



The Quest for Fulfillment: Materialism, Success, and the Enduring Value of Good Deeds

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Abstract: In a society that equates success with material wealth and possessions, many individuals are experiencing a paradox: once they have attained what they struggled and fought for, the satisfaction they had hoped for turns out to be all too brief. The following paper explains how material success is losing its meaning, how listlessness and dissatisfaction permeate the ranks of the wealthy, and what the outcomes of living without great goals are. It appeals to the empirical work in psychology, economic theory, and ethical philosophy to reevaluate whether the pursuit of material wealth and worldly success is irredeemably unfulfilling while precisely arguing that acts of kindness, altruism, and personal relationships provide more enduring paths to life satisfaction. Overall, evidence would suggest that living with purpose-through meaningful work and good deeds provides greater long-term contentment than the mere accumulation of wealth and status.

Keywords: material wealth, hedonic adaptation, professional goals



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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, material wealth has increasingly become synonymous with success. A person is socialized from very early in life to accept that economic success and attaining status indicators of success, such as cars, homes, and expensive goods, constitute the essence of living a meaningful life. However, many of those who achieve such external symbols of success often feel discontented. This sense of disillusionment has at its core the hedonic adaptation, which is described as people's tendency to return to a baseline state of happiness even after significant changes in their lives.

Empirical evidence from the psychological field also greatly supports that happiness attributed to material goods is temporary. For instance, in a longitudinal study by Brickman and Campbell (1971), people who experienced major positive or negative life events tended to revert to baseline levels of happiness relatively shortly. It suggests that material possessions or dramatic alterations in life, such as lottery winnings, make a person very happy for a short period; however, over time, the emotional impact fades away, and they seek other ways to regain that temporary state of happiness.

This cycle is magnified through the role of consumer culture, which consistently reinforces the idea that satisfaction can be achieved through a simple transaction. As Csikszentmihalyi (1999) identifies through his research, even though living standards have risen and more consumer goods are accessible in today's society, people report lower levels of satisfaction with life compared to previous generations. This infers that this constant pursuit of "more"-a new car, the latest smartphone, or nice clothes-actually misses the mark on meeting deeper emotional needs.

This paper examines why perceived value from material possession diminishes over time and argues that pursuit of righteous activity, not material goods, offers a more permanent route to satisfaction. The paper takes on a psychological, philosophical, and ethical position in trying to show that meaning, significance, and selflessness will indeed last longer than transient pleasures attached to material success.

● **Section 1: The Nature of Material Value**

No object of desire can remain that desirable over some time. It simply is a hedonic adaptation combined with the human brain being hard-wired to desire novelty. It has been shown in many studies that people experience an initial wave of thrill and pleasure right after buying new goods. In any case, as time goes on, the people settle into their changed circumstances, so the object becomes integrated into daily routines, and its emotional meaning is thereby reduced.

In a study on consumer satisfaction, Dunn et al. (2008) argued that those who spent their money on experiences, such as going on holiday/vacation or socializing, demonstrated more lasting happiness than those who spent their resources on material goods. Experiences create long-lasting memories and build social relationships, whereas material goods are subjected to hedonic adaptation.

Think of the new car-a person saves up money for several months and looks forward very much to acquiring the asset. At first, the new car brings a great deal of satisfaction; after some weeks or months have passed, it becomes just another part of life. The individual does not experience the same thrill driving that particular car again, which leads to the pursuit of other products that are hoped to recapture those first feelings of excitement. The same trend continues with many other possessions, from clothing and electronics into luxury homes.

This process is further muddled by social comparison theory, which suggests that people determine their happiness and fulfilment to other people. Even when one finally achieves a luxury good, the satisfaction might be undermined if one perceives others as having finer things. This will help explain why the richest people, who have it all, are often those who feel unhappy. Beyond a certain threshold of material prosperity, people begin to compare their situation with those who have more, and relative deprivation, or dissatisfaction is felt.

The depreciation of material goods knows no class boundary and cuts across a multitude of socioeconomic statuses, highlighting the greatest fallacy in the idea that happiness is something to be bought. Whether it be a high-end car or an inexpensive smartphone, the attraction for these items, outside of novelty, always seems to wane after some time, placing the consumer in searching for their next replacement.

● **Section 2: The Rich and Bored: Success Without Satisfaction**

Success and wealth are too often viewed as the ultimate goals, yet so many of the wealthy and successful feel unfulfilled. It is not so unusual for those who have reached the height of success or have wealth beyond their wildest dreams and who sometimes say that they are bored and lack meaning after their financial or professional goals were reached.

Studies reveal that this phenomenon is not restricted to the modern times. Throughout history, rich individuals have expressed dissatisfaction with life, despite their material possessions. Ancient philosophers, like Epicurus, argue that true happiness stems from inner contentment and frugality and not from the accumulation of wealth alone. However, Seneca, another Stoic philosopher, warns of relentless pursuit of wealth, citing that often it leads to stress and an insatiable longing for more material possessions.

All these philosophical observations find their strong support in contemporary empirical research. A 2010 research conducted by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton of Princeton University found that while money can add to life satisfaction by allowing people to meet basic needs, it does not dramatically improve emotional well-being once basic needs have been met-around \$75,000 in annual income in the United States. Once the basic needs of individuals have been met, greater income returns less with respect to overall happiness.

This paradox can be powerfully demonstrated in the lives of extremely wealthy celebrities and entrepreneurs. In spite of their high level of income, many members from this group report feelings of depression, loneliness, and even lack of meaning in life. The actor Jim Carrey once said, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer." Just the same, many billionaires, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, have shifted their efforts away from amassing riches into philanthropy and state very clearly that the satisfaction they can achieve definitely does not come from accumulated wealth but from an opportunity to contribute to society in meaningfully significant ways.

Part of the disconnection between material achievement and emotional satisfaction may be explained by what has been called the **goal-attainment paradox**. In simple terms, this concept states that when goals are achieved, there is often lost the meaningfulness that initially provided the motivation for pursuing success in the first place. When new, worthy goals do not come forth, this can lead to an effect of boredom and discontent among those who have achieved all previous aspirations. For numerous affluent persons, the path to achieving success often provides greater gratification than the success attained, leading them to seek novel methods to address the emptiness they experience.

- **Section 3: The Absence of Goals: A Life Without Purpose**

It follows from this that human beings are goal-oriented by nature, and having clear, meaningful objectives provides direction with a purpose. As psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, founders of the self-determination theory, would say, humans have three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Gratification of these needs is supposed to enable people to achieve well-being and personal satisfaction. But when they eventually reach their biggest milestones-usually financial security-they are thrown into a crisis of purpose, due to the lack of goals they can work for.

This assertion is particularly pertinent to those who have spent decades, if not their whole lives, in the pursuit of financial success. When they finally reach a level of wealth that can sustain them in comfort, they indeed ask themselves, "What's next?" For many, this question leads to a feeling of existential boredom whereby life becomes mundane and unsatisfying, regardless of their worldly successes.

On the other hand, people who retain meaning because of extensive work or relationships generally show higher satisfaction levels regardless of their revenues. According to Viktor Frankl, a famous psychologist and survivor of the Holocaust, the search for meaning, rather than the search for pleasure or material possessions, is the foundation for which one can have a life worth living. Frankl locates, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, that during those gloomy moments, people could easily find meaning if they looked at it in the light of what they could do for others or some higher cause.

Setting goals is more important than some high ideals of garnering fortune or fame. Even the most modest, everyday goals perfecting skills, nurturing relationships, or giving something to the community bring a sense of accomplishment and prevent stagnation. The sense of fulfilment for a highly regarded and proud taxi driver, for instance, who develops substantial associations with his clients, maybe more genuine than that of a disillusioned millionaire who has lost interest in life once he has achieved his aim of gaining material wealth. Whereas his income may be meagre, the respect and worth he achieves from serving the community deliver a level of fulfilment that raw wealth will never be able to create.

That is in contrast to meaningful work versus wealth without purpose. The contrast underlines the importance of having clearly defined, attainable life goals. It is continuous goal-setting, rather than an achieved ultimate objective, which is the source of lasting satisfaction.

● **Section 4: The Enduring Value of Good Deeds**

Though the material things will finally fade, the impacts of positive things that one does could last for centuries. Acts of humaneness, philanthropy, and benevolence to other people are some of the good legacies that outlive the material things one does. This is further cemented by numerous studies showing

that people who engaged in selfless acts are more likely to display life satisfaction and enhanced well-being compared to egoistic self-interested individuals.

The studies by Post (2005) highlight the fact that altruism, defined as an unselfish concern for the well-being of others, is indeed strongly associated with positive mental health. Individuals who volunteer, give money to charitable causes, or otherwise contribute to the well-being of others exhibit higher life satisfaction, lower depression, and a greater sense of social connection. This suggests that the act of contributing to the common good provides a sense of meaning and purpose that is not satisfied by material wealth alone.

Good acts last due to the social and emotional networks that come along with doing good. Acts of kindness build bridges and a sense of belonging, while often individual material acquisition tends to alienate individuals, especially those more privileged.

It can also extend beyond the life of an individual. For example, philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates are remembered not just for the huge accumulation of wealth but more for what they did with it: investing in education, health, and advancing humanity. Likewise, ordinary men and women who create small ripples of goodness can have resounding effects on their surroundings, including touching lives for generations to come.

This is in direct opposition to the perishable nature of physical things, which become less important once they have been used or replaced by more modern alternatives. A person's wealth can ebb and flow throughout their time; the memory of their philanthropy and the impact of their philanthropic work can endure for many years, if not centuries.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a cross-cultural comparative analysis, integrating psychological studies, economic data, and philosophical literature to assess the relationship between material success, good deeds, and life satisfaction across different cultural contexts.

Data Collection

Data was gathered from existing empirical studies in the fields of psychology and economics, particularly focusing on hedonic adaptation, life satisfaction, and altruism. Key studies such as those by Brickman and Campbell (1971), Kahneman

and Deaton (2010), and Dunn et al. (2008) were analyzed to understand the psychological mechanisms behind material satisfaction. Additionally, cultural attitudes towards happiness were examined by incorporating research from scholars like Eunkook Mark Suh, who studied how different cultural frameworks impact individuals' self-reports of happiness.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

A key aspect of the methodology involved comparing life satisfaction and the value of material wealth between individualistic and collectivist societies. In individualistic cultures, such as those in Western countries, happiness is often linked to personal achievement, which may lead to over-reporting of happiness due to societal pressure. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures, particularly in Asia, people exhibit a more fatalistic attitude towards happiness, potentially leading to under-reporting or a different understanding of well-being. These cultural variables were considered to account for differing definitions of success and fulfillment across societies.

Ethical and Philosophical Frameworks

In addition to empirical data, the research integrates ethical theories from ancient philosophers like Epicurus and Seneca, alongside modern psychological frameworks such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan). These theories help to contextualize how material success is perceived about ethical behaviour and altruism across different societies.

Limitations

While this study draws on a wide array of existing research, the data is primarily drawn from secondary sources. Future research could include original qualitative interviews across different cultural groups to further substantiate these findings. Moreover, self-reported happiness data may be subject to biases, particularly in cultures where happiness is tied to social or moral expectations.

CONCLUSION: a meaningful life beyond materialism

The evidence from this research suggests that while material success can provide temporary happiness, it is not the key to long-term life satisfaction. The transient nature of material goods, coupled with hedonic adaptation, means that people often feel unfulfilled after achieving financial success. Instead, living with purpose—through meaningful work, personal relationships, and acts of kindness—offers a more enduring route to happiness.

Philosophers from Epicurus to Viktor Frankl, along with modern psychological research, have shown that true fulfillment is not found in the pursuit of wealth or status but in a life dedicated to others. The enduring value of good deeds lies not only in their immediate impact but also in the legacy they leave for future generations. For individuals seeking a life of contentment, the pursuit of meaning and selflessness may offer a more reliable path than the endless chase for material possessions.

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