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## Simmel and the Posthuman: Money as the God of Bad Infinity

*Abstract:* Contrary to a longstanding tradition of associating the attractive force of the modern economy with its unbridled materialism, I claim in my paper that the power of capitalism lies in the transfer of human desire into the realm of the abstract. Our passionate attachment to the capitalist system stems from its money-mediated capability to organize the infinite: money is a special form of structuring infinity, which I term the “count to infinity.” The paper develops this concept, drawing on three in-depth analyses offered by Georg Simmel in his *The Philosophy of Money*: first, the infinite structure of value, or, money as bad infinity; second, money as the pure vehicle of life; and third, money as the “absolute means.” It is my main contention that by moving human desire into the realm of the abstract, money has provided life with a vessel to elevate itself to a higher plane of energy, thus transcending the bounds of the human species.

*Keywords:* money, infinity, bad infinity, God, Simmel, count to infinity, philosophy of life, posthuman, capitalism.

### Infinity Structured

Critics of the modern economy typically point to its vulgar materialism as the source of their indignation. There is a long list of charges that can be leveled against it in this regard. Capitalism has pushed us into exchanging our spiritual needs for sensual pleasures; shopping malls are temples of consumerism; commodity fetishism—in the colloquial sense, far removed from Marx’s analysis—has driven us to obsess over specific, branded pieces of matter. “Dost Thou know that the ages will pass, and humanity will proclaim by the lips of their sages that there is no crime, and therefore no sin; there is only hunger? ‘Feed men, and then ask of them virtue!’ that’s what they’ll write on the banner, which they will raise against Thee, and with which they will destroy Thy temple,” explains Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor to Jesus when the latter pays him a visit (Dostoevsky 2007: 277). This line of reasoning has an even older pedigree: “Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ,” St. Paul writes in his *Epistle to the Philippians*. “Their god is their stomach [...] Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3: 18–20, NIV). On one side there are the *psychikoi*, and on the other the *pneumatikoi* (1 Cor 2: 14–15): people of the senses and people of the spirit. The belief that the capitalist process is rooted in the stomach and fueled by the corporeal intensity of the “enchanted world” of consumption only begins to fade somewhat in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s contemporary analyses, which are inspired by psychoanalysis and focus on the “machine dimension” of capitalist desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1983).

Contrary to the tradition of associating the attractive force of the modern economy with its unbridled materialism, I claim that the power of capitalism lies in the transfer of human desire into the realm of the abstract—a shift accomplished by money. Our passionate attachment to the capitalist system stems from its money-mediated capability to organize the infinite.<sup>1</sup> “Money,” writes Georg Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money*, “is the symbol in the empirical world of the inconceivable unity of being, out of which the world, in all its breadth, diversity, energy and reality, flows” (Simmel 2011: 540). Thus, money only pretends to be about temporality. In fact, its nature is thoroughly metaphysical. This same interpretation emerges from the poetic and ostensibly paradoxical juxtaposition, made by the young Karl Marx, of Christ’s statement on the nature of true wealth with the logic of capital.<sup>2</sup> “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal,” goes the famous admonition in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 6: 19–20, KJV). Paraphrased by Marx, this call to asceticism becomes a diagnosis of the spiritual nature of capitalist accumulation:

The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save*—the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour—your capital. [...] All the things which you cannot do, your money can do. It can eat and, drink, go to the dance hall and the theatre; it can travel, it can appropriate art, learning, the treasures of the past, political power—all this it can appropriate for you—it can buy all this: it is true *endowment* (Marx, Engels 1988: 218–219).

Marx does not claim, therefore, that money leads us to desire lowly and fleeting pleasures. On the contrary: it is money in the form of capital that is an invincible treasure and, as such, constitutes the full-fledged psychological and structural counterpart to that which is typically referred to in the Judeo-Christian tradition as “heaven.”<sup>3</sup> The game of capitalism isn’t meant for those who enjoy basking in the sun, cocktail in hand, or even for those who throw orgies on yachts worth upwards of a hundred million dollars. At best, these people can serve capitalism as its useful idiots: momentary carriers of a process that, in the grand scheme of things—as in the quoted passage from Simmel—is likely to transcend the reality of the entire human species.

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<sup>1</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello write about capitalism in a similar way: “In many respects, capitalism is an absurd system. [...] Capitalists [...] find themselves yoked to an interminable, insatiable process, which is utterly abstract and dissociated from the satisfaction of consumption needs, even of a luxury kind” (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005: 7). However, their insistence on the need for a “spirit of capitalism” or personal and material reasons to engage in the capitalist process—structurally equivalent to what Deleuze and Guattari call “reterritorialization”—runs contrary to the idealist perspective I am pursuing in this paper. Management guides and business training programs—which Boltanski and Chiapello see as capillaries feeding the capitalist ectoplasm into the farthest reaches of the social consciousness—would be rendered impotent without the background of the utterly absurd passion for the interminable, incorporated by capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> That, to the best of my knowledge, the logical correspondence between these two oft-quoted sections has not been noted by any of the thinkers who have posed, in its myriad iterations, the question “Was Jesus a socialist?” shows just how counterintuitive it is to our received knowledge to perceive the “ideal contents” in economic phenomena.

<sup>3</sup> On the associations between the notion of infinity in medieval Buddhism—embodied by monastic “inexhaustible treasuries”—and the development of capitalism, see *Debt*, by David Graeber (Graeber 2014: 258–270).

Let's put it in different terms. Ontology is concerned with the structure of reality. It seeks to answer the question of what—essentially and ultimately—the world is made of, in the deepest sense. Metaphysics goes further. It makes statements concerning the realm of the invisible, freedom, or infinity.<sup>4</sup> Metaphysics has the audacity to assert that even the nonexistent does, in fact, exist, and that it has a certain structure. There are laws governing the invisible. Theology—the logic of God—adds yet another element. Not only does there exist a certain form in infinity, but it has a specific, substantial, and perhaps even personal form. God speaks to us in freedom. Thus, the difference between metaphysics and theology—as I understand the two—to a certain extent corresponds to the difference between meditation as practiced in the East or the Far East and that of Christianity. In the former, the greatest truth is voidness. The Christian, meanwhile, meditates in order to encounter God within it.<sup>5</sup>

I do not claim—or at least I do not intend to do so at the outset—that a metaphysical interpretation of economics must necessarily be theological in nature. The question I pose in this essay is much more of a methodological exercise, one dictated by practical considerations, particularly the cognitive utility of such a strategy. Its purpose isn't to convince anyone that the economy is a religion. But we are likely to arrive at interesting discoveries when we ask ourselves the question: What would happen if we were to treat economics *as if* it were theology? If there were a personal absolute in this metaphysics, what would he ask of man? What global plan could we deduce from his previous choices? I believe that such a perspective, if it were to be assumed, would quickly reveal that the name of the God we worship by way of the modern economy is growth, and his practical psycho-social vehicle is money. Or, to use somewhat more technical jargon: the being of the God whom we worship by way of the economy involves imposing a particular order on a realm of human freedom that is tied to what I will refer to as “the count to infinity.” In what follows, I develop this concept, drawing on three in-depth analyses offered by Georg Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money*. First, the infinite structure of value, or, money as bad infinity. Second, money as the pure vehicle of life. Third, money as the absolute means. Finally, I make some concluding remarks.

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<sup>4</sup> I assume here, after Hegel, that infinity is a form of the human spirit as well as a kind of skeleton key or password that opens its reality, much like the question “How high can you count?” leads a child to discover the meaning of eternal punishment. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel writes with his signature pathos, “At the mention of the infinite, soul and spirit *light up*, for in the infinite the spirit *is* at home, and not only abstractly; rather, it rises to itself, to the light of its thinking, its universality, its freedom” (Hegel 2010: 109).

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that the strength of every social system and successful ideology stems from its ability to somehow harness man's characteristic instinct for the infinite. Let's take nationalism, with its notion of the “eternal life of the nation.” The infinity to which the nationalist model of patriotism refers is the infinity of biological life. It is, in essence, biopatriotism. “Rota” (“The Oath”), a patriotic poem written by Maria Konopnicka in 1908 and considered by many Poles to be a prime candidate to replace “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego” as the country's national anthem, is highly informative in this regard: “We won't abandon the land whence our kin! / We won't let our native tongue be buried. / Polish people we are, Polish folk, / We are of the Royal Piast clan. / We won't let the enemy Germanize us! / So help us God!” (trans. Peter Gessner). Within the space of a few verses, Konopnicka mentions land, clan, and kin—all categories that are strongly tinged with biology. The very word “patriotism” is derived from the Greek *pater*, meaning father or head of a family. In other words, nationalism is an attempt to extend biological or genetic blood ties onto entities comprising millions of people, while giving them the appearance of eternity (the common denominator of “land, clan, and kin” is the implication of continuity and natural regeneration).

### Money as Bad Infinity

To Simmel, money is a medium, expression, and ultimate symbol of the (relativistic) social world: a world in which we are incapable of stabilizing the values of things, one whose complexity stops it from bending to the demands of our will.

This much is already apparent in his history of exchange processes. According to Simmel, exchange begins as a single and subjective event, often taking the form of simple theft or plunder: acts in which one person directs the force of his *individual* desires against the outside world. Exchange then becomes socially stabilized. At this stage it remains subject to regulation by the will of a *group of people* (Simmel mentions here the ritual of lending assistance to neighbors, and the public nature of medieval trade, in which the frequent subjectivity of the value of exchanged items was counteracted by group pressure). Finally, prices emerge; in Europe, this occurs more or less in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Exchange henceforth becomes objective and impersonal, as we assume that prices are a manifestation of the object values of objects, and thus the current state of the will of those participating in the exchange is irrelevant (Simmel 2011: 102–105). From this point on, it is we who are subject to the logic of exchange, not vice-versa.

Simmel perceives this as part of the broader process of departure from what he describes as the “articulation of the world as a stable core within fleeting appearances, and the accidental manifestations of enduring bearers of such appearances” (Ibid.: 107), and thus a shift away from a world viewed through the lens of substance toward a relativistic world, one comprehended as “motions, the bearers of which are increasingly divested of any specific qualities” (Ibid.: 109). He writes, “That the apparent stability of the earth is not only a complicated movement, but that its position in the universe is established by a mutual relationship to other masses of matter, is a very simple but striking case of the transition from the stability and absoluteness of the world’s contents to their dissolution into motions and relations” (Ibid.: 109). The fundamental principle and the utmost symbol of the traditional world was God. In the modern relativistic world of processes, this role has been assumed by money.<sup>6</sup>

In this relativistic social world, it is money that tells us what a given thing is, as we can no longer determine it for ourselves. Money is thus the voice of God in our heads, instructing us on the objective value of the world. Money “sees”—and subsequently explains by way of price—the ties and interdependencies that our limited or finite mind is unable to perceive. This is illustrated by Simmel’s well-known analogy involving the length of lines. Is a given line long or short? If we can determine this without resorting to comparisons, then it is only because we have forgotten about comparisons made in the past: “definite standards have grown out of the innumerable comparisons of length, and they form the basis for determining the length of all tangible objects” (Ibid.: 91). The same logic governs the cultural process associated with money, thanks to which, in developed societies, the values of particular objects display a “bi-layered structure.” The core value comprises the permanent sediment of tradition: the net result of all exchanges, past and present, in which a given object was involved. This layer is occasionally reshaped by the context of

<sup>6</sup> Graeber notes that “The images stamped on Greek coins (Miletus’ lion, Athens’ owl) were typically the emblems of the city’s god” (Graeber 2014: 246).

the moment. The first and stable level, Simmel writes, is formed “by the sublimation of the latter” (*Ibid.*: 101). In other words, the value of a given object expressed in money, that is, its price, has both a synchronic and diachronic dimension. More than just the sublimation of a commodity’s place in the social whole, it is also a sublimation of its entire social history, all the past exchanges in which it was involved, to which is added, under certain circumstances—for example, when we need water in the desert—the demands of the moment. What is crucial from our perspective is that in developed societies the amount of information amassed in the price of even the simplest product is impossible to reproduce. Money measures, down to the penny, a whole which we can barely sense.

From the perspective of our finite nature as a brain and body, money is therefore infinity, or at least addresses us from that level. Simmel says so explicitly: “The interdependence of things, which relativism establishes as their essence, excludes the notion of infinity only on a superficial view, or if relativism is not conceived in a sufficiently radical way. The contrary is indeed true [...] If the effect that one element produces upon another then becomes a cause that reflects back as an effect upon the former, which in turn repeats the process by becoming a cause of retroaction, then we have a model of *genuine infinity* in activity” (*Ibid.*: 126, emphasis mine). Simmel furthermore argues that the only truly authentic infinity is this kind of internally and dialectically looped infinity, as opposed to that which emerges as a result of some attempt to articulate it in qualitative terms: “If infinity is regarded as a substance, or as the measure of an absolute, it always remains something finite though very large. The finiteness of existence is only transcended through the conditioning of every content of being by another content, which in turn is equally conditioned” (*Ibid.*).

I argue that the exact opposite is true. Notice that money is infinite only in the practical sense: it is an infiniteness that stems from its superior computing power. Money tells us about the world from the perspective of a great multitude of connections: a number so enormous that even if we were to spend the rest of our lives counting, we would never even approach the number of internal interdependencies “accounted for” within money. Therefore, by surrendering to money and accepting the rulings it hands down through prices, we surrender not to infinity, but rather to a horrendously large number comprising trillions of historical and contemporary economic transactions. Thus, one might say that the infinity enclosed in the concept of money is an immanent and ontological infinity that ought to be, in my view, contrasted with the infinity that humans have attempted to see in figures such as God or the absolute, that is, infinity, in the sense of an idea, a metaphysical infinity. This might be the very reason why the manner in which we most commonly experience the absolute in our era is something that we call the “system”: the sense of complete and utter dependence on something that surpasses us and is beyond all comprehension, yet is at once devoid of all sublimity. Any attempts to map this mechanical infinity or sketch its more substantial features invariably degenerate into conspiracy theories. Ontological infinity is something we cannot but despise.

This contrast between mechanical and metaphysical infinity corresponds roughly to the Hegelian categories of true and bad infinity.<sup>7</sup> In general terms, bad infinity means progress

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<sup>7</sup> I use the terms bad and true infinity, which correspond to the German *schlechte* and *wahre* or *echte Unendlichkeit*, also translated as spurious and genuine infinity. As Wayne M. Martin observes, this entails certain

toward infinity. It is the ordering of the realm of infinity by means of what I referred to earlier as the count to infinity. Hegel implies that, in his day, it was something akin to a popular or even socially prescribed intuition about infinity (according to my reading of Simmel, it is that infinity or form of the human spirit that becomes second nature to us as we use money in our everyday transactions). It is, as Hegel writes, “the *progress to infinity*, which is accepted *in so many shapes and applications* [emphasis: B.K.] as an unsurpassable *ultimate* at which thought, having reached this ‘*and so on to infinity*,’ has usually achieved its end” (Hegel 2010: 113). And a few more observations: “The progress to infinity is therefore only repetitious monotony, the one and the same tedious *alternation* of this finite and infinite” (Ibid.). “This progress is [...] fixated at that perennial repetition of one and the same alternation; at the empty unrest of a progression across the limit toward the infinite which, in this infinity, finds a new limit but is just as unable to halt at it as it is at the infinite” (Ibid.). The modern being ceaselessly *herstellt*—adds up or produces—wrote Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977: 15–18). Hegel ultimately explains this notion with a certain illustration: “The image of the progression in infinity is the straight *line*; the infinite is only at the two limits of this line, and always only is where the latter (which is existence) is not but *transcends itself*, in its non-existence, that is, in the indeterminate. As true infinite, bent back upon itself, its image becomes the *circle*, the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present, without *beginning* and *end*” (Hegel 2010: 119). Bad infinity is therefore a number line and the recitation or attempted creation of further and ever greater numbers, along with the associated excitement incited by the very act of crossing quantitative thresholds—not unlike the excitement that accompanies the breaking of economic or athletic records. True and authentic infinity, on the other hand, is that which can be enclosed in finite form without losing any of the eternity that imposes itself on our minds. Or, *a fortiori*, *only the infinity* that can be conveyed through a finite form while losing nothing of its infiniteness is true, meaning that it lends us existential support. In section 95 of the *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel writes that the concept of true infinity is the most important proposition of philosophy (Williams 2012: 161). One can hardly argue against this claim. In many ways, an action that bears the structure of true infinity is what we refer to as salvation.<sup>8</sup>

### Money as Pure Vehicle of Life

One of the reasons for Simmel’s optimistic account of the infinity embodied by money is its transparency, a trait he repeatedly emphasizes—the fact that it is “dissociated from any purpose” (Simmel 2011: 214).

Money is the tool that manufactures a world of widespread exchange and unfettered communication, binding into a single system those elements of reality that had been fixed,

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consequences. Bad infinity is still infinity—the kind that, for one reason or another, leads us into moral and existential intricacies. Spurious infinity, meanwhile, is not infinity at all (Martin: 169–170). I return to this matter later in the essay.

<sup>8</sup> As with Kierkegaard’s knight of faith who “constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else” (Kierkegaard 1994: 32).

static, and “mute” prior to the intercession of money. To use a typical illustration: if I have a cow and need shoes, while my neighbor has shoes but needs a tent, nothing happens. Things look different, however, when we have a means to pay each other (*Ibid.*: 473–474).<sup>9</sup> In this sense, money becomes the medium of “universal” cultural communication, the lexically and syntactically richest language ever to be developed by humankind, enabling us to invent ever-new and astonishing “words”—as incomprehensible to non-monetary societies as typewriters or touch screens would have been to hunter-gatherer peoples still using hand axes. Simmel’s triumphant paeans to money and the metropolitan life it enables can only be rivaled by Marx’s veneration, emanating from the oft-quoted passages of the *Communist Manifesto*, for the wonders created by the bourgeoisie.

Economic interactions take place with such admirable expediency, by subtly organized dovetailing of innumerable details, that it would be necessary to assume that they were integrated by a superior mind, operating with superhuman wisdom, if one did not fall back upon the unconscious power of adaptation of the human species. The conscious intentions and foresight of individuals would not suffice to maintain the harmony that economic activity displays alongside its fearful discords and inadequacies (*Ibid.*: 157).

This living, pulsating, and effectively infinite entity that is the modern economic system could not have been constructed, therefore, through conscious effort. Nevertheless, Simmel claims that it still serves the needs of humankind, much like the invisible hand of the market that helps push our interests along. Laws governing the flow of money, although infinitely complex, are ultimately a function of countless individual decisions taken by human beings and therefore do not develop into some ominous fatality. On the contrary, money goes where people themselves would if they were able to invent a mechanism that aggregated their voices in real time. From this angle, the market system seems something of an all-encompassing democracy, one that allows those participating in it to make, in real time, decisions about even the most minute details of their everyday lives. Despite its breathtaking complexity, however, monetary economy can still be analytically pared down to a subjective process taking place within the psyche of a single individual.

This, in turn, stems from Simmel’s reconstruction of the process of creating money. As we have already seen, its roots reach all the way back to barter exchanges. Subjectively, such exchange implies that “one has to give up the possession or enjoyment that the other wants in order to persuade the latter to give up what he owns and what the former wants” (*Ibid.*: 75). The next step is objectivization. Although completely natural, the process resembles an alchemical metamorphosis, transmuting internal psychological processes into objective communal facts, reforging the relative into the absolute (*Ibid.*: 505). Note that in order for an exchange to transpire, we need to feel that it secures for us an object whose value we believe to be *higher* than the one we had and exchanged. The fact is, however, that

<sup>9</sup> It is, incidentally, exactly the sort of example that Graeber tries to invalidate as part of his critique of the myth of barter. Invoking the efforts of 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropologists, he demonstrates that exchanges between the owners of cows and the owners of shoes still took place even without money to serve as a medium of exchange. The transactions were made possible by the emergence of credit. There was nothing more natural, Graeber argues, than a situation where my neighbor would give me the shoes upfront, thus extending credit to me, leaving me in his debt, at least up until the point where I would obtain ownership of something he considers attractive, but not as valuable as my cow. Money, therefore, is not required to render barter obsolete, but it certainly makes the process much more efficient. Money exists as a quantitative “overlay” on top of credit, allowing a more precise gauging of its extent and facilitating exchanges between people from different communities (Graeber 2014: 21–41).

from the perspective of an external observer, that subjective element of exchange seems to disappear in a manner that is almost magical. What the observer sees is the fact that under these circumstances, *people in general* consider the two exchanged objects as having equal value. Moreover, after a while, when the number of such exchanges becomes appropriately high, we cease to notice the initial source of that value. Subjective feelings are altogether eclipsed by the internal value of things engendered in the process of objectivization. Constituent elements of the world, now mere commodities, become substantially “full” and seem to us valuable in and of themselves, and, as such, “enter into a reciprocal objective relationship” (*Ibid.*: 75), which comes back to us as an autonomous mechanism governed by its own logic.

Subsequently—in the final step of this evolution—the circulating values are tied to specific monetary sums. Thus, as the second derivative of our subjective reaction to items (objective value being the first), money is “a shadow of a shadow” and seems to have no direct link to our desires and emotions. Ultimately, however, its core essence still stems from individual human psyches. In other words, money does not add anything to the world. It is “the purest example of the tool” (*Ibid.*: 225)—“Money belongs to those forces whose peculiarity lies in a lack of peculiarity” (*Ibid.*: 475)—which, at most, can “paint” reality a certain way but cannot manufacture it on its own. The role of money, therefore, is limited to the actualization of energy, which already exists inside all of us, and its presentation in an aggregate and portable form.

The process itself, however, is far from obvious. Marx takes a wholly different view of the matter. When capital arrives at a specific ceiling or achieves particular critical mass, it

assumes an automatically active character [...] value is here the active factor in a process, in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it at the same time changes in magnitude, differentiates itself by throwing off surplus value from itself; the original value, in other words, expands spontaneously. For the movement, in the course of which it adds surplus value, is its own movement, its expansion, therefore, is automatic expansion. Because it is value, it has acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs (*Marx 1996: 164–165*).

Thus, in its capital form, money can be considered an emergent process, one that has detached itself from the ground it has sprung from and has become a separate entity intent on pursuing its own goals and ceaseless reproduction on an expanded scale—something Marx labels “accumulation.” Rather than a nebulous idea embraced by people engaging in an exchange of commodities, it is something that money brings into and ultimately imposes onto the world. Accumulation, its structure resembling the process of counting to infinity, ultimately constrains human creativity by forcing it into an overly cramped frame of profit-oriented manufacturing and thus precluding “the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick” (*Marx 1993: 488*). Reality, therefore, needs to be purged of the malignant growth that is capitalism, if the true extent of the human creative spirit is to reveal itself. True human potential is hampered by capital, and thus only after being released from its grip will we be able to do decidedly *more*. One of the fundamental theses of Marxism states that as societies develop, the forces of production find themselves increasingly (1) at odds with existing relations of production, leading to (2) repeated crises of overproduction which, in turn, lead to (3) a period of social revolution and the toppling of the existing social order and eventually result in

(4) human productivity being elevated to new heights or unshackled from its previous limitations.

Whenever he touches upon similar notions, Simmel seems absolutely convinced that accumulation *has already had* a positive impact. Money—also, or maybe even primarily, in its contemporary capitalist incarnation—is the unparalleled midwife of life, rather than its brakesman.

The superior power of the culture of objects over the culture of individuals is the result of the unity and autonomous self-sufficiency that the objective culture has accomplished in modern times. Production, with its technology and its achievements, seems to be a cosmos with definite and, as it were, logical determinations and developments which confront the individual in the same way as fate confronts the instability and irregularity of our will. This formal autonomy, this inner compulsion, which unifies cultural contents into a mirror-image of the natural context, can be realized only through money. On the one hand, money functions as the system of articulations in this organism, enabling its elements to be shifted, establishing a relationship of mutual dependence of the elements, and transmitting all impulses through the system. On the other hand, money can be compared to the bloodstream whose continuous circulation permeates all the intricacies of the body's organs and unifies their functions by feeding them all to an equal extent (Simmel 2011: 474).

Although the spiritual development of the individual lags behind the breakneck pace of the “culture of objects”—and it is plausible, as Simmel himself speculates a few pages earlier, that economic and technological developments actually have a detrimental impact on man as an individual—the obverse of this process, apparent on the streets of metropolises and visible to the naked eye, is the enhancement in “the variety and richness of life” (Ibid.: 512).

It seems that despite differences in their respective narratives, Marx and Simmel make a similar mistake—both seem unable to transcend equating humanism with the development of life itself (and understandably so, given the fact that in the course of their lifetimes, a device that would beat humans at chess existed only in the form of the Mechanical Turk, later revealed to be a hoax). What is good for humankind, therefore, must be good for life—thus human emancipation would allow life to flourish, predicted Marx; Simmel, on the other hand, posited that the staggering escalation of creative forces that he was observing on the streets of major capitalist cities was the best possible proof that we are moving in the right direction. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly clear that maximizing the development of life is not a humanist, but rather a post-humanist or even a trans-humanist ideal. By moving human desire into the realm of the abstract, money has provided life with a vessel that has allowed it to accumulate such power, intensity, and complexity as were heretofore far beyond its reach: “There is no more striking symbol of the completely dynamic character of the world than that of money. [...] Money is nothing but the vehicle for a movement in which everything else that is not in motion is completely extinguished. It is, as it were, an *actus purus*” (Ibid: 517). In other words, just as DNA is the vehicle of life in nature, coordinating processes and behaviors exhibited by living organisms and selfishly using both to replicate itself in the greatest possible numbers (thus maximizing the energy of life itself), so does money exist as the vehicle of life in the transbiological realm, blending (in line with the notion of universal commodification) objects, human beings, machines, animals, and ideas, striving within them for self-replication, and thus facilitating the elevation of life toward a higher energetic plane. Therefore, the infinity of money is not bad or detrimental because it's hostile to life itself, but because its ceaseless amplification of the power of life

is indifferent to human form. Money mobilizes and releases energy regardless of its nature. The psychological dimension of this process is illustrated by Simmel's third analysis, to which I now turn.

### Money as an Absolute Means

Simmel observes that every human action is grounded in the sequences of ends (*Zwecksreihe*), which he also refers to as teleological series or sequences. These are sequences of depictions or representations that enable humans to mobilize and focus their energy and to apply it toward the accomplishment of a particular task. At the end of each of these teleological chains lies a certain value. More precisely, as Simmel writes, what is perceived from the theoretical and emotional perspective as the value is, in practical and volition terms, the purpose (Simmel 2011: 229).

The material conditions that stand between a person's current position and goal are what Simmel refers to as means. Means have only relative value, which they acquire in relation to their ultimate goal. These are rather elementary matters. What is interesting is that Simmel ascribes absolute value to the purpose: "The value of things is absolute—here in the questionable practical sense—where a process of the will definitely stops" (*Ibid.*). Thus, in psychological terms, we are unable to think or desire anything that lies beyond the farthest horizon of our aims. The place where the motivation for our actions ends is, in the practical sense, the absolute.

But there's more. What is truly relevant here is the ratio of means to ends within the bounds of the teleological system. This resembles the strategy employed by contestants on the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*. Simmel writes, "[...] the ultimate link of our practical sequences, which can be realized only through the means, will be all the better realized the more our strength is focused and concentrated on producing these means. The real practical question is then the production of means" (*Ibid.*: 231). This occurs because, "if we are constantly conscious of the final purpose, then a certain amount of strength is withdrawn from the labor by the means" (*Ibid.*). It thus stands to reason that "[...] one cannot promote the final purpose any better than to treat the means as if it were the end itself" (*Ibid.*). In order to win the million-dollar prize, our actual and ultimate goal, we must exert a maximum of effort at each intermediate stage.

Considering the extraordinary complexity of modern societies, such an approach seems unavoidable. To read just the instruction manuals for the objects we use or to study in detail each clause of every contract that binds us as citizens would occupy the better part of our lives. Mastering modern "life techniques" requires great mental agility and an enormous time investment. In Simmel's view, concentrating on the means and setting aside the goals further reinforces our perception of the latter as a given, established once and for all (*Ibid.*: 233). Were we to draw our own path through life, we would certainly give more consideration to the matter of whether our actions at each step bring us closer to what lies at "the end." Meanwhile, it is much more common for us to embark on the realization of a plan that, in a sense, has been handed down to us, and the example set by many of those around us only reinforces our conviction that success does not involve look-

ing around and asking uncomfortable questions. We just need to perform our tasks effectively.

Simmel summarizes the ratio of means to ends within the teleological chain with the help of the principle stating that the longer the chain of means leading to a particular end, the more likely it is that one of the means will itself become the ultimate goal. The more dependencies there are to keep track of, the more likely it is that we will lose sight of “the purpose of it all.” It should be noted, however, that the nature of this correlation is purely psychological. We might imagine, for instance, a situation in which we are faced with the following pair of choices: the pool of goals (values) as a whole or the pool of money as a whole (the means through which we can accomplish virtually any goal). Simmel rightly observes that if we were to opt for “all the money in the world,” we would instantly understand—like King Midas, rewarded by Dionysus for showing hospitality to Silenus—its inherent worthlessness: “[...] a choice between the objects as a whole and money as a whole would immediately reveal the intrinsic valuelessness of the latter, which provides us only with means, not with an end” (*Ibid.*: 216). On the other hand, due to the unlikelihood of such an event occurring under normal circumstances, and because the alternatives we typically face require us to decide between a certain amount of goods and the equivalent amount of money, it is hardly surprising that we place greater value on money. It does not, after all, limit us in the way that specific goods do. Money can be exchanged for anything, while goods can only be used in the manner permitted by their internal substance. Consequently, in modern societies, where the ultimate goal of our actions is no longer visible, and “[...] the range of objects made available to money grows continuously [...] things submit more and more defencelessly to the power of money” (*Ibid.*: 232). Though logically it remains worthless, in the psychological sense money becomes everything. As Simmel writes,

Never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as a means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness (*Ibid.*).

It is precisely in this sense that money becomes the absolute means. It is no accident that this term bears religious connotations:

[...] money in its psychological form, as the absolute means and thus as the unifying point of innumerable sequences of purposes, possesses a significant relationship to the notion of God—a relationship that only psychology, which has the privilege of being unable to commit blasphemy, may disclose. The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is—according to a beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa—the *coincidentia oppositorum*. [...] There is no doubt that, in their realm, the feelings that money excite possess a psychological similarity with this. In so far as money becomes the absolutely commensurate expression and equivalent of all values, it rises to abstract heights way above the whole broad diversity of objects; [...] The frequent animosity of the religious and clerical mentality towards money matters may perhaps be traced to its instinct for the similarity in psychological form between the highest economic and the highest cosmic unity and to its awareness of the danger of competition between monetary and religious interest (*Ibid.*: 237–238).

### Beyond Boundaries

The transformation of money into the focus of our aspirations—a psychological shift from means to end—entails yet another important consequence. It means that the experience of

the boundary has been banished from the realm of human motivations. The purpose imposes on us a specific form. In the case of human beings, this form is most closely tied to the material shape of our bodies, particularly its limited capacity to acquire new “capabilities.” Wherever the means—that is, the accumulation of potential energy—become the end, these limitations disappear as a matter of necessity. Locke therefore wrote in his *Second Treatise of Government* that it is precisely the appearance of money that abolished the naturally existing limits on private property, ones later described as *spoilage limitation* (people can lay claim only to that amount of natural provisions that will not spoil before it is used). Money enables us to purchase an amount of land so great that its products will necessarily decay before we can consume them. Under these circumstances, there is a temptation to use this land to achieve an advantage over others, tipping the natural and relative balance of ownership, one limited, after all, only by the diversity in the forms of the human body (Locke 2003: 292–302).

In other words, money shifts human consumption into the symbolic realm, which is bound by no material limitations. The symbolic realm is infinite, and thus however great an area we manage to stake out with our money, there will always be an infinite expanse to claim “on the other side.” Money, to put it differently, abolishes all boundaries; it is always scarce. Is this not the root of so many of the problems with which the classic Greek philosophers grappled—they who were among the first to encounter a world saturated with the presence of money in the form of coinage (Seaford 2004)? To the Greeks, the fight against hubris was a cultural ideal. Aristotle believed that economics becomes problematic when it transforms into chrematistics, thus ignoring the natural boundaries of the art of amassing riches: “[...] wealth-getting has no limit [...] all men engaged in wealth-getting try to increase their money to an unlimited amount” (Aristotle 1959: 45–47). In the *Philebus*, Plato mentions two elements: “the indeterminate and the determinant” (Plato 1975: 15). The former corresponds to pleasure, the latter to intelligence. “Pleasure,” Plato argues through Philebus, “would not be completely good [i.e., widely desirable; after all, Philebus, like many of the opponents whom Socrates debates in the Platonic dialogues, is none other than a personification of the populace—B.K.] if its nature was not to be indeterminate in quantity and degree” (Plato 1975: 20). It is only by Socrates’ wise dialectical intervention that the rational *via media* is chosen as the ideal: “We declared the mixed life winner” (Ibid.), a mix of indeterminacy and boundaries, or, in our reading, money and consumption. The gradual colonization of the world of borders, aristocratic hierarchies, and the finite human form by the bad infinity of money (Graeber 2014: 187) was also an issue of concern to Timon of Athens: this was one of the many ingenious intuitions of Shakespeare, himself a witness to the twilight of the old world at the dawn of capitalistic modernity. The aristocrat, an aficionado of opulent feasts, for whom money is simply a means to an end, namely, that of camaraderie, suddenly finds himself in a world where his companions value the prospect of profit over their own honor. As Timon looks on, money emancipates itself from the world of goals and detaches from the social logic to which it was once subject as it circulated from feast to feast, passing between the treasuries of the members of a social group as a debt of honor.

The liberation of money from the power of substance and purpose (another name for what we call capitalism), and the transfer of interpersonal rivalries into the symbolic sphere,

leave the game of distinctions ungoverned by any natural limitations on the energy that can be deployed within it. In the long term, this leads to the emergence of a system founded on the feverish production of signs—money, financial operations, products; given enough time, it detaches completely from the material limitations of human existence. Yet the problem is that while the symbolic space is virtual the energy needed to transfer into it the elements bearing our emblems is anything but virtual (the same is true of credit).

Cut my heart in sums. [...]

Tell out my blood. [...]

Five thousand drops pays that. What yours?—and yours? (Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, Act III, Scene IV)

—shouts Timon at the creditors approaching him; a similar grievance might be heard from the lips of a modern-day athlete who, in the pursuit of records, modifies his own body through the use of illicit drugs, or from the lips of a corporate workaholic who keeps track of his diet and sleep patterns using quantified self-applications in order to maximize his professional efficiency. I can't go any faster; what more do you want from me? There comes a point when the individual human body can no longer keep pace with the language it uses to measure itself and its own capabilities. It can no longer pay down, without risking its own physical integrity, the debt that arises from the body's participation in the market game. In result, it becomes, following Deleuze's famous metaphor, a schizophrenic body without organs or a surface: perforated, shredded, and reconstituted around the clots formed by the financial energies that flow around it. "Body-sieve, fragmented body, and dissociated body—these are the three primary dimensions of the schizophrenic body" (Deleuze: 87). An athlete in the morning, a wise man at noon, a little girl in the evening. "The parts of the body, its organs, are determined in virtue of decomposed elements which affect and assail them" (Ibid.: 88).

Thus money, in its capitalist stage, spirits us away into a magical realm in which human bodies throb and reorganize internally in step with the accelerating fluctuations of their environment. Any attempts once again to reconcile the registers of money and body seem hopeless. One very striking example of how this boundlessness runs against the limits of material existence are self-storage facilities: "[...] many of our houses are castaway museums," write Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir in *Scarcity*.

Think of the last time you moved or cleaned out a closet and thought to yourself, 'I don't remember owning this!' These closet castaways are so common that *space, not money, becomes the scarce commodity*. People need to rent out self-storage facilities to house all their stuff. Some estimate that over \$12 billion is spent annually on self-storage, three times as much as is spent on music purchases. In fact, the United States has more than two billion square feet allocated to self-storage space. The Self Storage Association notes that 'every American could stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self-storage roofing' (Mullainathan, Shafir 2013: 77–78, emphasis mine).

Put briefly, corporeal humans—if not the material world itself—have become an impediment to growth. Just think how efficient the contemporary system could be if it were not for the miserable substrate of the human body and its concomitant sensations: ears that pop at sudden changes in altitude (evolution did not foresee the invention of airplanes or automobiles racing over mountain highways), heads that can withstand g-forces no greater than 10 g, and the forty-hour workweeks demanded by warehouse employees, who waste

time by eating their packed lunches (unlike machines, which can be refilled under pressure). As it stands, continued dynamic development is only possible at the price of the shattering, or at least deconstruction, of the psychophysical whole which we have hitherto constituted as a species. The energy deployed by money—what we refer to when we speak of economic growth—currently awaits its connection to a more perfect medium than the exhaustible and impermanent human body, with its daily need for eight hours of sleep and its susceptibility to addiction.

Let's summarize. At the beginning of this essay, I posed the question: "If there were a personal absolute in this metaphysics, what would he ask of man? What global plan could we deduce from his previous choices?" One possible way to answer this question is to say that money, as eternal scarcity, the absolute of bad infinity, is the God of the post-human future. For the count to infinity is bad and destructive—or at best neutral—only from the perspective of our corporeal limitations. Put differently, it is a formula of bad, but not spurious, infinity. And even this moral judgement must be withdrawn if we admit the possibility that the ultimate "addressee" of infinite economic growth is not man, understood as a psychophysical whole.

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