

Metaphors of Money

Common conceptualisations of money by Andrew T. Austin

The discussion of money is often taboo, leading people to feel a bit uncomfortable when the subject is raised. But regardless of how we feel, money is everywhere and it is an integral part of our societal functioning and economic interactions.

People think about money in many different ways, often adopting simple values that are based on common expressions and *memes* that infuse their culture, such as:

- The love of money is the root of all evil
- Money doesn't grow on trees
- Filthy rich
- Dirt poor
- Money corrupts
- It is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God
- Money for old rope
- Look after the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves
- Save it for a rainy day
- He has the midas touch

These expressions and the original stories that some of them emanate from form a background in our cultural understanding of how we believe money operates.

Often our assumptions arising from this may be quite erroneous.

One common conceptualisation of money takes the logical form of “money as liquid.” Here are some common examples of how people do this and some of the logic that spills out of such conceptualisation.

“Cash flow”

“Income stream”

With *cash flow*, the bigger the flow the better. Sometimes it might slow to a *trickle* or *dry up* completely. The economic *climate* will have a significant influence as will the structure of the business.

For example, the *flow of funds* needs to be directed into/through the company, money will be in the pipeline.

The company may have a significant *reservoir* of capital whilst the *flow of money* needs to be controlled and harnessed, *leaks* and *losses* minimised. When doing well, money and profit will come *pouring* in.

There may well be a fountain of wealth somewhere whilst liabilities may be *siphoning off funds*.

There is a paradox in the metaphor structure here when it comes to financial forecasts.

- When the economic *climate* is good and favourable, money will, or at least it should, *pour* in.
- When the economic climate is unfavourable, i.e. *storm clouds are gathering*, only the most robust business survive.

“Our funds are drying up”

“Our profits are just evaporating”

Directors are failing to keep a *lid* on spending and are undoubtedly feeling the *heat*. The economic *climate* may not be favourable and the business may need to *survive a drought*.

One of the first things that happens is that spending is *capped*.

In this situation it is stopping the losses that tends to be the focus of the subsequent remedy.

“Cash injection”

“Injection of funds”

Where a *cash injection* is required, the company/business is seen as being *sick*. This company is anthropomorphised into a living being. We may hear expressions such as, “*an ailing company*”, “*the company is in poor health*,” “*business is limping along*,” “*the business is weak*,” “*the company is dying*.”

In situations such as this, the *cash injection* may be structured as a medicine to *restore the business to good health*, or somehow *revive the business*.

The cash that comes from existing customers to the business is failing to *keep the company alive*. Customers may form the *life blood* of such a business, and money put into the business to improve its health may be seen as an *infusion* or *transfusion* of money. This infusion may be a *slow drip-feed*, or a *rapid infusion*.

However, the business may also be *haemorrhaging money* and/or may have a liability that is *bleeding the company dry*. In such a situation, a *sticking plaster approach* is unlikely to help.

“Money keeps the company afloat”

A public company has been *float*ed on the stock market. When in trouble the business might *sink* and a *bale out* plan is initiated to try and prevent the company *going under*. The company needs to stay *afloat* and not end up *on the rocks*.

Companies like this really depend heavily on *economic climates* and *financial forecasts*.

When in trouble, investors might desert the *sinking ship* in their droves, like rats.

Independent entrepreneurs might seek to *keep their head above water* and hope that the *tide will turn* in their favour.

These businesses are *launched* and often need others *on-board*, they run a *tight ship* and need a good sense of direction and effective *navigation*.

Examining your own conceptualisation of money

Ask yourself, “What is money like?”

Avoid thinking too much about how you feel about money or what you do with money. Also try to avoid looking for a definition of what money is or what it means.

In answering the question of what money is like, you are looking for a simile or metaphor. “Money is like”

Money is like what?

You may have a vague picture or representation which might take some time to explore.

For example, one workshop attendee reported that for him, money was like a drying up river. It was still quite full, but the level of the lake was steadily dropping over time. The lake would not remain full for too much longer.

We enquired as to the source of this water, he pondered for a moment, and told us that it came in one big rainfall. This lake was his inheritance, but since he'd given up work, there was no further money filling up his lake.

He needed to find a way of getting a steady income stream into his lake to replace that which was evaporating and pouring away. He had been spending time finding ways of minimising the losses, but clearly this wasn't sufficient to keep it topped up.

Want can be interesting if to have someone else ask you questions about your metaphors. It will get you to think about areas of your understanding that you may not have thought of otherwise.

For example, with regards to the example above, we asked:

Where is this lake?

Are there any other people there?

Is the lake the only container of the fluid? Is there a more stable or secure place that some of the fluid could be stored for a long term investment?

Is there anything else in the lake?

Are there any leaks in the lake bed?

And so on.