

Ethics and Money: The Goodness of Giving

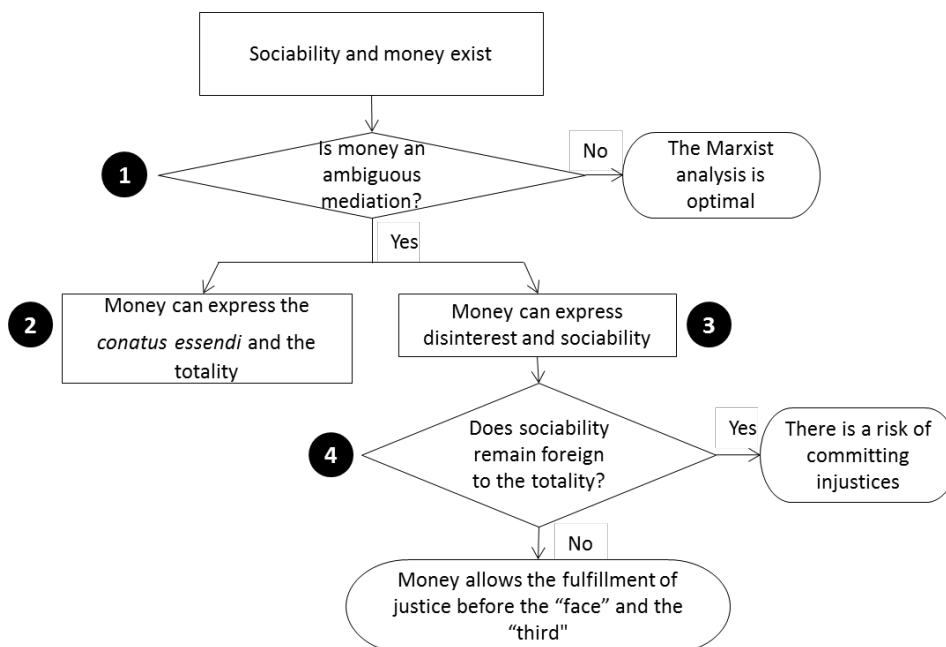
Jorge Medina / UPAEP (jorge.medina@upaep.mx)

Dear friends. In the present work I would like to make a re-reading of “Socialité et Argent”, conference presented in 1989 by Emmanuel Levinas at a colloquium of French Language Jewish intellectuals devoted to the “money” and of which you have a copy in your hands. This brief conference is a magnificent piece that can illustrate very well how the main philosophical theses of Levinas are synthesized relating to a very peculiar topic: money.

The order that I want to follow in these minutes is guided by four questions:

- 1) Is money, mediation par excellence, an ambiguous mediation? That is, should we accept only the Marxist analysis of capitalist system or does money lend itself as something more than exploitation and oppression?
- 2) If in its ambiguity, the money totalizes and homogenizes both goods and services, then is money the phenomenon par excellence of the *conatus essendi*, of the totality and the tyranny?
- 3) On the other hand, if the money is an ambiguous mediation: Can money express human interchange? That is to say, by doing phenomenology of money could we find features of an ‘addressing to...’, a “disinterest” or a “recognition without prior cognition” in which the sociability with the Other man consists?
- 4) Can sociability -which overwhelms the totality- remain foreign to totality? If so, can the charity of disinterest be unjust? If not, can money comply with both the justice demanded by the comparison with “the third”, as well as with the justice demanded before the face of the Other?

The following flowchart provides a key to the reading of the above questions:



1) Levinas sees that money, in its indeterminacy, is the mediation par excellence for the exchange of goods and services. The monetary indeterminacy allows not only trade, but preserves the freedom of the owner to buy this or that. True, it is possible that money makes us believe that with it we can acquire goods and services, and with them, we “acquire” the labor and time of the worker, and even the worker himself, with which, the money consists in the ever-present possibility of annihilating otherness. But it is also true that money, when condensing our time and effort, is a presentation of ourselves, and that beyond the differences in languages and cultures, enables the meeting of those foreign and different. Beyond the corrupt uses of money and indifferent banking speculation, money preserves the possibility of mediating the encounter with another and his service, in exchange for ours.

Therefore, together with the critique that Levinas makes of the civilization of money, as an echo of the interest, the totality and the anonymity, the author himself sees the opportunity to consider it as an event of non-violent encounter with the Other, as the occasion of inter-human proximity between two strangers. The goodness of giving reflects the plasticity of money, which can be the bearer of my time, my energy, my life, in order to be exchanged for goods and services (time and life) of the Other, and thus establish society, but also to be given without further ado, and thus materialize the charity of disinterest.

Money is, then, an ambiguous indeterminate mediation: possibility of being human or inhuman. Here it seems to us that the Marxist analysis of surplus value is short or poor, since it does not acknowledge the positivity that money reveals, given that behind every business transaction there is the outline of a previous transaction, nascent of any social and communicative act, which consists of “addressing to...” in the “shalom” prior to every discourse and to every trade.

2) However, we must analyze both terms of the ambiguity. Inasmuch as the money is indeterminate mediation, it performs the function of homogenizing everything: goods and services. Money, when expressed in the “value” that we attach to things, hides or overshadows human work (the very humanity of the worker) that provided us of the good or service. Even more: money reveals to us that we need things and services to continue existing; it reveals to us the tether when existing, the axiology of the *conatus essendi* whose relentless march is not expressed in terms of *Dasein* (as a being in which the act of being performs its own being), but in terms of *consumer* (as a being in which the act of acquiring performs its own being). The tyranny of being manifests itself as well in the tyranny of money, and the civilization of money is only the manifestation of the totality which assimilates everything, that nothing is left outside calculation and interest: totality without infinity.

Stepping beyond being and from its shackles, does this not imply perhaps exiting the economic totality that evaluates everything in the arithmetic of money? It seems that the accumulation of money goes to the detriment of the Other, as the obtaining of more money is linked, by the surplus value, to the deterioration of the consumption capacity of the Other, namely, his ability to survive. If in essence, in a civilization of interest, life is affirmed by the amount of money, be it for the nourishment it guarantees, be it for the diseases it cures, then, freedom itself, such as the capacity of choice, is directly proportional to the amount of money: possible as far as payable. As Marx said: if I have the money to buy a six-horse carriage, then I move about on twenty four feet, that is to say, I am what I have; if I’m ugly, but I have money, it turns out that I am beautiful. Money is the galvanochemical force that unites and transforms the opposites. Thus, the tyranny of money is the root of violence and war; and war is the destruction of civilization: there can be no sociability based only on money.

3) But in its ambiguity, money is not only the possibility of the affirmation of the I (interest), but the permanent possibility of affirming the Other (disinterest). Levinas describes the disinterest with a very interesting statement: "The positivity of being tied to being, insofar as being of another". And is that, in fact, the hunger of others, their thirst and nudity are not effectively satisfied but with food and clothes that cost money. The responsibility for the Other and the response to the vulnerable face that commands me from his misery, are verified in "the goodness of giving". The sociability, seen as such, as the recognition of the Other from the responsibility, cannot be accomplished without money.

It is true, without ethics, money is blind (does not see the needs of the Other, but only those of its possessor); but it is also true that without money, ethics is sterile (could not be responsibility, but mere discourse). Money, as a donated thing, transcends the feeling, reaches the Other, consummates charity; or in the words of Levinas himself: it is 'bearer of love". Let us remember that Maimonides, in his Mishnah Torah, noted there were eight degrees of charity, where some are distinguished from others in that they are done in good will, or if there is anonymity in the action, but all the degrees of charity have something in common: they consist in giving (it is true that the first degree is to give help, and not a hand-out, to avoid dependency and achieve maturity and economic independence of the poor, but at the end of the day, it consists of a "give").

In many cases, therefore, giving food, yielding the *place under the sun*, ceding self-interest and sacrifice for the Other, have as a condition of possibility, the economic capacity of the transferor. Money reflects, thus, the extraordinary ambivalence of what is human, that although it is bound to being, it is also the possibility of evasion of being; the money reflects that the axiology of holiness and transcendence is not barred by the axiology of interest.

4) Assuming, therefore, that the sociability overflows the economic totality one inhabits, we need to ask if this sociability can remain foreign to totality, or to say this in Levinasian terms, if total surrender to the Other involves neglect (and therefore injustice) to a third. Levinas formulates, in this regard, an interesting hypothesis: May the third be or have been a victim of whom to which I reply and approach in the charity of disinterest? Or let us ask the question in monetary terms: How do you give money to "x", if we don't know if that money cooperates in the injustice against "y"?

The third is also Other, and other than the neighbor, neighbor of my neighbor and, therefore, also my neighbor. The infinite dignity that is the face of the Other that is in front of me, it is also the face of the third that is not in front of me. And out of respect for both dignities, I should compare, compare even what is incomparable, in order to do justice. But, can this comparison of the incomparable be performed, in its own way, by money?

Through money -paid in taxes, for example- is the totality of men addressed (the thirds) within an economic order and, at the same time, for the money -offered as gift, for example- one is lifted up to the holiness of the Face that cries out at me from his hunger and nakedness; through money is that institutions remain and we bestow capacity for action on the State, and through money are mercy and charity made operational. What great ambiguity of money is that it allows, in its mediation, both disinterest and justice!

THANKS

Sociability and Money¹

Emmanuel Levinas (1989)

A reflection on the social or economic reality of the money is certainly not possible without an in-depth search of empirical data where this reality - or institution - is apprehended, without a point of view on its history and without the function analysis that money exerts in fact, by the dynamism typical of an economic dominance so complex in the planetary extension, which he has taken from the science and techniques of the European genius. But it may not be impossible - or useless - to reflect on certain "dimensions" which money outlines, hollows out or reveals in the moral conscience of the European man in which the main characteristics remind us of biblical inspirations and Greek thoughts; their evolution within the Judeo-Christian civilization and its rationalist fidelity.

Money and exchange

Whatever the variety of functions exercised by the money in the multiple alignments of the economic order, whatever the various incumbent roles (and even in their prestigious or monstrous and spectacular -even televisually photogenic- or even omnipotent accumulations of power), the hallmark and its permanent value consist of, in its various avatars, being exchangeable with all things and all services; it is what places money -mediator par excellence - not as a possession in act, but as possibility or capability of entering into possession. Possibility that leaves a part of indeterminacy and vitality to the still-free will of the owner, open to other decisions. And yet in another sense, thanks to this mediation, a strange and remarkable ambiguity of the human is displayed: in the adventure - or in the anecdote - of being, the man will have had, because of money, the power to acquire things and services -things and human labor - and enter invisibly through the chaining of the economy, through the payment of wages, as if in possession of the same working men; but at the same time, already in the event of exchange - where the money is inserted, where its role as mediator begins, and which does not cease to refer- the man *would have resorted* to another man in the *meeting* that is neither simple accession from individual to individual, nor violence of a conquest, or perception of an object by offering in its truth, but as an all-facing-the-face of the Other man, precisely he who already in his silence questions and to whom he responds: declaration of peace in the *shalom* or desire for good in the *good day*. Recognition without prior cognition. Greeting. Response or original responsibility: the "addressing to" of all speech. In money matters one can never forget this inter-human proximity; transcendence and sociability that pierces through it, from singular to singular, from stranger to stranger, the *transaction* from which all money originates and all money relives.

¹ Two versions have been reviewed: "Socialité et argent" in C. Chalier et M. Abensour, *Cahier de l'Herne*. Emmanuel Lévinas, Éditions de l'Herne, 1991, pp. 134-138 y "Socialité et argent" in *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, 50/3 (1988), pp. 415-421. The original was published during the French Language Jewish Intellectuals Symposium devoted to *The money*, Editions Denoël, in 1989.

The interest

Money, power to acquire things and services, two heterogeneous orders, although all things contain human labor. Heterogeneous values within each order. Expressed in monetary units - the price figures - these values access uniformity; allowing for comparison and totaling. Homogeneity, without doubt, suddenly paradoxical: it obfuscates, in its value, the human services it bears -related precisely to utility and interest-, the unaffordable dignity of this work which, while human, and as such, would be measured according to other principles or would be incalculable. But thanks to the measure money introduces everywhere, freeing the exchanges, where it was born, from the shames and subjective inspirations of bartering; from the money, the "goods" constitute an objective whole despite the surprises - Do they beg mentioning?- in which the subsequently-called surplus value threatens the exact calculations of the value of labor.

Objective totality, or world of values or recognized from a primordial axiology which is the original ligature of the living to life; tension which implies, if we may say so, the reference, formally required, of the entities to their being. For the men who, while living, certainly, spend their existence in the mere act of existing. Original valorization expressed in the so-called natural or material needs: tethered to *existence*, to the event of being, to the same *esse* important to men and their concern, which they have and where, already immanent to the world, they have to themselves: original and natural and naive inter-est.² The interest *as immanence*: appetite to exist or hunger of *being* through earthly food, but at the same time, breathing of its atmosphere and habitation on this earth and its perception through the knowledge of things and places; capture and conquest of being through beings; effort of being, act, but also in this *capture*, com-prehension of the coveted being, instinctive ontology or escalation of an essential thought. The "phenomenology" of this axiology of interest - and of the ontology implied- has not been systematically investigated yet, only a few characteristics can be pointed to, and is not explicitly stated without detours. The intentionality that drives this zest of being -this inter-est- does not show itself up to us except probably in the anguish of the "last moments". In the specifics of everyday life, the human interest is always concealed-and exalted - to the point of forgetting their original and apparently healthy "view" of existence, in the "comforts" of the consummation and satisfaction of needs, where he risks misplacing the *appetite of being*, capable of going, thus, as far as illness and death, but it is also where, regarding pleasures, the singular knot of the pronoun *is* would have been drawn as such to contract the form of the verbs in a reflective *Being-for itself*, and selfishness in the joy, without a doubt, regarded "more precious than life", but which retains, nonetheless, the affirmed intimacy of Existence or life.

But the intention still healthy and naive of the interest, the original axiology of being, does not extend, in the man, the struggle of the living for life?³

² [NT] The reflection of the sense that in French Levinas gives to the term *inter-esement* is intended.

³ *The struggle of the living for life*, where perhaps a *persistence* of being in its being is transposed, the "older" or more serious, that is discerned, metaphorically, on the solidity and hardness of the solid, in the *consistency* of the material, as if *being while being* was atomic materiality and infiltration.

In their more natural forms, the interest, does it not occur from its origin without looking out for the others? Interest that forces through human needs. The *Being-for itself*, light of consciousness, does it not become perseverance in being, in spite of its variants or promising poems, received from the "experience" of the other where the proximate is shown in truth or beauty, without "perplexing", without undressing, without confessing its face or its misery? Harsh univocity of inter-est that turns into hatred: emulations among men, competition in rivalry and coincidence reaching cruelty, the tyranny of money and the bloody violence of wars. And, moreover, behold the homogeneity of money that assimilates human services - the work- to the things in the wages, and forgets the dampened work in the objects; since then, all value is recognized through the interest of the need and appropriation through purchase; pivotal moment in the emergence of a money civilization. The commercial value of services and human work testifies to the strong idea of totalized and unique *being*, speaking of the matter of economy and arithmetic of money, order or system by overlaying or disguising the disorders of the ruthless struggles of inter-est where the Other is assessed in monetary terms of the price of his *doing* and his *how-to-do*; integration of man to the economic system, his starting price at the different articulations of economic development. In terms of excellence or the dignity of man - memory or promise of biblical wisdom from our old Europe - it would seem impossible without uprooting to all men, without a philosophical position - could be "Being-in-itself" and "Being-for-itself"- an "I" always in first person, but due to money accumulation, detrimental to others. Freedom, independence of the rich. And, for the others, eventually provisional and precarious independence of hours, days or years, released in view of "Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself" by the money in the pocket and the money in the bank.

Dis-inter-est

However, one must wonder if a humanity that enters the entire economic order from the interest - but also from transactions sealed by money, which is inaugurated in the use of exchange between men - would be sentenced without mercy in a totalitarian system. The economic totality of the men who unlawfully hold the money does not bear resemblance to the formal structure -or logic - of the parts in the whole which absorbs them and in which they are added without leaving a trace. The totality of an economic order, does it not bear perhaps a set where, at the same time, men who are bearers of money and buyers are integrated themselves to the goods, and do they not overexert themselves - do they not lose their own souls - by possessing and belonging? Beyond the axiology of the inter-est, beyond the appetite of being, beyond the concern of each one by its stillness, by his *being-there*, for his part in the existence, beyond the care for the concern of what has been admirably called *Dasein*, concern that we read on the needs that the money allows to satisfy -but as the casual cruelties of the "struggle for life"-, is not the name the disconcerting possibility -exception of the order of all the ways of being - to cede his place (the *Da*), to sacrifice for the Other, of dying for the foreigner? Are we never too surprised of this extravagant possibility of the "human animal", more powerful than any ontology where in the human - in the face of the other man, before any Writing - holiness is heard, silent or imperative call, : new axiology where God comes to mind, for which the message of the Book allows for translation and understanding?

We have tried in other texts, to which, all of them - would befit the title of "Otherwise than being, to describe the axiology of the *dis-inter-est* that is neither the nihilistic abstraction of pure denial of the

value of being, neither the first step in the constructive synthesis of the dialectics, but that is the goodness of giving: charity, mercy, and, in the responsibility, response, and discourse, and thus, the positivity of a being tied to being, insofar as being of another; therefore, a serious take on the needs of the neighbor, of his inter-est and the money given. Is it necessary to insist on the importance that the financial activity acquires on the axiology of the disinterest concerned with giving? Relation to the Other -foreigner- which, by cause of his weakness, misery and mortality, concerns the I, it concerns *me* and precisely, as well, "looks at me", that is to say, bares his face behind the "continent" of giving himself, from behind the mask - the person - *that* gives it its appearance; proximity of the foreigner, which is not a failure of a coincidence or an immanence, but rather *sociability*. Recognition of another as title of responsibility, sociability, irrepressible in its excellence, bearer of love. Extra-ordinary thought: the beloved being always unique, thought of the absolutely Other, beyond the individual, yet tucked away in the community of the genre, which perception captures. Proximity as axiology of beyond being; axiology of transcendence.

Sociability and Justice

Can, however, the sociability brimming over what is expressed in the totality of economy and the axiology of interest that supports it, remain foreign to said totality? Is the sociability and the peace in the proximity of the Other - who was the first to come-, the misery and the authority of the face to which the I that is originally defined has to respond, not by the closure of a "Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself", but it is precisely for this possibility of having responded, charitable and merciful, for neighbor, respond as the accused without guilt and without having committed anything; all this event of what is human and the dis-inter-est in the being, not being, from I to the Other, not the neglect of the *third* ? Ignorance of the third and all those who, on the sides of the *third*, are the numerous united humanity, in its own way, in economic totality from the money, but in which each one remains, however, "Other", unique in its uniqueness, incomparable, and that should be of my concern, or insofar as face, "look at me".

The third, other than the neighbor, is also my neighbor, or even neighbor of the neighbor. The elevation and the holiness in the love of neighbor, are they not perhaps committed by this neglect of the third, which in an anonymous totality, may have been the victim of whom to which I reply, and to whom I approach in mercy and charity of dis-inter-est? It is necessary that among singulars there be a comparison, a trial. We lack a justice, on behalf of the same dignity as singulars and incomparables. But, comparing the incomparable, this is, without doubt, addressing the person returning to the totality of men in the economic order in which their actions are measured in the homogeneity of him who has the money, without being absorbed or simply added to this totality. The holiness of the human soaring high above the being that perseveres in his being, over the violence that this perseverance perpetuates, announced in the mercy and charity responding to the face of the Other; but that same holiness also makes an appeal to Reason and the laws. But the justice demands a State, institutions and a rigor and an informed and impartial authority-even the liberal State, capable of a better legislation-; also demands consciences, which in his singularity before the unpredictable resources, remains vigilant and able to provide non-deductible graces to the always severe universality.