

An Honest Wage: Dollars, Hours and Ethics

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In the nation's capital this month, Mayor Vincent Gray vetoed legislation that would have forced large retailers to pay more than the federal minimum wage, which is \$7.25 an hour. Gray was under pressure from Wal-Mart, which threatened not to expand operations in Washington if the so-called "living wage" bill were passed. Passionate debate on the issue has dominated the local news for months.

This debate took me back to when I was a young man, working in a thread factory for \$1.60 an hour. That was the minimum wage at the time, just raised from \$1.40 the year before. I was a student, living on nothing, so I didn't need a living wage. My factory pay, in inflated dollars, is almost exactly the same as the minimum wage is today—and still not a living wage.

Dollars and hours. Hours and dollars. The minimum wage is a practical, symbolic and psychologically resonant matter. It inextricably links the two most basic resources we have in life—time and money—and makes explicit what your time and my time are worth in dollars and cents, down to the penny.

But are these two basic resources really equivalent? Not deep in the human psyche, two psychological scientists argue. Although we trade time and money all the time in a real world of work, in fact these two resources trigger very different processes in the mind. According to Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School and Cassie Mogilner of Penn's Wharton School, dollars and hours may have a previously unrecognized ethical dimension. Specifically, time may be linked to moral reflection, while money may be the currency of self-interest and dishonesty.

At least that's their theory, which they tested in a few simple experiments. In one, for example, they primed volunteers to think about either money or time. These volunteers, and controls, then played a game in which they had an opportunity to cheat in order to increase their winnings. Those who had money on their minds were much more likely to cheat, and perhaps more notably, those thinking about time cheated least of all—even less than controls.

So dollars appear to encourage unethical behavior, while hours discourage it. But why? In order to plumb the volunteers' motivations, Gino and Mogilner ran a second experiment, a variation on the first. In this one, some volunteers thought they were taking an intelligence test, while others believed they were taking a personality test—to see what kind of people they were. The idea is that thinking about time makes people more self-reflective—and as a result more ethical. They wanted to see if taking a personality test had the same effect—trumping the dark influence of money.

And it did. As reported in an article forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*, priming thoughts of money still led to cheating—but only when the volunteers thought they were taking an intelligence test. When volunteers were primed to think of money, but then took a personality test, they were just as ethical as those thinking of time. In other words, taking a personality test made them reflective, which reaffirmed their ethics. In another experiment, performing the task in front of a mirror had the same

effect—boosting self-reflection and reducing cheating.

So does money corrupt? Is that what this comes down to? Well, yes—and worse than that really: Merely thinking about dollars has a corrupting effect. But happily, Gino and Mogilner say, thinking about time is just as powerful in the opposite way. It leads us to think about who we are—to hold a mirror to our selves—and act in ways that make us proud of ourselves.

The challenge for psychological scientists and policy makers is to find ways to nudge people toward self-reflection. Self-reflection is a luxury for those scraping by on \$7.25 an hour, who have trouble thinking of free time as free. But particularly at times of economic stress and temptation, this could be an effective strategy for curbing dishonesty.

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