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Goethe's *Faust* and the Philosophy of Money

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Abstract. Philosophers today don't think of Goethe's *Faust* as an important contribution to the philosophy of money. But this is mistaken, I argue. Underneath its lyrical form, Goethe's text develops a comprehensive view of money that came to be an important influence on left-wing (Karl Marx) and right-wing (Oswald Spengler) discussions of money. Centrally, Goethe argues that modern economic practices have transformed money-obsession (long conceived primarily as an individual vice) into a *structural problem*: social structures are now set up to systematically *require* individuals to engage in quasi-obsessive behaviors towards money (e.g. persistently talking about/sacrificing for money) independently, to a significant degree, from their individual choices. This structural power, Goethe proposes, requires a rethinking of how behavior towards money should be morally evaluated – and, importantly, a *critique of moral attitudes* that 'individualize' what is, in truth, a social problem.

Introduction

Philosophers today – in so far as they are familiar with the text at all – do not think of Goethe's *Faust* as an important contribution to the philosophy of money¹. Indeed, the very idea that Goethe's two-partite lyrical drama, which deals with various overt esoteric, magical and religious themes, contains interesting or influential *economic commentary of any kind* might strike a reader as far-fetched². So, while the important influence that *Faust* exerted on the development of German poetry and on the development of German drama (and perhaps on the theory of both) is widely known and often acknowledged³, the text is not generally understood as a milestone in the evolution of the philosophical reflection on money.

But this is a mistake, I want to argue. Underneath its lyrical form, Goethe's text develops a consistent and comprehensive view of money – a view, in fact, that came to be, by their authors' explicit

¹ Unlike his social philosophy (including his philosophy of money), other elements of Goethe's philosophical view – his philosophical methodology or his philosophy of nature, for example – have recently received some renewed attention in from within Anglo-American philosophy. Paradigmatic here is Eckart Förster's work, e.g. "Goethe als Philosoph," *Die Drei* 78:6 (2008): 9-19, "Goethe's Spinozism," in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, ed. by Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 85-99 as well as the prominent role attributed to Goethe in *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

² Outside of academic philosophy, to be sure, this suggestion might be received more kindly. In German studies, for example, there is – since the 1970s – a small but persistent literature on general economic themes in *Faust*. Standout contributions in this context, all of which we will discuss in more detail below, are Thomas Metscher, "Faust und die Ökonomie. Ein literarhistorischer Essay," *Das Argument. Sonderband 3* (1976): 28-155; Hans Christoph Binswanger, *Geld und Magie. Deutung und Kritik der Modernen Wirtschaft* (Stuttgart/Wien: Weitzbrecht, 1985); Werner Hamacher, "Faust, Geld," *Athenäum – Jahrbuch der Friedrich Schlegel Gesellschaft* 4 (1994): 130-187; Ulrich Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust* (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 2012), esp. Ch. VIII and Richard Gray, *Money Matters: Economics and the German Cultural Imagination, 1770-1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), esp. Ch. 9. A good overview over the recent literature can be found in Bernd Blaschke, "Ökonomie," in *Faust-Handbuch*, ed. by Carsten Rhode, Thorsten Valk and Mathias Mayer (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 544-552.

³ For example, with a view to the rich literature on the subject, in the magisterial Chapter X of Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust* which almost constitutes a book within a book.

admissions, an important influence on both left-wing (Karl Marx) and right-wing (Oswald Spengler) discussions of money. Central to Goethe's proposal is the thought that modern economic practices have transformed obsession with money (long conceived merely as an individual vice) into a *structural problem*: social structures are now set up such as to systematically require individuals to engage in quasi-obsessive behaviors towards money (e.g. sacrificing for money, continuously talking and thinking about money etc.) independently, at least to a significant degree, from their individual choices. This structural power of money in modern society, Goethe proposes, requires a fundamental rethinking of how individual behavior towards money needs to be evaluated – and, importantly, a *critique of moral attitudes* that 'individualize' what is, in truth, a social problem.

Now, I should say, that – from the perspective of someone in Goethe's own time – neither the claim about the philosophy of money being contained in *Faust* nor the claim about its historical influence would have been very surprising. As a minister in Weimar, Goethe was known among his contemporaries to be deeply familiar with monetary policy and theory⁴ (probably more directly and more practically than many other 19th century social philosophers!), making it unsurprising that some of these views would also echo throughout his *magnum opus*, *Faust*. And, by the same token, *Faust* came to be regarded as a canonical piece of German literature even in Goethe's lifetime, rendering it, from a contemporary perspective, surely unremarkable that it would exercise some influence on the views of those thinkers. The fact that *we today* hesitate to count Goethe and his *Faust* among the major figures/texts in 19th/20th century philosophy of money probably has more to do with the fact how *we*, in the 21st century, have decided to draw boundaries between poetry, economics and philosophy – boundaries that were, in the past, not as readily observed and that Goethe's work, at any rate, actively defies.

This paper proceeds in two steps. In the first step (Sections 1 and 2), I reconstruct the view of money in Goethe's *Faust*. In the second step (Section 3), I trace the impact of Goethe's view to Spengler's and Marx's philosophies of money.

I. The basics of Goethe's view and how *not* to interpret them: is *Faust* telling a moral tale?

Goethe was, as we have already mentioned, both a political theorist *and* a political practitioner. As minister of state in Weimar, his expertise and his portfolio included economic matters: Goethe, in fact, even is said

⁴ Goethe took over the role of minister of finance in the duchy of Sachsen-Weimar already in 1782, and concretely worked on political-economic matters for most of his life. The most fundamental exploration of Goethe's background knowledge is Bernd Mahl, *Goethes ökonomisches Wissen. Grundlagen zum Verständnis der ökonomischen Passagen im dichterischen Gesamtwerk und in den 'Amtlichen Schriften'* (Frankfurt a. Main/Bern: Lang, 1982). Brief summaries of some of the highlights bearing specifically on *Faust*, are in Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust*, 521-522 and Gray, *Money Matters*, 357-358.

to *have owed* his position within Weimar government at least in part to his economic knowledge⁵, which included acquaintance with Adam Smith, but also with German economists such as Georg Sartorius or Johann Georg Schlosser⁶ (the latter, Goethe's brother-in-law, dedicated an economic treatise to Goethe). When it came to the issue of money specifically, we know that Goethe had read Johann Georg Büsch's 1784/85 *Abhandlung von dem Geldsumlauf (Discourse on the Circulation of Money)* and therefore was familiar with the conventions of monetary thought and policy of his time.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that money also makes an appearance in Goethe's *magnum opus, Faust*⁷. Indeed, money does not only make *one* appearance, but, rather, several: *Faust*, as readers of the text know well, centers on the alchemist, scholar, and magician Faust, who enters a bet with a devilish spirit, the ever-sardonic Mephisto. The terms of this bet, as set out early on in the text, are fairly clear: should Mephisto manage to procure him a moment of highest satisfaction ("If ever to the moment I shall say: Beautiful Moment do not pass away" (ln. 1699-1700⁸)), Faust agrees to be Mephisto's servant in the thereafter (ln. 1692-1706). This pursuit of this highest moment, then, prompts an epic journey "from heaven, through the world, to hell" (ln. 242, trans. modified) – stretched over two parts of the tragedy: *Faust I* and *Faust II* – in which the two protagonists seek out various sources of satisfaction (in order, roughly: sex, affluence, beauty and political/colonial power), in the end reaching a moment in which Faust proclaims to experience the "highest moment (*höchsten Augenblick*)" he sought (ln. 11580-11586): only to have his soul, in a stunning reversal, whisked away by angels, ostensibly defrauding Mephisto of his reward for winning the bet (ln. 11735f.).

Now, I should hasten to say that this summary already tells us that, with Goethe's *Faust*, we have to be 'on guard'. The text continually plays with the reader's expectations, only to subvert them in subtle ways. *Faust*, for example, is *not* the 'classic' story of a deal with the devil: there is neither a 'deal' (instead there is a 'bet', which Faust clearly thinks he will win), nor is Mephisto straightforwardly 'the devil' (instead he is portrayed as 'a' devil or a devilish spirit), nor, most importantly, does the story have the clear,

⁵ Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust*, 521.

⁶ Albrecht Schöne reports that there were forty-six books on national economics alone in Goethe's own library (Albrecht Schöne, "Faust – today," in *Goethe's Faust. Theatre of Modernity*, ed. by Hans Schulte, John Noyes, Pia Kleber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23. For the discussion of Sartorius, Schlosser and Büsch, see e.g. Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust*, 521-522.

⁷ Goethe's *Faust* and its two parts, of course, have a complicated publishing history and exist in multiple versions. For simplicity's sake, my interpretation here – like most interpretations – pertains primarily to the final and most complete version of the text. For a general and extremely helpful overview over changes between the different versions, see e.g. Jane K. Brown, "Faust," in *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe*, ed. by Lesley Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91-100.

⁸ In this paper, as per convention, I'm citing *Faust* by line number. The edition of the *Faust* used is: Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie erster und zweiter Teil*, ed. and commentary by Erich Trunz (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), which is itself based on the Hamburg edition of Goethe's works. Translations are generally drawn from David Luke's translation of the text, available as Goethe, *Faust. Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Goethe, *Faust. Part Two*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

morally satisfying ending one was led to expect: in the end, Faust is *not* punished, but rather escapes to salvation, leaving both Mephisto and the spectator in astonishment and, perhaps, disappointment. So, even though familiarity with terms like ‘Faustian bargain’ – or with other treatments of the Faust legend, e.g. in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*– might trick us into thinking that we know exactly how the story will go, the plot frequently pulls the rug out from under our preconceptions⁹.

Money starts appearing right at the beginning of the text. Indeed, the issue of money surfaces already in the scenes leading up to Faust’s bet with Mephisto, with Faust proclaiming in desperation that his scholarly endeavors have not yielded him any significant “property and money (*Gut und Geld*)” (ln. 374, trans. modified), with this being one of the drivers for Faust “seeking magic’s assistance” (ln. 377). Against this background, it is unsurprising that Mephisto returns to the issue of the powers of money and the enticing possibilities they offer when Faust – after the bet is made – already despairs at the possibility of ever attaining satisfaction (“Suppose I keep six stallions (*sechs Hengste zahlen kann*), don’t you see? / The strength of each of them’s a part of me” (ln. 1824-25)). Those powers are then vividly on display in the rest of *Faust I*, where money is a central facilitator of Faust’s seduction of the innocent Gretchen, who only becomes receptive to Faust’s advances after receiving expensive gifts from him (ln. 2783-2804 and ln. 2874-2878): opening the door for Faust, and, with it, for Gretchen’s ultimate demise. The affair ends disastrously, with Gretchen having lost both her honor and her family, while Faust escapes in disgrace as the curtain of *Faust I* falls (ln. 4614).

In *Faust II* money then truly assumes center stage: the plot prominently involves Faust’s stint at the Imperial Court, where he is begged by the Emperor and the Emperor’s courtiers to help the country in its current financial crisis (ln. 4812ff., “We’re daily trying to economize/And yet we’re daily spending more” (ln. 4852-4854)). Faust, with help from Mephisto, obliges, prompting an extended *Charade* (*Mummenschanz*) – a somewhat bizarre ritual featuring costumes and magic¹⁰ – that culminates, at its very end, in Faust’s and Mephisto’s introduction of paper money to the empire (ln. 5920-5985). Here, Goethe, as others have already pointed out, draws on his own historical experiences and, in particular, his knowledge of various attempts to replace the use of metal coins with paper notes that could be redeemed for a certain fixed quantity of precious metals¹¹. Indeed, Goethe literally *stages* such an introduction here in *Faust II*, with Mephisto and Faust leading the charge.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview over the origin as well as of the different uses of the Faust legend before Goethe, see Erich Trunz, “Nachwort,” in *Faust: Der Tragödie erster und zweiter Teil*, ed. and commentary by Erich Trunz (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 470-477.

¹⁰ Goethe here is, in fact, drawing together elements of traditional Florentine comedy with more idiosyncratic elements. For a helpful analysis of Goethe’s sources for the description of the *Charade*, see also the commentary in “Anmerkungen,” in *Faust: Der Tragödie erster und zweiter Teil*, ed. and commentary by Erich Trunz (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 591-604.

¹¹ E.g. Binswanger, *Geld und Magie*, 21-2.

Now, while it is certainly easy to recount, as I just did¹², the various *appearances* of money in the text, it is harder to say what *view*, if anything, lies behind all these various appearances. How, as it were, do the dots connect, if they connect at all? Upon some inspection of the text, there is one interpretation in particular that, at least on first glance, seems to assert itself as a plausible candidate for how to interpret Goethe's underlying position. According to this interpretation, Goethe's *Faust* continues a long tradition of texts that convey a *moral warning about money* i.e. texts that, at once, urge human beings not to get too attached to money and that convey a negative moral judgement on those who have become so attached. Indeed, such moral warnings about money, of course, go all the way back at least to Platonic and Aristotelian antiquity, echoing e.g. through Plato's critique of oligarchy in the *Republic* or through Aristotle's warnings about the love of money in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Indeed, in the literary tradition, these kinds of moral warnings often take a 'narrativized' form, presenting the reader/the spectator with characters that are either moral exemplars (virtuous agents defying the temptations of money) or, even more often, moral anti-heroes, who fall prey to these temptations and then suffer the terrible consequences. The perhaps most paradigmatic story of the latter type, surely familiar to Goethe¹³, is the story of King Midas, famously told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*¹⁴ and then frequently adapted in later literature (such as, in the American literary tradition, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Golden Touch*¹⁵). To recount it in brief: Ovid's King Midas loves money so much that he wishes to turn everything he touches into gold. Once, however, the god Dionysus grants him this gift, Midas quickly learns the devastating consequences of his new ability, as even food and drink, and everything else he loves, turn into gold once he touches it – leading him to his own ruin (from which he can only escape by begging the god to take back the gift) .

At first glance, Goethe's *Faust* can easily be seen to issue such a moral warning about money. Indeed, in particular, Goethe's characterization of the Emperor seems to fit the mold of King Midas almost too perfectly. When we encounter the Emperor for the first time, he (and, in fact, the whole court) are clearly

¹² Note that the above paragraphs are merely intended as a condensed summary of the appearances of (specifically) *money* in the story. There are, of course, many other economic themes woven through the text, such as the discussion of property in Act IV or the discussion of the ecological/political consequences of economic expansion in Act V. See, for example, William H. Carter's highly interesting exploration of economic themes in Act II and III in William H. Carter, "Faust's *Begehren*. Revisiting the History of Political Economy in *Faust II*," *Goethe Yearbook* 21 (2014): 103-128.

¹³ Explicit and implicit references to the *Metamorphoses* abound in *Faust*. One of the most explicit is the appearance of Philemon and Baucis in Act V (ln. 11043ff.), which references *Met.* VIII 611-724.

¹⁴ *Met.* XI. 85-145.

¹⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tanglewood Tales. A Wonderbook for Boys and Girls* (London: Frederick Warne, 1853), 42-64. It is worth to note that Hawthorne's version, among many other changes, even intensifies the focus on the corruptive power of money/gold vis-a-vis the version that can be found in Ovid. Whereas, for Ovid, Midas' giving into the temptations of gold is only one example of Midas' general foolishness, gold/money takes the center stage in Hawthorne's retelling of the story.

shown to engage in obsessive behavior towards money, thinking about and discussing almost nothing else. Even though the Emperor convenes his cabinet to talk about *all* matters affecting the Empire, the discussion quickly turns, as if pulled by a kind of gravitational force, to one issue and one issue only: the topic of money and how to get more of it (ln. 4728-4875).

Just like in the story of King Midas, this focus on money lets the Emperor turn to the supernatural for help: to Faust's and Mephisto's magic, which ultimately yields the introduction of paper money (which appears, or so it seems, as an analogy to Midas' 'Golden Touch'). Indeed, as others have already discussed in much detail¹⁶, Goethe's text here consciously links the introduction of paper money to the 'magical art' of alchemy or, more specifically, to the mystical practice of making gold from entirely valueless material. Goethe strongly implies that while the alchemistic attempt to make literal gold from valueless materials might have failed, paper money presents the indirect 'triumph' of the black arts just by other means. If that parallel was not already clear enough, Goethe's text casts the actual process of bringing paper money into existence into the form of a bizarre ritual (the *Charade*), with the Emperor and his court dressed in mythological costumes, performing obscure rites that they do not understand and accidentally setting themselves on fire in the process (a fire that only Faust's magic can extinguish, ln. 5970-5986).

And just like in the story of King Midas, things – or so it seems – ultimately do not turn out very well for the Emperor. After all, at the end of *Faust*, when Mephisto and Faust encounter the Emperor and his court again, the Empire is in the process of economic, political and social collapse, partially linked, at least indirectly, to the introduction of paper money (ln. 10242f.). Indeed, Goethe knew fully well from his own historical experience that these early forms of paper currency – 'token money' that could be exchanged for precious metals at a fixed rate – could spectacularly collapse when consumers lost faith in the paper currency, causing its real value to plummet significantly under its nominal value (wreaking economic havoc in the process¹⁷). It is these kinds of experiences that Goethe seems to be drawing on when he portrays the Empire as having made a spectacular decline in the wake of the Emperor's decision to dabble in the 'black art' of making paper gold: thereby bringing, or so at least it seems, *all* the elements of a Midas-like moral tale to the table (the obsession with money, the grasp for a 'supernatural' source of riches, and the inevitable cosmic punishment).

But it is not only the story of the Emperor that traces, at least at first glance, the outlines of a classic moral warning about getting too attached to money. Even in the story of Gretchen – which, to a certain extent, is even more integral to the overarching plot of *Faust* than the story of the Emperor – there seem to be elements of this classic moral tale at work. After all: Gretchen's moral fall from grace is precipitated in

¹⁶ Binswanger, *Geld und Magie*, Ch. 1.

¹⁷ Commentators here frequently refer e.g. to Goethe's familiarity with the failure of the Assignat currency given out during the French Revolution. For more background, see e.g. Gray, *Money Matters*, 355.

large part by her becoming obsessed with expensive jewelry, which Faust has procured her with Mephisto's help. Indeed, once she receives this gift, she can think of nothing else "day and night (*Tag und Nacht*)" (ln. 2851, trans. modified), rendering her unable to turn Faust's second gift over to her mother (indirectly setting into motion a chain of events that leads to her own demise). The text, hence, seems to cast the obsession with money/material value as a kind of 'gateway drug' that leads to catastrophe.

Against this background, then, it is understandable that commentators – most famously, perhaps, Hans-Christoph Binswanger – have again and again seen *Faust* as issuing a moral warning about money¹⁸ i.e. as a story about how easily our attachment of money can turn into self-destruction, implicitly calling for us to be on guard and to avoid becoming so attached. Indeed, in his Faust commentary *Geld und Magie [Money and Magic]*, Binswanger positions Goethe as a sharp-sighted diagnostician of the dangers of money, issuing the tell-tale combination of urging human beings not to give into these temptations and judging those who have fallen into what one might think of as a 'golden' trap. On Binswanger's reading, Goethe shows a "prophetic gift"¹⁹ in describing the temptations of money, urging us all to make better decisions – lest we face the same dire consequences as the Emperor and Gretchen seem to face in Goethe's story. (Other interpreters have trended in similar directions, seeing the Emperor as an exemplar of human greed²⁰ and reading these passages in *Faust* as carrying out a project of 'goaded' readers into better, more virtuous forms of behavior²¹).

However, despite its superficial plausibility, reading *Faust* as issuing this kind of moral warning is misguided and, as we will see, turns Goethe's position *precisely on its head*. This is because – on a close reading of the text – Goethe's text seems to be specifically designed to cast doubt on the central premise of all such moral warnings: namely on the premise that, under current social circumstances, *human behavior towards money is voluntary*, and hence an appropriate object of (moral) exhortations and blame. By contrast, if there is one consistent theme throughout *Faust's* discussion of money it is precisely that under current social circumstances human beings frequently *do not* get to choose exactly how they relate to money – but that instead their behavior towards money is centrally determined by structural economic factors. From that perspective, issuing the classic 'moral warnings' about money seems problematically out of touch with the structural conditions of modern life, on which human beings have lost much of their freedom vis-a-vis what role they assign to money in their lives.

Indeed, Goethe presents this view about money&human agency to the reader in three crucial ways. The first, and most obvious, way consists in Goethe showing how the money-related decisions of his characters (such as the Emperor or Gretchen) are, when looked at from a broader perspective than the one

¹⁸ Binswanger, *Geld und Magie*, 91.

¹⁹ Binswanger, *Geld und Magie*, 91.

²⁰ Gaier, *Lesarten von Goethes Faust*, 555.

²¹ Gray, *Money Matters*, 359.

assumed by the ‘moralistic’ reading, often strongly influenced by structural-economic factors working in the background. This is particularly clear in Goethe’s description of the Emperor, where Goethe, in setting up the Emperor’s plot-line early in *Faust II*, seems to place much emphasis on the fact that the Emperor’s behavior towards money stems – at least to a significant degree – from the challenges of modern government: in a socially and culturally diverse, and systematically much more anonymous modern state, appeals to shared trust or to shared values often do not command the service of one’s subjects – only money reliably does. The deliberations of the Emperor’s cabinet are, on a closer reading, presented as turning to money *for that very reason*: the Emperor’s allies, or so his courtiers report, will no longer support the Emperor without seeing their own monetary interests rewarded (ln. 4841-4851), and neither will his soldiers, his army (ln. 4819-4822), or even the courtiers themselves (ln. 4852-4875) – highlighting significant external pressure for the Emperor to seek out money in order to save his rule²². In that way, the Emperor is ultimately shown as being in a significantly different situation than e.g. Ovid’s King Midas: Midas is *free to choose* his behavior towards money (and uses this freedom to choose a life that is devoted to money), the Emperor’s behavior towards money stands, from the very beginning, under different premises.

Similar things can, maybe even with greater clarity, be said about Gretchen and her behavior vis-a-vis the necklace she received, once read from a broader perspective. Unlike what we would expect from a classic moral tale, Goethe is very careful to show, setting up Gretchen’s plot-line in *Faust I*, that Gretchen’s behavior vis-a-vis the jewelry is not, or at least not fully, a chosen devotion, but, to a significant degree, an after-effect of external circumstances. Indeed, the text returns again and again to the precariousness of Gretchen’s social station, contextualizing her “day and night” rumination about the necklace in a way that makes that behavior seem less like a choice: the reader learns already in the introduction of the character that she has lost her father, and, along with her mother, has to get by without much help (“And we’ve no maid. I cook and sweep and knit / And sew, all day I’m on my feet. / And my mother insists everything’s got / To be so neat!” (ln. 3111-3114)). Even more: Goethe stresses that, with even local communities turning more diverse and anonymous, Gretchen and her mother cannot expect any direct support from the neighborly community surrounding them, without being able to pay for it (ln. 2786-87) – since, clearly, even in this kinds of community, it is only money that could reliably command such support²³.

²² In this sense, I agree with Hamacher that the Emperor is no longer fully acting as himself when he signs the new money into existence (Hamacher, “Faust, Geld”, 165) – but I disagree that this lack of self is due to the Emperor’s own decision. Rather, it is due to the desolate structural economic conditions under which the Emperor already operates and that significantly limit his range of choices.

²³ It is for this reason, of course, that Gretchen – upon finding the first piece of gifted jewelry – does not even *fathom* the possibility that it could be a gift. Rather, she immediately suspects that it is part of a financial transaction (!) and

A second point underlines this line of interpretation. Unlike Ovid's Midas, who chooses his 'Golden Touch' *enthusiastically*, Goethe's characters are decidedly *ambivalent and 'torn up'* about the significance that they assign to money in their lives – signaling clearly (and understandably, given the structural pressures described above) that they perceive themselves as not fully in control of their own relationship to money. This is clear in the case of the Emperor: after the bizarre quasi-magical ritual yields the introduction of paper money, the Emperor is – at first – portrayed as being horrified at this invention, and immediately suspects foul play (“I suspect fraud, some vast deceit / Who dared to sign my name in counterfeit / Has no one yet been punished for this crime?” In. 6063-6065, trans. modified). Only after additional prompting and convincing by Mephisto does he accept his form of the 'Golden Touch', displaying a kind of 'half-willingness' that was entirely absent from e.g. Ovid's King Midas, who accepts his form of the 'Golden Touch' without reservations.

Similar points apply to Gretchen: even though she thinks of Faust's expensive gifts 'day and night', we also hear that she is actually at both an emotional level repulsed by the gifts (“I have a feeling something's wrong / I hope my mother won't be long. It's a sort of scare coming over me” (In. 2755-2757)) and ashamed of her own attachment to them (In. 2883-4). Indeed, it is this deep emotional ambivalence about the necklace that prompts Gretchen to bring the second necklace Faust gives her to her neighbor Marthe for advice: a deeply ambivalent gesture in and of itself, since obviously bringing it to her overtly materialistic neighbor Marthe (In. 2865f.) is not quite the same as turning the necklace over to her virtuous mother, but is also not the same as simply keeping the necklace for herself. In that way, once again, Gretchen's pursuit of material value – and the significance that she assigns to it in her life – shows a kind of 'half-willingness' that is entirely absent from characters such as Midas, whose devotion to money is unadulterated (until he learns his lesson).

This, then, brings us to the third point. After all: as if to drive home the point that his characters – such as the Emperor and Gretchen – are not, or at least *not entirely*, responsible, and consequently blameworthy for their own behavior towards money, Goethe has them *saved* from ultimate cosmic punishment for their behavior. Indeed – and this point is often overlooked²⁴ – Goethe is very careful to

serves as collateral for a loan her mother might have given a neighbor: “Perhaps my mother lent / Some money on it, and it's meant / As a security. Oh dear!” (In. 2786-2787).

²⁴ Another very clear example of this neglect is Thomas Metscher's Marx-inspired reading of *Faust II* (Metscher, *Faust und die Ökonomie*, 28-155). For Metscher, the Emperor is a representative of an old and doomed feudal order, who gets wiped away by the forces of history (e.g. 78 and *passim*). But this reading has to suppress and awkwardly explain away the Emperor's ultimate triumph (83). On my reading, the Emperor is not so much a representative of the doomed feudal order, but rather a representative for the struggles of modern political rule under modern economic conditions: struggles that are connected with the difficulty of unifying a political whole that is itself not longer united by shared non-monetary values. For more on this, see the detailed argument in Section II below.

show that, unlike King Midas²⁵, both Gretchen and the Emperor ultimately escape their supposedly ‘just desserts’ at the end of their stories.

We can already see this in the case of the Emperor. After all: even though it is indeed true that the introduction of paper money leads the Empire into a kind of crisis, the Emperor and his reign are ultimately *rescued* without much of the Emperor’s own doing (namely by Faust and Mephisto, who arrive once again on the scene, magically vanquish the Emperor’s enemies and grant him, ultimately, a glorious victory, In. 10849f.). Indeed: the last we hear of the Emperor within *Faust*, he is looking towards what is being presented as a promising political future, dividing up the treasures and the lands that the military victory has won him (Ibid.). When it comes to the end of their stories, then, the Emperor is *not* an analog to Midas: even though he suffers some bad consequences of his deeds, he is saved from paying the ultimate price (without any contrition on his own part).

This pattern is equally perspicuous in the case of Gretchen. After all: even though it is true that her devotion to the necklace opens the door for a kind of personal descent (landing her in prison with her family and honor lost), the text is very careful to make the point that her eternal soul is ultimately saved and, in a surprising twist, *ascends to the heavens* (In. 4612). Indeed, Goethe deliberately stages Gretchen’s salvation as the culminating point of the first part of *Faust*, having this stunning conclusion symmetrically foreshadow the ultimate salvation of Faust’s own soul (which, correspondingly, occurs at the end of the second part of *Faust*). So, once again: at the end of her story, Gretchen is *not* an analog to moral anti-heroes such as Midas; even though she suffers some bad consequences of her deeds, she is saved from paying the ultimate price.

Looking over these three points, a clear suggestion for a new interpretation emerges: instead of issuing a moral warning about money, Goethe means to bring out that the *very premise* of such money moralism has become questionable: determined by structural economic factors, human beings do not longer have full freedom to decide the role that money plays in their lives, lifting their behavior, at least to a significant degree, beyond the moral exhortations and blame constitutive of traditional money moralism. In this way, Goethe is not – as Binswanger would have it – a proverbial ‘preacher in the wilderness’ (urging us to rethink the role that we decide to give to money in our lives), but rather a diagnostician of economic modernity intent on bringing out how little of this role is really still up for us to decide.

Indeed, one could even take this a step further: from the position that Goethe is taking in his text, it’s not only that the traditional money moralism is ineffectual (in its exhortations) and inappropriate (in its

²⁵ One might object here that, in some sense, Ovid’s Midas is saved too: After pleading and groveling, Bacchus takes the ‘golden touch’ back after all (*Met.* XI. 127-145). But this is misleading. Ovid’s Midas is still left to live with the horrifying psychological and political consequences of his actions (*Met.* XI. 146), whereas Goethe’s Emperor is led to political triumph. So whereas the Emperor is truly saved, Midas punishment is merely gradually ‘reduced’ as a result of Midas’ admitting is foolishness.

judgments), but that it is – through the picture of human agency vis-a-vis money it implicitly endorses – an *active obstacle* in identifying the challenge that money poses to society. Indeed, Goethe could be seen as arguing, it is by implying that the role of money in human society is due to the decisions of corrupt individuals (‘greedy’ political leaders, the ‘filthy’ rich etc.), that traditional money moralism actively obscures, rather than reveals, the real social challenge that money poses to us in the present. For this problem does not lie in greed and other individual misbehavior, but rather in the fact that the power of money has long transcended the grasp of our individual decisions, and that this power now cannot longer be controlled by individual virtue and good intentions.

From this perspective, the aforementioned ‘parallelisms’ between the figure of the Emperor and the figure of King Midas assume a distinctly new significance, which is contrary to how we originally conceived of them: the point here is not to replicate the story of Midas, and to issue a similar moral warning about the dangers of money, but rather to *consciously take up the ancient story* in order to show how much things have changed in economic modernity. The point, in short, is not repetition, but conscious contrast: whereas Ovid’s Midas is the economically autonomous agent choosing money over everything else, Goethe’s Emperor is dragged along, half-willingly, by the economic circumstances of his rule. And whereas Ovid’s story clearly locates the problem in individual behavior (manifested by Midas’ punishment), Goethe shifts that emphasis to the social system itself, leaving the Emperor, at least in the last consequence, off the moral hook. Indeed, insofar as the reader of Goethe’s text still clamors for the Emperor to receive his ‘just desserts’, Goethe seems to be appealing to his readers themselves to *critique their own moral attitudes* and fight their own tendency – a tendency learned from centuries of ‘money moralism’ – to individualize what is really a social problem.

Ironically, from a Goethean perspective, one might turn to Binswanger’s reading of *Faust* itself to see how *necessary* this sort of self-critique of moral attitudes still is. If even Goethe’s critique of money moralism can be misread precisely *as an instance of such moralism*, it really shows the powerful hold that these (from Goethe’s perspective: antiquated) moral attitudes still have over our thinking and over our intuitions. Just like magic, we are still drawn to the idea of understanding quasi-obsessive behaviors towards money (such as the ones shown by the Emperor and by Gretchen) *as individual moral failings* i.e. to ‘individualize’ them, overlooking the structural factors that bear on their behavior and significantly limit the range of their choices. In this way, Binswanger’s reading of the text itself – or so one might say – is a useful reminder of the relevance of the Goethean text, albeit not in the way that Binswanger himself intended it to be: it serves as a reminder of how natural it seems for our moral intuitions to ‘moralize’ about money without attending to its structural power in bourgeois society.

Now, I called all of this a ‘suggestion’ for an interpretation (instead of simply ‘an interpretation’), because of course some of the details of Goethe’s argument are still missing. So far, after all, I have largely

focused on the reasons why reading *Faust* as a traditional moral warning about money is misguided, and on the passages/figures of the text (such as the Emperor and Gretchen) that initially seemed congenial to such a reading. But we still have to say a little bit more *in general* about what reading of *Faust* – and its position on money – might be correct, and why we have reasons to endorse it. It is, therefore, time to approach Goethe’s view more in general and on its own terms.

II. Goethe’s view: the structural power of money in bourgeois society

So, what is Goethe’s underlying position on money in *Faust*? In order to unfold his view, I think it might be worth attending to no less than five brief, interrelated points. The first point is a basic structural economic observation which we have already touched upon above, but which still deserves to be spelled out in full: Goethe holds the view that, due to the increasing diversity, scope and anonymity of modern society, the exchange of goods and services can no longer be based, in any significant way, on trust or shared value. While, in previous social settings, it might have been possible to command such goods and services based on an *appeal to shared non-monetary value* (e.g. appeal to membership in the same religious community or the same political community) or, at least, based on an *appeal to interpersonal trust* (esp. trust in future reciprocation), those kinds of appeals do not longer command goods/services in a more diverse and anonymous society. It is against this background, as we already saw above, that the Emperor is not able to appeal to e.g. certain shared political goals (e.g. the glory of the Empire, membership in a political party such as “the Ghibelline and the Guelph” (ln. 4845, trans. modified)) in order to engage the services of his allies or of his military, since such an appeal would presuppose a shared framework of non-monetary value that simply does not reliably exist anymore (“And [political] parties, though they may call themselves this or that, can today no longer be trusted” ln. 4841-2, trans. modified). Similarly, as we already learn earlier in *Faust*, even the economic exchange in smaller communities (in particular: in the local community Gretchen lives in) no longer runs primarily on trust and shared commitments (ln. 2786-87), as these communities, one suspects, diversify with people moving into them and out of them at a higher pace.

What fills this gap, and this is the second point to attend to in this context, is money. Unlike trust²⁶ or shared non-monetary values, Goethe thinks money can command goods and services from others even in completely anonymous contexts, since its value – by definition – is not tied to any evaluative context: it

²⁶ Goethe does not seem to consider that there is a complicated way in which even money itself still relies on an attenuated form of intersubjective trust (for example, and most importantly, trust in the state issuing the currency). It is important to note, though, that Goethe’s portrayal of the progressing ‘financialization’ of human exchange retains much plausibility, even if this qualification would have been taken into account. (For an analysis of this nexus between social trust and money see e.g. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 21-42).

is *abstract* value, which means that its value is, by and large, context-independent and does not turn on shared bonds or shared evaluative commitments of any kind. The aforementioned relationships between the Emperor and his subjects or between Gretchen's mother and the other members of her local community here tell the tale: in lieu of appeals to trust or non-monetary values, *money* has taken the role of *the* central facilitator here, becoming not just 'a' medium of exchange, but '*the*' medium of exchange: not just an optional tool for commanding goods and services on par with other such tools, but a *necessary and unavoidable* tool without which these types of goods/services could not be obtained in the first place. Goethe here has Gretchen summarize the situation early on in *Faust*, when she exclaims: "Alas, for gold strives / On gold depends / Everything. Woe is us! (*Nach Golde drängt / Am Golde hängt / Doch alles. Ach, wir Armen!*)" (ln. 2801-04, trans. modified).

This immediately brings us to the third point that is worth attending to in this context: namely that, given money's role as an unavoidable, and not merely optional, facilitator of obtaining goods and services, individuals have to adjust their relationship towards money. After all: since *only* money can reliably command goods and service in exchange, and such exchange is necessary for the satisfaction of most needs and desires (especially under conditions of an ever-progressing division of labor in modern society!), money naturally takes center stage in our lives. No matter what we want, when we want it and from whom we want it, money is the gatekeeper: the *condition sine qua non* of both need-satisfaction and desire-fulfillment.

This, however, means that certain behaviors (such as thinking about money constantly or sacrificing other non-monetary for the sake of money) have now become *structural requirements of modern life*, and as such are perfectly normalized, even though they might seem – from a more old-fashioned or detached perspective – the epitome of a problematic obsession with money. Take the constant thinking about money: with money as *the* central gatekeeper to satisfying our needs and desires, thinking about money has become a *de facto* universal requirement of instrumental rationality, no matter what our needs and desires are. In contrast to a world where goods and services can be commanded through other avenues (e.g. appeals to interpersonal trust or shared non-monetary value), money now requires a kind of deliberative omnipresence which it did not require previously.

Goethe illustrates this deliberative omnipresence very nicely, when – throughout *all* of *Faust*, not merely in describing such figures as the Emperor or Gretchen – he has money exert a kind of magical force on conversations between adults, betraying that money is perpetually 'on their minds'. Independently of who is involved, and in what context they are speaking, money ultimately becomes the topic of conversation: Goethe's *Faust* has academic conversations gravitate towards money (ln. 1877), conversations between neighbors (ln. 2865f.), conversations between political leaders (ln. 4812f.) and conversations between their political subjects (ln. 6145-6173). Whenever adults speak with one another, Goethe suggests, the topic of money is *virtually inescapable*, showing the kind of presence that it has in

individual consciousness. (And, indeed, while this kind of omnipresence, when looked at from a distance, should certainly strike us as obsessive – imagine if a different topic occurred almost inevitably in all of our conversations with all our possible interlocutors! – it is now so normalized that, for a modern reader, it does not even register as particularly strange or unusual).

Or take the sacrificing for money: in a world where money is the gatekeeper for the satisfaction of needs and desires, we do not only need to give it our persistent mental attention (see above), but we also systematically need to give up other non-monetary values for it. After all: given the role it plays, money holds a *de facto* conditional priority over other values – giving up *some* non-monetary values for the sake of money is, in other words, a requirement for being able to realize *any* of them. Of course: in an economic-social world in which appeals to shared non-monetary values or to interpersonal trust can command significant goods, this would not be true – but those appeals, or so at least Goethe thinks, have lost much of their commanding power.

This dynamics is also the subtext of various scenes throughout *Faust* (e.g. in the first half of the *Charade*), where Goethe shows ordinary folk immediately ready to sacrifice something valuable to them for money (e.g. such as, in the context of the *Charade* scene, their personal safety, ln. 6100 ff.) – but not because, somewhat implausibly, they are *all* corrupt money-lovers, but rather because they have come to be part of a social system that has systematically normalized this kind of behavior and indeed requires it in many instances. In that way, the point is that this dynamic is not a form of mass-irrationality, but rather precisely an illustration of exactly *what is rational* under current economic circumstances.

Now, of course, saying that some of these quasi-obsessive behaviors have now become requirements of deliberation and action under modern economic circumstances, and as such are normalized, does not obliterate *any* room for individual differences: some of us clearly might resist the pressures of money more firmly than others. To put it in the terms of Goethe's text: not everyone is, of course, a character like Gretchen's neighbor Marthe, who overtly and basically without any qualms flouts her own materialism (Upon hearing of her husband's death, her first reaction is to deplore the lack of an inheritance: "What! No old metal, not some jewelry?" (ln. 2933)). Yet the point is that even those of us who subscribe to and emphasize non-monetary values in their lives, and who would probably strongly reject (even with a certain sense of moral self-righteousness perhaps) the suggestion that they 'love' money, still will give money a surprisingly central role in deliberation and action. Indeed, Goethe's text is challenging those of us who think of ourselves as 'not very attached' to money to reflect on *how much of our lives*, both in terms of our thinking and in terms of our action, is in actuality still devoted to money, and how much in our lives we are still sacrificing for it in terms e.g. of our time and of our wellbeing. The answer to such critical self-examination, or so Goethe's text strongly suggests, is that it is a whole lot.

Goethe expresses this structural power of money in society – and this is the fourth point to attend to in this context – also through what is, as we will see, a conscious re-interpretation of the metaphor of money having become ‘a god’ in society. Indeed, this kind of image – in the spirit of the biblical story of the ‘Golden Calf’²⁷ – is often taken to imply precisely the kind of moral warning that we have already discussed above: the kind of moral warning that urges human beings not to get too attached to money and that conveys judgements on those who have become so attached (just in the way in which the Israelites face divine judgment after having chosen the ‘Golden Calf’ as their God in the biblical story). But in Goethe’s text it takes on a fundamentally different, and in some sense indeed contrary significance.

To start with, it is worth noting how frequently and how prominently Goethe returns to this metaphor of money having become a god in different parts of his text. Indeed, the image occurs in all three mythological languages (Germanic, Classical and Christian) that are spoken throughout the text: money appears as ‘Lord Mammon’ in the Walpurgisnight scene (drawn from Germanic mythology, ln. 3934), money appears as Lord Pluto in the *Charade* scene (drawn from Classical mythology, ln. 5622) and money is analogized to the Christian God in the dialogue that Gretchen has with herself in her chambers, when she laconically analogizes money to the *summum bonum* (ln. 2801-04). Moreover, Goethe underlines the divinity of money indirectly by attributing several qualities to money that are traditionally associated with divinity, such as, most prominently, the quality to transform anything into anything else (ln. 1820f., a quality that, especially against the context of Classical Greek and Roman mythology, is a hallmark of the divine).

However, in Goethe’s text, the divinity of money is meant to be understood precisely *not* as implying a kind of moral warning about making the *right* choices vis-a-vis money (à la the story of the Golden Calf) – but, instead, Goethe’s text presents a conscious re-appropriation of this metaphor as a symbol for how little human choices still matter in the face of money. This becomes particularly perspicuous in the passages such as the *Charade* in which Goethe has money personified as Lord Pluto, pulling the strings behind the back of individuals, making them move in ways that they do not always fully understand, control or reflectively grasp (e.g. ln. 5715ff.). Indeed, in that way, the *Charade* seems almost construed as a conscious modern response to the story of the Golden Calf, just as we saw the story of Goethe’s Emperor figure as a conscious modern response to the story of King Midas; whereas in the story of the Golden Calf, gold is the passive object of devotion, in the *Charade* it becomes the active master of ceremony²⁸.

²⁷ Indeed, prior to the *Charade*, Mephisto himself invites this parallel by invoking the ‘golden calves’ in ln. 5041.

²⁸ This transformation of money into a master of ceremony here is to be understood formally, since – within the context of the *Charade* – Pluto literally replaces the herald that was meant to manage the *Charade*: as the heralds power wanes, Pluto’s power grows (see ln. 5757-5858).

Of course, this all presses us to raise a fifth, and last, point: on Goethe's view, what *can* be and *should* be done about the relationship between money and human beings? For the moral tales, the answer to the question of what 'can' and what 'should' be done is as easy as it is identical: human agents should withdraw, or withhold, their devotion from money, thereby saving themselves and saving others around them. But for Goethe, the answers to the questions of 'can' and 'should' are not so simple anymore, precisely because they are no longer strictly identical: on the one hand, Goethe clearly portrays the present situation as in some sense threatening and in need of change. After all: even if the reduction of individual agency comes with a reduction of individual responsibility, it also comes, by the very same token, with a reduction of freedom and autonomy. Indeed, there is something distinctly and intentionally horrifying about the way that Goethe has Lord Pluto possess human subjects in the *Charade* scene, showing a lack of self-control and will in the face of money. So, while there is a way in which Goethe's views moves the blame off individual agents, it moves it towards the economic-structural system: individual behavior is no longer the central problem, but the social system very clearly is.

Yet, on the other hand, while the situation seems intentionally horrifying in the way just described, the Goethean narrative, by the very same token, actively undermines our confidence in the fact that it *could* be changed. After all: if it is indeed true that our agency is curtailed vis-a-vis money, then – of course – it is also questionable whether we are still able to employ that agency in order to change the structural position that money has acquired. Indeed, if we follow Goethe's analysis, the very same fact that makes money's status in modern society so problematic (its structural power) also undermines the very possibility of this problem being resolved. That way, the reader is actively led to wonder whether there is *anything* that could be done, given the social and economic form of life that we have come to inhabit, to curtail money's structural power and to change precisely the kind of state that Goethe himself tells us is detrimental to our freedom²⁹ (and occasionally leads us, behind our backs, to set ourselves on fire).

Goethe's view, hence, ends in purposeful ambivalence between the implicit acknowledgement of a need for change and the admission of the limitations of individual agency vis-a-vis the structural power of money in contemporary society. As we will see – when we now shift from explaining Goethe's view on its own terms to explaining its historical significance – it is precisely this underlying ambivalence that allowed Goethe's view to exercise influence on such *different views* as the revolutionary perspective of a Karl Marx and the fatalistic-conservative perspective of an Oswald Spengler. Depending on which element

²⁹ In this context, I disagree with Michael Jaeger when he argues that the text formulates a therapeutic "corrective" to modern economic circumstances, represented by Philemon's and Baucis' form of life (Michael Jaeger, *Global Player Faust oder das Verschwinden der Gegenwart. Zur Aktualität Goethes*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2019 orig. 2013, 73 and 88-91). Rather, Philemon and Baucis' primitive hut serves as a reminder that whatever value their form of life possesses stands *outside* of the current economic world and is therefore beyond our grasp: trying to reach for it, and integrate their form of life in ours, only brings horrific and somewhat unintended destruction (ln. 11310-11357).

of the Goethean ambivalence is being foregrounded (his acknowledgment of a need for change or his admission of the limitations of individual agency vis-a-vis money under current economic conditions), Goethe's view can become a stepping stone for different approaches to money, to the social role it plays and, most importantly, to how that social role can and should be changed.

III. The historical significance of Goethe's position

Goethe's *Faust* is one of those texts which were canonized even in Goethe's own life-time. This, of course, is in part due to the larger-than-life status of its author: Goethe was a revered public intellectual in his time, so much so that the beginning of the 19th century was contemporaneously referred to as *Goethezeit* or the 'Goethean age'. Against that background, it seems – even without having yet looked at the historical and textual details – plausible that Goethe's philosophical positions, like the one that he took towards money in *Faust*, would exercise some kind of intellectual influence on the thinkers writing in and after Goethe's time in Germany. After all: *especially Faust*, Goethe's most famous work, was frequently quoted and performed in 19th century Germany, so much so that it is reasonable to regard it as a kind of shared intellectual background for intellectuals writing at that time³⁰. (It is tempting to say, in this context, that Goethe exerted an influence over the 19th century German-speaking world in the same way in which Shakespeare or Milton exercise influence over the English-speaking world today, but even this analogy – on some consideration – seems misleading and uncharitable to Goethe. After all: Goethe was perceived as influential and contemporary in his time, not a mere 'classic' to cite, but a living intellectual position to engage with and take up).

Yet, despite this *prima facie* case for Goethe's influence on German philosophy in the 19th century, Goethe's influence – particularly in social and political philosophy, including the philosophy of money – is still not often and not very carefully investigated. The literature on Marx's view of money is a good case in point here: often potential connections to Goethe are not even pursued or subjected to investigation³¹, since there is an implicit sense that Goethe belongs to the realm of poetry and literature, but not to the realm of serious philosophy. In the vein, even explicit references to Goethe (and we will such references below) are often only noted peripherally and in passing, whereas even only implicit references to 'real'

³⁰ For a helpful history of Faust performances in Germany, see Julius Petersen, *Goethes Faust auf der deutschen Bühne. Eine Jahrhundertbetrachtung* (Leipzig: Quelle&Mayer, 1929).

³¹ Jonathan Sperber, for example, doesn't mention Goethe at all in his introductory "Marx on Money", and even in Anitra Nelson's monographic *Marx's Concept of Money*, there is only one parenthetical reference to Goethe. See Jonathan Sperber, "Marx on Money," in *Money in the German-Speaking Lands*, ed. by Mary Lindemann and Jared Poley (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2017), 173-185 and Anitra Nelson, *Marx's Concept of Money* (London: Routledge, 1999), 20.

philosophers (such as Aristotle) and social theorists (such as Moses Hess) are given much more attention³². But this way of drawing the boundaries between philosophy, poetry and economics appears anachronistic when speaking about intellectual culture in 19th century Germany (and, in this particular case, appear especially out of touch with the way that Marx himself – famously unconstrained by the boundaries of academic disciplines – operated).

So, what does the evidence say, once we actually attend to the connections? To start with the basics: Marx knew Goethe, and especially Goethe's *Faust*, exceedingly well. Visitors to Marx and his family in London recalled him reciting the role of Mephisto from memory and concluded *Faust* to be "the work he liked best in the whole of German literature"³³. Marx's early literary attempts also reflect an intense intellectual engagement with *Faust*: at one point he composes a dramatic fragment that seems, in some respects, Marx's own version of *Faust*³⁴. And, indeed, this appreciation – this is important to stress here – did not only extend to a general literary level. It did include, very specifically, the *societal and political insights* that Marx thought were contained in *Faust*. In a (now widely forgotten) review of a volume on Goethe, published in the 1840s in the *Deutsche Brüssler Zeitung*³⁵, Marx argues that Goethe had – like the protagonist of his *Faust* – two souls within himself: one was the soul of the political administrator and bourgeois intellectual that rose to power and prominence in Weimar, the other was the soul of the true genius that had insight into the oppressive economic structures of bourgeois society. And it was the *latter* that expressed itself in *Faust*, Marx argued here.

From that perspective, it is not surprising that Goethe's *Faust* and the discussion of economic topics contained therein (such as money) would be an important – and, as we will see: explicitly acknowledged – influence on Marx's own analysis of these issues, as he starts to deliberate about them in the 1840s. His 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* make this pretty clear. We can already see this if we abstract from any explicit text references for a moment, and just focus on conceptual parallels. After all: the most basic insight in Marx's view, just as it is in Goethe, is that, under modern economic circumstances, money has become *structurally* problematic: the social and economic circumstances require that individuals show some quasi-obsessive behavior towards money – e.g. make it the topic of their constant deliberation, sacrifice for it etc. – independently, by and large, of their present choices. Indeed Marx casts this

³² David McLellan, for example, attributes the insights about money's divinity and structural power – discussed below – largely to Marx's readings of Hess's essay *Über das Geldwesen* (David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1969), esp. 154-155). Indeed, McLellan charges Marx, in effect, with a kind of plagiarism and speculates that Hess felt the same way (Ibid.). But in light of the analysis presented here, this doesn't seem fully convincing: Marx himself here references Goethe and Shakespeare as his intellectual dialogue partners (rather than Hess), and we have no *prima facie* to suspect Marx to be dishonest in his own reading notes.

³³ This anecdote is reported in S.S. Prawer, *Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 327.

³⁴ Prawer, *Marx and World Literature*, 16-17.

³⁵ Cit. in Max Grundwald, *Goethe und die Arbeiter* (Dresden Kaden, 1912), 22f.

structuralist insight in the same metaphor of ‘deification’ that Goethe had, as we have seen, also consciously reappropriated for *Faust*: just as in Goethe’s text, money is portrayed as a quasi-divine force in human affairs, where this “visible divinity” (MEW EB I, 565³⁶) and “divine power” (Ibid.) is understood not as moral exhortation for human beings – but as a symbol for the lack of autonomy that individuals face vis-a-vis money in contemporary society. Under current economic circumstances, Marx argues, the progressing ‘financialization’ of the exchange of goods and services makes it so that participation in social life requires a kind of practical devotion to money. Money, after all, is “the bond of all bonds (*das Band aller Bande*)” (Ibid.) which “can dissolve and bind all ties” (Ibid.), such that ‘tying’ ourselves into the social world requires a practical devotion to this “true binding agent– the chemical power of society” (Ibid.).

Indeed, just as we saw in Goethe, Marx pairs this insistence on the structural power of money in modern society with a *distinct critique* of moral attitudes that have not yet caught up with the structural conditions of modern life: a critique of “avarice (*Habsucht*)” (MEW EB I, 550) among the rich, he argues, reflects a fundamentally outdated consciousness fueled by “romantic, anti-industrial memories (*romantische, anti-industrielle Erinnerungen*)” (MEW EB I, 556)– since, under modern conditions, the problem isn’t individual avarice or greed, but the underlying economic practices of exchange and production. (It’s hard not to see this broadside against this individualistic critique of avarice foreshadow Marx’s and Engel’s meta-critique of various forms of ‘critiques of capitalism’ in the *Communist Manifesto*, esp. their critique of so-called “conservative or bourgeois socialism” (MEW IV, 459-493). Here, the position is that these alternative critiques are often just dangerous vehicles that feign a certain concern with capitalism, but actually obscure the power dynamics as it exists under capitalism, thereby helping capitalism thrive).

But we do not have to merely rely on these kinds of conceptual parallels to establish intellectual influence here. As we have already alluded to, Marx himself tells us explicitly that Goethe’s *Faust* is one of the texts – along, importantly, with Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* – that Marx worked through to arrive at this view of the structural power of money in society. Indeed, in the 1844 manuscripts, Marx mentions explicitly that he regards Shakespeare and Goethe as important sources of the view that money has now a *structurally powerful status in society* i.e. the status of a God, where this divinity is precisely understood along the structuralist lines described above. Marx even makes a point to directly go back to the text of *Faust*, when he illustrates that very power: quoting lines 1820-1829 from *Faust* I, Marx draws out an interpretation of “[this] passage from Goethe (*der goethischen Stelle*)” (MEW EB I, 564) in which he with

³⁶ Marx’s works here are quoted according to the *Werke* edition prepared by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1965-1975)) and their *Ergänzungsbände*. Translations are my own, but I have profited from consulting the translation of the *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts* by Martin Milligan, available in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York/London: Norton, 1978 orig. 1972), 66-125.

great precision describes Goethe's analysis of the transformative power of money in society as one of the many ways in which the structural power of money manifests.

None of this, of course, is to say that Goethe's influence on Marx takes a mechanic form i.e. that Marx simply takes over and replicates Goethe's – or for that matter: Shakespeare's – analysis of the structural power of money. Rather, the influence here takes an organic form, where a certain idea is taken up, but significantly transformed by being put both in a new context and to a new purpose³⁷. Indeed: In Marx's hands, the idea of money's structurally divine status in society comes to be combined with the general idea, associated with Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion, that any *divinity can be understood as a form of alienated human power*. Making this connection allows Marx to articulate the point about the man-made divinity of money in the language of *alienation* (a language largely absent e.g. from Goethe's discussion). For Marx, money's divine power and “visible divinity” (MEW EB I, 565), hence, is not just an outgrowth of modern social and economic conditions, but something more specific: it is a *transference* of human power that alienates that power into a thing (namely into money), leaving human beings themselves powerless: “[Money] is the alienated potential of humanity (*das entäußerte Vermögen der Menschheit*)” (Ibid.).

Conceiving of money in these terms allows Marx to understand the structurally powerful status of money as merely *one instance* of a much *more general phenomenon*: namely of human alienation under what he went on to call ‘capitalism’. On this view, the structuralist understanding of the power of money no longer stands alone, but comes to be ‘tied into’ a much larger critique of the modern conditions of production and consumption – as well as into the *revolutionary program that is associated with this kind of critique*. Indeed, in Marx, the Goethean dilemma between the need for change and the recognition of the limitations of individual agency has come to be decisively resolved towards ‘change’. As Marx's *On the Jewish Question* (written shortly before the 1844 *Manuscripts*) makes clear, Marx argues that revolutionary action indeed can, and should, change the economic system of alienation and the structurally powerful status of money within it (MEW I, 377 and *passim*). The key here is that – and this becomes, of course, even clearer with the *Communist Manifesto* – if individuals just combine their agency into a *collective subject*, the structural powers limiting the agency of each can be *overcome together*. In other words: while individuals acting on their own would indeed be caught in the net of money, as Goethe's story shows, the same is not necessarily true for the collective revolutionary subject of the proletariat. Here, or so at least Marx and Engels suggest, lies the possibility to break out from the direction of money's structural powers.

³⁷ It is worth noting, also, that Marx's views about money, and its relationship to capitalism, do not remain static over the course of his life. It would be a worthwhile project to see how Marx's relationship to Goethe (and to Goethe's view of money) develops over time – a project, for example, that would have to analyze the various references to *Faust* strewn through *Capital*. I will not undertake this project here.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, in Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, things are, in some ways, astoundingly similar, given the underlying political differences that are at work here. In the first instance, Spengler – just like Marx – is very clear both about his knowledge and about his deep appreciation of Goethe's work. Indeed, in the introduction to *Decline* (for which he chooses a quotation from Goethe as an epitaph), Spengler tells us that most 19th century historians and philosophers have not been able to untether themselves from a kind of myopic view of their circumstances, but that Goethe alone is able to rise above the level of his contemporaries in an unprecedented manner (UdA, 37³⁸). In doing so, Goethe develops a comprehensive view of the inner workings of history – and with that, of the present – that Spengler judges deeply impressive: “No general, no diplomat, and certainly no philosopher, has felt the becoming of history so deeply (*hat Geschichte so unmittelbar werden gefühlt*)” (Ibid.). No wonder, then, that references to *Faust* become a kind of *Leitmotif* of the whole text, in which Spengler uses *Faust* as a guide to modern culture (e.g. UdA, 136 and *passim*.)

But not only is Spengler explicit about his knowledge and appreciation of Goethe, his view on the status of money in contemporary society – itself a prominent topic of analysis in *Decline* (UdA, esp. 1145-1182)³⁹ – also bears this out explicitly. Once again, one of the basic theses here is, just as we saw it in Goethe and in Marx, that contemporary economic practices have given money a structurally powerful status and that this ultimately requires certain quasi-obsessive behaviors towards money, even if one doesn't choose them: a “dictatorship of money (*Diktatur des Geldes*)” (UdA, 1156) indeed. And just as we saw in Marx, Spengler sees this idea of the modern economy prefigured in *Faust*: Most prominently, Spengler shows himself to be particularly impressed here with the idea that the ceaseless creation of money based on pure *fiat* – which he takes to be another characteristic of the contemporary economic order – seems already foreshadowed in *Faust* (and, in particular, in the paper money episode!), which leads him to call this money “Faustian” throughout his whole book (UdA, 1177 and *passim*). (Spengler, of course, traces these kinds of Faustian elements through all parts of modern civilization, with Faustian money only being one of those instances – which highlights, from yet another direction, the significance of the Goethean text for Spengler's work).

Just as with Marx, however, Goethe's influence on Spengler's analysis of money is not mechanic, but rather organic: the insight into the structural power of money is transformed by being put in a new context and to a new purpose. Whereas in Marx's analysis, this new context was Marx's critique of

³⁸ Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* is cited after Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Munich: DTV, 2003 orig. 1972) which itself is based on the 1923 edition of the text. All translations are mine.

³⁹ For a helpful recent analysis on Spengler's view of money and the economy, see Max Otte, “Oswald Spengler und der moderne Finanzkapitalismus,” and Helge Peukert, “Die Wirtschaft und das Geld im Werk Spenglers,” both in *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie. Eine multiperspektivische Annäherung*, ed. by Sebastian Fink and Robert Rollinger (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 357-394 and 394-435 respectively.

alienation under capitalism, for Spengler it is his general *morphology of historical forms and their rise and decline* i.e. his “morphology of world history (*Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*)” (UdA, 7). Indeed, in Spengler’s hands, the contemporary status of money in bourgeois society comes to be another symptom of the fact that ‘the West’ has entered a state of decadence and decline: a state of decadence and decline previously seen and in fact structurally prefigured e.g. in Ancient Rome (which had, among other things, also experienced its own form of *Geldherrschaft* (UdA, 1171)). Indeed, Spengler argues, that the structurally powerful status of money in society – just like the decline of philosophy, religion and poetry he diagnoses in modern society – heralds the titular *Decline of the West*.

From that perspective, the Goethean ambivalence between structuralist fatalism and change – which we saw resolved towards ‘change’ in Marx – has become resolved towards ‘fatalism’ in Spengler. In a remarkable passage at the beginning of the work (UdA, 55), Spengler draws out the fatalistic conclusions of his view in fairly clear terms: the point of his morphological analysis, he says here, is not to inspire a kind of conservative revolution against the overall movement of history. Rather, all that it means to give us – and, according to Spengler, all that it *can* give us, given the overwhelming force of the historical structure – is some sort of self-consciousness about the kind of historical, social and political process that we are all undergoing: “Until now, one was at liberty to hope from the future what one may. Where there are no facts, emotions rule. But from now on [i.e. with the publication of Spengler’s analysis in *Decline* – TH], it will be a duty for everyone to learn what *can* happen and what *will* happen, with *the inevitable necessity of fate*” (UdA, 55, emphasis mine). More than that lies beyond the reach our agency.

We can conclude. Despite its lyrical form and its outwardly esoteric content, Goethe’s *Faust* develops a comprehensive and consistent view of money – at the heart of which is an analysis of its structural power in bourgeois society, paired with a critique of contemporary moral attitudes and intuitions (‘money moralism’) that have not yet caught up with the structural conditions of modern life. Influencing the later tradition in social philosophy, this view – as we have been able to show – gives an important intellectual impulse to Marx and Spengler, who respond to this impulse in radically different ways: Marx with a call for collective action towards change, Spengler with a fatalistic reconciliation to the forces of history. Against this background, no one should doubt the contribution of Goethe’s *Faust* to the philosophy of money and to its history.

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