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# Plundering EGYPT

A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy

G. P. WAGENFUHR

Christian engagement with economics tends to baptize preexisting sociopolitical perspectives, thereby assuming a predetermined metaphysical narrative. What happens when the story of the development of economics, told from an anthropological and sociological perspective, is juxtaposed with a biblical theology that focuses primarily on relationships? Wagenfuhr tests a theological method grounded in three kinds of relationships: Creator-creature, estrangement, and Reconciler-reconciled, by comparing these with a fourth relationship: the economic. He argues that economic relationships, and the worlds they create throughout history, are the fruit of relationships estranged from God. Much theology has committed itself to a metaphysic rooted in the reality of economics and has told a metaphysical story that tends to legitimize current sociopolitical realities. Wagenfuhr argues that reconciliation with God is entirely subversive to economic relationships. No economic relationship or system is established or justified by God; but neither does he reject them. Instead, the love of God in Christ speaks the economic language of a people, with a critical edge, leading to loving subversion of any and all economic relationships. This book argues for a robust theology that offers the post-Christendom church a renewed sense of the total scale of God's mission of reconciliation.

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PLUNDERING EGYPT  
A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy

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*For Ainhoa*  
Ξένοι και παρεπίδημοί ἐσμεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

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## Preface

This book came out of my reflections on the place of money in the church in light of the work I did for my PhD on revelation as desacralization. In so few places in the church is the contrast of Scripture and contemporary belief and practice more evident than in economics. There is no shortage of Christian financial pundits who have supposedly biblical principles for economic thriving. This is amazing when one considers that the writings referenced by these pundits were written in entirely different social and economic situations to our own. There is a profound ignorance of the history of money, evident even in many popular translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, which translate “silver” or *kesef* with “money,” so inviting the reader to import modern economic theory into an ancient society that had never seen a coin, let alone a financial institution. Supposedly God is there as an economist, like Adam Smith’s invisible hand of providence, ensuring that the natural economic laws he established at the creation continue as intended. God is seen as the source of money such that Christians can be stewards of God’s resources. And it would be somewhat understandable if popular Christianity had made a few minor mistakes in the way it thinks about money, erring a little too often on God supporting their chosen careers and blessing their investments. Most all peoples have bartered with the gods. But the problem is just as prevalent, perhaps more so, in professional theology. And this is seriously concerning for the future of academic theology, not to mention a post-Christendom church.

Only recently has a transactional atonement come under scrutiny, but for the wrong reasons. Postcolonial interpretation has helped confirm a contemporary hatred of violence and hierarchy. But postcolonial interpretation, child of Marxism, is itself economic and based in our own modern postmonetary economic system. So attempts to make the atonement non-transactional are still motivated by, and use the logic of, economics. Instead

of a hierarchical atonement, an egalitarian atonement is now emphasized. It often goes unspoken that hierarchy vs. equality, that long-standing social debate going back to ancient Greece, is itself a product of economic thinking and relationships.

So it is not surprising that many Christian attempts at economic ethics work from principles divorced from a robust biblical theology, and so end up basically affirming a version of the contemporary liberal economic agenda. Socialism, communism, and capitalism are all narratives that depend upon a certain perspective of human ontology, what human thriving means, and how it can be achieved. These narratives all have roots in civilizations deeply influenced by some more or less rudimentary reflection on the Bible. As we will see, the idea that humans are naturally self-interested is a secularization of Augustine's vision of original sin, invented in the Renaissance, that removes any notion of original sin from the narrative. Self-interest is supposedly neutral and natural. It is not evil, but is often misdirected. Such a perspective, necessary as it is to economics, creates a Pelagian theology. If what is wrong or dangerous about humans can be harnessed by right and just government, the commonwealth can be ensured and humans can thrive. We can fix what is wrong with our societies if only we discover the right system or theory of how to deal with this ontologically real thing called "The Economy." After reflecting on the actual history of money as given by archeologists and anthropologists, and not the invented stories of mainstream economics, what if we find that the Bible narrates an alternative story to that given by all possible economic theories? What if we find that this story suggests that economics is a human invention in response to our rejection of God and is not an essential part of our nature? What if we find that Jesus is being deadly serious and profoundly intellectual when he says that God and money are entirely separate and contradictory masters? How then can God be in support of our economy? How then will we create an ethic of money that does not call for a simple rejection?

By taking the biblical revelation seriously, which means not treating it as a collection of timeless ethical principles, we must go through the hard work of reading in context, understanding the sweep of the whole story. We can then form a theology from which we can derive ethical applications. If we short circuit this process, Christian ethics will always and everywhere be but a feeble echo, heard long after the original call to action given by those who take a more active hand in forming the world we inhabit. Christian ethics will continue to eviscerate the church by arriving too late with nothing new to say, save for adding some proof texts to what conservatives or progressives have already long believed without reference to the Bible.

I remain resolute that the gospel of Jesus Christ has unbounded power in all possible contexts, not because it affirms or condemns this or that practice of this or that people, but because it subverts all possible worlds and values that people try to create. This book is a call to Christian ethical action. It can find no support outside of the church, because it does not pursue commonwealth, but reconciliation. Reconciliation, as we shall see, subverts any and all past, current, and future theories of economic relations.

I would like to thank all those to whom I am not indebted, but who graciously supported me in this project, expecting no compensation: my wife Ainhoa, my grandparents Brigadier General Philip Caine USAF (Retired), PhD, and Doris Caine, who proofread this work, my parents Kolin and Barb Wagenfuhr for their continual support, and the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ who took the first step in reconciliation and has bid me do likewise. This is my attempt at telling the gospel of reconciliation with economic implications.

I thank Robin Parry of Wipf & Stock for taking on this project.

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## Introduction

In Egypt the Hebrews were an economically oppressed people. They lived under hierarchical, racial, and classist violence. As slaves they existed in an economic relationship with the Egyptians, always seeing them through the lens of their separate and subservient lives. A man named Moses, spared from a genocidal-infanticidal campaign of the Pharaoh by the machinations of his mother and the grace of the Pharaoh's daughter, comes to despise Egyptian oppression. Not having been a slave himself but of the aristocracy, he did not live with the fear of repercussions for disobedience or spreading subversion. One day Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and interceded to the point of killing the Egyptian. His indignation at a system turned to an uncontrollable rage focused on a representative of that system. And so Moses tried the first path of resistance—violence. Moses retreated into a forty-year exile living with remote Midians and building a life there. Called back to his former family and tribe, Moses and his brother Aaron begin the second attempt at resistance and change—nonviolent protest. As the protest is not heard, Moses performs signs and wonders. He does not incite the people to violence or to rise up. These signs and wonders are able to be performed by the Pharaoh's court magicians as well, at least for a time, invoking a cosmic battle to show the supremacy of the Hebrews' God. Which cosmology will prove superior? This is an outright battle, so although there is no direct violence, the battle is located on the spiritual plane with material results.

The Pharaoh's gods prove inferior, and yet he will not relent. Property loss to the extremely wealthy is relatively less catastrophic and, as usual, the owner is able to outlast the slave or striking employees due to accumulated wealth and alternative sources of labor and supply. It is only when the Pharaoh experiences personal and irreplaceable relational loss, with the death of his firstborn son and heir, that he relents to liberate his slaves. This is only

temporary, however. Filled with vengeful wrath he will pursue the Hebrews even to his own destruction. The loss of the source of his wealth is a significant blow to his identity in the eyes of his own people. He is an image of the gods, representing the gods on earth. The cosmic battle he has lost could be the loss of the entire Egyptian cosmos.

As the Hebrews depart Egypt, the Egyptian women give their gold and silver jewelry and clothing to the Hebrew women. The Hebrews do not go away empty from their time in slavery, ending up with worldly riches. But these riches are entirely useless for a long wilderness journey—gold and silver having no use value. Eventually they come to Mount Sinai where, feeling abandoned by Moses and his God, the Hebrews turn to Aaron and create a golden calf out of the plunder of Egypt. Aaron stood up and proclaimed “Behold these are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> And so the Hebrews were led astray by their own plunder, turning their gold into their gods and believing that they delivered them from Egypt.

This is a hopeful and tragic story all at once. The oppressed Hebrews are released from captivity but so earnestly desire to be mastered that they must create their own gods out of their plundered wealth. But it is not an unusual story. Money transforms those who use it into its own image. The Hebrews so valued their gold that they turned it into a god, a projection of what they thought had saved them. Because value is created in the self and in the community, and this was a wilderness community ostensibly not engaged in any trade or production of its own, the gold was entirely useless. Nevertheless, it was given great value as a representation of divinity. The Hebrews create their own gods and worship them, deceiving only themselves in the process.

Though they did not escape Egypt by violent revolution, nor did they stay in support of the Pharaoh, the Hebrews did not carry through in the plundering of Egypt. For they took away something far more important than treasure, they took away a system of economic value so that the plunder of Egypt ended up corrupting them. This book tells a larger story, and one that does not end so disastrously. The Christian is called to plunder Egypt, not by taking its valuables or inheriting its values, neither affirming Egyptian economics nor rising up in revolutionary violence. The Christian ethic of economics is a third way, obeying the letter of Egyptian law while subverting its economic structures by the love that refuses to acknowledge material wealth as determinative.

1. Exod 32:4.

## Outline

This book tells two stories: the history of human economic relationships, and the story of reconciliation in the Bible. By juxtaposing these stories, we find that the two are profoundly different from the very beginning. The first chapter sets forth that this book is one example of a particular kind of theological method, a method that prioritizes relationships over metaphysics. The second chapter then recounts an anthropological history of economics, dividing human economic history into three kinds of society: premonetary, monetary, and postmonetary. Metaphysics itself is seen to have its genesis in the new invention of coinage in the monetary society. This introduces a difficulty for economic ethics. The Hebrew Scriptures were broadly written in a premonetary society, and the New Testament was written in the monetary society, but we now live in a postmonetary age that has significant differences to these former eras, which makes direct application of economic principles from Scripture problematic.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters examine the three kinds of relationships that people have with God in the narrative of Scripture: the Creator–creature relationship, estrangement, and the Reconciler–reconciled relationship. Each of these is examined in some detail for their relation to economic concerns. We learn that God is not an economist in his relationships as the Creator, but engages in these relationships for the purpose of subverting them, leading to reconciliation. Estrangement creates new ways of thinking in the absence of a relationship with God. The economic relationship is one major outcome of this estrangement by its transformation of human epistemology.

The sixth and seventh chapters address the application of this theology to a few ethical concerns. Throughout we find that God’s mission in reconciliation is a subversive one that is neither a divine “Yes” or a divine “No.” It is a divine engagement in human systems for the purpose of liberating individual people from these systems and stories for reconciliation with himself, creating reconciliation with others and his creation, forming a community of the reconciled whose mission it is to continue this work of subverting the stories and values of human *cosmoi*.

## Special Terms

Along the way the reader will encounter a few terms of my own that require a little explanation. The first is *cosmos* and its plural, *cosmoi*. These terms refer to humanly created worlds, acknowledging that, in estrangement from

God there is no one world or creation. Indeed, the creation is marred beyond recognition as such by worlds that people groups create. People do not create one world, our world is continually shifting. We are integrated into a world from birth until death, but it is a world of our construction and a world we are continually constructing. So in order to avoid confusion I speak of a single *cosmos* to mean a humanly created world, often in story form, and its plural *cosmoi* to refer to the many worlds that have been created throughout space and time.

A second term or concept that is important to identify is the economic relationship. “The Economy” is a reification no different than the golden calf of the Hebrews. It is a major construct of the postmonetary age. Instead I refer to economy as a kind of relationship in which personal relationships are mediated through material wealth. In this way we can identify similarities throughout human history, enlightened by the vast differences of human economic expression.

A third term to note is estrangement. In keeping with the prioritization of relationship over metaphysics throughout this work, I do not refer to the event of original sin as *the Fall*, but as *the Estrangement*. For I will argue that humans do not undergo metaphysical transformation but break a relationship with continuing repercussions that are amplified in our own time.

Though this is mainly an academic work I conclude with a call to action. Indeed, this entire book is a call to action and is itself an example of the action of subversion. As Christians, the false dichotomies presented by our cosmos must be rejected, for the cosmos itself must be re-narrated. Thus, the terms of our problems must be challenged and restated. Christ has nothing to offer a preordained economic system, for Jesus came to love individuals, not to offer his own cosmology. And so we see that Christ is the second and better Moses. Moses’s people were led astray by plundering Egypt, exchanging reconciliation with God for slavery to idolatry and the worship of economics. The people of Jesus—not necessarily the actual history of Christianity, but those who follow the living Christ—devalue economic relationships by loving subversion.

The problem of economics for the Christian is eminently theological. A proper theological ethic that addresses economics must engage in a cosmological subversion, for economics lies at the heart of our present relationships with each other, the gods, and the nonhuman world in our very conception of each of these things. If we desire to engage with economics as Christians we must start again at the beginning of a story. In this book we trace two stories, a history of economics and the biblical history with an eye towards economics. We will see that the power of the gospel is not in direct opposition nor in affirmation but in subversion.

# 1

## The Theology of Relationship

What is presented here is a brief outline of the theological method that lies at the heart of this book. It is a newer method that is as original as any other idea can be. This means that it has influences, some that are readily apparent and others that are not. The clearest influence is Jacques Ellul (1912–94), the French theologian, sociologist, and professor of the history of institutions in Bordeaux. Though I see Ellul's most important theological contribution as being a pioneer in a theology that highlights relationship while downplaying the importance of metaphysical questions, what follows here is not a summary of his work or ideas, but a development of some of the hints and minor points that Ellul makes throughout his work. Ellul did not develop a theological method based on this notion. His own method involved a similar juxtaposition of sociology and theology, but without significant theological development. Intimations in his work have helped lead me to this theology of relationship.

### THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS

Who are we? What does it mean to be human? What is it that unites things and gives them meaning? Such questions are what metaphysics attempts to answer. Metaphysics answers these questions by exchanging or sacrificing relationships for a universal definition. Relationships must be exchanged, or traded, in order to have universality. For it is only by abstracting particulars that one can have universals, and yet the particulars are what make

relationships meaningful. Pornography is an excellent example of this troubling exchange. By depersonalizing sex and turning what is an expression of a relationship into an expression of individual desire, one pursues technique and method—categories of behavior that elicit feelings of power and pleasure. The concentration on method, on categories of activity, and on types of objects, means that the woman is only important as an aesthetically pleasing machine. She, like a statue, is important only for what she represents, and what she represents is partially the responsibility of the man himself. One cannot express love mediated through universal categories. In doing so it is turned into self-love, a projection of the self. Pornography is often said to objectify women, and this is very true, but it also makes the man become a subject. The lone viewer of pornography enters into a solipsistic world in which women exist for his pleasure in creating his identity. But such women do not really exist at all, except in his eye and mind, for the image replaces the person. The addiction of pornography is like the addiction of metaphysics and the addiction of money. The more one desires the universal and finds it, the more unreal individuals and relationships become. Individuals have been exchanged for universality, love of another exchanged for love of the self. This is an economic relationship, as are all kinds of metaphysics, for they operate on the law of scarcity, on equilibrium, and so demand sacrifice to maintain balance. A relationship with one person cannot last long if it is done for the sake of individual pleasure because one is seeking an experience of universality and by definition experience of one particular cannot lead one to universality.

This is the problem of metaphysics: it is economic. When we return to more fundamental questions, like “Who are we?” or “What is being?” the lessons learned from pornography carry over quite well. In order to define a universal, we must take away particularity. Consider human ontology or human nature, what-it-means-to-be-human. We must begin with concrete relations that we have with other people and other animals, then abstract the concrete to form a universal. In doing this we exclude what is not like us, ever refining the process and excluding more subtly. Animals are excluded by means of rationality, for example. This eventually proceeds to excluding mentally disabled humans from true humanity. Rationality values itself and creates a solipsistic world in its own image. Rationality loves itself. Aristotle’s God thinks itself. In the end, human metaphysical rationality might be nothing more than an exploration and love of itself.

Creating universals in this way tends toward a certain political philosophy. It is not inconsequential that Aristotle was an enemy of the demagogues and the tutor of Alexander the Great. Nor is it inconsequential that virtue was his ethic, as this is an ethic based in attempting to achieve an

ideal notion of what-it-means-to-be-human through the achievement of *eudaimonia*.<sup>1</sup> Virtue and self-discipline tend inevitably toward mysticism because they are aimed at an achievement of an ideal that is difficult, if not impossible, to fully instantiate. By creating an abstract ideal Aristotle renders humanity something that must be obtained. We might say Aristotle's metaphysic is virtuous, godlike, aspirational, or aggressive in that it strives after an exclusive human ontology. Another classic example of this would be Nietzsche for whom the word "human" carries a dirty connotation when he describes the herd as "all too human."

An opposing definition of human might be called populist, democratic, inclusive, and passive, thus endowing all with equivalent rights, extendable in many cases to nonhuman animals. This again is based in an abstracted ideal rather than in a concrete particular set of relationships. The ethic of this sort of metaphysic is observable in liberal society, an ethic of entitlement and affirmation.

In either case we have extreme visions of what-it-means-to-be-human that necessarily produce an ethic that judges people in terms of their relation to an ideal; though this is an ideal that has been created by a person observing and analyzing actual relationships in a deeply historical context, building on the received metaphysics of generations. In this way metaphysical speculation begins to look less like speculation and more like Feuerbachian projection. The real problem of projection is not with God. The concept of the One, or God is simply the culmination of metaphysical inquiry. The real problem is metaphysics. The mechanism of projection is no less real for metaphysical universals than it is for God.

The building blocks of "reality" are people and things. But these two must inevitably merge into one by seeking unity or oneness. People and things become contained in nouns, in subjects and objects. They are "real" insofar as the description corresponds to "reality." Metaphysics is problematic because it seeks after the real, presupposing the real to be found in or through nouns, thus finding an ultimate reality contained in an ideal person-thing, which usually happens to be called "God." This ideal person-thing has all the features of both things and people, serving as the source of both. In this merging of people and things, any possibility of relationship is either excluded or is made essential, so that some theologians speak of a relational ontology. But what if our conception of metaphysics, and thus of God, is fundamentally problematic? What if we prioritized relationships over nouns? What if people and things were understood not only as forming

1. A Greek term with a somewhat debated definition. A literal etymological definition is "good spiritedness" but it is usually taken to mean "thriving." Traditional translations of Aristotle say "happiness."

relationships, but also as being formed by relationships? This would, of course, militate against a seeking for the One. It would also prevent turning a living God into a set of propositions or ideals. And it would force us to abandon any concept of essential similarity to God. This would force us to reassess how metaphysics leads to economic relations, how metaphysics as a subject was partly created by money, and how metaphysical thinking inevitably results in a divine legitimization of human economies. The problem with metaphysics, as we shall see with economics, is not that it is inherently violent or hierarchical, for egalitarianism depends equally on metaphysics and economics, but that it is a symptom of loneliness and estrangement from the Creator, his creation, and from his creatures.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

The problem of metaphysics leads us to particular epistemological and ethical problems. Virtue ethics, and a maximal or aggressive notion of human ontology, go hand in hand, just as a populist or minimal human ontology goes hand in hand with a rights-based ethic, as we've said. Ethics depends on ontology for the source of knowledge of the good. We must distinguish between ethical method and values. Ethical methods, for example, agent-based virtue ethics, act-based deontology, or consequence-based utilitarianism, do not provide value data. That is, we might know *how* to attain the good, but we do not yet know *what* the good is. This good has often derived from the situation in which the ethicist has lived, whether supporting it or providing the terms for rebellion against it.

If we try to disentangle ethics from metaphysics we inevitably destroy its universal appeal and thus its power. Ethics must fit behavior into categories. Kant's categorical imperative is the most obvious example. The purpose of ethical reasoning is to establish and encourage right action, action in accord with rule, principle, and nature. But ethics without ontology is highly relativist, that is, based in particular relationships rather than in universal ideals or rules, and so somewhat impotent.

Epistemology is also problematic if we prioritize relationships, because we end up focusing, not on how a universal "we" know, but on how individuals know. Indeed, relationship knowledge is quite different from factual or ontological knowledge. Relationship knowledge comes in narrative form, not propositional form. Romantic languages preserve this distinction much better than English. The difference in French of *savoir* and *connaître* attests to this. In English we say "I know that" to refer to factual or ontological knowledge, and we say "I know so and so" to refer to relational knowledge.

As we will see in the biblical narrative, relationship determines epistemology and epistemology becomes problematized when people become estranged from God. Metaphysics can only explain epistemological problems in terms of the limitations or corruption of rational human nature. Metaphysical theology thus presupposes that human rationality is not limited or so thoroughly corrupt that it cannot grasp the divine or analogies of the divine. I will show through the biblical narrative that it is systematically impossible to know the divine if there is relational estrangement, because God reveals himself only in relationship and not in ontological similarity.

### PRIMACY OF RELATIONSHIP

As will be seen in the course of this book an anthropological history of economics and the influence of money on the development of Greek philosophy and metaphysics will help demonstrate the primacy of relationships. The character of relationships determines metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, not vice versa. The development of coinage radically transformed relations in premonetary debt-based societies, with consequent changes to their cosmos.

Theologians and philosophers must deal with relationship before considering being, and after thinking about relationships it will usually turn out that being is a superfluous concept. Heidegger talks of a “thrownness,” the experience of being always-already within the world. This is an experience of previously established relationships. But instead of trying to find what lies behind or beyond these relationships, as Sartre attempts to do, perhaps accepting the fact of relatedness and examining it would prove far more fruitful than an investigation of what can never be known: being in itself. Relationships are not part of, or subordinate to, what-it-means-to-be-human, simply because this is unspecific. Humans are not uniquely social animals. Instead of describing what-it-means-to-be-human, relationships preexist questions of being. And it seems to me that it is not possible to transcend actual relationships by positing a notion of “relationality” that lies at the heart of human ontology, or ontology in general.

Granted, we can form a relational ontology, but such concepts are at best meaningless, and at worst highly self-deceptive. For what can be gained by notions of a social ontology, except an ethical imperative to be “more fully human” by relating to each other in this or that way? Indeed, most ethical arguments tend toward this end. The argument runs something like this: (1)  $x$  is what it means to be human; (2) it is an ethical imperative that humans be humans; (3) therefore, we as humans ought to do/be  $x$ . In this

argument the second proposition is generally unstated. This second proposition, a tautological ethical imperative, enables ethicists to find or project an ethical agenda onto human nature without observing the absurdity. If I am human then I ought to act like a human, which requires me to look at a species identity, choose the aspects that are ideal and attempt to form my life around those ideal aspects of the species identity. Human flourishing, it is said, is most well achieved when we live up to our species identity. But it is just as easy to find another aspect of human nature to emphasize, perhaps conquering power, perhaps the ability to make enemies and overcome them through strength of mind, will, and body. Those who are weak are thus less than human, and are rightfully killed as abominations to the shrine of human nature. It ought to be clear that the form of ethical argument based in human ontology is absurd.

But countless philosophers and thinkers of various fields have followed in this tradition. Adam Smith is exemplary. He taught that humans are uniquely economic animals. After all, “Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog.”<sup>2</sup> Humans are, by nature, creatures prone to “truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”<sup>3</sup> And so it is a moral imperative that the government not get in the way of human flourishing by the enabling of free markets. Mercantilism was inimical to proper human thriving, because it went against the grain of human nature. Smith’s arguments are largely disproven by anthropological investigation of human societies that did not really engage in barter relationships, as we shall see. Nevertheless, Smith attempts to derive an economic and ethical theory from human nature, that great *carte blanche*. Such a move ought to be regarded as rhetorical and political rather than serious ethics.

Discrediting this kind of argument is necessary to the establishment of a theology of relationship, because most who encounter such an argument will make objections based in established knowledge of human ontology. They will thus fail to see that their own nexus of relationships forms their notion of human ontology, and thus they imprint a world construct of their own upon human nature before magically deriving their preconceived idea from human nature. Possessing knowledge of human nature that is unmediated by preexisting relationships, and therefore possessing disinterested knowledge of human nature, is impossible. Not only is it impossible, it is undesirable, as we shall see.

2. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 5. Not only did Smith use this example, but Al-Ghazali (1068–1111) and Al-Tusi (1201–74) both use this exact example. See Hosseini, *Smith’s Division of Labor in Medieval Persia*, as noted in Graeber, *Debt*, 279 n84.

3. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 5.

Some will also object that our relationships are formed by our nature. And this may be true as well, but we cannot transcend our concrete and particular relationships, nor should we want to. A mystical ascent to the world of the forms or the mind of God, or to nirvana, is not possible, or even desirable. For such an ascent implies the conjunction of the self with the whole, or the great One, that eliminates any principle of individuation. As a Christian theologian, I believe one of the great strengths of the Christian narrative is that God does not expect us to become enlightened through self-negation or transcendence of individuality, but by embracing a reconciled relationship with God, and thus with others, thereby highlighting individuality-in-relationship rather than diminishing it. Indeed, what can be a better principle of individuation than the kind of relationship one has with God, the one who can know our hearts and loves us all the same?

Theologians ought to glory in this inescapability of relationality, and it is strange when one considers the endless submission of relationality to ontology in theology. No matter what source we have for divine revelation, it is still implicit in the need of revelation that there must exist some kind of relationship through which this revelation is mediated. Reason, tradition, history, nature, or Scripture all require some form of relationship to something outside of being in itself.

This book is one example of an applied theological discourse that examines the relationships between God and people throughout the narrative of Scripture, and compares those relationships to those we observe between people and nature, and between people themselves. Economy is a kind of relationship. Referring to a “kind of relationship” does not require a realist ontology of relationship. Instead what is being attempted is a discourse that submits questions of being to questions of relationship. Instead of a “relational ontology,” an attempt to fit relationships under the guise of being, this is a discourse on relationships. Every relationship is unique because it involves different characters. Nevertheless, there must be similar characteristics of the Creator-creature relationship, the estrangement between God and his creatures, and in the Reconciler-reconciled relationship because they all involve a relationship or lack thereof with God, who is constant. This sort of discussion is not an easy task with the current state of our language, or even with how our language has developed over the last few millennia in Western society. Our vocabulary and syntax is always-already ontological, even economic.<sup>4</sup> But this does not mean that we cannot perceive the limitations of our language, especially by consideration of ancient languages and

4. Kevin Hector seeks a therapeutic way out of the linguistic debt to metaphysics, holding a possibility that language is not necessarily metaphysical by a proper theology. Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics*.

culture. We can learn the walls of our linguistic expression, and even proceed somewhat beyond them, aware of the great difficulty that this presents.

Our own language has great difficulties going beyond metaphysics. English standard word order: subject–verb–object, prioritizes being because the subject is of primary importance. Furthermore, because English verbs are not inflected—the subject cannot lie within the verb as in Romance languages—the subject is propelled to even greater significance since it must be explicitly mentioned apart from the verb. Because speech requires time, the first utterance is that upon which all other words must rest. In contemporary colloquial English the addition of “so” at the beginning of a sentence softens a strong statement or question by reducing the presence of the self and thus the perceived violence of the statement. Interrogatives place the question word at the beginning, thus altering the remainder of the sentence in tone and meaning. But the standard sentence begins with the subject and so it carries priority. I don’t mean to imply that sentence syntax is determinative of the human mind and the questions we ask, only that it is one influence, and one that is not always acknowledged.

But in classical Hebrew, for example, a language that we might call pre-ontological, the word order prioritizes the verb and thus it prioritizes the action. Verbs relate because all action requires a subject and an object, even if the subject and object are the same. Verbs also locate the action in time, and thus provide, at a bare minimum, a relationship between a subject and time. Thinking does not really require space, but it does take time, and this places us in a whole complex set of relationships. The time of day at which I think of something may change what I am thinking about or how I think about it. Thinking about sleep when I have to wake up early is very different than thinking about sleep at ten in the morning after a bicycle ride. But there is a larger sense of time as well. Thinking about slavery in mid-nineteenth-century America is very different to thinking about slavery in early twenty-first-century America. The terms, conversations, and socially acceptable opinions have all changed. Verbs lead us to consider these things in a way that concentration on nouns do not. Verbs situate the subject. A properly constructed sentence requires a finite verb, that is, a verb that is limited to a specific subject and time. Not all verbs require objects, but the majority do, and this places the subject in relation to an object in time.

What all this means is that, for a native speaker of English who has no knowledge of foreign languages, or even of English syntax, the priority of the subject, and most notably “I,” makes questioning the priority of metaphysics in philosophical or theological reasoning to be absurd. After all, isn’t theology itself just thinking about God? Yes, what but goes unspoken in this definition is the relationship of the subject of the sentence to its object.

Theology is *our* and *my* thinking or account of God. It is not accidental that theology is a Greek term, given to us by a people who were enamored with metaphysics. For a *logos* is an account, a reckoning, a term derived from economic considerations. And, as we shall see, economic relationships, especially those which are aware of money, tend toward quantification, then to abstraction, and thus toward metaphysics and notions of correspondence between truth and reality. So in this sense it is not surprising that theology has been dominated by metaphysical considerations. But we can begin to repair this problem. God may be *a se*,<sup>5</sup> and if this is the case, he is unreachable, and thus theology is nothing but metaphysical speculation. Christian theology must begin, as Karl Barth does, with revelation. Because *we* are the subject of theology, the ones who are doing theology, who are writing an account of God, the object. If we forget that we are the subject of the action of theology our theologies tend inevitably toward unifying the subject and object: gazing at ourselves in a celestial mirror.

A theology that prioritizes relationships over metaphysics will inevitably give us a different perspective on economics and this book explores the implications of just such a theological method. But this is a theological method that requires quite a lot of self-study. This book is profoundly mine. I am its author, and it will naturally bear witness to my own personality. I'll not give my biography, but my own life story is important. This book, and my theology, rest profoundly within all the various relationships that I have with a number of influences. It also rests upon the lack of relationships I have had, that others may have had. For example, a lack of a strong mentors throughout my childhood, a lack of intellectual masters throughout upper education and my postgraduate work of whom I could be a disciple, has helped instill and confirm a suspicion of authority. And many of these things need to become explicit in the course of doing theology. It is essential then to combine a study of theology with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other human studies. Not because these social sciences have infallible methods or true theories. But because they lead us to the understanding of how the act of doing theology is related to the subject of such a theology—ourselves.

### REVELATION AS RELATIONSHIP

Revelation is itself a relationship. God has revealed himself to people in a time and in a place. He does not reveal some kind of absolute truth from the perspective of one who lives in the world of forms. Such a revelation could

5. Latin: "in himself" i.e., self-sufficient.

not be given in speech or writing in any case. But God does not reveal some kind of a-perspectival truth, because God himself does not occupy such a place. The God of Jesus Christ is always in relationship with his creation, though there be an infinite qualitative distinction, as Kierkegaard and Barth following him are so keen to say. This is not an ontological relationship. There is no metaphysical connection between God and his creation. But there is a chosen, personal relationship. Therefore, God has a perspective, and one that is not fully communicable because it can only be understood in the particular relationships that he has, which are nearly infinite. However, God can and has revealed stories of a few of these relationships, which comprise the majority of the Bible.

God reveals himself. But this is not a revelation of the being or essence of God, but a self-revelation in relationship to people. We cannot know God except as he has revealed his relationship to us. Our attempts to find God through metaphysical enquiry have always been met with very predictable results—various kinds of self-projection. The metaphysical method of doing theology is nothing but a language game. We look at the structure of our language, its spatiotemporal aspects, and abstract these things from it. We consider what it must mean to be a subject without an object. This is why Aristotle's God is disinterested. In order to consider what "God" means, Aristotle must abstract every kind of relationship except the one that is necessary, the first cause. Because he has abstracted every possible relationship, it is no surprise that his conclusion is that God cannot be in relationship. His conclusion is implicit in his method. This is the economy of metaphysics.

But God is in many, innumerable, indeed, nearly infinite personal relationships. What this means is that all of his self-revelation must be characterized not only by himself, but also by those to whom he is revealing himself. Thus divine revelation is necessarily contextualized. It takes on the character of the people to whom it comes. But, like all relationships, it does not leave people unchanged. Thus we have the spatiotemporal aspect of revelation. It is characterized by time and change, by the births, deaths, sins, and faithfulness of those with whom God is in relation. God is known in these relationships, not in spite of them.

### THEOLOGY AS RELATIONSHIP

Theology itself is a relationship, though this is often unacknowledged. Even for atheists, who, though they do not believe in God still define themselves by the concept, there is an implicit relationship in their doing theology. The atheist is in a kind of relationship with at least the idea of God. There are

many personal influences that go into the doctrinal belief that there is no God. And this creates a relationship, albeit a negative one. It has often been observed that atheism depends, just as all negative concepts do, upon the positive. Atheism only lives and survives by the thriving of theism. And so we can say that the atheist doing anti-theology is still in some kind of relationship with God or the idea of God.

Theology is my or our talk about God. Therefore, we need to ask not just “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” but also “Who are we in relation to God?” Theological enquiry is not a static enterprise. If there is a living God, then doing theology places us in a kind of relationship with God that changes our theology. Theology is always undergoing revision, just as any relationship cannot remain static for it to be living. And this means that our talk about God inevitably undergoes shifts as our lives change.

All of this means that the kind of relationship we have with God radically determines what form our theology will take. This is why Augustine’s idea of faith seeking understanding is so important and perceptive. A living and actively reconciled relationship with God cannot but have a major effect on one’s theological method and conclusions. Likewise, a relationship estranged from God will necessarily construct a different account of who God is. And so we can see that revelation, even the static text of Scripture, is not of itself sufficient for knowledge of God. God, through the Holy Spirit, must transform the dead text into something living and active.<sup>6</sup>

This has profound implications on how theology is done. Academic theology that attempts to bracket off this relationship necessarily begins to speak of an *idea* of God. Though there is still a kind of relationship here, and such a theology will undergo some changes based on the author’s life circumstances and new learning, it will itself only ever talk about an idea of God rather than God himself. Thus it should be no surprise to us that theology has become a subject relegated to the back corner of the humanities department, or subsumed under departments of religious studies. The idea of God cannot transcend humanity, and so this sort of theology is nothing but a kind of self-deceptive psychology masked in empowering and grandiose language of eternity. As a further consequence we should not be surprised when students of theology and religious studies “lose their faith,” because there is a category error occurring. These students believe that they are talking about God, when they are merely talking about themselves and about our contemporary culture in which the idea of God has fallen on rather hard times.

6. Heb 4:12.

These considerations become important for the task at hand of considering the economic relationship and how a Christian ethic might interact with such a relationship. Any kind of ethic that does not take this relationality of theology into consideration will end up following one or another nontheological account of economics with the idea of God there to give infallible justification to the proposed economic system. Such a theological ethic is ultimately meaningless, for it adds nothing to the considerations of the economic system. It is, however, a tool for persuasion and propaganda to influence a broadly Christian social group that is susceptible to this kind of sophistry.

The perceived downside of this relational theological and ethical method is that it can say nothing to influence those who do not have such a living and active relationship with God. But this is only a perceived downside, not an actual one, because Christians already have almost nothing to add to the general ethical debate. There is no genuinely unique Christian position that is shared by the vast majority of Christians. Instead they tend to fall in line with those whose political views they already share. And this also means that Christians can safely dispose of the idea that they are seeking a “common good” that unbelievers will accept. Such Christian pronouncements are often, unfortunately, delusions of grandeur. Pursuing this argument further here will distract us from the main task, and it will become clear as the reader reaches the conclusion of this book why it is that Christians cannot seek a positive systemic socioeconomic order, and so cannot wholeheartedly support the commonwealth.

### THE THREE RELATIONSHIPS

As I have said, every relationship is unique because it involves different characters. This is what is so powerful about the consideration of relationship instead of ontology. Rather than considering the nature of species, we consider the relationships that God has with individual people and other creatures. Each will be unique, but because all these relationships involve God in some way, they all will reveal something of God’s character.

So although it is a simplification, considering three different kinds of relationships in Scripture creates a neat timeline within which we can place ourselves, helping to produce a portrait of our world and what our hope for the future can be. God is revealed historically, much to the annoyance of all who are looking for timeless principles to live by. And it is therefore of utmost importance to place ourselves in the proper time, rather than trying

to abstract principles from time immemorial, from a now extinct kind of relationship that once existed. I am thinking primarily here of Genesis 1–2.

These three kinds of relationships are the Creator-creature relationship (chapter 3), the relationship of estrangement (chapter 4), and the Reconciler-reconciled relationship (chapter 5). The first relationship occupies only the first two chapters of the Bible. This is because, as we shall see, the notion of a creation depends upon the notion of a Creator. And in the relationship of estrangement, this knowledge is, as Paul says, suppressed in unrighteousness.<sup>7</sup> Thus creation and the Creator in many ways disappear. And when people come to reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ, they do not simply revert to the knowledge of Adam and Eve in the garden, but to a more mature knowledge that knows God as an adoptive Father, and as the Reconciler. Thus from Genesis 3 until our own day the latter two relationships have existed simultaneously. There are those who “walked with God” like Enoch (of Seth)<sup>8</sup> or Noah, and these lived within a very basic Reconciler-reconciled relationship, at least as far as we can know. Through the course of biblical history, we come to know more and more about God the Reconciler. Indeed, the very point of Scripture is to reveal God as the Reconciler throughout a long historical period and not just God as Creator or Judge, notions other mythical traditions already contained.

One foundational thesis of this book is that the kind of relationship that one has with God determines the kind of relationship that one will have with oneself, one another, with each of God’s creatures, and with God’s creation itself. In other words, what role God plays in one’s life is the primary factor in determining the shape of other relationships. A relationship of estrangement will lead to estranged relationships with all others. For example, to believe that God does not exist, or to actively rebel against him, will inevitably result in the transformation of the “creation” into depersonalized categories like “nature” or “the universe.” These concepts are rather meaningless insofar as they are used to incorporate everything, thus excluding nothing. Both Nature and the Universe are often spoken of as having agency, which is tantamount to saying that everything causes everything, which is either absurd or a tautology depending on how one interprets such a statement. But these super-universal concepts play the same role for most economic perspectives that God or the gods do in more traditional societies. That there is such a thing as the Economy depends entirely upon a depersonalized view of agency. Estrangement from God leads to the elevation of the sum of human economic relations to the status of a universal with agency.

7. Rom 1:18.

8. Gen 5:24.

For there to be a natural law of human economic relationships requires a particular anthropology, and there is no anthropology without a correlative theology. Those who deny this point evince a relationship of estrangement from God and from themselves.

The kind of relationship one has with God determines the kind of relationship that he or she has with everything else. To be reconciled to God leads to a very different perspective of creation and other people and how one is to interact with them in the economic field. An entirely unique Christian ethic will therefore follow this perspective.

### ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP AS A CASE STUDY

The three main relationships seen in Scripture that we are looking at in this book are related to a fourth, the economic relationship. Now, it is somewhat dangerous to say that there is something called an economic relationship because it may lead one to think that the human history of economic relations has not profoundly changed over time. It has, of course. And it is a rather complicated history that mainline economists tend to reduce to a highly simplistic myth of progression from barter to currency to virtual money. The rather complicated history of human economic relationships does not mean, however, that there are too few similarities to speak of a general kind of relationship.

This economic relationship is serving as a case study to prove the merit of the theological method I have very briefly outlined here. Rather than focusing on a reified thing, like the Market or the Economy, it is far more important to focus on the kind of ways people relate to each other that we can call "economic." Because we are not considering things, but relationships, it is important to ask what the economic relationship has to do with the three broad relationships we see in the biblical narrative.

Thus this book forms a genealogy of the economic relationship in the broken relationship with God. This is, of course, entirely impossible to document or consider actual history. I make no claim to establishing historical fact. The importance of this book's argument is not in its verifiability, but in its interpretative power.

## 2

### A History of Economic Relationships

Before we begin to consider how the biblical story and theology relates to economics, we need to engage with a very brief history of economic relationships. Importantly this is not a history of economics or the Economy. Instead I prioritize human relationships and look at the history of how people have related to each other and the world in economic terms. This means many standard questions are not investigated or even mentioned. This chapter produces a purposefully simplified view of the history of economic relations as premonetary, monetary, and postmonetary.

This chapter begins with a discussion of ancient Greece and the origins of money and metaphysics. Surprisingly, these two very important human creations have their birth in roughly the same time and place. Although money was invented in Lydia/Greece, India, and China at roughly the same time (600–500 BC),<sup>1</sup> it is more beneficial to concentrate on the one case that has played the much larger role in Western history. For this section I refer often to the work of Richard Seaford, a professor of classics and ancient history at Exeter, whose book *Money and the Early Greek Mind* offers a thorough investigation of the social and cultural conditions that made the development of money possible.

After this discussion of monetary society, we then go back in time to premonetary societies and discusses relationships of debt and credit. Although this is a prior situation to the invention of money, the three above mentioned societies all largely abandon coinage and return to a system of

1. Graeber, *Debt*, 212.

debt relationships around AD 600. For the discussion of premonetary society I will often refer to David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Graeber is professor of anthropology at Goldsmith's, University of London. He has written widely about theories of value.

Finally, we travel to our own time when modern money arrangements seem to be a synthesis of debt and currency and the consequent perspective of a universal humanity. Each of these perspectives reveal an implicit narrative that we might call theological. All presuppose an essential problem, a proposed solution that fits the terms in which the problem is expressed, and a way to that solution. For each there is a problem that needs solved, though the nature of this problem is different in different monetary situations. Ultimately we see that the economic relationship, though expressed in different ways in different times, is a constant among human peoples. The solution to the problem is always given in terms that ironically reinforce the problem itself, so that attempts to bridge the gap result in widening the gap.

### WHAT IS MONEY?

There are a number of qualities that something must meet to be considered money. Precious metals had long been used in exchange before coinage came about, but precious metal should not rightly be considered money as we shall see. This means that what we see in the Old Testament, for example, is a society in which silver and gold weighed in shekels were used as a measure of value. Nevertheless, precious metal should not rightly be considered money, and the ancient Israelite society, like its neighbors, was a debt-based or premonetary society. Seaford gives a good list of the qualities that make up money, that is summarized below.<sup>2</sup> Not all of them are required, but the more qualities met, the more rightly we call the thing money.

- (1) Money is first of all valued not for its use value, but for its ability to *meet social obligations*. In this there is a distinction between exchange and payment. Money for exchange and money for payments of fines, taxes, tributes seem to have distinct origins. This is a point that the common Neoclassical narrative, and that of Aristotle, miss when they put the origin of money in market transaction alone. This power to meet social obligation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for something to be money. That is, there are many things that could meet this condition, and many governments have demanded taxes in a variety of goods. Seaford combines this ability to meet social obligation

2. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 16–20.

with the storage of an object for the meeting of future obligations. This brings an object closer to money, as stored objects lose their use value.

- (2) Money is *quantitative*, whether in number or amount, or both. Something can meet a social obligation, say in a public sacrifice, without it thereby being seen primarily for its quantity. We might think of the Old Testament importance placed on the quality of animal offered.
- (3) The object under question may be used as a *measure of value*. Again, something can be used to measure value of different things without it being used as money. This measure of value can also function as a unit of account and so it need not be exchanged. Such seems to be the case for cattle in Homer. Cattle seem to be for offering at a sacrifice, and thus they meet a social obligation. Nevertheless, though it may have these aspects, cattle do not seem to actually be exchanged as a currency in Homeric Greece. They function as an imaginary unit of account rather than an actual exchangeable commodity.
- (4) *General acceptability* is a crucial qualification for something to be considered money. An object can meet other qualifications, but if it is not generally acceptable, it is not really functioning as money, but more of a direct exchange of goods or barter.
- (5) On the other hand, *exclusive acceptability* is also an important aspect of money. Though things can be exclusively accepted in special situations, when combined with *general acceptability* one has nearly identified money there. For example, many premonetary societies exchanged one specific thing for another, and this was an exclusive relationship, x for y, but not for z. So it would fail to be generally acceptable as exchange or value and thus not be money.

Qualities 1–5 are generally sufficient for a thing to be considered money, but there are two others that play a very large part in the development of money, and have major implications in the formation of metaphysics, and thus of much theology.

- (6) Seaford uses the awkward term *fiduciarity* to explain how money is abstract. Coins are physical objects with a certain exchange value. But once they are stamped with a seal their value is guaranteed by virtue of the seal, not by the weight of the coin alone. So for a one-ounce gold coin to truly be money, it would need to have greater exchange value than one ounce of gold would in bullion or natural form. If the value of the coin was equal to or less than its constituent metals, they would be melted down and used, or exchanged in bullion form. But fiduciarity is not simply conventional value as though coins were only tokens

with no intrinsic value. Modern money is this way, but only after going through the stage where the coin had a greater exchange value than an intrinsic value.

Fiduciarity, though it is a strange word, is a necessary concept to grasp. To restate it simply, fiduciarity is “the excess of the fixed conventional value of pieces of money over their intrinsic value.”<sup>3</sup>

- (7) The influence of the *state* plays a major role in the development of money. Though again this is more specific to the origins of money than to its continued existence. The state helps the development of money in a number of ways and Seaford does not mention many of them, because they are not directly applicable to ancient Greece. He notes that a government can guarantee the value of a coin and thus help it be divorced from the exchange value of its constituent elements, or it can stamp a guarantee of purity and weight. But there are many other ways the state encourages an object to be money. Through taxes a government can demand payment in a certain form. If a government demands sheep, sheep will immediately take on a different value than they had previously. If the government coins its own money, it ensures that valuable precious metal reserves return to the government itself and thus the local economy can be boosted while providing some safety net in case of military demand by melting the coins down and trading the bullion internationally, or paying the troops in bullion exchangeable internationally. The so-called state theory of money, often associated with John Maynard Keynes, goes too far in exclusively pointing to the state for the formation of money. But it does have a point that taxes help create markets by enforcing a uniform currency. Nevertheless, many ancient governments did not demand taxes of their own citizens, instead they took tribute from subject peoples.

Fines are another crucial means of developing something into money. Though I will discuss the transformation of justice by money later, we can say here that the establishment of the city-state requires a more objective or mediated justice system and money provides a convenient way to universalize all offenses, making the criminal a debtor to the state instead of to the victim. But this obviously requires that the currency be stored or accessible for the payment of fines.

Now that an object can rightfully be *identified as money* based on the above seven characteristics, we need to consider the *properties of money in itself*. Money is homogenous, impersonal, a universal aim, a universal

3. Ibid., 7.

means, unlimited, concrete and abstract, and distinct from all else. This list again comes from Seaford's work.<sup>4</sup>

- (a) Money is *homogenous*. Money has equivalent value because its value is conventional instead of based primarily in the object itself. This means that money has no history. It is valuable precisely because its history is unknown. Because money is homogenous it is exchangeable for nearly anything else. But its homogeneity in valuing things tends to spread to those things, such that money becomes the primary mode of valuation and most all things are viewed in terms of it. It is a universal to which all particulars may be compared. This is called *commensurability*.

This homogeneity can and does spread to its users, so that they begin to be valued in terms of money as well. It is worth quoting Seaford on this because it will become an important point later on:

Firstly, it [money] facilitates the kind of commercial exchange that is disembedded from all other relations: the only relation between the parties to such exchange is commercial, and *from the perspective of this relation* the parties are identical to each other, for all each wants is the best possible deal. Aristotle<sup>5</sup> observes that currency equalises not only the goods but also the *parties* to the exchange.<sup>6</sup>

Money, as Aristotle and Seaford observe, alters people themselves by altering the very structure of social relations. Money imposes its homogeneity on society, a point we will see become very clear in modern society with its emphases on the transcending of difference.

- (b) The homogeneity of money requires that it be *impersonal*. The heirlooms so important in gift-exchange or premonetary societies help develop a person's character or personality. This is seen in epic literature, whether from Greece or elsewhere, in the importance placed on these heirlooms, often of a military character. Who is Jason without the golden fleece? Who is Thor without Mjolnir his hammer, or Arthur without Excalibur? Both are significantly named. The impersonality of money is what enables it to be equivalent in value and therefore homogenous.

The impersonality of money means that it is promiscuous. That is, it can be exchanged with anybody for anything. In so doing it ignores all other non-monetary relationships. This was, as Graeber notes, the

4. See *ibid.*, 149–72.

5. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1133a17–21.

6. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 151–52. Italics original.

utopian vision of Adam Smith. Instead of the inefficiency and trouble that personal relationships bring to exchanges and transactions, having the mutual respect that one dollar has for another, exchanges would take place on an even footing, guaranteed by the anonymity that money creates.<sup>7</sup>

- (c) Money becomes a *universal aim* of people who use it. The homogeneity of money suggests that there is something equivalent about the various things of life. That is, people begin to see value only in the monetary value of the thing and thereby abstract the thing from the value, leading to a pursuit of money itself. Aristotle distinguishes this kind of practice, of seeking money as an end in itself, rather than as a means to the end of household management. In typical aristocratic disdain of the market, he derides those who seek money for itself, because this becomes a never-ending process. It is the most unnatural of human activities.<sup>8</sup> Those who use money begin to want to acquire money in itself for the representative stored power that lies within.
- (d) Because money is a universal aim, it also becomes the *universal means*. Because people begin to want money above all else in exchange for a good or service rendered, money becomes required to perform all things. Money becomes the foundation, not only of economy, but it can also pervade things like ancient sacred rituals, as Seaford demonstrates from the dramatists Sophocles and Aristophanes. Money not only serves to buy all kinds of products, it is necessary to acquire supreme goods, like public welfare or divine good will. Money also becomes the means to political power.

What Seaford does not point out that is absolutely important to understand is that because money is a universal means and end, it is a self-sustaining cycle of human thought based solely upon itself. The mere use of money transforms all things by the establishment of a new kind of relationship, one always mediated by money.

- (e) Money is *unlimited*. That money is a universal means and end requires that money be unlimited in power and therefore in number. Money has no limit, even if there can be said to be a certain number of dollars in circulation, its power and influence are potentially unlimited, for its value is not based on its exact quantity, but relative power. Money is the basis of unlimited desire, as well. For it is only possible to conceive of unlimited desire by reference to an abstract value, as money represents. Having a massive surplus of any goods is unsustainable. They

7. Graeber, *Debt*, 335–36.

8. *Politics*, 1257b.

will rot, decay, lose value, or cost more to upkeep than they eventually become worth. But one can always imagine having just one more dollar and the consequent power that would bring. It is hardly coincidental that the first person on record to speak of the personal virtue of moderation is Solon (c. 638–c. 558 BC),<sup>9</sup> who lived in the first generations of Athenian money society. The principle of moderation requires something that is potentially unlimited. There is no such thing prior to the invention of money that would enable such a view.

And it is easy to see from here how money is deeply connected to metaphysics. If premonetary societies can only consider power to be personal, and thus projected onto gods, monetary societies must consider power to be universal and unlimited, thus impersonal. So Anaximander's *apeiron* or Parmenides's god are each universal and impersonal, as well as all powerful, as I will discuss below.

- (f) Money unites opposites. Money enables one thing to be changed into another. We will see how Heraclitus refers back to monetary gold to describe the universal fire that can transform into anything. But money also is able to invert opposites and ultimately homogenize all things. Seaford notes how money can efface the difference between breeding in marriage. It can make a good man bad and a bad man good.
- (g) Money is concrete and abstract. This is another way of talking about *fiduciarity*. Money is, during the monetary period but not necessarily during the postmonetary period, concrete and abstract. It is based on something physical with actual inherent use value or exchange value, but it is also abstract and therefore of greater value in exchange than its inherent materials would allow.
- (h) Money is *unique*. As universal, money cannot be a particular instance of something else. There is nothing for which money can be substituted in every case. The uniqueness of money ensures that its homogenizing power turns things into itself, and not into a third thing. Thus, when relationships are mediated by money, they take on the characteristics of money rather than some third thing.

Money is homogenous, impersonal, a universal aim and means, unlimited, it transcends former divisions, is concrete and abstract, and is unique. These characteristics have important theological implications when we come to see that money is related to metaphysics. Any God or universal being, mind, or thing constructed through metaphysics is likely to share in most, if not all, of these characteristics. Let us then turn to ancient Greece

9. Solon, frag. 4c.3, in Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 197.

and the rise of coinage to see the deep connection that metaphysical thinking has with money. We shall then turn back to premonetary societies and finally to the postmonetary society we see developing today.

## FROM MONEY TO METAPHYSICS: ANCIENT GREECE

### The Story of the First True Money: Coinage

In Homeric heroic society there is a vital difference between kinds of goods: heirlooms and consumables. These are unable to be traded directly and no third way, namely, money, exists to give them an equivalence in value.<sup>10</sup> This is a situation not at all confined to preclassical Greece, but is fairly universal to premonetary societies.

The glimpses we get of heroic society show a disdain for the exchange of heirlooms for common objects. In cases where Homer gives the value of a set of armor, he does so in cattle, for the reason, it seems, that the sacrificial system provided a means of accounting for values of otherwise disparate objects. Indeed, gifts given to temples around this time are often heirlooms themselves, like armor. In this situation without money sacrifice is what gives value.

Homer is himself dismissive of gifts given to the temple, instead prioritizing the tomb and the heroic deed. Gifts to the temple create relationships and sociality whereas tombs and heroism are particular to the individual. The heroic individualism of Homer is somewhat unique to Greek society and it would play an important part in the formation of money. Homer represents a transitional figure in whom the novelty of gifts to the temple is seen and derided. The Homeric virtues of honor, life, and perpetual fame are vaunted above the reach of wealth.<sup>11</sup>

The other side of this heroic Greek economy was in the distribution of booty. Much of the dramatic tension of the *Iliad* revolves around what Seaford calls “reciprocity in crisis.” Achilles and Agamemnon are at odds because of unfair distribution of booty. Though Agamemnon has hurt Achilles’s honor and offers extraordinary wealth to cover over the injury, Achilles will not accept any wealth for dishonor, nor wealth for certain death in battle. Life and honor are far more important than wealth. The *Odyssey*

10. Though there are means by which things can be valued, like silver, silver itself is not normally exchanged. Likewise, even in societies that have an awareness of money it can be purely imaginary as in the European Middle Ages where the Carolingian system of “imaginary money” ruled. See Graeber, *Debt*, 282.

11. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 56.

portrays a similar crisis, though on the other side. Nobles who could feast in the house of a lord like Odysseus go too far and turn their welcome into plunder.<sup>12</sup> These crises of reciprocity, of what one can rightly exchange for something incommensurate, are major social battles. Distribution is based on a combination of status and merit. This distribution according to honor we might understand as an equality of opportunity for wealth.

But Homer also shows the peacefulness of corporate animal sacrifice that is pleasing to a deity. These do not tend to happen in a temple in Homer, which is an important fact. Sacrifices are times of communal feasting wherein each person, Homer is at pains to show, receives an equal part.<sup>13</sup> In this way the wealth of a group is redistributed from the wealthy to those without wealth. These sacrifices ensure stability, as they are performed regularly and according to established forms and customs. The sacrifice is redistributive and equal, such that we might say participation warrants equivalent reward, an equality of outcome. That they happen apart from a temple shows that they do not exist for the maintenance of a religious order. In this way no temple tax is extracted from the people, an important distinction between Greek and ancient Near Eastern practice. Ancient Near Eastern temple systems were complex and large. They required large sacrifices to support a massive infrastructure, and so the temple, naturally, was closely associated with a massive, imperial state. This hindered the formation of money in the ancient Near East because sacrifices of large amounts of consumable goods were desirable, whereas for the Greeks such large sacrifices would often have meant spoilage. In the ancient Near East there was little impetus to exchange consumables for durable wealth, whereas in Greece there was a solid motive for this exchange.

So Homeric literature shows a tension that exists amongst two forms of redistribution. On the one hand there is a peacefully decentralized and religious group in which wealth is regularly redistributed through ritual. And on the other hand is a group wherein the leader controls the distribution of plunder according to personal will at irregular times and in irregular ways. We might call these communal and tyrannical. There is a contrast, then, of the stability of the group that is present in a homogenizing religious ritual, and the honor of the heroic individual that is competitive and demands personal differentiation in terms of value expressed in booty. This is a contrast of two systems of just distribution, redistribution through sacrifice and meritorious plunder.

12. *Ibid.*, 44.

13. *Ibid.*, 46.