty and fascination.

So enjoyment of that is a very form of wealth. And when one finds oneself engaging with other people in that wealth, encountering them, making a difference to them as they might make a difference to you, that adds to your wealth.

So, think of this. If you have a million pounds in the bank, and you don't spend a penny, you're no different from a poor man. But if you have ten thousand pounds in your pocket, and you have a damn good holiday on the basis of it, then while you're doing it (not afterwards of course) – while you're doing it you are one of the richest of people. Why? Because you are experiencing. Because time has stopped, and life has begun. Because you are giving, and spending, and doing, and making something, which is experience, the making of experience.

So the more you spend, the richer you are, the richer in a real kind of wealth. The more you give, the wealthier you are, because the more satisfying life is, to feel that you've made a difference to other people out there and around you.

You've all heard that story haven't you? About that fisherman, who got into his canoe, and went out and caught a fish and brought it back, and gutted it, and cooked it, and ate it, and then he sat on the beach and looked at the sea, all day long. And he was spotted by a passing businessman, who thought this is no good, and he went up to the fisherman and he said "Why did you only catch one fish?" And the fisherman said "Well why would I catch more?" And the businessman said "Well if you'd caught more you could have sold the surplus on the market." And the fisherman said "Why would I want to do that?" And the businessman said "Because then you've got money!" And the fisherman said "What do I want with money?" And the businessman said "You could invest it." "Why would I want to invest it?" "Well, you'd become rich!" "And why would I want to be rich?" "Well, because then you could sit on the beach all day, looking at the sea!"

So it may very well be that the fisherman had a much acuter and clearer sense of what it is to be wealthy. Of what it is to possess the things that make a life where you really do feel good. And it is emphatically the case – and I'm sure that there are plenty of people sitting up and down these tables, in this room, at this very moment, who know just how wonderful it is to be a giver.

It is said, that the full heart always has room for more. The empty heart has room for nothing.

Thank you.

