

Every Man Has His Price: Money and Slavery in Immanuel Kant's Doctrine of Right

SEAN CAPENER

ABSTRACT: Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy is organized around an exclusive disjunction of dignity or price, equality or equivalence. In his 1797 *Doctrine of Right*, however, Kant places enslaved black people on the wrong side of this disjunction when he speculates that their status as currency may offer insight into the origins of money. Recent work in black studies has begun to speculate on the link between blackness and money in modernity, and this paper draws attention to Kant's role as an unlikely and unwitting precursor for monetary theories of blackness. Precisely in his attempt to secure the priceless and unconditional character of freedom and dignity, it argues, Kant ends up demonstrating the positional value of both.

KEY WORDS: Kant, money, slavery, dignity, freedom

The rationality of the rational has never been limited, as some have tried to make us believe, to calculability, to reason as calculation, as ratio, as account, an account to be settled or an account to be given. . . . The role that "dignity" (Würde), for example, plays in the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals belongs to the order of the incalculable.
—Jacques Derrida (2003: 25)

Every man has his price, for which he sells himself.
—Immanuel Kant (1998: 6:38)

I

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy is famously organized around an exclusive disjunction. Everything that falls under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Ends "has either *price* or a *dignity*" (Kant 2012: 4:434).¹ *Tertium non datur*; nothing can have both a price and a dignity, and nothing can have neither. According to Kant, it is the capacity to engage in self-directed moral reason—autonomy—that invests human beings with dignity, and this dignity is a matter of "worth"—*Würde*. "Worth," he will insist, is both priceless and incalculable. Price, on the other hand, is a matter of "value"—*Werth*. Unlike worth, value is eminently calculable; it is even defined by its availability for calculation. The value of anything that has value, Kant tells us, is always relative to the value of other things. "What has a price," Kant writes, "can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity" (ibid.). Because they have dignity, human beings are utterly incomparable to one another. They are equals in the sense that they are equally irreplaceable. Because they have a price, however, goods and services invite comparison with anything and everything else. They are equivalents in the sense that they can be replaced by anything whose value is equal to their own. But to judge two things to be equivalent, Kant thinks, there must be a measure against which to judge them. In a word: there must be money.

At a key moment in the Doctrine of Right, Kant places enslaved black people on the wrong side of this disjunction. He offers them as an example of a commodity (*Waare*) that can pass for money:

But how is it possible that what were at first only goods finally became money? This would happen if a powerful, opulent *spendthrift* who at first used a material for the adornment and splendour of his attendants (his court) (e.g., gold, silver, copper, or a kind of beautiful seashell, *cowries*; or as in the Congo a kind of matting called *makutes*, in Senegal iron ingots, or on the Coast of Guinea even black slaves), that is, if a *ruler* came to levy taxes on his subjects in this material (as goods), and in turn paid with this same material those his demand moved to industry in procuring it, in accordance with exchange regulations with them and among them (on a market or exchange). — In this way only (so it seems to me) could a certain merchandise have become a lawful means of exchange of the industry of subjects with one another, and thereby also become the wealth of the nation, that is, *money*. (Kant 2017: 6:288, translation modified)

The context of the passage is crucial. "Black slaves" (*Negersklaven*) are not simply one example among others. Instead, Kant tells us that they offer nothing less than a window into the very origins of money. Slavery, it seems—the utter confusion

of dignity and price, equality and equivalence—has something to tell us about how it is that money comes to be money in the first place.

From its inception as an intellectual and institutional formation in the North American university, black studies has been deeply attuned to the idea that there is a close relationship between blackness, slavery, and monetary value. In the words of Hortense Spillers (1987: 74), black studies seeks to comprehend what it means to claim a community and a kinship that “can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations”—that is, by money. More recently, however, many black studies scholars have suggested that blackness might not simply signal vulnerability to the movement of money but might be a kind of money itself (Judy 2021). The truth of Frantz Fanon’s chiasm—“you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (Fanon 2004: xx)—may not rest on the fact that whiteness *is* money, but on the fact that it *has* money: blackness. As Taija Mars McDougall (2022) puts it, this realization calls for nothing less than a “monetary theory of blackness”—one that can illuminate the appearance of a homology between the two terms. In this respect, Kant begins to look like an unwitting and unlikely precursor for contemporary developments.

In what follows I offer a reading of Kant’s speculative story about the origins of money. The aims of this reading are modest. I am not trying to offer a critique of Kant’s practical philosophy, even if the reading I put forward could serve in support of one. Nor am I trying to indict Kant for his philosophical racism, even if my reading could be put to work for that task as well. What I am trying to do is put myself in a position to be able to answer the question of what it is, exactly, that invests the figure of the black slave with the philosophical currency it so clearly holds for Kant’s account. Why, in other words, does the border between price and dignity appear to collapse into indecision here, at the precise moment when Kant is attempting to account for the genesis of price itself?

At first glance, it is tempting to say that one of Kant’s examples is simply not like the others. The black slave, a reader might object, is a human being who should be afforded dignity. Instead, they have been mistaken for the bearer of a price. This could be Kant’s mistake, or it could simply be one that Kant dutifully reports to his readers as a matter of historical fact. The very existence of other examples on his list seems to attest to the fact that the relationship between money and slavery is extrinsic in character. Money obviously need not arise out of slavery, the reader might insist; after all, Kant tells us that it just as characteristically arises out of the desire for precious metals and decorative goods. As tempting as this objection is, it requires the reader to ignore the relationship between Kant’s most troubling example and the examples that precede it. Slavery, it turns out, is the red thread that ties the rest together.

Every currency Kant mentions is noteworthy for its significance to the business of slaving on the West African coast, so much so that Kant cannot have chosen

them at random. Promises of gold and silver famously drove European commercial interests to every corner of the globe. Readers could be forgiven for failing to intuit any special link between the mania for these metals and the overseas trade in African slaves. Copper money, however, would have been most familiar to European audiences in the 1790s in the form of *manillas*, or metal bracelets that had served as currency in a number of West African societies since at least the initial incursion of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century (Einzig 1949: 151). Money cowries—*Monetaria moneta*—were produced in the Maldives and circulated in a number of Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean societies. Like *manillas*, they would have been familiar to Kant's readers mainly for their ubiquity as international currencies across West Africa (Hogendorn 1986). Both were carried by European trading vessels almost exclusively as a means of payment for the purchase of slaves. So-called "voyage iron" and cloth currencies like *makutes* were less international and more local in character than *manillas* and cowries, circulating mainly in the vicinity of what are now Senegal and Angola, respectively (Evans and Rydén 2018; Martin 1986). They too would have been familiar to Kant's audience primarily as the money of the slave trade. So when Kant sets off and emphasizes his last example—"even black slaves"—he is drawing attention to a chain that already links the examples that precede it, if only implicitly. Kant's selections ensure that his story about money has been a story about slavery all along. And not just any slavery—the enslavement of black West Africans, specifically. Kant does not project his origin story backwards across the gap of history or prehistory. He tells it in the present rather than the past tense, relative to himself and his audience.

Kant's statement that it seems to him that this is the only way that what is not yet money could become money signals something important about what is at stake. It can only happen like this; it can happen no other way. It is *necessary*. Somehow, money and slavery are inextricably bound up with one another. But to understand where to locate this bind, we must be careful about questions of register. What Kant offers in the passage is a speculative example of an empirical circumstance. Nothing he says in it can be taken as an attempt to define money in its essence. If there is a necessity in play, it is not a categorical or conceptual one. It is a necessity of some other kind.

At the outset of the Doctrine of Right, Kant (2017: 6:205) tells us that he is after pure, *a priori* concepts of practical reason—and pure concepts, if they are to be "pure," cannot be essentially determined by the empirical. Insofar as they can serve as a guide for practical reason, however, even pure concepts must be *applied*. Kant's insistence that there is only one way that the concept of money could come to be applied to an object thus signals that there is something of the pure concept's applicability at issue in his example, even if its definition is not. In Kant's terms, what is at stake is not the *concept* of money but its *schema*—the

imaginative procedure that makes the sensible commensurate with the intelligible, that makes the object amenable to capture by a concept (Kant 2009: B177/A138).

The passage thus entitles us to ask a number of questions. Why does Kant seem to imply that money needs slavery—or, at the very least, the circumstances that surround it? Why, despite the wall of separation he erects between prices and persons, must Kant speculate that price comes into existence as a price of people? Knowing that we are asking after a schema, not a concept, we can be a bit more precise. The question can be phrased as follows: what, exactly, is the *imaginative procedure* that Kant takes to underlie the application of the concept of money to an object? What is the link between this imaginative procedure and the institutional practice of enslavement?

II

To ask about the procedure that enables us to apply a concept, we first need to know what concept we are trying to apply. When Kant raises the question “What is Money?” in the Doctrine of Right, he tells us that price provides the key to his answer. The “intelligible concept” to which money corresponds is “the concept of a thing which, in the circulation of possessions . . . determines the price of all other things” (Kant 2017: 6:289). Without money, in other words, price would be impossible. Readers of Marx and Aristotle will find the logic immediately familiar. If twenty yards of linen and forty pounds of coffee both cost two ounces of gold, then one can infer that gold establishes a ratio of equivalence between linen and coffee by the associative property of arithmetic. If $A=B$ and $B=C$, then $A=C$; one yard of linen *equals* two pounds of coffee (Sorrentino 2019). But to establish equivalence, Kant thinks, money must be able to measure the things that money can buy. And if money is a measure, then it must be possible to establish some similarity between the many things it measures. There must be some “X” these things all have in common. Kant, working under the long shadow of early modern political economy, calls this common attribute “value,” or *Werth*. But what, exactly, is “value”? What is it about things that makes them amenable to measure in increments of price?

Kant himself gives one possible answer this question by offering a loose paraphrase of Adam Smith’s own in *The Wealth of Nations*. Things are valuable, Kant insists, just insofar as they take effort and industriousness—*Fleiß*—to make or acquire. And so money, he writes, is “the universal *means by which men exchange their industriousness with one another*” (Kant 2017: 6:287). Money, in other words, is a sign. It renders things homogenous under the category of quantity by establishing a procedure with which we can represent them in the language of number. In terms borrowed from the language of contemporary economics, this means that money is both a *unit of account* and a *store of value*. It can stand as a

sign of things other than itself because it stands for the “value” or “industry” that makes them commensurate with one another.

If we were to rest with this answer, however, we would miss something crucial about Kant’s understanding of equivalence in exchange. Equivalence—like equality—is a moral concept. It is not an empirical one. Like equality, this means that equivalence can only be postulated; it can never be known. And so when Kant (2006: 7:274) addresses money in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, for example, he begins to write that money “does not have . . . any use other than that of serving merely as a means for the exchange of human beings’ industry.” But as soon as he begins, he corrects himself. It is not the case that money *does not have* any other use, as much as Kant wants to say this. He is forced to say that money simply “should not have” any other use instead (ibid.).

This raises a critical issue. If money is meant to serve as a sign that represents value, then why is Kant forced to conclude that we can never know that it tells the truth? A possible answer can be found in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. There, he tells us that there is not just one kind of price. There are two. On the one hand, there is what Kant calls “market price.” Something has a market price so long as it satisfies “general human inclinations and needs” (Kant 2012: 4:434). The example he offers is “industry” or “diligence” in work—“*Fleiß*,” the very thing that both the *Anthropology* and the Doctrine of Right claim that money is made to measure (4:435). Money tells the truth, in other words, when it facilitates the exchange of real necessities for human flourishing. But on the other hand, there is what Kant calls “fancy price.” Something carries a fancy price if it merely satisfies “a certain taste” or “a delight in the mere purposeless play of our mental powers” (ibid.). The products of our “wit,” “imagination,” and “humor” (ibid.), he tells us, are examples of things that can be “priced” even though they can respond to no general assessment of needs. What one person finds funny will be droll to someone else—and this might even be part of why the first person finds it funny. Market prices put a number on values that are held in common or in general. Everyone, for example, needs food to live. Fancy prices put a number on desires that are positional in character. What one person will pay to enjoy a prestigious prix fixe menu, the next person very likely cannot.

The problem is that the difference between market price and fancy price is fundamentally undecidable. There are many ways to make this point, although many of the most compelling would require one to go well beyond the bounds of Kant’s own ideas (Drumm 2021). Kant’s treatment of money in the Doctrine of Right, however, offers its own way into this point. Consider the arithmetic series that we used to introduce the concept of equivalence in exchange: twenty yards of linen = two ounces of gold = forty pounds of coffee. The equation contains an unstated assumption. To be sure that any two things on the list are numerically equivalent to one another, we must first assume that they have one and only one

price—that they are numerically equivalent to themselves. Money can establish arithmetic equivalence between linen and coffee only to the extent that money is equivalent to itself: two ounces of gold = two ounces of gold. But this is exactly what Kant’s account precludes us from knowing. Gold becomes money, according to Kant, at precisely the moment that the ruler who demanded that his subjects procure it to satisfy his fancy turns around and pays for the industry it took to procure it in the very same gold. Money itself, in other words, has at least two prices: a market price and a fancy price.

This could seem contradictory on its face—after all, the very concept of money, Kant tells us, is the concept of a thing that can establish the price of other things. But just as money has two different prices, money answers to two different concepts. Money may correspond to an intelligible concept, but money is not merely intelligible in character. Money, unlike market price, is an object we meet with in experience. Whether in coins, slips of paper, or notes in a ledger, money literally passes from one person to the next. In addition to an intelligible concept, then, money must also correspond to an empirical concept. The empirical is not the intelligible, but this empirical concept must say something about what enables money to play its intelligible role. The “empirical definition” of money, Kant (2017: 6:286) writes, is “a thing that can be *used* only by being *alienated*.” Money, in other words, can represent the price of other things because it possesses a power that differs from its power to make prices—it possesses a power to procure things other than itself, to serve as a *means of payment* and *medium of exchange*.

Colin Drumm (2021: 58–61) makes a distinction that can help us. To the extent that money answers to the norms of market price, we might say that it responds to the rules of metaphor. Money represents things other than itself by representing what makes them like one another. Money is a sign of something else: value. But to the extent that money answers to the concept of fancy price, we might say that money responds to the rules of metonymy instead. In the latter case, money does not need to represent anything that objects have in common—it simply needs to promise proximity to them, to precede and follow them in a series. In this, money is not so much a *sign* as it is a *substitute*. People hold it instead of holding other things. They are willing to do so because money is liquid. Whoever has money can give it away to get something else.

The relationship Kant establishes between the power of metaphor and the power of metonymy is asymmetrical. The former is purely intelligible in character; it exerts only normative force on the latter. Metaphor restricts metonymy according to a rule. Only the latter, however, is empirical. Metonymy is the only way we encounter money in the world of appearances. Notably, it is also by way of the latter that Kant explicitly connects money to the imagination—the faculty responsible for enabling us to apply concepts by means of a schema. And so the search for money’s schema must take its point of departure from the phenomenon of fancy price.

III

Money may be a moral concept, but Kant also insists that money poses a fundamental threat to moral life. This threat is closely tied to the relationship between money and the imagination. In the *Anthropology*, Kant treats money primarily as the conduit for avarice, or the “mania for possession.” Like all “cold” passions, Kant (2006: 7:271) tells us, avarice arises from the inclination towards the capacity to influence other human beings. This inclination is not in itself morally suspect. Kant (*ibid.*) notes that it can instead coincide with prudence, the management of other people’s foolishness. The desire to cultivate the means to achieve “whatever aims” rather than some specific aim, in fact, is an inclination that aspires to the status of a rational faculty. But when the power to influence others is pursued without restraint, it makes its pursuer irrational instead. The connection between the powers we pursue and the opinions and judgments of others makes the pursuit itself vulnerable to imaginative excess. They hand us over to “inclinations of delusion” because they offer no means to distinguish “the mere opinion of others regarding the worth of things” from “real worth” (7:270).

Kant provides the first real clue to our investigation when he frames this as a problem of the relationship between master and slave. The love of money, he tells us, inculcates a “slavish disposition” in those afflicted by it (Kant 2006: 7:272). Money promises the power to influence other people; but what the pursuit of money delivers is a power with which other people can gain influence over us instead. When we will do whatever it takes to get money, Kant argues, we become slaves to our own desire for it. More importantly, by yoking ourselves to the desire for money, we enslave ourselves to anyone who can promise to fulfill it. It is as if Kant were describing an addict in search of a fix. When we get caught up in the mania for money, he argues, our choices become constrained by what others will offer us money to say or do. Like addicts, Kant suggests that those most deeply afflicted by the mania for money do not and cannot want to be cured (7:265–66). So while Kant himself does not use the word, it is worth keeping in mind that the concept of “addiction” emerges out of a metaphorical appeal to the meaning of enslavement with close parallels to Kant’s own (Rosenthal and Faris 2019; McCracken 2023).

Money’s indeterminacy sets it apart from the objects of the other manias. Honor and domination, for example, are particular means that promise particular ends. But Kant believes that money’s liquidity promises to procure anything under the sun for the person who has it, including the sorts of social status that the pursuit of honor and domination promise. “Money,” Kant (2006: 7:274) writes, “is the solution, and all doors that are closed to the man of lesser wealth open to him whom Plutus favors.” Unlike the objects of the other cold passions, money promises to stand for capacity in general. It promises to compensate for whatever its owner happens to lack, which is why Kant tells us that the elderly are the people

most likely to be afflicted by the mania for it. Money's promises, he suggests, are most appealing to those whose mental and physical capacities are already being eroded by the ravages of time. Moreover, by holding money, one holds the power to refuse to decide in advance what capacities one wishes to compensate for. For people most deluded by the desire for money, Kant (7:272) worries, hoarding it begins to appear more useful than spending it.

The idea that our passions enslave us has a long philosophical pedigree. But the idea that our passions enslave us not only to their objects, but to the people in a position to take advantage of our desire to attain them has a much shorter one (Forman 2012). The passions, according to Kant, are essentially social in character. They are directed towards other human beings and can only be satisfied by other human beings. When the passions enslave us, they enslave us to other human beings as well. Kant almost certainly comes to this idea by way of his interest in Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau (2008: 122–23) connects the passions to property, arguing that once we have established private property, human beings enter into relations of dependence on one another to such an extent that we become one another's slaves—even, perhaps especially, when we set ourselves up as masters. Like Rousseau before him, Kant's rhetorical use of the metaphor of enslavement turns on a dramatic reversal. Money promises mastery to the people who pursue it. But if they pursue it for the sake of that mastery, it will deliver slavery instead. As Rousseau (156) puts it in the second sentence of the *Social Contract*, “one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they.” Now, where there is a reversal, there must be an expectation to reverse. If money promises mastery, it must promise something in the place of a slave. So what does money promise in the slave's place?

Kant's answer cannot be other human beings—at least not directly. This is made clear by the very different treatment he gives to the manias. The mania for domination (mastery) and the mania for possession (money) both promise influence over other people. Moreover, both promise to supplement their pursuers' diminished capacities by substituting the capacities of other people in their place (Sorrentino 2023). Unsurprisingly, Kant (2006: 7:273) insists that the mania for domination is “intrinsically unjust” because it infringes on the freedom of others. Slavery reduces human beings to mere means to the master's ends and fails to respect their prerogative to pursue their own (Kant 2017: 6:241). This follows from the specific desire that Kant imagines to give rise to the mania for domination. The master, he tells us, is motivated by fear. He (*sic*) is afraid that if he does not possess the power to determine other people's choices, other people will determine his instead (Kant 2006: 7:273). If what someone wants is mastery over choice, then the only mastery that will satisfy is mastery over other beings with the power to choose. The master wants to make other people's choices into his possessions—the objects of his choice. But in contrast to the mania for mastery, Kant (7:274) tells

us that the mania for money need not appear morally reprehensible on its face. It appears insipid and banal instead. The lover of money acts in a way that denies their own dignity rather than the dignity of others, which is why the miser is *despised* instead of *feared*. None of this would make sense if Kant believed that the pursuit of money aimed to curtail other people's freedom in the same way that the pursuit of mastery does. If the pursuit of money, like the pursuit of mastery, ends up reversing a relation between master and slave, then a different slave must be at stake in the pursuit.

Kant leaves only one answer open. If money does not promise mastery over other people, then what money promises must be mastery over itself. In effect, money is a metaphor for a slave. In many places Kant seems to suggest that money really delivers what mastery merely promises. The master, for example, is afraid that he is not free if anyone else is. He is afraid that his freedom—which, for Kant is also his dignity—has a positional value. What Kant seems to suggest is that money is what prevents the master's fear from coming true. In other words: money enables us to take possession of another person's choice, but in a way that is mutually binding and, as a result, mutually free (Kant 2017: 6:247). Kant, after all, defines "right" as the conditions that guarantee the possible coexistence of people's powers of choice—conditions that can only be guaranteed by coercion. And so "strict right," he says, is the force by which people bind one another from binding one another against their wills—a paradoxical coercion not to coerce (6:231).

Like mastery, then, money enables me to make use of other people. Ideally, Kant thinks, I should do this only to meet my real human needs. In reality, no one can guarantee that I do not do it to pursue purely imaginative aims. But even if I use money to use people to pursue a delusion, money's mediation ensures that my use of people can be bounded by the requirements of strict right. Money intervenes between me and the people that I use in such a way that it ensures that any use I make of them is contingent on their own choices. Because money passes between us, other people can choose to use my choice to use them, or they can choose not to do so. But if they do, they can get money and use it to pursue their own ends. They can take my money or leave it. Money, like a slave, cannot decide what it will be used for. Money, like a slave, can be used to the point of being "used up" (Kant 2017: 6:330). But if money can substitute in place of a slave, Kant seems to suggest, then human beings do not have to.

All of this suggests some answers to both of our guiding questions. First, it offers a possible source for money's *schema* as Kant would understand it. It suggests that the imaginative procedure that enables us to apply the concept of money as a rule might be found in the imagination's power to perform acts of substitution. More specifically, in the imagination's power to substitute the promise of a thing for the thing itself. As Drumm might put it, money is schematized by the procedure of metonymy, not metaphor. If the procedures of metaphor apply, it is only after

the fact, as a rule to restrain metonymy. One need not imagine that the things money can buy have anything in common with one another, or that money has anything in common with them. One need not imagine equivalence. One only need imagine that things promise money and money promises things—one after the other, in a series. Second, it offers a possible link between substitution and slavery. Money's power to substitute for what it promises, Kant seems to suggest, incites the imagination because it promises to substitute for something specific: slaves. After all, in the arc of Kant's story, we encounter only two kinds of money: slaves and things that can buy them. Here, however, Kant seems to imply that metonymy does, in fact, bleed into metaphor. Unlike the other things money can buy, money substitutes itself for a slave not by promising to buy slaves but by serving in the slave's place—money promises to perfect slavery as if it were abolishing it (Farley 2005).

These answers, however tentative, raise a further question. The link they establish between money and slavery would seem to imply that the more money perfects itself as a metaphor, the more it makes "literal" slaves a thing of the past (Garba and Sorentino 2020). Notably, the list on which the slave appears is a list of potential money commodities, not a list of monies as such. In a sense, the hypothetical reader's initial objection was correct, but it was correct for the wrong reasons. The slave is not one example among others; the slave is a limit case that money may approach but never reach. This is, of course, a familiar trope. It lives on in contemporary critical theory as the difference between "concrete" and "abstract" or "personal" and "impersonal" domination (Postone 1993; Mau 2023). To the extent that all social relations have been subsumed under the mediation of money, the story goes, the direct and personal forms of compulsion that defined slavery have become more and more unprofitable and unnecessary (Williams 1994). The enclosure of independent means of subsistence behind the barriers of the property line has produced a society in which nearly everyone depends on the market for their subsistence instead (Aston and Philpin 1985; Wood 2017). What this describes is not a society without compulsion—a fact that Kant himself notes when he assigns the worker the role of a "passive" rather than an "active" citizen in the *Doctrine of Right* (Kant 2017: 6:314). It produces a class of people who must buy what they need to live while having nothing to sell but their capacity to work. But it describes a society in which everyone is, ostensibly, free—at least to the extent that they are constrained only by the choices on offer in the market itself and not by anyone's power to choose on their behalf. As Kant frames it, workers may not be freed from the need for employment in general, but they can always free themselves from the whims of any particular employer. The mediation of money means that they retain the power to quit (Pascoe 2022).

The question this raises is simple. If Kant thinks that metaphorical slavery makes literal slavery a thing of the past, then why does he tell his origin story in

the present tense? When Kant discusses slavery as a problem for a theory of right, he is usually inclined to discuss it in the context of Greek history or Roman law. Conversely, his references to racial chattel slavery are almost universally made in the context of pragmatic questions, rather than moral or metaphysical ones (Lu-Adler 2022). Classical slavery, Kant seems to think, is a matter for history; Atlantic slavery is a matter for anthropology. So why is the origin of money a question that directs Kant to anthropology and not to history? Why must the metaphor remain a “living” one rather than “dead”? In the space that remains, I want to propose a possible answer to this question.

IV

In addition to the fact that they are all customary currencies of the slave trade, Kant’s examples have one other thing in common. Many of the objects he mentions are the ones that inspired debates in anthropology over the question of “primitive” money throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1949, the anthropologists Paul Einzig and Alison Quiggin both published books surveying a wide variety non-metallic monies around the globe—including, but by no means limited to the slaves, shells, and *makutes* that Kant mentions in the Doctrine of Right (Einzig 1949; Quiggin 1963). The daunting array of ethnographic examples they surveyed provoked strong, sometimes hostile reactions among subsequent generations of anthropologists and economists (Maurer 2020). This hostility was not simply prompted by the sheer array of objects the two writers put forward as examples of non-Western money. Instead, it was prompted by the profusion of uses to which these “currencies” were put in their respective societies—a profusion that raised controversy about whether they should really be referred to as “money” at all.

What called into question the claim that so-called “primitive” currencies were currencies was the fact that most of them are used facilitate the exchange of goods on a market only peripherally, if at all. In many cases, these currencies are prohibited from changing hands in a market context (Dalton 1965). Their primary use is not to buy goods and services, but to represent and reproduce social relationships and obligations. Two of the most ubiquitous use cases for money objects, for example, are the negotiation of “bridewealth” and “bloodwealth.” In societies that treat marriage as a means to higher social status, there is almost always a requirement to present a monetary gift in the form of dowry or brideprice in order to ratify the formation of a new household. These gifts almost always require their givers to borrow them from a person of status. Only rarely can they be accumulated by means of purchase and sale. In many cases, the requirements of the marriage gift may even require one to borrow from every adult member of the community in order to ratify the marriage (Maurer 2020). As a result, non-

market money reproduces differences of status and standing by ensuring that one must oblige oneself to those who already possess it to join their ranks.

In Part One, Book Ten of *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes describes a similar dynamic when he discusses the meaning of dignity. “The *value* or WORTH of a man,” he writes, “is, as of all other things, his price” (Hobbes 1994: 51). This means that human dignity, or *Würde* as Kant would put it, is conditional. It is “a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another” (ibid.). Dignity must be recognized to be realized, and this means that it requires the recognition of other human beings. We give each other this recognition, Hobbes suggests, by performing acts of obedience and giving gifts that agree with our assessments of status. “To obey is to honour, because no man obeys them whom they think have no power to help or hurt them. And consequently to disobey is to *dishonour*” (52). Likewise, Hobbes (ibid.) writes that “to give great gifts to a man is to honour him, because ’tis buying of protection and acknowledging of power. To give little gifts is to dishonour, because it is but alms, and signifies an opinion of the need of small helps.”

This sort of assessment of human dignity as conditional upon the evaluation of others is exactly what Kant sets out to preclude in advance. The exclusive disjunction of dignity and price, equality and equivalence, is meant to affirm the unconditional character of moral worth. But as critics have often noted, Kant is only able to render human dignity intrinsic and unconditional and shield it from all possible calculation by excluding it from the order of possible knowledge entirely (Rose 1984).

With this in mind, we might take another look at the story Kant tells in the Doctrine of Right. At first glance, it looks more like the story Hobbes might have told than we might expect. Kant’s story is quite explicitly a story about the relationship between “small” and “large” gifts in the making of relative social status. There is neither equality nor equivalence to be found. What happens is that a rich and powerful spendthrift (*Verthuer*) gives prestige objects to his underlings (*Unterthanen*). Importantly, we know that he intends the recipients of his gifts to display them; we are told that they are needed for “adornment” (*Schmuck*) and “splendor” (*Glanz*) (Kant 2017: 6:288). The emphasis on display tells us something about the social role of the objects. On the one hand, they establish a difference of standing between their giver and their recipient, because they establish that the giver can afford to give them. On the other hand, they establish a difference of standing between their recipients and everybody else, because they display the fact that the giver has seen fit to give them to *these* people and these alone.

In keeping with the differences of standing they establish, small gifts are both preceded and followed by large gifts. In his capacity as ruler (*Landesherr*) rather than spendthrift (*Verthuer*), the giver of the gifts can demand taxes and tributes from his subjects, and he can even demand that they furnish him with the very things that he will turn around and use as gifts to reinforce his status. Importantly,

even in this second moment of Kant's story—the moment in which he tells us that the display objects have become money—this “money” cannot be in the business of establishing equivalence between commodities, because it cannot even be in the business of trading at par with itself. There is a market in money, Kant tells us, but only in a nascent and peripheral way. It does not yet facilitate the exchange of other goods and it does not establish a “market price” in the sense of an exchange of equivalents. If the ruler pays his subjects with the very same money they procure for him, then he cannot be paying them at a ratio of 1:1. If he were, he would have no money left to give away or use for his purposes. Money is marked by difference—in this case, the difference between its so-called market price and its fancy price. The inequality that obtains between the ruler and his subjects is mirrored in their money.

This is, in part, why it is so important to be clear on the myriad differences of register that Kant puts in play. The sensible is not the intelligible, the schema is not the concept, what *is* is not what *ought to be*. *The origin is not the accomplished thing*. What Kant describes when he describes how money could have become money is not what he thinks money must be. But the intelligible, in Kant, has nothing to regulate except the sensible and the empirical. What ought to be can only place boundaries and limitations on what is. If what money is, is a means to establish and represent differences between people, then what money ought to be cannot finally have done with these differences, even if it locates dignity outside the circulation of money entirely.

What could it mean to put a price on one's dignity? For Hobbes, it could have meant any number of things. He believed that we are constantly embroiled in a struggle to assert our relative worth. But for Kant, it can mean nothing at all—the phrase is sheer nonsense. There is a sense in its nonsense, however, and that sense is slavery. Dignity, after all, is guaranteed by autonomy; its value is the value of freedom. The exclusive disjunction of dignity and price, equality and equivalence, entails that one either has intrinsic worth or is entirely open to the vicissitudes of exchange (Terada 2017). The Doctrine of Right dramatizes this in spectacular fashion. For all the difference money makes between the spendthrift and his underlings, we know that the relative dishonor that marks the underlings does not diminish their dignity. We know this because Kant tells us they are not slaves. Slaves are the money that makes them underlings. Among the many differences money makes is the difference between being money and having money—a difference that, for Kant, seems to separate the slave from the servant and black people from everybody else. So long as we recognize ourselves in the terms offered by this disjunction, *tertium non datur*—“no third option is given.”

NOTE

This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. Except for citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which follow convention by citing the pagination of the A and B editions, all citations from Kant refer to volume and pagination of Kant's (1902–) *Gesammelte Schriften*, which are reproduced in the margins of most English translations. All references to Kant's German are cited from the same.

REFERENCES

- Aston, T. H., and C. H. E. Philpin, eds. 1985. *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalton, George. 1965. "Primitive Money," *American Anthropologist* 67(1): 44–65. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1965.67.1.02a00040>
- Derrida, Jacques. 2003. "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology* 33(1): 9–52. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640360699591>
- Drumm, Colin. 2021. "The Difference That Money Makes: Sovereignty, Indecision, and the Politics of Liquidity." Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2629417599/>.
- Einzig, Paul. 1949. *Primitive Money in Its Ethnological, Historical and Economic Aspects*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Evans, Chris, and Göran Rydén. 2018. "'Voyage Iron': An Atlantic Slave Trade Currency, Its European Origins, and West African Impact," *Past & Present* 239(1): 41–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtx055>
- Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Farley, Anthony. 2005. "Perfecting Slavery," *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 36(January): 225–56.
- Forman, David. 2012. "Kant on Moral Freedom and Moral Slavery," *Kantian Review* 17(1): 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415411000318>
- Garba, Tapji, and Sara-Maria Sorentino. 2020. "Slavery Is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,'" *Antipode* 52(3): 764–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12615>
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1994. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Hogendorn, Jan S. 1986. *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Judy, R. A. 2021. "The Unfungible Flow of Liquid Blackness," *Liquid Blackness* 5(1): 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-8932565>
- Kant, Immanuel. 1902–. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2006. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2009. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2012. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Jens Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2017. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2022. "Kant and Slavery—Or Why He Never Became a Racial Egalitarian," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10(2): 263–94. <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.10.2.0263>
- Martin, Phyllis M. 1986. "Power, Cloth and Currency on the Loango Coast," *African Economic History* 15: 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3601537>
- Mau, Søren. 2023. *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. London: Verso.
- Maurer, Bill. 2020. "Primitive and Nonmetallic Money," in *Handbook of the History of Money and Currency*, ed. Stefano Battilossi, Youssef Cassis, and Kazuhiko Yago, 87–104. Singapore: Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0596-2_2
- McCracken, Lucas Miles. 2023. "Christianity's *Addiction*: Voluntary Enslavement and the Paradox of the Will." Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- McDougall, Taija Mars. 2022. "Blackness, Terminable and Interminable." Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Irvine.
- Pascoe, Jordan. 2022. *Kant's Theory of Labour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Postone, Moishe. 1993. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quiggin, A. Hingston. 1963. *A Survey of Primitive Money: The Beginning of Currency*. London: Methuen.
- Rose, Gillian. 1984. *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*. New York: Blackwell.
- Rosenthal, Richard J., and Suzanne B. Faris. 2019. "The Etymology and Early History of 'Addiction,'" *Addiction Research & Theory* 27(5): 437–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2018.1543412>
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2008. *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300129434>
- Sorrentino, Sara-Maria. 2019. "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," *Theory & Event* 22(3): 630–73.
- Sorrentino, Sara-Maria. 2023. "Abolish the *Oikos*: Notes on Incapacity from Antiquity to Marxist Feminism, Black Feminism, and Afro-Pessimism," *Qui Parle* 32(1): 199–243. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-10427992>
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17(2): 65–81.

Every Man Has His Price

Terada, Rei. 2017. "The Racial Grammar of Kantian Time," *European Romantic Review* 28(3): 267–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2017.1314674>

Williams, Eric. 1994. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 2017. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. New York: Verso.