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## **The *A Priori* of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature**

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Literature may inform us more richly about the psychological and ideological significance of social, political and economic phenomena than a traditional sociological or economic treatise. Established economics still centres on the scarcity of goods and services and on money as a kind of regulative and objective correlate of these. Goods and services must be paid for in relation to their scarcity. The corresponding code is liquidity versus non-liquidity, to pay or not to pay, to have or not to have. Economic theory is predicated on the quantitative ratio of commodities and money. The quantitative approach, however, makes it very difficult to explain the inversion of the ratio of money, goods and scarcity in developed countries. The more goods and money that are around, the scarcer they seem to become. And since economics, by its own academic standards, cannot take the imaginary and a-rational dimension of money into account, its assumedly scientific analyses and predictions regularly turn out to be false. It cannot explain, moreover, the manner in which money structurally determines the way we conceive of private and social relations. Neither can it account for the consequential metaphysical and even theological hypostatization of money ever since biblical times. Literature, on the other hand, proceeds in a paradigmatic or synthetic way. As an epistemologically and socially specific discourse, it may well

*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

observe those abstract and imaginary qualities of money which spring from its artificial exchange value.

Shakespeare, in his *Merchant of Venice*, *Timon of Athens* or *King Lear* and Ben Jonson in his comedies have not only articulated the non-empirical character of money; they, in addition, demonstrated that in a mercantile society money naturally manipulates and organizes our concept of reality as well as those ideals which traditionally are believed to transcend the material world--such as love or monarchy. Money in itself proves to be the ideal. The basic reason for the fascination of modern writers with money is not scarcity as a monetary principle (and a social reality), but the metaphorical, communicative and even transcendental or transcendent character of money. Money, like literature, pretends and promises a formal or ideal substantiality beyond the sphere of production and reception. We naturally forget the material basis of both literature and money. As a generalized symbolic medium money with its abstract exchange value (and it functions here no differently from the abstract tropes of literature) appears to be able to reconcile the most dissimilar experiences and perceptions as, for instance, a book of poetry and 20 Euros or a young man and a summer day. Words, like money, may be converted into anything else. Even though, or precisely because, these media are grounded on artificial and metaphorical equivalences, they nevertheless lay claim to general validity, while at the same time allowing for personal attributions, imaginary projections. As a rule, money *and* literature make sense to everybody individually. They seem timeless and function as transhistorical stores of values. Thus they seem to transcend the constraints of the factual world and triumph *metaphorically* over the complexity of conditions. Money, like literature, incites the imaginary and seems to open up countless possibilities.

In his monetary poems, John Donne not only observes his own sensuous relationship with money, but also the meta-physical attraction it has obtained for modern man. He thereby shows much more insight into the function of money than most of his contemporaries in the merchant trade. Even experienced businessmen believed that money still had an intrinsic value reflecting an equivalent

Philipp Wolf

value of goods.<sup>1</sup> In his poem “The Bracelet” the speaker has lost a piece of jewelry given to him by his lover. It consisted of twelve coins each named “Angel.” Yet he does not deplore the loss of a love-token, which would owe its significance and value primarily to their love-relationship, what he truly laments is “but the bitter cost.”<sup>2</sup> His elegy is meant above all for the loss of the determinative form or formal fixing of those Angels, which he compares, among other coins, with “Crownes of France” or “Spanish Stamps.” (86-87) While downgrading the latter, he literally hypostasizes his own angelic coins. He is deeply worried that a possible finder of the coins might melt them down to produce just another chain of gold. This would definitely destroy their idea or, in Marxian terms, their exchange form, and thus destroy them in their general significance. Donne regards monetary form (not the material) as substantial or essential in (neo-) platonic terms. The speaker’s lover tries to console him by maintaining that “the gold doth still remaine, / Though it be chang’d, and put into a chaine.” (88) Even fallen angels were still angels. But he remains inconsolable. This, he claims, cannot be true for *his* ‘Angels’:

... *Mine are none;*  
*For, forme gives being, and their forme is gone:*  
*Pitty these Angels; yet their dignities*  
*Passe Vertues, Powers, and Principalities. (88)*

Here, as in other poems dealing with money, such as “Loves Progress,” the poet is attracted by the aesthetic qualities of coins. But this sensuous attitude only seems to pave the way for a much deeper fascination with the *eidos*, categorical form or exchange value of money. This synthetic abstraction transcends the contingency and complexity of objects and guarantees continuity, thus creating a third instance

1 See the chapter on money in Philipp Wolf, *Einheit und Abstraktion und literarisches Bewußtsein: Studien zur Ästhetisierung der Dichtung zur Semantik des Geldes und anderen symbolischen Medien in der frühen Neuzeit Englands* (Tübingen, 1998).

2 John Donne, *Poetical Works*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson (Oxford, 1971), 86. Further references are given in the text.

*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

which links subject and subject, subject and object. "Perfection," Donne accordingly claims, "is in unities":

*I, when I value gold, may think upon  
The ductilness, the application,  
The wholsomness, the ingenuitie,  
From rust, from soil, from fire ever free:  
But if I love it, 'tis because 'tis made  
By our new nature (Use) the soul of trade. (104)*

One may value money/gold for their intrinsic and physical properties, but these are only of a secondary and private significance. The use value of a coin remains contingent and irrelevant. It becomes interesting and an object of desire only through its reference to the other, to those who may or may not have the coin. Donne can only identify with the coin in its exchange function. He loves it insofar as it is current (in "Use") adopting thereby a symbolic and, as it were, metaphysical or unifying meaning. And this meaning is indeed a 'made' category negotiated intersubjectively in our second 'new nature' exchange, the 'soul of trade'. This soul presents a purely formal concept, it transcending subject and object, and standing therefore in contrast with the physique of the monetary body. Donne seems to use 'soul' in this context in a metaphorical sense. But its association with exchange, which is abstracted from our material reality, may nevertheless suggest the identification of money with the platonic idea of formal oneness (= 'soul') and also the principle of unity in Christian dogma.

John Donne's neoplatonic representation of money<sup>3</sup> nicely dovetails with the Neomarxism of Alfred Sohn-Rethel. It is not, if we follow Donne, the accidental nature of a physical body that engenders unity of "being," it is, rather, "form" that ought to be regarded as substantial. For "form" comes into being in abstraction from the real and independently from the individual. Likewise, Sohn-Rethel's irritating achievement has been to demonstrate that our supposedly transcendental and metaphysical forms or categories of thought may in

<sup>3</sup> For other examples see the reference given in Fn.1.

Philipp Wolf

fact be derived from the abstract form of commodity--in other words, from the socially synthetic function of money. Money, the epitome or schema of exchange, differentiates one thing from another, identifies and synthesizes or equates the manifold:

*"Instead of Kant's 'pure apperception' as the 'subject of transcendental synthesis,' money as the functional vehicle of social synthesis in commodity production provides the historical explanation for the 'a priori' of understanding."<sup>4</sup>*

Rather than an idealist mind, an *a priori* or transcendental signifier, money, according to Sohn-Rethel, mediates between being and consciousness. Money, in other words, constitutes the *a priori* of abstract and supposedly timeless knowledge. Thus, the oft-quoted relationship between money and God may not simply be metaphorical, but also, and more likely, metonymic. Not only do monotheism and money share some common features allowing us to talk about the one in terms of the other; money, also organizes forms of thought and society in the same way as the transcendental signifier 'god' used to organize thought. Money functions as theology functions. In fact, we no longer believe in a credo; we believe in credit.

Sohn-Rethel backs up his materialist argument by drawing our attention to the unlikely theoretical foundation of modern Galilean science and, more convincingly, to the strikingly concurrent emergence, in Greece between 680 and 600 B.C., of abstract and metaphysical thought on the one hand and coined and current money on the other. As the second historical point seems much more pertinent to our subject literature, let me put it aside for the meantime. I shall revert to it at the end of my synoptic presentation of Sohn-Rethel's systematic argumentation. Around 1600, Sohn-Rethel claims, the Greek and medieval conception of a closed and qualitatively distinguished cosmos was replaced by the idea of an open and unlimited universe. The unity of the latter was now to be guaranteed by the identity of its fundamental laws. Galileo was the first, according to Sohn-Rethel's authorities Newton and Alexandre Koiré, to regard the law of inertial

4 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Das Geld, die bare Münze des Apriori* (Berlin, 1990), 22.

*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

motion as the most important of these laws: "Il affirme qu'un corps abandonné à lui-même reste dans son état de repos ou de mouvement aussi longtemps que cet état n'est pas soumis à l'action d'une force extérieure quelconque."<sup>5</sup> The problem here, however, is that no one has ever been able to observe such motion; there is no correlation in the world of perception. In order to appear evident and logical, the new scientific episteme thus had to lay down a number of premises, the first of which is "la possibilité d'isoler un corps donné de tout son entourage physique," second, "la conception de l'espace qui l'identifie avec l'espace homogène infini de la géométrie euclidienne" and third, "une conception du mouvement et du repos qui les considère comme des *états* et les place sur le même niveau ontologique de l'être."(180)

In contrast to this, however, Aristotelian and, indeed, common knowledge tells us that movement may be considered only in relations to objects, that any object in motion is subject to change and that it is, moreover, dependent on agents. But if this seems obvious enough, why could an impossible construct like the Galilean inertial law nevertheless come to be accepted almost universally?

Sohn-Rethel puts it down to the split between manual work and head work and the universal establishment of monetary exchange value at the beginning of what has been described as the age of 'Possessive Individualism,' which is also the age of Ben Jonson, John Donne and Samuel Butler. The Galilean scientist, to be sure, withdraws his hands from the ongoing experiment, confining himself, in Kantian terms, to the 'spontaneity of understanding' and the 'receptivity of his senses.' As the concept of inertial law can be drawn neither from nature nor--because of its spatio-temporality--from pure thought, it can spring only from an abstraction which again can be attributed neither to the object nor to the subject of natural knowledge. Consequently, the only way of substantiating such forms of thought is to put them down to that purely *social* or *intersubjective* abstraction, which marks the determinateness and constancy of form of every single act of exchange (Sohn-Rethel 28). Only the social and, in fact, physical act of exchange, in contrast to the private act of use, implies physical constancy.

5 Alexandre Koyre, *Etudes d'Histoire de la Pensée Scientifique* (Paris, 1966), 178. Further references are given in the text.

Accordingly, Sohn-Rethel recognizes in the masked reality-abstraction ("Realabstraktion")<sup>6</sup> of commodities, which is shaped by money, not only the historical model for that conceptual abstraction called "being", but also a paradigm for modern science. For any description of the schema of abstract monetary motion corresponds precisely to Galileo's description of inertial motion. "In a narrower sense" it defines, according to Sohn-Rethel, "the course of the transfer of property" in terms of an abstract (uniform) movement of abstract substances through both abstract (homogeneous, continuous and empty) space and abstract time. Thereby they undergo no material changes, admitting only quantitative differentiation.

Sohn-Rethel's theory becomes more plausible when he proceeds from historical analogies to the systematic analysis of the form of exchange value. This must have--and this is the crucial point--a non-empirical basis. It is only in a temporal difference from immediate, spatio-temporal and contingent utility acts, and in disregard of the mutable and private individual, that the physical movement of exchange may occur. Commodities must not change while they are transferred, sold and bought. Notwithstanding the abstraction of the movement, every participant really and truly relates to the act of exchange. In addition, of course, to the non-empirical and physical transaction, the social principle of reciprocity and the ensuing postulate of equivalence must be taken into account.

Yet it should first be stressed that, in Sohn-Rethel's theory, abstraction does not come from consciousness in the first instance. Abstraction originates from the real acts of acting persons who cannot avoid submitting to the necessity of the temporal separation of exchanging and of what might have been or will be a sensuous or even sensual object of use (cf. 29). Initially, it is the real (socially intersubjective) event that allows for a distanced and abstracted comparison (or equivalence, identification, quantification, categorization and so forth) of the manifold, which, metaphysically speaking, comes down to or, better, amounts to the "unity of being." In other words: only the exchange act (and not Kant's famous "I think" accompanying all

6 "Realabstraktion" can mean both a real abstraction (or an abstraction *in* the real) and an abstraction *from* the real.



*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

one's experience) can impart a non-sensuous abstract form of value on commodities which seems objective, conceptually identifiable, general and universal. Whatever producers and consumers may be interested in, be it the sensuous quality of the commodity, its use value or the value magnitude of the corresponding labour time, they are at the same time always already subjected to a non-empirical and, as it were, transcendental (as well as social) identity of form, which is represented by a third factor, the schema of money. Once a product has entered the sphere of exchange, it is bound to be dealt with in terms undefinable and unjustifiable in content. Equivalences can be fixed only under the condition that, for the sake of intersubjective and quantitative evaluation, all interior quality is extinguished (30). Correspondingly, money functions as the uniform, quantifiable and quantifying norm of exchange: In itself it is devoid of all content and independent of the commodity itself.

Even though exchanging or transacting persons carry out highly complex--irrational as well as rational--operations, their consciousness remains private and, albeit vaguely, filled with those images, fantasies or sensuously suspicious realities from which their social transaction abstracts. We may certainly reflect on and analyze our categories of understanding. And we may turn our attention to the synthetic character of the unity (or quantity), limitation (or quality), relation, the actuality or non-actuality of what we exchange. Yet in the course of this we are unaware of the conditions of the possibility of understanding and exchange. We just do it, taking any synthetic product at face value. This act, nevertheless, becomes our "second nature": "spatio-temporal, socially synthetic reality *and* the ideal of cognitive faculty through abstract concepts" (32), cash, pure money and the a priori of the fundamental subject. Just as everybody has a command of abstract money without any necessity to reflect on it abstractly, everybody uses his or her mind without being conscious of its supposedly ideal manifestation--which cannot but originate from the real.

Thus, Sohn-Rethel solves one of the most persistent and nagging philosophical problems: how does general experience and conceptual thought coincide with and relate to the particular objects of experience? No doubt, "thoughts without content are empty." But how does the

material world contribute to the way we order, connect and classify our experience? Instead of putting up with the dubious dichotomy between noumenon and phainomenon, should we not accept the possibility that the phenomenological content of the real and objective world may just as well provide us with the conditions of the possibility of *its* experience?

Sohn-Rethel's answer is as simple as it is stunning: Conceptual thought - undoubtedly non-empirical (and non-sensuous) - springs from the praxis (!) of a monetary social system in which, as a matter of course, it has been used perpetually and which, as we have seen, is non-empirical and indifferent to the sensuous as well. Abstractions of thought and the abstractions of commodity form have always been firmly interlocked. For through the inevitable interlinking of the factual abstraction (of the real) and thought abstraction in the course of exchange, homo oeconomicus is not only bound to equate in principle and formally, he or she also categorizes, as we have already pointed out, according to the (Kantian) concepts of understanding, i.e., quantity, quality, relation and modality. His praxis has proved, after all, that he is familiar with these categories. He knows that his commodity forms a unity, which is entirely different from the commodity to be exchanged, that property is limited in principle and that exchange is therefore necessary, that it is worthwhile distinguishing between substance and accident and that 100 real Euros make a difference to 100 possible Euros. These categories have been, as it were, pragmatically habitualized through the intersubjective exchange of different and intuitively unrelated goods.

But let me try to put the question of conceptual transformation more clearly. The commodity abstraction or 'Realabstraktion' of money emerges, as I have said, from an exclusively intersubjective relationship between two propertied or monied persons. How, then, can a social relation (between two subjects) bring about the subject-object relation of the conceptual function? The answer might be as follows: the initial relationship or social intercourse between two subjects entails an eclipsing of or abstraction from nature and their primary relationship with the objects of nature. So far, all that takes place is a form of socialization, separately from their metabolism with nature (cf. 38). Yet,

*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

if they initiate and enter into an exchanging relation, they are compelled to withdraw their attention from each other. A second abstraction thus takes place. The single consciousness is now absorbed by the abstract and formal character of the objectified entity 'money.' The social sphere or interhuman origin of the abstraction vanishes in its turn. Hence, the universal and formal subject-object relationship towards nature or the outside world is established. Nature, in other words, returns as the conceptual schema of money.

Money is indeed pivotal to the transformational process. It is only in the face of money that the intersubjectivity of the exchange relation, just like the conceptual subject-object-relation, can take on a tangible form. Money is prior to objects or events which are to be related to each other. Through its non-sensuous form it makes appear and establishes a quantitative and qualitative connection and virtual identity between particular things. It is therefore money which makes continuous and uniform experience possible. The material money is made of--the alloyage--does not matter. Since early modern times at the latest, it has been of no consequence. What matters is the supertemporal unchangeability or constancy of money; it must not be subjected to natural mutability (vide the national bank). In the form of credit, the very substratum for a capitalist society, it relates past and present to future. My past work as well as my future retirement are, so to speak, lifted up and preserved in a bank account. Consequently money as "money" is not really perceptible, it functions as a mere transempirical notion (which is not to say that money does not represent labor or the income of a nation or that the currency value of money may not be fixed by national and supranational institutions). Yet at the same time it possesses, as everybody knows, a material and spatio-temporal identity: a Euro is or will be a Euro, is or will be a Euro.... It is objective, it circulates in many different ways and places; yet, again, it is without empirical correlative or representative. The equivalent commodity which I may obtain in exchange--very much like a signifier or an entry in a dictionary--may only be realized through the use value of another commodity or another signifier--*ad infinitum*. It would appear, then, that the principle of exchange value--for its synthetic relationality, timeless universality and non-empirical formal character

on the one hand and its, albeit accidental, sensuous appearance on the other--could well become the paradigmatic reference of transcendental epistemology--if it wasn't for its baseness and meanness.

While Kant naturally had to leave the question of the genesis of categorical thought undecided, Sohn-Rethel manages to locate it on the basis of the social. Kant had to admit an ominous entity, the "thing-in-itself," which in Schopenhauer and the early Nietzsche gave rise to plenty of metaphysical and ideological speculations. In Sohn-Rethel, there is no ominous "Ding an sich." Therefore, Sohn-Rethel's argument is much better suited to dispel the ontology of those figures of thought which have come all the way down from Parmenides and which have been continuously applied to literature ever since the Renaissance. These are the One and the "Unity of Being" as opposed to the "Manifold" and, furthermore, "Substance" in contrast to the accidental.

The "One" or "Unity" corresponds to the Parmenidean "Being": that is to say, the reality of all things is not present in their sensuous appearance. What may be predicated only of the non-sensuous "One" is its totality which fills space and time, its immutability, indivisibility and immovability. It is subjected neither to genesis nor to decline in this world (35). This idea, Sohn-Rethel claims, presents nothing but the one-sided description of the substratum of a coin. These structural similarities do not, however, boil down, as one might suspect, to an oversimplified analogy between money and abstract thought. None of the founders of classical philosophy actually accounts for the constitutional process of his abstractions, after all. Parmenides, for example, does not deduce his alternative to "Becoming" and the "Manifold" by means of an *analogia entis* (a logical ascendancy). Instead, he receives his alternative explicitly from "above" (36). Yet his notion nevertheless forms the hinge for all other identifying and differentiating procedures of thought, including Hegel's dialectics. In fact, Parmenides is much more likely to have gained his idea from the experience of the non-empirical and formal character of those coins which started to circulate in his age, when, in a society of slave and surplus production, the separation of manual from mental work necessitated an artificial exchange equivalent.

*The A Priori of Money: Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Literature*

Much the same is true for the related concept of "Substance," which could be a formal synonym for money and which has become its synonym in reality. "Substance" (or "essence" in the platonic version) is imperceptible, too. In Kant it functions as an a priori category, supertemporal and persistent. Ontologically, it exists independently and is yet the subject of all predications or accidents, endowing with a substantial reality what is perceived only in an arbitrary, changing or qualitative way. The latter inheres in something else, it is due to the reason of the underlying essence. Accordingly, the use value of a commodity is accidental, sensuous, material and of varying quality. Correspondingly, money confers a persistent and independent form upon commodities. The exchange value, Donne's platonic form, the idea or ousia of money, would then be substantial. The abstraction itself does not appear, although it provides the formal, non-sensuous and non-empirical condition of the possibility for the appearance of commodities in a market society built on abstract labour.

Especially in Hegel, Coleridge and Yeats, the poetic imagination in its symbolic and metaphoric mode was assumed to reconcile meaning (or sense) and being, beings and being, the manifold of sensuous intuition and the uniform of conceptual understanding. The symbolic mode, as it seems both sensuous and abstract, was supposed to have the albeit temporary capacity of transforming difference, thereby establishing the homogeneous unity of experience. In Sidney, Samuel Butler, Eliot or a modern critic like Murray Krieger, to name but a few, the substantial character of the literary signifier has been conjured up repeatedly. For Sidney, the "Idea is manifest" and it works "substantially."<sup>7</sup> Three hundred years later, but still in the same vein, T.S. Eliot propagates "a rhetoric of substance...which is right because it issues from what it has to express."<sup>8</sup> Such a rhetoric of substance aims at effacing the materiality of language in order to reveal the real, homogeneous and self-sustained presence of an, albeit opaque, signified. Under the accidents of visible signs, beyond time and place, we are, without doubts, of some detachable and abiding substance. The

<sup>7</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. G. Shepherd (London, 1965), 101.

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York, 1964), 26.

*Philipp Wolf*

ideological purpose of this kind of opacification is to institute a transcendental otherworldliness into which the material signifier as a means of communicative and useful understanding is raised, absorbed and neutralized. Only the initiated will know.

I need not pursue this any further. These hypostases have been thoroughly deconstructed by critics like Paul de Man and Terry Eagleton, among many others. What remains is to point out that the literary ideology of unity and substance may well have, apart from language itself, a profane and, indeed, material basis in social exchange and its sensuous/non-sensuous signifier money. Sohn-Rethel, to sum up, draws his conclusions exclusively from the material world of appearances. By concentrating on the abstractions implied in social exchange and embodied in money, he unmasks those postulates as ideological which, in epistemological and critical discourse, have served the erasure of difference. By pointing out the epistemological function of money, he furthermore reveals the instrumental subordination of materiality to conceptual understanding as well as the violent identification or "Aufhebung" of the heterogeneous--not the least by concepts like 'unity of being' or substance. Ultimately, then, the obscurity of these concepts could easily be dissolved. They do not originate from some otherworldly, inner or metaphysically transmundane sphere. They naturally emerge in social discourse.

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