

Kant, Marx, and the Money of Metaphysics

JOSEPH J. TINGUELY*

University of South Dakota, USA

Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between Kantian idealism and Marxian materialism. Part I examines the reasons this relationship is misconstrued to be predominantly a matter of practical philosophy and turns to the neglected works of Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Richard Seaford to outline the importance of money for understanding Kant's theoretical work. Part II considers an objection that Kant confuses the commodity form for the transcendental object of experience. I am ultimately concerned with defusing the accusation that the identity of the commodity with a Kantian thing renders Kantian idealism "bourgeois" in the pejorative sense. Money is implicated, historically and conceptually, in the very intelligibility of metaphysics. In that case, Kantian idealism and Marxian materialism are two sides of the same coin.

Keywords

Kant, Marx, Money, Metaphysics

On passing...to the transcendental employment of the understanding, we find that this idea of a fundamental power is not related merely as a problem for the hypothetical use of reason, but claims to have objective reality, as postulating the systematic unity of the various powers of a substance, and as giving expression to an apodeictic principle of reason...In all such cases

* Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Dakota. USA. Email for contact: joseph.tinguely@usd.edu

reason presupposes the systematic unity of the various powers, on the ground that...parsimony in principles is not only an economical requirement of reason, but is one of nature's own laws. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*)

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (Marx, *Capital*)

Part I: On the Relation between Kant and Marx

Directions of Inheritance

A common and sensible way to consider the relation between Kant and Marx is one of forward historical development. It seems only natural to think that in plain virtue of the fact that Kant came before Marx that the philosophical direction of influence is one of inheritance and development. That is, Kant set the terms of a philosophical agenda in which Marx was made to operate. The relevant question for historians of philosophy, then, is how he did so: which Kantian themes did Marx reinforce, which did he subvert?

Although natural, this forward-looking direction of fit is not philosophically innocent. If one begins by asking how Marx's "Critique of Political Economy" (the subtitle of *Capital*) inherits and transforms Kant's "critical" project, it seems obvious that one is asking about the reception of Kant's practical philosophy (as laid out, for instance, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*) which is organized around the notion of autonomy. This line of thought is not unprofitable. After all, the basis of Marx's criticism of the alienating and exploitative effects of capitalism is that it inhibits human freedom, once freedom is properly understood not as the absence of restrictions in the pursuit of one's desires but as the capacity to take ownership of the ends of human action. Coming to understand freedom aright, then, requires one to see a considerable degree of similarity between Marx's critique of capitalism and Kant's notion of autonomy. Since this forward developing line of thought has the advantage of being correct (i.e., there really is a developing notion of freedom that runs from Rousseau and Kant through German Idealism to Marx), it is not surprising that this view is, in fact, what one finds in contemporary scholarly discussions about the relation between Kant and Marx.¹

But as common and natural as it may appear, this line of thought is no more obligatory than it is innocent. After all, it is at least possible to construe the philosophical relation between Kant and Marx in the other direction, that is, as backwards looking. A retrospective analysis of Kant from the perspective of Marx would be in order if there is something philosophically important, without which one is not in a position to appreciate

¹ It is the common orientation, for instance, of each of the articles of the 2017 special issue of *Kantian Review* on Kant and Marx. (Volume 22, Issue 4, December 2017)

the forces acting on and shaping the Kantian turn of thought, but which only becomes available or perspicuous in Marx's writings. Imagine, for instance, that one were willing to entertain the thought, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness".² If that core thought of historical materialism is at least possibly true, but not fully expressed until Marx, then one can raise a number of questions which are theoretical as much as practical about the nature of any philosophical pursuit, Kantian or otherwise. A historical materialist, backwards looking critique of the metaphysics and epistemology of Kant's transcendental idealism can be ruled out of bounds only if one rejects, or at least ignores, Marx's core claim about the nature of philosophical activity.

Historical Materialist Critiques of Kantian Idealism

Although there are some traces in contemporary theory of this second, retrospective direction of fit between Marx and Kant which considers theory as much as practice,³ this methodology (backwards, as it were) was ascendant in mid-century Critical Theory when it was fashionable to cast Kant as the philosopher of the bourgeoisie.⁴ But as much as it was common practice to assume that being bourgeois was a bad thing and that Kant was guilty as charged, the actual case against him was rarely accompanied with much by way of dispositive exegetical evidence. (And the lack of defenders disputing the charge that transcendental idealism is bad, bourgeois ideology may well be a reflection of the lack of prosecutors willing to present an actual case.) Innuendo and polemic seem to have been enough to presume that Kant was guilty until proven innocent, or at least until the conversation moved on (on, that is, to the forward-directed development of the proper understanding of freedom).

One notable exception to these intellectual currents is the curious case of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who mounted something of an argument for the claim that Kantian idealism "is itself an intellectual reflection of...the form of exchangeability of commodities underlying the unity of money"⁵. Sohn-Rethel is a figure who may require some introduction, at least among contemporary Kantians. Prior to earning a doctorate in economics in 1928 from Heidelberg, he studied philosophy for a time and had contact with several leading members of what would become the Frankfurt school, including Benjamin and Adorno, on whom he appears to have had some impact. His analysis of the relation between the form of a commodity and the form of thought was said by a young Adorno to have been one of the single most important intellectual experiences of his philosophical career.⁶ But Sohn-Rethel did not have anything near that level of influence on a wider readership. His main work, *Geistige und Körperliche Arbeit*, did not appear in print until 1970 or in English translation as *Intellectual and Manual Labor* until 1978. And just as

² From the "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859. (1989, 11-12)

³ Lotz (2016) and (2014), Karatani (2005), Wayne (2014).

⁴ Adorno (2001), Goldman (2011), Lukacs (1971).

⁵ (2001, 77).

⁶ Lotz (2014, 25 n4), cites Reichelt (2002, 181 n5) who cites Theodor W. Adorno und Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1991, 32). See also p 177 of *Negative Dialectics* (1973).

Sohn-Rethel's work arrived late in the English-speaking world, it also left early. *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, whose first part attempts possibly the only historical materialist critique of Kant's theoretical philosophy, is currently out of print in English. Suffice it to say, a historical materialist critique of transcendental idealism does not appear to be a serious option in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. It does not even register as a minor irritant that needs to be brushed away.

A historical materialist critique of theoretical philosophy is, however, a serious intellectual option outside of philosophy. Classicist Richard Seaford's seminal study, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, argues for a direct link between the first formation of commercial society in 6th century BCE Ionian city-states and the simultaneous emergence of a specific intellectual enterprise identifiable as philosophy. Although Seaford's sustained comparison of Ionian political economy and philosophy has not yet garnered the attention of philosophers, it has made an impression in the fields of anthropology and economic history.⁷ It is not surprising that Seaford's work wouldn't automatically register as relevant to scholars of modern philosophy since his specific argument concerns the nature of philosophy at its inception in 6th century Ionia; but he notes in a recent paper the resemblance between his own views about the relation between monetary society and pre-Socratic philosophy and Sohn-Rethel's analysis of the materialist underpinnings of Kantian idealism. It is with this fortuitous constellation of factors that we find ourselves today, 200 years after the birth of Marx, coming into position for a backwards looking critical reappraisal of Kantian idealism and its relation to political economy. Although the intellectual tools for such a critique are not directly on hand, they are at least ready for assembly.

The Subject and Object of Money

A wider challenge for any such historical materialist critique of transcendental idealism is not simple ignorance about how to put together the components of analysis but rather a pervasive incredulity about why such an effort would matter. Granted, there may be historical gaps to fill in or counterfactuals to entertain, but what, if anything, of philosophical significance hangs in the balance? A direct answer, however, may prove surprisingly difficult to state upfront if it turns out, as Marx suggests, that the very idea of "philosophical significance" is not a self-standing category but is itself the product of social and historical conditions from which it is not easily detachable. In other words, it may well be the case that we inhabit a form of life in which it is difficult to imagine how one could be surprised to discover that the transcendental conditions for a possible object of experience map directly on to medium-sized dry goods, the kind of commodities bought and sold on the open market. After all, what else could an object be? Setting aside the question of whether some things *should not* be bought and sold, what kind of object *could not* be bought or sold?

⁷ It has accrued to date a sum total of six citations as registered by PhilPapers. Contrast that reception with the influence of Seaford on the work of Graeber (2014) and Martin (2013).

A historical materialist critique of transcendental idealism will eventually need a reply to these questions. In the meantime, however, an answer to both “what it is” and “why it matters” can be started by sketching two axes along which Seaford compares his own analysis of pre-Socratic philosophy with Sohn-Rethel’s analysis of Kantian epistemology.⁸ The first concerns the *object* of money itself together with the global cosmology needed to make sense of money’s distinctive ontological qualities. The second is the nature of the *subject* who uses money along with an attendant notion of *psuche*, selfhood, or “transcendental unity of apperception” absent from pre-monetary societies. It is on the latter, subject-pole that Seaford spots the greatest overlap between his analysis of the pre-Socratics and Sohn-Rethel’s critique of Kantian idealism. And it is indeed on this point that Sohn-Rethel directs his most explicit comments about how the specific terms of Kantian idealism are grounded in the material conditions of commercial life. Sohn-Rethel thus brings Part I of *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, “Critique of Philosophical Epistemology”, towards a conclusion with a rather picturesque claim:

A closer analysis would reveal that the ‘transcendental unity of self-consciousness’, to use the Kantian expression for the phenomenon here involved, is itself an intellectual reflection of one of the elements of the [commercial] exchange abstraction, the most fundamental one of all, the form of exchangeability of the commodities underlying the unity of money and of the social synthesis. I define the Kantian ‘transcendental subject’ as a fetish concept of the capital function of money.⁹

Just as Seaford traces the emergence of a doctrine of *psuche* as a unitary site of consciousness to members of the first city-states adopting a fully monetized market economy, so too does Sohn-Rethel implicate the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception at the inception of modern capitalist society.

It is about the subjectivity required by money considered as a “transcendental unity of apperception” that Sohn-Rethel is in Part I most directly focused on Kant. But direct attention to Kant drops out of Parts II-IV which are more concerned with the relation between money and developing notions of objectivity.¹⁰ There is nothing that would prevent Sohn-Rethel from directly exploring the relationship between the commodity form and Kant’s analysis of the transcendental conditions for possible objects of experience. In fact, that line of thought seems especially promising given that the central concept of Part I is that the essence of money lies in what Sohn-Rethel calls its “real abstraction”, and it is precisely that abstraction which for Sohn-Rethel sets the course of the subsequent

⁸ Seaford (2012, 78-82).

⁹ (1978, 77) [brackets added].

¹⁰ It understates the point to say, as did a helpful anonymous reviewer, that this reading does not attend to the critique of Sohn-Rethel’s view given by Horkheimer and others. In fact, it is beyond the intention of this essay even to analyze Sohn-Rethel’s critique of Kant. What is central for present purposes is only that Sohn-Rethel is sensitive to the way Marxian materialism (its “ideology critique”) recasts the philosophical importance of Kantian core theoretical notions (unity of apperception, categories), and that he is the lonely figure who bothered to try working out argument. Granted, Sohn-Rethel may in fact have failed in executing that argument (as I am myself suggesting), but what matters is that he fails in the right direction, an accomplishment that eluded his critics.

programs of philosophy, math, and science. On this view it is the abstraction first required by real practices of exchange that makes possible the ideal or mental abstraction characteristic of theory. In other words, a materialist account of the commodity form provides the basis for an idealist account of objectivity.

Real Abstraction

“Real abstraction” is Sohn-Rethel’s term of art for explaining how it is that money and commodities are ontologically unique—unique enough, that is, to require a revolution in thought to comprehend them. By “real” Sohn-Rethel means that the objects and relations that factor into commodity exchange do not first exist, as it were, in our heads or in consciousness, but rather they inhere in actual social practices which precede and elicit a certain kind of self-conscious understanding. But by “abstract” Sohn-Rethel means that any description of what the objects of exchange *really are* cannot be accounted for in terms of their physical, empirical properties or practical functions. The essential philosophical claim is that the objects of exchange, such as commodities and coinage, can only *be* the objects they *really are* insofar as they are essentially abstract (or perhaps “ideal”).

One way to appreciate this essential abstractness (or ideality) is to see that in order to consider any two distinct objects as somehow equivalent as required for commercial exchange, the standard or unit of equivalence between objects must be something totally different from their use or function in practice.¹¹ For example, it is not in virtue of its ability to cut that a particular bowl would be equivalent to a certain knife. Cutting and drinking are not equivalent practices. Thus exchangeability of a bowl and a knife is abstract in the direct sense that whatever it is that makes them equivalent is categorically different than the usability of either object. After all, if two objects had an equivalent use, say both were perfectly suited for drinking a particular sort of wine, why would you ever exchange them on the market?

Another way to consider the abstractness inherent in the actual practices of commercial exchange is to consider the medium of exchange, namely, coinage or currency.¹² Coins are ontologically distinctive in the sense that, although as material and objective as anything could be, an answer to the question “what they really are” is necessarily different than an inventory of their empirical attributes. This ontological abstractness of coinage remains obscured by conventional theories of money for which a suitable medium of exchange would have to be one whose properties are independently valuable to each party (something, like livestock or metal, they would have use for or need of anyways, and so have an external reason to accept as terms of payment). But Sohn-Rethel shared with the newly emerging credit theories of money that it is not in virtue of its portability, material content, or any other physical property that a coin functions *as money* but rather only for the role it plays in facilitating social exchange relations (a standard

¹¹ See especially §4, “The Phenomenon of the Exchange Abstraction” (1978, 22-9).

¹² See §7, “The Evolution of Coined Money” (1978, 58-60).

mechanism for accounting who owes what to whom).¹³ Hence, as holders of Confederate dollars found out after the American Civil War, one and the same object can be money or not be money depending on changes in social circumstances but without the slightest alteration to the physical composition of the object. It is in virtue of its essential abstractness that there is no end to the physical forms money can take: shells, coins, bills, cigarettes, balance sheets, electronic digits. And this bit of monetary history becomes relevant to the history of philosophy because it is by this very abstractness that an empirical investigation is especially unsuited to understand the nature of money. What kind of metaphysics would one need in order to comprehend what money really is?

How to Relate Marx and Kant?

The description of money and exchange relations as “real abstraction” is one example of why Marx is right to say that a commodity “appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing” but “[i]ts analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties”.¹⁴ How is it that actual objects can be most *real*, that is, answering most directly to what they “really are”, only when they are grasped in abstraction from their practical use and empirical properties? How is it that an abstract quality such as equivalence can set the limits and conditions for what can count or show up as real or what does or does not function as money? Money and commodities are very queer things, indeed. There is cause, then, to turn the conceptual arsenal of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy in the service of a thoroughgoing critique of capital. In other words, once an elaborate logical and metaphysical framework has been worked out, it is just a matter of time until someone trains those concepts on economic phenomena. That is one way to construe Marx and to place his project in a forward developing post-Kantian tradition. This rendering would naturally look for connections to Kantian idealism primarily in Marx’s analysis of capital.

But if Seaford and Sohn-Rethel are right, to say that the central lesson of Marx is that money stands in need of metaphysical analysis is to get things the wrong way around. It is metaphysics that stands in need of a monetary analysis. That is, what it means to say that “[i]t is not... consciousness... that determines...being, but... social being that determines... consciousness”¹⁵ is that metaphysical and logical categories are not pure or self-standing standards capable of leveraging a critique of capital but rather stand themselves in need of “ideology critique”. Thus for Seaford and Sohn-Rethel it is a non-trivial fact about philosophy that it arises together not with the modern phenomenon of

¹³ As one pioneer of a credit theory of money, Alfred Mitchell Innes, puts the point: “The eye has never seen, nor the hand touched a dollar” (2004, 56). It would be an instructive project at the intersection of philosophy and economics to reconstruct how Sohn-Rethel’s philosophical critique of modern epistemology is consistent with and influenced by the emergence in economics of credit theories of money, presumably through the influence of his dissertation director, Emil Lederer.

¹⁴ The first sentence of “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secrete”, section 4 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*, (1990, 163).

¹⁵ (1989, 11-12)

capitalism but with ancient emergence of *money* and commercial exchange.¹⁶ This alternative way of considering the relation between Marx and Kant, then, departs not from Marx's critique of capital but rather from his critique of ideology. What matters most for reappraising Kant, to put the point somewhat crudely, are the impulses of the young, philosophical Marx rather than the sustained efforts of the elder, scientific Marx.¹⁷

On the alternative reading, there is more to say about the tightness of fit between the commodity form of objects and the Kantian transcendental account of the form of any possible object of experience. So when Sohn-Rethel claims, "In a purely formal way Kant's transcendental *subject* shows features of striking likeness to the exchange abstraction in its distillation as money",¹⁸ he could have also added that Kant's transcendental *object* likewise shows striking likeness to the exchange abstraction. In that case, Kant's notion of the transcendental object, would turn out to be the right *kind* of notion one would need to approach the "real abstract" quality of money and commodity exchange. That open but unexplored argument would reinforce Sohn-Rethel's goal of demonstrating "not only an analogy but true identity"¹⁹ between the material conditions of commercial life and the ideal conditions of epistemology, first correctly *articulable* by way of Kant's transcendental idealism but only *appreciable* from the perspective of Marx's historical materialism.²⁰

If one could establish, or at least entertain, an identity between social practices inherent in commercial life and the abstract forms articulated in philosophical idealism, one could then raise a question about how to account for this similarity. In what direction does the influence run? Do we have the kind of objects we do because of the way we understand the world, or do we understand the world to be a certain way because we have the kinds of objects we do? Is this a case of consciousness determining being or being determining consciousness? In either case, how would one decide? As Sohn-Rethel puts

¹⁶ That something important is lost when we lose sight of the fact that money is logically and historically prior to capitalism see, e.g., Martin (2013, 65). That metaphysics is a corollary not of capitalism but of monetization is a theme I return to in Part II of this paper when I deny that a post-capitalist utopia would be a post-monetary one and therefore would be a post-metaphysical one.

¹⁷ It is Marx's historical materialism in general, and the scrutiny "ideology critique" brings upon the nature of philosophy, rather than the specifics of his analysis of capital in particular that sets the course of the alternative reading I think one finds in Seaford and Sohn-Rethel. From this general perspective, what takes center stage is money and commercial life rather than the specific forms of value under the conditions of capitalism. Of course, this high level of altitude abstracts away from much of the specific details and innovations of Marx's theory of value. But I do not think a general and profitable way of reading Kant waits on the details of that project. Even if Marx has the wrong view about money, he was still right to attend to the social-economic basis as the condition out of which systems of understanding (philosophy) emerge. It is the legacy of historical materialism rather than the critique of capitalism that best allows the continuity between Kant and Marx to emerge.

¹⁸ (1978, 7) (*emphasis added*).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ An account of the correspondence between a Kantian Copernican turn to transcendental idealism and credit theories of money, where the latter would have been made available by historical materialism, is complicated by the fact that Marx himself held a commodity theory of money in opposition to early credit theories. But Fleetwood (2006), Kennedy (2006), and Nelson (2016 and 2005) each demonstrate where Marx could take on board elements of a developed credit theory.

the point: “Kant might at his time have been introduced to an English public as the Adam Smith of epistemology, and at the same period Smith could have been recommended to a German audience as the Immanuel Kant of political economy.”²¹ This question of influence, in any event, mirrors the one between Kant and Marx. Is Marx’s critique of political economy simply the program of Kant’s Copernican turn applied to social life? Or is Kant’s critique of pure reason rather the intellectual, ideological upshot one would expect if historical materialism is true? Or, finally, are Kantian idealism and Marxian materialism two sides of the same coin?

Part II. Money and Metaphysics

Objects and Commodities

It is certainly provocative for Sohn-Rethel to claim that “Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781...strive towards the same goal: to prove the perfect normalcy of bourgeois society.”²² But is it true? Beyond the polemic, what’s the argument? It’s hard to say what kind of direct textual argument one could give here since Smith didn’t write about epistemology and Kant didn’t write about political economy, and Kant only occasionally uses monetary or economic examples to illustrate a metaphysical point. Adorno is keen to suggest that “what may seem...to be rather philistine analogies from the bourgeois world of commerce play a major role in Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.”²³ But whether or not the role such economic examples play in expositing the central doctrines of Kantian idealism is a major one, it is certainly not explicit or self-conscious.²⁴ So even Adorno is cautious: “[I]t is wholly impermissible simply to twist what is *said* in a text like the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and to turn it upside down. But even more important is the question of how to justify the claim that *more* is said in such an interpretation than can be found on the page.”²⁵ But if direct exegesis is of no avail because Kant did not discuss money, the question remains: what would it be to argue that there is anything approaching an “identity” between the transcendental object of experience and the form of a commodity?

²¹ (1978, 14).

²² (1978, 35).

²³ (2001, 11). The passage quoted in the epigraph to this paper (A650/B678) is one example where there is a structural homology between an economic principle (*ökonomischer Grundsatz der Vernunft*) and a key function of the “ideas” of reason, that of systematic unity. And there are other similar passages, e.g., A306/B362, A653/B681. Perhaps the most sublime example comes at the heart of “The Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God” where Kant suggests that any purported ontological proof for God’s existence is a metaphysical version of the accounting trick of cooking the books. (A599/B627).

²⁴ The fact that money and political economy remain a subtext for Kant goes some way in explaining why these themes are largely passed over in contemporary Kant scholarship which is largely occupied with the analysis and reconstruction of Kant’s arguments as well as their historical genesis. Given that Kant doesn’t make any overt arguments about money [excepting the brief and derivate section, “What is Money?” in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996, 434-6)], the theme won’t show up in a history of philosophy devoted to such pursuits.

²⁵ (2001, 79).

In the absence of clear textual guidance, there is a mistake one can make in setting about to argue for the significance of the overlap between the transcendental object of idealism and the commodity form of materialism; but it is hard to see at the outset that it is a mistake rather than good, sound practice. For reasons that can only become compelling with hindsight, the mistake is to think that any such argument would have the requirement of tracing a general or pure conception of objectivity which is somehow prior to or uncontaminated by the commodified form of the object in order to show how Kant's narrow, bourgeois or commodified concept of objectivity falls short of the real thing. In other words, it is tempting to think that the argument would have the form of showing that Kant's bourgeois idealism confuses the species (*res venalis*, as it were, a thing bought and sold) for the genus (*res*). But from a later vantage point it will prove to be a mistake to think the burden of proof for the argument that Kant's transcendental object maps on to the commodity form turns on sketching an alternative notion of objectivity: what objects *really are*, say as they would appear prior to the emergence of market economies or as they would factor into life lived in a socialist utopia. (To anticipate the conclusion, the mistake would be to think that as a matter of course members of a socialist utopia would have to engage in an intellectual activity we call metaphysics, but they would have been liberated from our bad, bourgeois notions of objectivity.)

It is not immediately obvious why the attempt to establish a metaphysically neutral conception of a "thing" against which a commodified object will appear as privative will, as an argument, end in failure. But a start in this direction can be made if instead of beginning in pursuit of a metaphysically pure object, one inquires first into the transcendental conditions for the possibility of commodities. What does an object have to be like in order to function as a commodity, to be the kind of thing one can buy or sell with money? If it turns out that an answer to that question requires the metaphysical apparatus of Kant's idealism, we would then be in a better position to inquire into the reasons for the overlap between the Kantian transcendental object of experience and the commodity form.

The Myth of the Monetary Monastery

The text of Kant's *Critiques* is not immediately helpful in explaining the similarity between the transcendental object of idealism and the form of a commodity, nor will it prove fruitful to start with the metaphysical question "What is a thing?" and work backwards to a purportedly inferior, commodified form. With no other recourse, it may be expedient (in the manner of Rousseau) to construct a myth about the origins of commercial life.²⁶ That is, perhaps a start can be made by asking a loosely historical or genetic question about what has to happen for a society to come to have commodities and money. A first step in the construction of such a myth is to posit a time prior to the invention of money and markets in order to appreciate that money and commodity exchange are not

²⁶ As Rousseau says in the "Preface" to the second *Discourse*: "[I]t is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in man's present Nature, and to know accurately a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have exact Notions in order accurately to judge our present state." (1997, 125)

necessary features of human life. That is, there are possible forms of life in which people would not reproduce themselves through the production and exchange of commodities. Such non-monetary forms of life are not only possible but in fact they are actual, whether in the historical form of pre-monetary civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia or Homeric Greece or in present social arrangements such as a monastery or a kibbutz. The difference between these social forms and commercial life is that the sustenance of each member and of the group as a whole is not dependent on the existence of a market where one commodity can be exchanged for any other. Imagine, then, for the sake of argument that one of these non-monetary societies wanted to introduce money and commercial markets into their lives. What would be required for them to do so?

The difference between a non-monetary society, say the one depicted in Homeric epics, and a thriving market economy, like that of Classical Age Greece, cannot be traced to the invention of some new object unavailable in earlier times. Even the objects used as early forms of money, such as cowry shells or metal spits, were already on hand and in use in pre-monetary societies. The same goes for the objects that would later be brought to the market. The issue that determines whether a social arrangement is commercial concerns not the existence of given objects but rather the manner or form in which the objects are arranged in relation to each other. It is a matter not of the objects' existence but of their placement or arrangement. In other words, the introduction of the market requires not new material or content but rather a new *form* of the relation between objects.

Although a pre-monetary society might have all of the goods that will come to be traded in a commercial society, what they lack compared to commercial life is a particular way of arranging those objects such that any one thing can take the place of another in an act of exchange.²⁷ As Marx puts the point in *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*: "A commodity functions as an exchange-value if it can freely take the place of a definite quantity of any other commodity, irrespective of whether or not it constitutes a use-value for the owner of the other commodity."²⁸ Of course there might be need for some calibration or haggling over the ratios, say of barley to pigs;²⁹ but the thought that any one object, of sufficient quantity, can take the place of any other is taken as a matter of course for commercial societies.

A much different sense of the possible arrangements of objects structures the pre-monetary world of, say, the Homeric Age where objects featured prominently as gifts or prizes. It is, infamously, the unstitutability of the captive Briseis which sets off the feud between Agamemnon and Achilles in the *Iliad*. The difference between the enslavement of Briseis and the commercial slave trade like the one Plato found himself caught up in is not that humans couldn't be treated as objects but that some objects couldn't be commercially exchanged. Plato was, after all, redeemable and his freedom is reputed to have been purchased by the aspiring Libyan philosopher Annikeris; but there

²⁷ See especially Marx's essay "The Value-Form" (1978).

²⁸ (1976: 43-4)

²⁹ David Graeber (2014, 238) points out the etymological link between calculating "ratios" and the nature of "rationality". A similar notion is expressed by Nietzsche in §8 of Essay II of *Genealogy of Morals*.

was not and could not be a ransom for Briseis. The conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon would have been avoided if there was a prize comparable to the right to enslave Briseis, but such an arrangement was inconceivable.³⁰ A less literary and more metaphysical way to characterize the difference from the commercial arrangement of objects is to say that a normal feature of pre-commercial life is the phenomenon of incongruent counterparts—that is, objects which no amount of twisting or turning, stretching or squishing, cajoling or haggling, can be made to take the place of an other. Commercial life, by contrast, requires a notion of space or place according to which all counterparts are congruent; any object can potentially take the place of any other in free exchange.

The Transcendental Aesthetic of the Marketplace

Following a mythical account of the origins of money, one feature that is absent from non-monetary society is a particular notion of arranging or arraying objects. In other words, what pre-commercial life lacks is a distinctive notion of space or placement, literally that of a “marketplace”. The relevant notion of space absent from non-commercial life is not physical proximity by which any object *could* be physically placed side by side with another (whether in actuality like in a museum or potentially, as in thought). Rather what’s missing is a notion of space in which any two random objects ever *would* be so placed in practice much less in principle. That is, the kind of space required for commercial life is an as it were “transcendental” space which structures how one can consider any object as being able to occupy the place of any other in the “marketplace”.

The recent rise of e-commerce in which everything is available for purchase “on the internet” makes it especially easy to appreciate the sense of a “marketplace” in which two objects can both be “on the market” even though they are not anywhere near each other geographically. The spatiality of the prepositions used to describe transactions in the marketplace—e.g., “on” the market, “in” contract negotiations—are not simply metaphors. They speak to the aesthetic conditions by which some thing registers as an object for attention. Such a mode of placement is a transcendental condition for the possibility of things appearing as objects qua commodity (*res venalis*). An additional question will be whether the transcendental “place” of the market is also a condition for objects to appear at all (*res*).

³⁰ Graeber points out (176 and 425 n57) that the Greek word used to describe the incommensurability of honor in pre-commercial life, *timē*, becomes the very word used in commercial life to describe the notion of “price” by which all objects are commensurable. See also Seaford (2004, 198 n46). Although Graeber also discusses the plight of Briseis (209), his focus there is not on incommensurability but on reinforcing an earlier argument that the similarity between the enslavement of humans and the commodification of objects is not coincidental. Each requires that something be torn from its context and made to stand apart as an object (127-64, esp. 146, 158-62). To work through the metaphysics of objectivity implied by Graeber’s anthropology one would need some notion like Heidegger’s account of the present-at-hand as a privative mode of the ready-to-hand. See ¶15 of *Being and Time* and a good discussion in chapter 5 of Haugeland (2013, 99-120).

Marx will ultimately be skeptical about whether the “marketplace” form of space is a *necessary* condition for appearance as such, but he is explicit that the property in virtue of which an object is a commodity is every bit as much phenomenological or aesthetic as it is logical. In his essay “The Value-Form” (which was appended to the first edition of *Capital*), Marx describes the commodity as bearing a literal *form* or “shape”. Objects come to have monetary value insofar as they exhibit a particular “shape of value” (variously, *Gestalt von Wert*, *Wertgestalt*, *Wertform*). There is for Marx then a kind of aesthetic or phenomenology which characterizes the form or shape which structures the way objects in a commercial market are arrayed: “what concerns the commodity functioning as *equivalent* [to another object with which it can be exchanged] is that it counts for another commodity as the *shape of value* (*Wertgestalt*), a body in *immediately exchangeable* form.”³¹

There is, on this account, a distinctive essence to objects considered as commodities which determines how they can *appear* and what they can *be*. And it is when this essence becomes *common* to any and all objects, when any one thing exists in a common space and is therefore in principle not of a different kind than any other, that an object can be bought and sold. This common essence is expressed as an object’s value or price (*aestimatio*). But in the “Value-form” essay, such a price is not described by Marx as an internal property, its content, but rather its external form. The essence or priceability of an object is an aesthetic or phenomenological matter of outward form, how it can appear in a world of other possible objects, how it will strike us at first glance, what possible movement or circulation it can actualize. In the marketplace, the essence of a thing is a matter of its shape, but shape considered not as *res extensa* but as *res aestimata*.

But what would it mean for the marketplace to be a transcendental space in the Kantian sense of a necessary condition for any and all appearing? An indication that this marketplace notion of space has become constitutive not just of some class of objects we call “commodities” but of objectivity as such (that is, blocking the possibility of a metaphysics of the pure or natural object) would be if a counter-claim that some thing was irreplaceable or priceless is taken as a mark not against the universal shape of the market space but rather against the reality of the supposedly unique thing, existing in isolation outside of the marketplace as if it were a monetary monad. Imagine, for example, a starry-eyed graduate telling her career counselor that she wants to combine her interests in fashion and botany by producing fashion accessories for plants. “Be realistic,” her counselor would caution her, “that’s not even a thing.” Even if the counselor’s phrase “not a thing” was meant figuratively, it would be true literally or metaphysically if the market space figures in place of a “transcendental aesthetic”—the necessary form in which any object must be placeable in order to *appear* as a “thing” at all. If the space of the marketplace is transcendental, then what it is to be a “thing”, to count as “objective”, must be literally cashed out in terms of its market placement. There would be no other space in which it could appear and thus no way to detach the *res* from the *aestimatio*.

³¹ (1978, 143) [brackets added].

For the marketplace to be a transcendental space means that any other claim about the object becomes metaphysically downgraded to a merely subjective status. In that case, any object, say a ring kept as a memento of someone's grandmother, really *is*, as a matter of fact, worth whatever price it can fetch on the market, although an individual may continue to attach some additional sentimental value to it. But such sentimental value derives not from the object but, in the manner of Humean aesthetic properties, from the subject "gilding or staining ... natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment."³² In short, the marketplace is a transcendental space to the extent that an object's veritable qualities are coextensive with its vendible properties: the thing *is* a *res venalis* or a *res aestimata*. Without the *aestimatio* there is no *res* to speak of.

Bourgeois Philosophy

It is easy to be incredulous about a metaphysics that cannot distinguish between an object and a commodity. It is one thing to say that the qualities of vendibility are essential to the form of a commodity, but it would appear to be another thing to say that they are constitutive of the brute objectivity of a thing. And so Kant would appear to be liable to criticism if a close analysis were to show that the object of transcendental idealism tracked with the commodity form rather than a prior, brute form of an object.

Although we haven't yet seen any detailed argument that Kant does, in fact, conflate objectivity with the conditions of commercial exchange, one can begin to see the outlines of how such an argument could go. The demands of a commodity form capable of circulating within a commercial economy become inflected at various points in Kantian idealism: the requirement that all objects be locatable in a common, universal space in the transcendental aesthetic is the notion of space required for a "marketplace"; the category of community in the analytic by which all objects exist in relations of reciprocity with all others is the form of relation needed for the universal exchangeability of commodities; the ideas of reason in the dialectic which postulate that all events must cohere in a unified field of experience (and in particular the rational idea of God in the first *Critique* or the reflective principle of purposiveness without a purpose in the third *Critique*) have the same logical functions as Adam Smith's providential "invisible hand" which guides the market towards optimal outcomes; a transcendental unity of apperception such that one can identify a single subject through time is required to ensure that a debtor is responsible for repaying tomorrow what she borrowed today; and the restriction that we know things as appearances only not as they are in themselves is of one piece with saying we know objects by their price (*res aestimata*) not by themselves in isolation (*res*). The overarching accusation would be that it is contestable whether these features of transcendental idealism are, in fact, necessary conditions for the possibility of any and all experience but it is not contestable that they are necessary conditions for commercial exchange. The question is whether Kant uncannily, albeit unwittingly, takes the economic conditions necessary for commercial exchange and inflates them into a universal metaphysics.

³² Appendix I, §5 (2007, 82).

To consider a particular example, take the case of the subject of experience considered as the transcendental unity of apperception.³³ It is debatable whether continuity of subjectivity is a condition of any possible experience, but it is clear why the notion of a unified subject which subsists through time is needed for commercial exchange. Imagine, for instance, that you gave out a loan to someone who did not share Kant's conviction that there is a logical subject which unites various experiences through time. What would it be like to loan money to someone, who, when the loan came due, professed a Humean denial of underlying personal identity? (I take it that the second essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is just such an attempt to show why it fails to imagine credit and debt relations without an underlying notion of stable subjectivity and thus how it came to be that subjectivity is invested in a transactional logic of guilt and redemption.) Walt Whitman may well be able to contradict himself in his "Song of Myself" ("I am large, I contain multitudes"), but which line on a promissory note does the multitude co-sign? The point being, the notion of a stable subject, before it is ever a logical term for the transcendental unity of apperception is, as Locke put it, "a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit" to an actor engaged in relations with others:

This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness,—whereby it becomes concerned and accountable; owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present.... And therefore whatever past actions it cannot reconcile or appropriate to that present self by consciousness, it can be no more concerned in than if they had never been done... [Judgments of praise or blame] shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have, that they themselves, in what bodies soever they appear, or what substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the same that committed those actions, and deserve that punishment for them.³⁴

The case indicting Kant as the philosopher of the bourgeoisie could say the "transcendental unity of apperception" is exactly the kind of notion one needs "to have the right to make promises" as Nietzsche puts it, that is, to be a credible trading partner or capable of standing surety for a loan or standing liable for punishment in case of default. But it isn't otherwise necessary that a person understand himself this way, as Nietzsche, Hume, Whitman or countless others (including Nietzsche, Hume, and Whitman) would insist. Here would be an instance in which Kant's philosophical innovations are in the service of justifying the material conditions of commercial life rather than articulating the ideal (possibly utopian) conditions for experience itself. Saying something analogous about the way key features of the aesthetic, analytic, or dialectic track the commercial requirements of objects as exchanged on a market would corroborate such a historical materialist indictment of transcendental idealism.

Original Space

³³ For a handling of a different aspect of the relation between commercial exchange relations and the transcendental unity of apperception, see Sohn-Rethel §6, section a, (1978, 38) and Seaford (2012, 78-82).

³⁴ *Essay* Chapter XXVII, section 26 (1996, 148-9). [brackets added]

The case impugning *The Critique of Pure Reason* as in the service of a metaphysical campaign to prove the normalcy of bourgeois life turns, in effect, on the abnormality of commercial life. That is, there is some other way objects, persons, and the space of the world should be—a metaphysical Garden of Eden before the fall of commercial corruption or perhaps a metaphysical Promised Land waiting for us after a long wandering in the deserts of capitalism. After all, it certainly seems to overstate the case to say that the space of the marketplace belongs to a transcendental aesthetic the way that the extension of height, depth, and breadth belong to any possible form of space. A more natural explanation surely is that the space of the market is a later derivation or development of a prior natural, pure, or empty space—the one illustrated by a Cartesian grid or described by Euclidean geometry. Isn't there, after all, another way for objects to appear such as they did in pre-commercial life or such as they would in a post-commercial utopia? Wouldn't there have to have been some other way that objects factor into life such that a counterfactual Homeric metaphysician or geometer could have described the essential form of objects in terms that do not map directly on to the commodity form? Can't we at least identify how objects appear in a mythical state of nature?

Marx seems to think we can. In the "Value-form" essay Marx contrast the *Wertgestalt* to another, prior shape objects can exhibit which he calls their *Naturalform*.³⁵ This "natural shape" looks to fit the description of a prior, uncontaminated form of an object we would need to contrast with and criticize the commodified deformation of objects. In that case the "value-form" of commodities would be a contingent development, a disfigurement, one we need not be beholden to simply in virtue of trying to make sense of a world populated with objects. If one could then show that the Kantian transcendental object tracks the shape of the *Wertgestalt* but misses its *Naturalform*, there appears to be an opening to fault Kant for inflating the commodity form into a metaphysical notion of objectivity. The charge that Kantian idealism is bad, bourgeois ideology would stick.

The charge would not stick, however, if the shape or form of an object in the market place can be shown to be a necessary or transcendental form of space, in the Kantian sense, that is, if it comes to be the case that locatability within it is a condition for the possibility of any object to appear, show up, or count as an "object" at all. In Rousseauian terms, we may well need a notion of a mythical *Naturalform* by which we could be said "to know accurately a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist...in order accurately to judge of our present state";³⁶ but that is a different matter than saying that objects can actually exist in a "natural form" against which we can measure the depravity of the "commercial form".

It did happen, as a matter of historical fact, that domestic commercial markets preceded Euclid by several hundred years, and earlier geometrical studies don't appear to have been abstracted away from technical problems related to concrete social practices like

³⁵ (1978, 143).

³⁶ (1997, 125).

parceling fields or constructing granaries.³⁷ In other words, there is no record of anyone thinking about space as pure or empty prior to a commercial consideration of objects as existing in a common marketplace. But, still, we wouldn't want to confuse the *ratio cognoscendi* by which pure space came to be understood after the advent of commercial society with the *ratio essendi* by which there must be, it seems, a wider empty space in which the agora or marketplace would be located. But how to judge which space is original and which is derivative? How would we determine whether the "value form" is a product of a contingent shape, place, or space or whether it is a necessary, transcendental condition for the possibility of any object at all, natural or not? Here again a myth about the origins of commercial life may be serviceable.

Ousia

In order for a society to find itself with functioning commercial markets, we have seen, it must already be operating with a unified notion of space in which anything and everything must, so to speak, live and move and have its being in order to be accounted for as an object at all. A further consequence of the "transcendental" space of the marketplace is that every object which appears "in" or "on" the market, despite the wildest diversity of appearances and attributes, will register as different instances of the same basic *kind* of thing and therefore will be describable using the same set of concepts (or categories).³⁸ Each and every commodity has the same basic nature as a *res venalis* or *res aestimata*. It is only under such conditions that any two objects (of a certain ratio) can be deemed equivalent and exchanged. Standing behind the mundane ability to buy or sell things is a shared metaphysical conception of what it is in virtue of which anything counts as a "thing". It is in virtue of its fungibility or venality that one can pick out or discriminate what counts as a real thing (say, one's grandmother's ring) from what does not (the sentimental attachment to it).

There is, then, a very concrete sense in which if a society is going to have functioning commercial markets, it is also going to need a functioning metaphysics—a

³⁷ For Sohn-Rethel's discussion of the origins of geometry as a science of pure space as opposed to an element of technical craft, see §13, "Head and Hand in the Bronze Age", (1978, 88-94).

³⁸ One highly academic and Kantian way to put the point here is to say that along with a "transcendental aesthetic" of the "marketplace" (how objects would appear) there must also be a "transcendental logic" (what concepts are needed to understand what those objects are) culminating in something like a "transcendental deduction" which would show why objects cannot but appear in the ways we understand them. I put the point this way as a broad indication how the contemporary debates concerning Kantian epistemology would have bearing on the phenomenology and metaphysics of commercial life. For instance, the conceptualism/non-conceptualism debates about whether aesthetic form and perceptual givenness are self-standing or rather dependent on the categories, whether the B-deduction is gap-crossing or gap-denying, and so on, inflect debates in political theory and economics. For instance, a political version of this debate concerns whether there is a possibility of a non-commercial "state of nature" (e.g., Locke) or whether such a prospect is a political version of the "myth of the given" (Rousseau). A monetary version of this debate would consider whether the value of money is a real property (Locke in *Further Considerations*) or ideal (Berkeley in *The Querist*). And that issue has implications for the economic debate between conventional and credit theories of money about whether money is preceded by barter. But, still, it is not obvious if the metaphysical and epistemological debates are proxy for political-economic differences or whether it works the other way around.

shared answer to the question “What is a thing?” To be a “thing” at all is to be of the nature that it can be bought (appropriated) and sold (expropriated, alienated).³⁹ Anything that cannot be appropriated or capitalized, say gravity or sentiment, is also not properly speaking a substantial “thing” at all. Perhaps such words describe a mode of a thing or a relation between objects, but neither are themselves a substantial object. Thus, in a non-trivial sense, the exchange relation requires a metaphysics of *substance*, that is, a notion of some essential thing that stands under or “stands behind” any given appearance or attribute, the *res* of *res venalis*. It is that substantiality that makes any thing the thing it is. In that case, there are no markets without a metaphysics of substance and accident. Commodities on the market are so many different accidental forms of a basic, underlying substance.

So there is a clear way in which commercial life is attended by a metaphysics of substance. But someone like Kant would not be automatically implicated as a bad, commercialized metaphysician simply in virtue of having a notion of substance which had all and only the hallmarks of a commodity, a *res venalis* or *res aestimata*. After all, it’s possible that is just what objects are and all there is for them to be. Commodities are objects and vice versa. The *res* just is a placeholder for whatever it is to which we can attach a price, *aestimatio*. There is nothing else to say about them, so there is no need for a conspiratorial tone when pointing out that Kant didn’t say anything more about them. A conspiratorial tone, however, would be in order if Kant’s metaphysics overlooked another way for objects to be and to appear.⁴⁰ But what would it be to contrast this commercial substance (*res venalis*) with some alternative notion of a thing as a pure, uncommodified *res*?

Money and Metaphysics

The first thing to say about what notions of objectivity actually preceded the commodified form is that we don’t know. History cannot help us here. As Richard Seaford and George Thomson have pointed out, the first stirring of the kind of intellectual activity that we recognize as metaphysics arose concurrently with the issuance of money for domestic commercial markets in 6th century BCE Ionian city-states. And as a matter of historical fact, Seaford has argued in elaborate detail, the first metaphysical notions of substance just are the notions one would need to understand commodity form and monetary circulation. Although the history of writing is not easily detachable from the

³⁹ Rousseau says at the head of Part II of the Second *Discourse*: “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society” (1997, 161). It is not much of a gloss to add that such a person was the founder of metaphysics as well.

⁴⁰ The case that Kant is a bad, bourgeois philosopher would have two parts. The first would be to show that his notion of substance or objectivity maps onto the metaphysics of a commodity. But secondly one must also show that the transcendental deduction of the categories of this commodified object fails because there is a way for objects to appear and to be that eludes those commercial categories. Most of the polemic against Kant concerns the first part, although I am not aware of any careful argument. But it is really the second part that would be more important. Without it, the first part doesn’t say anything interesting.

history of accounting, it is especially notable that a historical record of a pre-commercial notion of substance is missing since many pre-monetary societies were highly literate. Civilizations in ancient Mesopotamia, Homeric Greece, and medieval Iceland all had sophisticated religious beliefs (or worldviews more generally) and had advanced forms of writing, but yet members of these societies didn't seem especially concerned to record any positions on what it was in virtue of which something counted as a "thing". That is, they did not do metaphysics.

Judging from the written record it looks to be the case that any time someone set about to answer the question "What is a thing?" the author was a member of a commercial society, and he ended up with a notion of substance which tracks closely with the conditions of being a commodity. Money and metaphysics are found together or not at all. If one sets about carving up the world into discrete and stable objects which are different instances of the same underlying substance, for what principled reason could those objects not be bought and sold? The scarcity of exceptions makes the connection between substance and the commodity form look to be obligatory. What doesn't appear obligatory, however, is that one would have to carve up the world into discrete and stable objects as different instantiations of an underlying substance. In other words, it's not metaphysics which shows us that money is a contingent feature of human life, rather it is money that shows us that metaphysics is contingent. In the treatment of Seaford, Thomson, and Sohn-Rethel, the actual history of metaphysics corroborates the core philosophical claim of historical materialism: it is our social mode of being which determines how we understand ourselves and the world.

It is not hard to be skeptical of such sweeping conclusions. Can one really entertain the thought of a human form of life that effectively lacked a concept of "thing" as a basic way of distinguishing reality from illusion? For historical materialism to have any traction, the answer would need to be an unabashed, "Yes, of course". The question is whether such unabashedness is really so outrageous. The world of Homeric Greece, for example, is populated by all kinds of stuff, but there is no trace of a demand that all of this stuff be accounted for as so many tokens of one basic, underlying type of thing.⁴¹ There is a similar lack of reflex towards universalism in other areas of pre-monetary life. Sohn-Rethel describes how pre-commercial societies such as Egypt had incredibly sophisticated units of measurement, for example, for the width of a field or the height of a pyramid.⁴² Likewise pre-monetary Mesopotamia had precise ways of measuring economic productivity ranging from units of barley to "laborer-days".⁴³ But neither society appears to have felt obligated to posit some underlying, universal unit of measurement such that a

⁴¹ Graeber (2014, 36 and 403) points to the anthropological literature on pre-commercial gift economies which can group objects in "spheres of exchange" where some objects are considered the same *kind* of thing as some others. But there doesn't appear to be any further (metaphysical) assumption that any object is the same basic kind of thing as any other object.

⁴² Again, §13, "Head and Hand in the Bronze Age", (1978, 88-94).

⁴³ Martin (58) cites the discussion of "Surveying and Administrating Fields" in Nissen, Damerow, and Englund (1993, 55-69). For the claim that ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, although they had large and highly bureaucratic economies, still lacked money and commercial markets, see Seaford, "Appendix: was money used in the Near East?" (2004, 318-37).

quantity of barley and, say, the number of fish caught in a day were somehow different expressions of the same kind of thing or that calculating the height of a pyramid as compared to its base reckoned the same kind of thing as when one determined the amount of fallow land a laborer could till in a single day.⁴⁴ The thought about metaphysics is, just as highly advanced civilizations operated without an abstract, universal measure of distance or value, they also seem to have gotten by just fine without an unified theory of objects such that all the stuff they encountered was different instances of a basic, underlying substance.

And why shouldn't they have gotten by without a notion of substance? Why think, as a matter of course, that one needs a universal concept of a "thing" to pick out anything much less everything?⁴⁵ What kind of practical problem gets stalled on an *aporia* until one strikes upon the idea of an underlying metaphysical substance? The answer, it turns out to be, is money.

The broadly historical materialist critique of metaphysics shared by Seaford and Sohn-Rethel is that it is not until the domestic circulation of coinage and the pervasion of commercial markets in domestic life (such that one cannot effectively maintain a household without regular market exchanges mediated by money) that there is any occasion to consider whether all of the assorted stuff of life is really the same basic kind of thing. Only at this point following commercialization and not before (*post festum* of exchange, as Sohn-Rethel puts it) does it even sound like one is stating a meaningful question in asking, "What is a thing?" Listening to a given metaphysical answer to the question, "What is a thing?", it is not hard to imagine a member of a pre-commercial life unabashedly replying, "We have no such 'thing'."

So while it is true that in order to exchange two commodities, a society needs to have a generic notion of thing such that two different objects are both instances of a same basic "thing", that appears to be half the story. It is also the case that the tightness of fit between markets and metaphysics runs in the opposite direction. Without the demand that any and all stuff be exchangeable for any and all other stuff, the notion of a "thing" doesn't factor into human life. It is not otherwise obligatory to think that the world carves itself up into discrete and stable objects of one basic kind, the sort of medium-sized dry goods arrayed on store shelves. But in that case, an intellectual attempt to understand oneself and the world in which one lives would not end up with a neutral conception of a thing (*res*) of which the commodity (*res venalis*) is a disfigured form. And if *res venalis* is the first form

⁴⁴ Sohn-Rethel, §13, *op. cit.* The origins of the standardization of units of measurement is the subject of Martin, chapter 2, (32-50). On the relevant unit of length deriving from the cultivation of fields, Martin cites Kula (1986, 42).

⁴⁵ A poignant statement of skepticism about whether the category "thing" tracks anything real is Hegel's famous passage in the *Phenomenology* about the "Eleusinian Mysteries": "For he who is initiated into these Mysteries not only comes to doubt the being of sensuous things, but to despair of it; in part he brings about the nothingness of such things himself in his dealings with them, and in part he sees them reduced themselves to nothingness. Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up." ¶109 (2013, 65)

in which the *res* appears, then “bad, bourgeois” metaphysics of the commodity form is metaphysics in its original, pure form.

It can, of course, look like just another version of the genetic fallacy to suggest that because metaphysics arose out of such base, material origins that it cannot ever break free of them. It is one thing to think that members of non-commercial societies *wouldn't* normally think of the world as divided up into “things”, but it appears to be another to say that they *couldn't* do so if, say, in a moment of leisure an ancient Sumerian or a future utopian of a particular intellectual bent turned a budding speculative eye towards the universe. In such a state of wonder, unburdened by the demand that the nature of things answers to the exchangeability of commodities, one might think that metaphysics is salvageable or redeemable: things in the world really are one way rather than another, and we can make some headway in describing them.

This kind of metaphysical aspiration goes wrong when it takes as its bogeyman not a question about the intelligibility of the category “thing” but a skepticism that we can ever adequately describe the way things are, knowing at best answers to the second-rate question of how things appear. But members inhabiting a pre-commercial life, such as the one described in the Homeric epics or medieval Icelandic sagas, don't fit that description of skepticism. That is, they don't take it for granted that all the stuff of experience congeals into discrete instances of the same basic underlying thing. So there is no question about whether they know how “things” are in themselves or only how they appear. Rather they seem entirely unperturbed by the prospect that there are different orders or kinds of stuff such that it makes no sense to exchange them as equivalent or ask after their common substance.⁴⁶ It is not as if the Homeric world is committed to a rival metaphysics, an alternative notion of “stuff” at odds with the commodified “thing” emerging in the commercialized city-states just around the historical corner. Rather non-monetary societies appear to be unindebted to the kinds of questions to which metaphysics takes itself to answer. (As such they would exhibit a kind of metaphysical innocence not unlike the morally “innocent” (*unschuldig*) of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* who are not those who have relieved their feeling of guilt (*Schuld*, debt) but who have avoided incurring it.⁴⁷) And if the historical record shows that the burden of asking questions about things and substances is felt to be mandatory wherever commercial life sets up shop, then money and metaphysics are two sides of the same coin. They either come together or not at all.

Historical Materialism and Transcendental Idealism

One of the attractive features of Seaford's and Sohn-Rethel's historical materialist critique of metaphysics is that it is falsifiable. It would be undone by a single, unequivocal example of a society which hewed to a robust universal notion of substance but which lacked money. But until that combination can be established this line of materialist critique of metaphysics should continue to feature at least as a minor irritant that needs to

⁴⁶ Again, consider the anthropological literature on “spheres of exchange” in gift economies in which certain kinds of things are *not* exchangeable with other kinds of things. Graeber (2014, 36 and 403).

⁴⁷ Second Essay, §20 (1992, 527).

be brushed off before one can return to business as usual—an irritant, that is, to the assumption that commerce and philosophy operate in different spheres, an assumption which has been in place at least since Socrates’ “Apology” defined true philosophical activity as disclaiming money.⁴⁸

But until such time as metaphysics can be divorced from money, the idealism of Kant and the materialism of Marx are considerably more entwined than they are normally taken to be. It is not just the case that the Kantian notion of autonomy underwrites a normative critique of the exploitative and alienating effects of commercial life. Nor is the final word that Marx’s ideology critique shows the extent to which Kantian “pure reason” has social and material bases. It is also true that a careful Marxian analysis can deflate the pretense that it is possible to stand outside of the commodity form and fault the Kantian object for failing to measure up to the real thing. And the philosophical gift can be reciprocated. Without a “Copernican turn” to Kantian idealism one lacks the intellectual framework needed to disabuse the conventionalist theories of money misguiding liberal political-economics. That is to say, just like money and metaphysics, Marx and Kant are two sides of the same coin. Transcendental idealism and historical materialism are just as fused together at the head of our monetary and metaphysical form of life as were the gold and silver of the electrum alloy used to mint the very first Greek coins.

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⁴⁸ Plato, *Apology* (33a-b).

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