

**Institute of World Culture
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What is True Wealth?

“To investigate the imaginative use of the spiritual, mental and material resources of the globe in the service of universal welfare.”

“Declaration of Interdependence”,
Institute of World Culture

I love titles that begin with the word ‘true’. It is an appealing invitation to move beyond the conventional meaning, the common place understanding of a subject and to probe it more deeply. It invites freshness of thought. It is a summons to the creative imagination and it allows ample latitude for interpretation.

In approaching the topic of ‘true wealth’, we might begin by making a simple distinction between ‘internal wealth’ and ‘external wealth’. Since these are relative distinctions, we might define ‘internal’ as that dimension of wealth that refers to the individual’s mental, moral and spiritual capabilities and ‘external’ as that facet of wealth which is principally material and derives its value from established social norms. To begin our inquiry, we might ask a conventional question: “What are the socially sanctified forms of generating wealth and for whom is the wealth to be generated?” That is, how is wealth conceived of in social, political and economic terms in much of our modern, overly politicized world?

In utilitarian, capitalist countries, wealth is conceived principally in materialistic terms. That is, wealth is usually thought of as pertaining to the accumulation of money, property, goods and the like. Furthermore, wealth is acquired principally for private use and enjoyment; this is a ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ notion of wealth. ‘My wealth’ is distinct from ‘your wealth’ and we only cooperate and pool our wealth together in order to build more wealth – always being careful, however, to ensure that we are legally able to get our proper share of the profits. In most capitalist systems our potential material wealth is only limited by taxes and death – in that order. It is a socio-economic outlook which upholds the ideal of individual initiative, innovation and the power of anticipating and meeting collective needs and wants – often at the confusion if not the conflation of the two.

Capitalistic societies tend to value profit above all else and the corresponding accumulation of goods and services that accompany it. The amassing of personal wealth through work is viewed as an indirect benefit to society because it generates jobs, improves goods and services and fosters a higher standard of material living. Generally speaking, capitalism initially invigorates the economy of a village, a community or a nation by freeing the energies of the imprisoned imagination as well as by lifting the burdensome weight of poverty and oppression. Eventually, however, pure capitalism

leads to social inequality and class distinctions as well as to a dilution of moral and social values intrinsic to the well-being of a community. Social status is no longer based on birth, ancestry or caste, but neither is social standing the happy result of recognized merit or service to the community. Instead, social influence is primarily due to the unequal distribution of wealth and of the limited access of citizens to goods and services. Rampant capitalism fosters, to some degree, a Darwinian attitude of 'the survival of the fittest'.

Socialism approaches wealth differently. It gives a higher priority to the needs of society as a whole, and sees the value of individual work chiefly in terms of its contribution to the overall social and economic good. Under socialism, everyone gets his or her share of what is essential since the primary means of production are in the hands of the state and not in the hands of a capitalistic, oligarchic elite. It is openly against the excesses of private wealth and its corresponding corrosion of primary social values such as trust, cooperation and an abiding awareness of the indigent and needy. Modern socialism is the principle of 'ours' and 'mine'. Individual freedom is operative within certain prescribed limits so that it can ensure equal access to certain socio-economic services for all its citizens. The potential for private wealth is often unlimited in theory, but circumscribed in practice due to the restrictions imposed by the state and the general social disapprobation of material excess.

Modern communism is based on the cooperative principle: from each according to his ability and to each according to his need. Communism is potentially the most cooperative form of society and 'wealth' is fundamentally 'commonwealth'. It rejects private property and personal wealth because they create inequalities and disrupt social harmony. There is really no "mine" or "thine" in terms of wealth. There is only "ours". In practice, communism only works in small communities such as religious communes, and secular cooperatives. Communism is typically the most socially controlled form of garnering wealth and it devalues all economically created inequalities.

It is important to understand that each of the above ideological conceptions of 'wealth' have their value. To the nineteenth century Russian or the twentieth century Indian peasant mired in the lowest tiers of the feudal system, the right of private ownership is a decided boon. To keep the profits of meritorious labor is psychologically as well as economically freeing. Furthermore, the sense of self-esteem often associated with private land ownership (or income generated by one's skilled labor) is not to be underestimated. But when earned wealth becomes excessive and crosses the threshold into self-indulgent luxury, there is usually a decided weakening of moral and cultural values which bind one to the collective good. Greed soon replaces need and spawns a form of hyper-individualism that eventually creates Plato's "city of pigs".

Socialism becomes a corrective to the lost chord of social responsibility in capitalism and attempts to reconnect the individual to the larger concerns of its citizenry through the agency of the state. The latter collectivizes essential economic resources and services to protect the public welfare and to ensure sufficient opportunities for future

generations. It attempts to redirect the competitive spirit of capitalism toward collectivist goals. It seeks to tap the potential of the “cooperative will” by enfolding critical economic variables into the widening circle of the social. However, as J. P. Narayan points out, socialist governments simply end up adding economic control to political control in their attempts to reduce class conflict and narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. This leads to a new brand of coercion and creates an “invisible oligarchy” instead of stewards of the public good.

Communism, in its turn, becomes a corrective for the “statism” of socialism. Ideally, it dissolves the political and economic into the social. It collectivizes all the modes of production, labor and property. However, the attempt to reduce and eventually eliminate social stratification through the homogenization of “wealth” usually necessitates new, if socially subtle, forms of violence to enforce collectivization. Social pressure in the form of shame, threats and ostracism warps the “cooperative will” and the prospects for genuine self-transformation are short-circuited.

Beyond these ‘isms’, there is the dynamic, curative principle of trusteeship, imaginatively articulated by M.K. Gandhi in the early Twentieth Century. Gandhi was a non-violent socialist who saw ‘wealth’ as a trust and not as a personal end in and of itself. For this reason, the desire for wealth must be consciously regulated by moral and social values. If not, then its mindless pursuit could easily corrupt consciousness and convert all desirable moral and social virtues into their very opposite. Gandhi believed that all men and women are entitled to voluntarily employ their skills and talents to meet both individual and communal needs. Likewise, all members of a community should have appropriate access to essential collective services and resources. But the active pursuit of one’s daily bread and the proper use of social services must be seen within the fabric of social responsibility and the cultivation of positive moral and social virtues: sacrifice, honor, trust, reliability, excellence, merit and non-violence. For this reason, the concept of trusteeship was Gandhi’s principal means of dealing with the ever-emerging inequalities of personal wealth and of effectively ensuring equitability rather than mechanical equality.

To Gandhi, trusteeship was (and is) the deliberate act of willingly reducing one’s excess wealth through voluntarily redistributing it among the needy and the worthy of society. This eliminates the need for state coercion, increasingly dispels attachment and fear, reduces poverty and enhances self-respect. In a word, it avoids both state sponsored compulsion and the need for revolutionary violence to address the accumulated excesses of wealth and power. It is the talisman for social evolution and global uplift because it benefits both the giver and the receiver, the successful and the indigent. In a deeper sense, trusteeship becomes a kind of consecration, a means of infusing the sacred into the domain of the material, a magical formula for transmuting private utility into universal welfare.

To appreciate Gandhi’s concept of trusteeship, it is helpful to examine wealth at another level of meaning. We might put this in terms of a fundamental question: Is it possible to rethink the notion of wealth in a more encompassing and comprehensive

sense? Can we conceive of wealth at different levels from the material through the mental to the spiritual, from the external to the internal, from the collective to the individual? The etymology of the word 'wealth' is 'well-being', 'weal', 'welfare'. It was originally used to describe a person's character. A 'man of wealth' was one of over-all well being, wholesomeness and balance. This notion invites a broader outlook, one in which material wealth is only a small portion of being a 'person of wealth'. From this standpoint, we can speak meaningfully of someone possessing a 'wealth of knowledge', a 'wealth of talent' or a "wealth of virtue". Each of these phrases refers to different inner dimensions of the human being. We can think of someone who is rich in intellectual understanding, or someone who has cultivated an abundance of talent in a given sphere of activity. We can also imagine an individual who is "well-to-do" in virtue: a hero in history, a model of the finest human characteristics, a paragon of human and humane qualities that inspire us to emulate him or her.

Looking at "wealth" in this more comprehensive sense, we can justifiably expand the circumference of our admiration to include more than just innovative entrepreneurs, wildly successful CEOs and ingenious state planners. We can legitimately include into the pantheon of the "truly wealthy" a host of diverse men and women who contribute to universal culture. We think here of: Buddha, Plato, Hypatia, Michelangelo, Newton, Mozart, Van Gough, Lincoln, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Einstein, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama or any similar constellations of brilliant, talented and alpha-hearted individuals.

All of these forms of 'internal wealth' seem to point to another dimension of 'wealth' that is intriguing, even if elusive. I refer here to the 'wealth of imagination'. An abundance of creative imagination seems to be requisite to any real notion of meaningful 'inner wealth'. To be clear, 'wealth of imagination' should not be confused with 'fantasizing' or the typical 'fever fancy' that often assail us in moments of psychic intoxication or in the gush of emotion. I am speaking here of the constructive, controlled power of visualization. It is at once rationally directed and warmly expansive. Creative visualization is often original and originating. For example, when top-flight physicists get together to discuss a common theoretical problem, they often engage in 'thought experiments' or deliberately constructed hypothetical situations that exist only in the minds of the physicists pondering the problem. But these 'thought experiments' often lead to fundamental theoretical solutions that are later verified by experimental testing. However, the 'power of visualization', need not be confined to what might be called the extraordinary or the unusual. Creative imagination may likewise be exercised in the simple sphere of daily duties or in the conscious act of applying conventional principles, precepts and rules in fresh and insightful ways to evolving circumstances. (In saying this, however, one must keep in mind the Dalai Lama's warning that one must first learn to apply rules consistently before one is in a position to know when to break them properly.)

We need the power of imagination not only to enrich intellectual inquiry and discovery, but to help us touch the lives of others. This points, perhaps, to a certain 'ethics of the imagination'. Otherwise, we might be guilty of unconsciously encouraging a kind of "capitalism of the imagination", i.e., a use of our creative powers to further the

self in its pursuit of knowledge, talents and skills. Well, if it makes a certain kind of Humpty Dumpty sense to speak of the “capitalism of the imagination” and other facets of inner wealth, does it make sense to speak of a “socialism of the imagination”? I think so. Deep social sympathies provide the energy which infuses the imagination with breadth. To deliberately and thoughtfully put oneself in the place of others is to temporarily dissolve the acquisitive self, the ambitious self, the grasping self, the miserly self. It is to increase the wealth of one’s understanding and to participate – however briefly – in the trials, tribulations and triumphs of our neighbors and fellow citizens.

In this regard, the Stoics said that when you encounter someone on the wayside who is suffering, you should sit down and commiserate with him for a while. Then, gradually, you should help him to regain his self-control, his self-confidence and, above all, his lost perspective. Isn’t this the essence of true therapy: to sympathetically identify with the needs of another and to help him visualize a doorway through the prison house of the psychological into the wider world of human life? Aren’t such acts of creative visualization, when magnified many-fold, the pivot point of social reform and innovative programs? Isn’t the serene ability to envision social circumstances that heal social ills and encourage communal concord the key to social and economic growth? Isn’t an abundance of social imagination the bread of life to the Utopian thinker, the dreamer of the dreams of men?

Clearly then, creative imagination or controlled visualization increases inner and outer wealth because it allows us to use our knowledge, skills and talents in morally viable and socially constructive ways. It awakens, in a sense, the ‘altruistic will’, the selfless but nonetheless rational desire to cooperate with others in the imaginative resolution of social and economic issues – regardless of the benefits or profits to us. In so doing, we add to the well-being and welfare of the larger community. And, most importantly, the very sacrificial nature of these kind of socially motivated acts of imaginative engagement become the means by which we shape and reshape our character, our qualities as an individual and a citizen. Thus, from visualizing solutions to practical problems, to intelligently resolving moral dilemmas, to initiating the mystery activity of self-gestation, creative imagination is the key. We might even say that the power of visualization is essential to the success of the benevolent, venture capitalist, critical to incubating the vibrant vision of the utopian socialist and critical to feeding the fervor of the pure, committed communist.

Paradoxically, we might say that inner wealth is a matter of waking up to the abundance we already possess. We are seeking, in essence, to give birth to a pre-existing mental, moral and spiritual potential, to release what we might call the fully ‘inspired mind’. The ‘inspired mind’ is that spiritual mentality in which the compassionate will is awakened and the courage to dare, to choose, to consciously live for the welfare of all, blazes with the steadiness of the eternal flame. Thus we see that from new business ventures to new interpretations of spiritual texts to new modes of human relationships, the inspired mind, the creative imagination, the power of visualization is crucial. It is the heart and heart-beat of Gandhi’s moral genius. It was vital to Einstein’s discoveries

and it is the moving force behind all authentic efforts toward self-improvement and universal uplift everywhere.

Interestingly, as spiritual teachers point out, true wealth, true well-being, true weal and true welfare are only possible and sustainable when we are willing to renounce our acquisitiveness, to give up the desire to appropriate and exploit, and, by contrast, when we are willing to insert ourselves into the larger weal of mankind. By ‘renunciation’, I am not talking here of the ascetic’s renunciation, although that has its value. I am speaking here of the shaving off of excess, of paring down to essentials, of continually redefining ‘need’ and distinguishing it from ‘want’. Henry David Thoreau once noted that he had discovered the secret of living and had, as a consequence, become rich. What was his discovery? He pointed out that he had simplified his wants, lived according to his needs and found out that he was wealthy. Thus, by conscious renunciation of the unnecessary, we are choosing to hold our abilities, knowledge, talents and property in trust for those most in need. This is the only way in which we, as Americans, can justify our wealth and morally redeem our abundance. We become worthy of our individual and collective excess by intelligently sharing it. We convert the gifts of fortune, of birth and of ability into blessings for others and add to the on-going and ever-evolving welfare of the global community.

Finally, one cannot help but think of the rather simple but nonetheless intriguing notion that ‘being wealthy’ is largely a matter of ‘being grateful’. This point came to mind when I recently read Einstein’s comment about his indebtedness to the great physicists, pioneers and heroes of the past:

“A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving....”

Applying this attitude to wealth, one might say that if I am already grateful for what little I have, I am far more likely to feel blessed and far less likely to feel as though I am lacking, or suffering from want. Furthermore, I am more liable to use what talents, abilities and resources I do have more intelligently and thoughtfully. When I do, I am less vulnerable to the seductions of excess and greed and more open to sharing what I possess with others in need. Why? Because, the grateful and intelligent use of my inner and outer resources leads me to the realization that most of what I do possess is made possible not only by my own labors, but by the bounty of God, nature and the myriad contributions of others. However, when I fail to appreciate what gifts and material assets I already have, or I fail to see their connection with God, nature or man, then I am quite liable to fall into the mistaken notion that I do not have enough, that I am lacking. In this case, even when I have a great deal, I do not use it wisely or well and I fail to see its real value to either myself or the community of which I am a fortunate beneficiary. Paradoxically, the grateful and frugal poor could feel as though they are ‘wealthy’, while the ungrateful and spendthrift rich could feel as though they are completely lacking and unfulfilled because they have disconnected from God, or nature or man. In this sense, the grateful usually

discover love and its abundance, while the ungrateful live in the shadows of fear and insufficiency.

In closing, I would like to cite a contemporary example of the interconnection of inner wealth and commonwealth, of the fusion of intellectual abundance, strength of character and purity of vision. I am referring to the prodigy, Greg Smith. Five years ago I was visiting my mother in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. My aunt was sitting in the living room waiting to watch her daily soaps. I sat down to chat with her and to keep her company before her shows began. The local news came on before the soaps and we glanced up at the television. Two news commentators from the local station were announcing that they were going to interview a nine year old boy from Jacksonville who had just graduated from high school and was preparing to enter college in the fall in West Virginia. They said his name was Greg Smith and that he was in the studio. The camera then turned to a young boy standing upright and relaxed next to the commentators. The lead newscaster then proceeded to ask young Greg a series of questions about his life, his hopes and his remarkable abilities. They approached him, at first, as a young boy, but eventually took him far more seriously when he clearly articulated his extensive reasons for simultaneously pursuing three Ph. D. degrees in college. I listened in rapt attention to this young genius, especially since he couched almost every response in terms of serving humanity. At the end of this marvelous interview, the second news commentator asked Greg Smith to name the person he admired most. (The commentator slightly chummed the waters by indicating mom or dad as distinct possibilities.) Young Greg drew himself up, looked straight into the cameras and said:

“Yes, I am very grateful to my mom and dad. They are really great. But the three people I admire most are Jesus of Nazareth, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. They are models to me of what it means for someone to live his life for the sake of others. I intend to use my gifts and abilities to help humanity in these very difficult times. Thank you.”

Four years later, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Greg Smith outlined two imaginative initiatives that he had taken in South America and Africa on behalf of disenfranchised children. These programs were aimed at increasing the wealth of knowledge and social understanding of these children as well as training them in certain practical skills that would benefit their community’s economy.

Clearly, Greg Smith sees himself as a golden trustee of his inner and outer resources. Let us, then, all draw inspiration from Greg and his ‘tribe’ and use our own talents, knowledge and social skills to imaginatively further the commonwealth of man.

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