

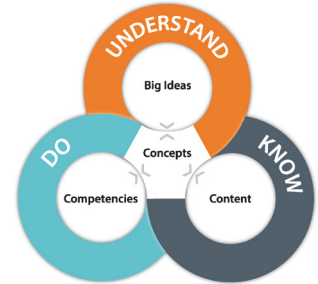
### The Philosophy of Money: Karl Marx and alienation

Money is usually seen as something used to buy goods and services, a means of exchange to facilitate trade and simplify commercial transactions. But money is also an important concept in human interaction. For this reason, it is important to explore the philosophy of money.

In order to live we must have things, and to have things we need money. But it is critical that we reflect on our relationship with money and material wealth, question the value of money and the meaning of wealth in our life, and think about the value of other things in life. We may even want to ask ourselves, “What sense does it make to have more than we can actually use?”

Many things related to money play a role in the everyday decisions we make, including the decision to gamble: our understanding of money and its relationship to material wealth, our place on the economic ladder, how we perceive ourselves in comparison to others, and so on. In other words, our relationship with money impacts many aspects of our experiences as citizens in a community.

This lesson provides students with an opportunity to explore the concept of money through the lens of Karl Marx’s materialist theory and the notion of ‘alienation.’ It helps students reflect on how money affects them, others, and the world around them, and encourages students to think critically about issues such as wealth inequality, our relationship to material goods, our social values, and how these may impact gambling behaviour. The lesson also discusses Eric Fromm’s ideas on alienation in the form of *having vs. being*. These ideas serve a double purpose as they are also relevant to building gambling literacy and competencies. Understanding what money is, and how it can influence our sense of connectedness or disconnectedness to ourselves and the world, can help us pause and be more mindful about our decisions and the ways we both see and use money.



#### Instructional strategies

1. Have the class read the [handout](#) at the end of this document independently and give them time to digest its content (you can also show this 2-minute video on alienation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ4VzhluKCO>). Then, divide the class into small groups and use questions such as those provided below to facilitate a discussion.
  - a. How would you describe money? What is money to you?

- b. In what way(s) do you think money or material objects can alienate/disconnect us from, or connect us to, who we are, others, and the world around us? Give examples.
- c. In your opinion, how important are money and material objects in life? Do you think it is possible to live without them? Discuss.
- d. According to Marx, human beings are shaped by the society they live in, but they can also



act to change that society. In other words, people are both ‘world determined’ and ‘world producing.’ What are your thoughts on this? How do you see the role of money in shaping us or vice versa?

- e. How do you see the role of technological, media and pop cultural forces in dehumanization or alienation (e.g., by placing individuals into categories based on their physical appearance, wealth, fame, creating competition, etc.)? How do you see their role in overcoming alienation or abstract relationships?
- f. Some people try to become wealthy by buying lottery tickets. Others go to casinos to socialize and connect to people. To what extent may these forms of gambling contribute to alienation (from self, and others—especially significant others)? What factors might cause gambling to move from having positive outcomes to having negative outcomes?

2. Invite the students to read the following quote by Marx, then, have a class discussion using questions like those provided:

*“The stronger the power of my money, the stronger I am. The properties of money are my, the possessors’, properties and essential powers. Therefore, what I am and what I can do is by no means determined by my individuality. ... As an individual I am lame, but money procures me 24 legs. Consequently, I am not lame. I am a wicked, dishonest, unscrupulous individual, but money is respected, and so also is its owner...through money I can have anything the human heart desires. Do I not therefore possess all human abilities? Does not money therefore transform all my incapacities into their opposite?”*

- a. Do you think wealth can make people look better, even if those people are dishonest or lame? Why? Under what conditions might this be true? Under what conditions might it not be true?

- b. Can you define wealth without reference to money? What other things in your life do you consider valuable?
- c. If money is power in our capitalist society, as Marx suggests, how can we ensure a “fair” society? What implications does this have for distribution of wealth? How about power?
- d. Do you think gambling in your community contributes positively or negatively to the fair distribution of wealth? Discuss.

3. Ask students to consider how money and/ or power appears to be conceptualized in contemporary music. Invite students to look at the lyrics of a popular song of their choice and to think about what the artist(s) is(are) saying about money and its relationship with us and the world around us. Then, engage the class in a discussion sharing their thoughts and ideas about the lyrics they each chose.

**Teacher note:** Post Malone, The Weeknd, Bruno Mars, Cardi B., and Drake are just a few of many contemporary artists that may have relevant songs to choose from. We have also included a few links to the website Choices and Chances where there are sample discussion questions for songs that discuss the philosophy of life and money. An older and a modern song have been included for comparison. Feel free to take from these questions and modify them how you so choose to make them relevant for the philosophy of money as it relates to life, or to allow students to lead the discussion with their own questions.

Nina Simone – Aint Got No, I Got Life: <https://choicesandchances.ca/think/aint-got-no>

Drake – God’s Plan: <https://choicesandchances.ca/think/drake-life-money>



## Gambling literacy

### Big ideas

- ✓ Gambling can be a fun recreational activity but can also lead to significant harm
- ✓ As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage gambling in our midst

### Competencies

- ✓ Assess the ways in which material goods are distributed in society, how those goods are valued and how this is related to gambling policies and behaviours
- ✓ Explore and appreciate the diverse cognitive, social, emotional and physical factors that impact gambling behaviour
- ✓ Develop personal and social skills to reflect on and manage personal behaviour and choices related to gambling

For a complete look at the gambling literacy competencies, as defined by the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, see: <http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf>

## Links to curriculum

### First Peoples' principles of learning

- ✓ Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- ✓ Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)

- ✓ Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- ✓ Learning requires exploration of one's identity

## Philosophy 12

### Big ideas

- ✓ Philosophy is a discipline that examines the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence
- ✓ Philosophy provides tools for investigating meaning and fostering understanding of different ways of thinking
- ✓ Examining questions in philosophy allows people to question their assumptions and better understand their own beliefs

### Competencies

- ✓ Assess the relevance of philosophical ideas for everyday life and current social and political issues
- ✓ Analyze philosophical ideas and assess their significance (significance)
- ✓ Explain different philosophical perspectives by considering the norms, values, worldviews, and beliefs of the philosophers who developed them (perspective)

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Money has been a part of human history for thousands of years. In ancient markets, humans bartered grain, livestock and other useful things as a form of early trade. As time went on, people began to use physical objects with inherent value such as beads and shells, and later on developed shekels and coins in silver and gold. After paper was invented in China, things changed. Today, paper money, banknotes, and other forms of money are printed, bearing no inherent or intrinsic value but representing monetary value. They are used as a means of exchange to facilitate trade and simplify commercial transactions.

Money is not only a physical object but also a social phenomenon—its existence depends on how we define it and what beliefs and attitudes are shared by people in a community or society. Moreover, money can enable us to engage in different kinds of activities (both humane and inhumane) and as a means for exercising our will. This means that money can be very powerful. It can help people meet their needs, pursue their visions, and guide their lives. In today's society, money exerts huge influence on our values, activities, and goals.

But what happens when money becomes the *aim* in life? What happens when rather than just being a medium of exchange and means of helping us fulfil our needs and achieve our goals, money itself becomes *the goal*? German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued that when money fuels 'wealth' activities—when it is used for gaining individual or social power, advancing our interests, or for the sake of getting recognition—it becomes dehumanizing and *alienating*. This phenomenon largely emerges through materialism. It turns human beings into abstract beings and estranges them from their own nature, from their sense of self and common humanity. The act of exchange ceases to be a human relationship. It becomes instead a disconnected or an "abstract" relationship.

For Marx, alienation is rooted in the material world. He discusses the separation of people from their human nature and creative power through the existence of a capitalist system. In a capitalist society, people work like machines. They are alienated from the product of their labor as it is owned and disposed of by another—the capitalist. In this sense, alienation is a loss of control. People are dehumanized as they do not have any control over their work and therefore their life. They are detached from their actual work and creative power.

The development of capitalism brought with it the problem of how to evaluate different commodities. It simultaneously created the solution in the form of money—the universal commodity. According to Marx, money facilitates people's desires. It can buy almost everything, and is the most powerful commodity in existence. As Marx states: "The stronger the power of my money, the stronger I am." Yet the sense of power that stems from having more money is not authentic and can lead to an alternate form of alienation.



In a capitalist society, mass commodity production continually seeks to create new needs for people. Much more so than in the past, people now seem to feel “alive” only when they ‘have’ things that they can directly eat, drink, wear, or possess. And they feel alienated when they do not have things. The more one has, whether it is money, a job, beauty, good grades, degrees, and the like, the more the (alienated) person feels worthy and so experiences a true sense of “being.” In Marx’s words: “The less you *are* and the less you express your life— the more you *have* and the greater is your alienated life. Everything the economist takes away from you in the way of *life* and *humanity*, he restores in you in the form of *money* and *wealth*.”

Eric Fromm (1900-1980), a psychologist and humanistic philosopher significantly influenced by Marx (and Sigmund Freud), talks about alienation too. He discusses alienation in the sense of *having* vs. *being*. Fromm sees having and being as two different kinds of orientation towards the self and the world. He says that we live in a culture in which the ultimate goal is to have more and more things, a culture that speaks of someone as “being worth a million dollars.” If she has nothing, she is nothing. It seems as if all of our physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the sense of having. We act as though an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, or utilized in some way. Ultimately, we consume more, we get more temporary satisfaction, and we experience more exclusion and alienation since our thoughts and actions are not conducive to human growth and strength.