

On 'Wage Slavery' and Word Games

A friend mounted a defense of the concept of 'wage slavery' and asked what I thought.

I had several problems with his arguments directly, but I had a hard time getting really passionate about whether or not someone can be called a wage slave, and if so, what to do about it. I tend to think it's an incoherent concept from the outset, and whether it is or isn't, completely free and open markets are the solution.

But what interested me more is a more subtle thing lurking in the discussion. The use of words themselves impacts the outcomes desired.

Using the phrase "wage slavery" may make escaping it harder.

Metaphors and language matter. If you see yourself as a slave, your imagination shrinks, and your sense of what's possible declines. Verbiage associated with victimhood, etc. have a powerful self-enforcing tendency.

This doesn't mean you can happy-thoughts your way into a better life, but framing matters.

I think of all the people I've known over the years. The ones who see their work in terms of wage slavery never have 1/10 the opportunity or progress as those around them who do not. They don't see it, or it never comes because they're so damn down-trodden and negative.

Even the extreme case portrayed in the movie Shawshank redemption, where Andy Dufresne was a literal prisoner, and Brooks Hatlen was not, the latter felt so trapped he killed himself (because he defined himself as a prisoner and couldn't see beyond it even when he wasn't) and the other escaped - mentally and physically.

It's also noteworthy that many of those we wealthier people see as wage slaves do not see themselves as such.

So it may be the case that, whether or not you can get away with defining something as wage slavery, you are more likely to overcome it (from the perspective within, or a third party) if you refuse to see it that way and instead define it as a shifting set of desires and choices about how to achieve them, no matter how few or unpleasant they may be.

The reverse effect is also possible. If you define your situation as "the unpleasant result of limited options" you may in some cases be less likely to seek an extreme or risky exit necessary to move past it. Starkly defining it as "slavery" may provide the raw framing needed to motivate escape.

My takeaway is that we are playing a series of games with language and metaphor (calling it a game does not mean it's trivial!). The games that best help us move closer to who we want to become are the best games. So if playing the game "I'm a wage slave", or, "Those people are wage slaves" makes you less likely and able to become a superior version of yourself, stop playing it. If it helps, play it. (But don't expect or force others to play the games that work for you).