

CITIZENSHIP AND SERVICE

Success?

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What is success? The society I live in holds to the belief that having gobs of money equals being successful. We value material possessions more so than anything else in our lives and equate having money with having a meaningful life. Someone who is poor in our society, for example, is stereotyped as being a failure. Wealthy business executives who cruise down our highways in \$100,000 cars, own numerous sports franchises, and relax on their yachts over Christmas are considered the most successful people in our country today; they have money and expansive possessions that serve as quantitative, tangible evidence that they have something to show for their work in life. But what have these “successful” people really accomplished?

What about the successful executives of the Enron energy corporation? Knowing that Enron was near the end, leaders at the energy producing company desperately tried to make as much money as possible by “inflating earnings by nearly one billion dollars and pocketing money in the

process” (American...sec. 3). They didn’t take into “account” standard business ethics, but instead decided to do whatever it took to insure their own financial gain. Not surprisingly, they committed innumerable illegal and unethical offenses in the process. Why did they behave this way? What spawned their decisions to perform such an extraordinary amount of illegality simply to secure money? With societal pressures, Enron officials ultimately made their first priority financial gain, the sacred American societal evidence of success.

It is ironic to think of the publicity and wide-spread media coverage the Enron scandal received. I remember going to a restaurant and discussing the latest headlines regarding the investigation with my coworkers there. With each conversation, the disgust towards these officials only steadily increased. We all tended to be completely outraged at such a large-scale example of unethical and illegal business practices; but at the same time, were we, as American citizens, truly shocked by this kind of activity? With our experience living in America today, being constantly surrounded by its monetary values the way they have been, could we have honestly said that we didn’t think that anyone would commit something such as what the Enron officials did? And weren’t we also desperately seeking money the same way Enron’s officials had, working practically everyday for hours at a time in a grungy

restaurant? And by doing so, hadn't we bought into the exact same American beliefs regarding money and success that the Enron leaders had?

In the *Apology*, Socrates says, "I shall not cease to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care of nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" (Plato 32). Why does Socrates think Athenians should have shame for behaving in this manner? Why will he not cease in pointing out this lack of shame? Why is seeking the kind of wealth in Athens such an abominable action? Why is the seeking of wisdom more honorable?

The Athenian societal beliefs in the time of Socrates are eerily similar to those of the country I live in today. Anyone could walk up to an American citizen and ask her, out of disgust and shock over the state of the majority in which she is a part of, the same probing question that Socrates did; such societal practices and beliefs of valuing money and material possessions over the state of one's soul are just as prevalent in the United States today as they were in ancient Athens. My coworkers and I were so quick to judge and attack Enron executives, but we failed to realize

that we had also bought into the same American ideal. We didn't stop to think that perhaps we should have instead been criticizing our own American societal beliefs concerning money and status, the catalysts of the entire situation. But why should we question such beliefs? Why are they so wrong, why should they disgust us so much, as they did Socrates? Why does Socrates think people should have shame for disregarding the quest for wisdom and truth, as his fellow Athenians and my coworkers had?

“Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively” (Plato 33). What is excellence according to Plato, then? What should the Athenians of the time of Socrates or my coworkers and I seek instead of money and material possessions in order to obtain this excellence, or true success? Wealth brought about by the tangible, substantial evidence we value so highly does not necessarily have the ability to make any American or Athenian citizen truly spiritually or emotionally happy or prosperous, according to Socrates. This kind of wealth cannot bring about excellence. Through the improvement of one's soul and intellect, though, a person may depend on herself to judge how possession will affect her. Possessing the kind of knowledge that is truly good is having wisdom that creates spiritual enlightenment, improving the soul.

This is found through passionately and relentlessly obtaining the information, not only about the world around us, but also about ourselves, to judge ourselves.

Through reading of Socrates' thoughts and beliefs regarding this topic of wealth, I have been able to look at situations like the Enron scandal in a whole new way. I now focus on the sadness of the situation through my understanding that the American values of money and success, the ones that I myself once bought into, are what spawn such behavior. I have been able to truly comprehend why obtaining spiritual and intellectual riches through education and religion are the best way to directly affect and better the state of my own soul and intellect; such things are genuine and substantial as opposed to the material possessions my own society values so highly, which are fake and only seemingly wealthy examples of success. In dismantling this societal opinion which I have grown up with and have been surrounded by for so long, I now understand that it has the ability to affect my life negatively, despite its being so passionately held by the vast majority of other American citizens. I could become so blinded with material ambition, as the business leaders in the Enron scandal did, that my direction in obtaining what can truly better my life, soul, and intellectual well being

could be completely disregarded. Through closely questioning this societal belief, I have disregarded it, and by doing so, have begun my journey towards the success that Socrates wished for his beloved city, as well.