

The Mythical Foundation of Money and its Early Moments of Abstraction. Connections Between Georg Simmel and Ernst Cassirer

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Article abstract

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The Mythical Foundation of Money and its Early Moments of Abstraction. Connections Between Georg Simmel and Ernst Cassirer

Abstract. *Are there similarities between Georg Simmel's concept of money in its early stages and Ernst Cassirer's works on myth as a symbolic form? To answer this question, this paper discusses parts of Simmel's "Philosophy of Money" and Cassirer's "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms": By showing how primeval use of objects which carry monetary characteristics can be parallelized with ways of mythic world interpretation, similarities between Simmel's and Cassirer's arguments can be highlighted. It is not only the mind, which gains the ability of abstract thinking their examples and concepts point to, but also an idea of culture, which reflects this development.*

1. Introduction

In the 1996's summer issue – “Simmel und Cassirer” – of this magazine (which at the time was still titled “Simmel Newsletter”) its publisher Wilfried Geßner writes in his article “Geld als symbolische Form. Simmel, Cassirer und die Objektivität der Kultur” (“Money as a symbolic form. Simmel, Cassirer and the objectivity of culture¹): “According to a prevailing classification, Simmel and Cassirer are still considered as incommensurable.” One stands for the “Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism”, the other one is “known either as a sociologist or as a philosopher of life” (1996: 1). Nevertheless, Geßner points out that the reception and interpretation leading up to said summer issue allows for a

¹ Unless stated differently, all German quotes were translated by the author.

systematic approach, which analyses the amount of shared ideas and concepts and consequently shows, what this means for a philosophy of culture. By parallelizing different aspects of Simmel's "Philosophie des Geldes" ("Philosophy of Money") (1989 [1900]) and the three volumes of Cassirer's "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" ("Philosophy of symbolic Forms") (2001 [1923], 2002 [1925], 2002 [1929]), Geßner aims to outline their respective "turn to a philosophy of culture" (*ibid.*).

While his paper was decidedly not taken as a blueprint for the paper at hand, its concepts and argumentation do convincingly show, how an undertaking like the presented one is feasible. Geßner works with a comparatively broad approach, whereas this paper substantially narrows down the focus: We will concentrate on the mythical moments of early use of money and not (yet) on the development towards a certain use of money, as it is – according to Simmel – customary for modern societies. Additionally, this paper aims to update and supplement selected sections of Geßner's article, when we seek to answer the following question: What does it imply to understand money as a symbolic form?

Weak reasons for doing so can be found by briefly looking at the amount of temporal, local and disciplinary intersections: From 1885 to 1914, Simmel (1858–1918) taught at the Friedrich-Wilhelms University in Berlin², while Cassirer (1874–1945) at first was a student of Simmel's lecture on Kant³, just to become a lecturer

² See also: Köhnke, 1996: 9. And: Nedelmann, 2006: 128.

³ From 1892 to 1893, Simmel was a, as Krois puts it, "teacher of Cassirer" (Krois, J. M. (1995). "Anmerkungen des Herausgebers", in: *Ernst Cassirer: Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Bd. 1: *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ed. by John Michael Krois, assisted by Appelbaum A., Bast R. A., Köhnke K. C., Schwemmer O., Hamburg: Meiner, p. 309-382, here: p. 310). Additionally, see Cassirer's comments on his attendance of Simmel's lecture on Kant in the summer term of 1892: Cassirer E. (1935). "The Philosophy of Hermann Cohen and his Conception of Jewish Religion", in: *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Bd. 17: *Davoser Vorträge. Vorträge über Hermann Cohen. Mit einem Anhang: Briefe Hermann und Martha Cobens an Ernst und Toni Cassirer 1901-1929*, p. 141-157, here:

himself at said university (from 1906 to 1919).⁴ If we attribute a fundamental characteristic to philosophy of culture – which is to define “culture as an independent problem area” and to affirm the validity of cultural “phenomena” (Konersmann 2009: 7) –, both Simmel and Cassirer represent a certain kind of philosophy of culture; we will see, where they overlap.

Regarding the aspects of content and structure, research is providing us with even *stronger* reasons: I am referring for instance to Recki (2000) and Adolf (2003), who – whether at the centre or on the verge of their attention – deal with the Simmelian concept of “tragedy of culture” and Cassirer's position to said concept; something, we will return to at the very end of this paper. And without a doubt, the above mentioned thematic issue of the “Simmel Newsletter” including its articles by Krois and Möckel (1996) shows that working out an entirely new approach is not necessary. Still, one may point out that to this day an argument for money as a symbolic form⁵ in the form of a dedicated paper, a chapter or even a few paragraphs is quite rare.⁶

p. 141. In addition to this: Orth, 1993: 103. And: Graeser, 1994: 12. Also: Schubbach, 2016: 126.

⁴ See: Paetzold, 1995: 18, 46.

⁵ In this context, the negation should also be considered: Reasons, which speak against this paper's undertaking are – to my knowledge – nowhere to be found within the research about Simmel or Cassirer: Neither the presumption has been formulated nor an argumentation has been elaborated which would eliminate the possibility of parallelizing said philosophers and their concepts.

⁶ Further exceptions are without a doubt parts of Schlitte's “Die Macht des Geldes und die Symbolik der Kultur” (2012) and Geßner's “Der Schatz im Acker” (2003). One has to emphasize that in the past, research aimed to argue for *something* as a symbolic form, too. Just to name a few: Marra J. (2015). “Humor as a Symbolic Form: Cassirer and the Culture of Comedy”, in: Friedman J. T. and Luft S. (Eds.). *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. A novel assessment*, in: *New Studies in the History and Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. by Hartung G. and Luft S., Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, p. 419-434. Extensively: Bindig A. (2015). *Humanitäres Völkerrecht als symbolische Form. Zur Normativität humanitären Völkerrechts im Spiegel der Philosophie der symbolischen Formen Ernst Cassirers*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. Plus: Rosengren M.

To both describe the undertaking of this paper and also suggest how a larger undertaking has to be structured, which is capable of *exhaustively* discussing what can only be discussed here partly: One has to begin by focusing on those concepts of Simmel's and Cassirer's philosophy, which are of significant importance to them. It is a necessity, that these concepts can be connected to each other, in order to find out if they relate in a meaningful way. The comparison is then drawn along central *notions*⁷; notions, which Simmel and Cassirer regularly refer to, from which their approaches start from and to which they return to, notions that are, ideally speaking, “irreplaceable”.⁸ In regard to Simmel's work, one has to analyse “value”, “substance” and “function”, “subjective” and “objective culture”, “economy of money” – in particular with recourse to his “Philosophie des Geldes”. When discussing Cassirer's concept, one should consider “symbolic form”, “function of expression, presentation and meaning” (“Ausdrucks”-, “Darstellungs”- and “Bedeutungsfunktion”), “symbolic conciseness” (“symbolische Prägnanz”), “mind” (“Geist”) and “culture” – always in reference to his “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen”.

A more modest approach is chosen here: In the following, we will discuss a small section of the development of money, which

(2012). “Cave Art as Symbolic Form”, in: Hoel A. S., Folkvord I. (Ed.). *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology. Contemporary Reading*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 214-232. Also: Neher A. (2006). *Panofsky, Cassirer, and Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI. And finally Panofsky's early attempt: Panofsky E. (1927). “Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form’”, in: Saxl F. (Ed.). *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 4, 1924-1925*, Leipzig, Berlin: Teubner, p. 258-330.

⁷ Insofar – whether there actually is room for such discussions or there is not – the aim cannot be to make the comparison an exhaustive one: It is not necessary to look at “the whole Cassirer” or “the whole Simmel”, or to even compare the majority of their ideas in order to see parallels between the two.

⁸ Insofar, it is preferable to always approach both philosophies in a way that they complement each other and their central theses can not only be made clear but also expanded upon.

Simmel categorizes using the term “substance value” (“Substanzwert”). We will compare this one with Cassirer's reflections on the symbolic form of myth and its “function of expression”; this also serves to show how an argument for money as a *symbolic form* can be made.⁹

2. Early barter objects and their monetary qualities

Lichtblau aptly discusses Simmel's aim of inquiry, which he especially pursues in his “Philosophie des Geldes”: Said work refers to the “ruptures, tensions and conflicts”, resulting from the “confrontation between modern world views' various tendencies”

⁹ Even if on the one hand the recently published volume “Texte zur Theorie des Geldes” (Asmuth C., Nonnenmacher B., Schneiderit N. (Eds.) (2016). *Texte zur Theorie des Geldes*, Stuttgart: Reclam), gathers a series of “classical” texts, which discuss for instance money in its function as a medium of exchange, the relation between money and power, moral and religion, money and fairness and money and language (See: Asmuth C., Nonnenmacher B., Schneiderit, N., 2016: 9) and on the other hand the interdisciplinary volume “Was ist? Wirtschaftsphilosophische Erkundungen” (Enkelmann W. D., Priddat B. P. (Eds.) (2014). *Was ist? Wirtschaftsphilosophische Erkundungen. Definitionen, Ansätze, Methoden, Erkenntnisse, Wirkungen*, Marburg: Metropolis-Verl., in: Reihe Wirtschaftsphilosophie, Band 3.1, ed. by Id. (Eds.) (2015). *Was ist? Wirtschaftsphilosophische Erkundungen. Definitionen, Ansätze, Methoden, Erkenntnisse, Wirkungen*, Marburg: Metropolis-Verl., in: Reihe Wirtschaftsphilosophie, Band 3.2, ed. By Id.. (Eds.) (2016). *Was ist? Wirtschaftsphilosophische Erkundungen. Definitionen, Ansätze, Methoden, Erkenntnisse, Wirkungen*, Marburg: Metropolis-Verl., in: Reihe Wirtschaftsphilosophie, Band 3.3, ed. by Id.) grants the topic “money” its own “section” (Enkelmann, 2014: 14), one has to agree with Geßner, who states the following: Considering a “philosophical tradition, which is still and to a large extent focused on the ‘eminent’ forms of mental activity, it can only seem uncommon if not alienating, when such a profane entity like money is treated as an object of culture.” Geßner continues: “[F]rom the perspective of an ‘aesthetic’ philosophy”, money and “its aesthetic shape could at best become an object of investigation or else become the culturally ‘other’” (2002: 26). To also cite Blumenberg, who wittedly writes that through its universality, money “has a high disposition to be a topic of philosophy.” Its universality is, as Blumenberg puts it, “a dynamic one” insofar as money “constantly furthers its own abstraction, leaves all materiality behind and tends to become pure form” (1976: 121).

(1997: 17). No matter to what extent, as Frischeisen-Köhler puts it, the “psychological, sociological and cultural empirical facts” influenced the “Philosophie des Geldes”, its final goal lies somewhere else (1990: 38): Simmel himself writes that he aims to “draw a line from the surface of economic events to the last values and meanings of everything human” (1989 [1900]: 12). Here, we do not strive to go this far.

In his “Philosophie des Geldes”, Simmel does not only develop a concept of value, describe monetary economies and formulate an argumentation for the “tragic” aspects of modern culture,¹⁰ he also pursues the goal to determine the “original” use of money – its, as Cantó i Milà puts it, “first form” (2003: 200). According to Simmel, evidence of how an early use of objects – whose “monetary quality” will be explained by intensively referring to the relevant examples – can be derived from a “case, reported on the New British Isles”: The “indigenous people”¹¹ are using money which comes in the shape of “cowrie shells, strung in a string”; it is being used in relation to its length. Meaning: The quantity of cowrie mussels traded for a certain amount of fish depends on “how long they are themselves”.

In reference to “cowrie money”, Simmel defines this “type of purchase” by the following: The same *amount* of two goods means equal value – for instance, a certain “amount of weed” equals a

¹⁰ Never clearly opposing the “analytic part” – which we mainly discuss here –, the “Philosophie des Geldes”’s “synthetic part” deals with phenomena of alienation, modern life and highly developed monetary economies. It focusses on the dynamics of contemporary relations of both dependence and freedom and its consequences for the modern individual (About this summary, see: Rammstedt, 2003: 28. And: Schlitte, 2012: 204.) According to Simmel, the monetary development aligns with the psychological, social and the developments regarding one’s world view.

¹¹ Unquestionably anachronistic are Simmel’s *ethnical* statements. How to deal with them? Without negating how problematic these statements are, this paper’s premise is that Simmel’s characterisation of a society as “primitive” does not lessen the argumentative weight of his reflections. That is why, in the following such statements will be critically recognized, but not separately discussed.

certain “amount of cowry shells” (1989 [1900]: 159).¹² What applies here, is the already mentioned “substance value” of money: when traded, its material, size, weight is of utmost importance – which is why Grabbe rightly speaks of the “primacy” of said “substance value” (2011: 246).¹³ “If the path to money starts with the exchange of natural goods”, reads Simmel’s description of a decisive not only monetary but also a *cognitive* development, “then its course is set only if a uniform object is traded with not another uniform object but with many.” So if “a robe is traded for a talisman” or “a boot for a weapon”, the archaic “process of evaluating values” is still intact: The trade does not yet happen “through the reduction of objects on a common denominator”. Now, if one does trade “a flock of sheep for a house, ten hewn bars for one piece of jewellery, three litres of beverages for one work aid, then the unity of these complexes [...] is – uniquely formed – represented in either barter object” (Simmel, 1989 [1900]: 134). Even though the “substance value” is still relevant, from the perspective of a developing money economy, money’s equalisation of objects is momentarily changing.

In regards to “indivisible objects” this means that “psychologically” speaking, the “feeling of value does not easily disconnect from the set unity of the particular”, as Simmel points out. But “as soon as one haggles whether that one piece of jewellery is worth twelve or maybe only eight bars, the jewellery’s value” – in spite of its “indivisibility” – “is being measured through the value of *one* bar.” Now it “seems possible to compile it with the eightfold,

¹² For an introduction to the subject of the “cowry shell” and further references, see: Muhl, 2001: 20.

¹³ Simmel writes about how material and money relate to each other: We read about the “fact that at the beginning of its development”, money was characterized by its materiality, its weight and size. For instance: “Fur, cattle, copper, bronze” and also cowry money. In this context one has to consider the “first [known] bill”, which originates in “end of the 14th century China and is 18 English inches long and 9 inches wide” (Simmel, 1989 [1900]: 160 f.).

the twelfold and eventually the tenfold of the corresponding object.” By doing so, “the value of both bartering objects gains a whole different commensurability, compared to when no such dismantling of one barter object made both values expressible through one and the same unit”, reads Simmel's analysis (*ibid.*: 134f.).

According to Simmel, this “combination” has reached its highest form in money, since it is the one “divisible object of exchange, whose unity makes it commensurable for the value of every indivisible object” and thereby furthers “the detachment of the abstract value from its concrete-specific content” (1989 [1900]: 135). Consequently, “the economic objects' relativity, which is, when one is trading indivisibilities, psychologically much harder to grasp – since here, everything has a quasi self-contained value – emerges, due to the reduction on one common denominator, even more prominently” (*ibid.*).¹⁴

Insofar, Papilloud aptly writes about the “birth of money”: “Money” stands for the “principle of exchange of objects by the means of a third, generally accepted object, which does not represent the direct proportion between two concrete things, but the one between the value of things” (2003: 163).¹⁵ This way, money does realise the exchange, but can never be consumed like “weeds” or a “tobacco rod” (Simmel, 1989 [1900]: 159f.); in this sense, it becomes the representation of the possibility of trade and exchange.

¹⁴ In this context, one may also point to the “dual role” (“Doppelrolle”) of money, for which Flotow argues on various occasions: 1992: 129-132, 217f.

¹⁵ Money does have the status of an “object” in that it is functioning “between the individual and the object as a true intermediary”, as Liebrucks put it. Accordingly, “it appears not as a bridge, but rather as the concept of a bridge between me and all desired things.” Thus, it is much more than merely an “instrument like a tool”, it is rather the “principle of all instruments, which does materialise as an object, though.” Concluding, Liebrucks calls it the “absolute instrument, which is detached from the dichotomy of principle and object” (1970: 172).

On this basis, Simmel points to the following: “[T]he role of money as a capacitor of value”, does not become more important “because of the increase in value of its singular quantum, but rather because of its expanding function for a growing number of objects” and its “concentration of more and more diverse values in its form”. Thus, the more this monetary “role” and “function” becomes an important one, “the more it shifts away from the necessary bond to substance”.

According to Simmel, this can be described as an “increasing abstraction of money” (*ibid.*: 245f.);¹⁶ the “substance value” is losing its relevancy, while the “function value” (“Funktionswert”) of money is becoming arguably more relevant. The process of *dematerialisation* is crucial for modern economies which depend on money. Thus, the Simmelian contemporary “plethora of moments”, the “forces, materials and events, with which the advanced live has to work with”, leads to the following: “[I]ts concentration in comprehensive symbols, with which one

¹⁶ On a side note: according to Simmel, there will always remain a “remnant of substantial value”, though. Since, on the one hand, the “economic technique” has “certain deficiencies” (1989 [1900]: 182); money’s “transition” of completely detaching from any material is “technically impractical” (*ibid.*: 193. Additionally, see: Schmoller, 1990: 198). Nevertheless, over time money develops in a way, as if it *should* “culminate in this very point” (Simmel, 1989 [1900]: 193. Also: Geßner, 2003: 83). What we see here, are Simmel’s reflections on the limits of the dematerialisation of money. So while money does have a material bond, its “fundamental character” is one “of the mind”, as Schlitte correctly adds. If we follow her interpretation, we can underline this point by referring to “fiat money”: According to Schlitte’s interpretation of Simmel, money may not depend on a medium made of “precious material” (it does not necessarily represent a certain amount of goods for that matter) anymore, but it still requires “a medium” (2012: 311). Thus, “the pure notion of money” – as the opposite to an “inherent value” –, which is able to represent *any* value, is still valid for Simmel, who is also considering the fact, that “the historical reality occurs only as a degradation of this notion”. According to him, “our intellect can”, on the other hand, “understand [...] reality only as a restriction of mere notions, which, while deviating from this reality, justify themselves with the service which they offer for said interpretation” (1989 [1900]: 197 f.).

calculates” – assuming, “that the result is the same if one had operated with the full range of particulars, so that the result is valid and applicable for said particulars.” Just as “the objects' relations of quantity become independent”, said universal application “needs to come about” (*ibid.*: 168).

Simmel points out that the “principle” of reducing expenses and substance, “which is becoming more and more effective” consequently “leads to always expanding operations with representations and symbols, which have no substantive relation to the represented objects anymore.” This happens in such a way, “that it certainly points to the same direction, when transactions happen with the help of symbols, so that it steadily loses its material relation to the definitive realities of its domain and becomes a pure symbol” (*ibid.*: 171f.).

3. “Equality of value as equality of quantity”: The mythical number and the “relation of identity”

We will turn to concepts of Cassirer now and undertake the attempt to see how the described phenomenon of money, which is defined by its “substance value”, but is also slowly detaching from it, fits into Cassirer's concept of symbolic forms: Science, language, myth, art and religion – as he lists a few symbolic forms – are characterized by the fact, “that they provide the components, with whom both the world of ‘reality’ and the one of mind, the world of self is built.” It would be a fallacy to “put these as simple entities in a given world”, one rather has to view them as “functions”, “with whom a specific organisation of being and its characteristic division and separation is realized” (2001 [1923]: 22). Just like the “means”, “which every function makes use of”, differ from each other and the “standards and criteria” are “required and applied by each one individually”, so does their distinctive “result”. Conclusively, the

scientific “notion of truth and reality” (*ibid.*)¹⁷ differs from, say, the mythical, religious or artistic notion, which also means: The corresponding “contexts of meaning” have a specific “constitutive principle, which impresses its seal to all its specific forms” (*ibid.*: 29).

Without having to extensively discuss¹⁸ the much-cited definition of what a symbolic form “is”, we shall work with the following: The symbolic form's scope of application is a universal one, it provides a specific world view and its own structural principles, it conveys order and furthers processes of distance-

¹⁷ Also see: Freudenberger, Heusden, Jagersma, Pätzold, Plümacher, Sandkühler, Wildgen, 2003: 13.

¹⁸ In Cassirer's paper “Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften” he states: “The notion ‘symbolic form’ shall be understood as any energy of mind, with which a mental meaning is tied and internally dedicated to a concrete sensual sign.” Cassirer E. [1923] (2003). “Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften”, in: *Ernst Cassirer: Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe, Bd. 16: Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (1922-1926), texts and annotations edited by Julia C., p. 75-104, here: p. 79. “[D]eliberately unspecific” is what Graeser, referencing said definition, calls “Cassirer’s use of the term ‘symbolic form’”; according to Graeser, this is due to the fact, that Cassirer had to do justice to *all* the symbolic forms he introduces (1994: 39. Additionally, see: Tomberg, 1996: 39). Recki argues in the very same direction, when she focuses on the term “energy of mind”: Cassirer's exact wording is “*any* energy of mind”, which suggest there is a *manifold* of energies of mind (See: 2004: 37 f.). No doubt: If there is no “restriction” set in place, “an infinite amount of symbolic forms is allowed.” Consequently, as Krois points out, the amount of symbolic forms is severely *limited* – which is, as we will see, congruent with our reflections on myth. In this sense, not only “the mineralogical” or “the nautical” but also “the culinarian” cannot be taken as symbolic forms. This also means: Their respective ways of world making are greatly limited, their area of application is confined, since the scope of a nautical or culinary interpretation of the world is of obviously abbreviated. They are only applicable for everything “nautical” or “culinarian” – in contrast to the, as Krois concludes, “artistic, religious, moral-juridical ways of interpretation”, which are “applicable to any object whatsoever” (1988: 19). This universality is an important, if not a *central* criterion, which also applies for money, its specific perspective, culture and dynamics – if money does indeed “form a characteristic and typical ‘world view’” (Cassirer, 2002 [1925]: 35).

gaining and self-liberation; finally, it constitutes cultural diversity and places the individual within said culture and world view.

Cassirer's dedication on myth is, without a doubt, partially based on his aim to develop an understanding of myth as a world view. In order to do so, he first and foremost needs to take myth seriously,¹⁹ since he wants to describe its world of experience as “organized and articulated”. Cassirer emphasises, that these “concepts”, which give the mythical world its “synthetic unity”, are “by no means simple or ‘primitive’” (2006 [1944]: 224). He shows just that in the second part of his “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen” – “Das mythische Denken”:²⁰ Here, Cassirer identifies myth and its “function of expression” as a “form of viewing” (“Anschauungsform”), a “form of thinking” (“Denkform”) and an a “form of living” (“Lebensform”).²¹ What this entails, is a “modality of understanding, which penetrates all societal areas of life” (Recki, 2013: 57);²² it is myth as a symbolic form.

¹⁹ Cassirer is, as Graeser points out, one of the few philosophers who take myth seriously (Graeser, 1994: 64). While *rationalistic positions* portray myth as the “chaotic turmoil and gesturing with disordered and absurd ideas, arisen from fear and the humiliating feeling of absolute dependency on higher powers” (Recki, 2004: 90), Cassirer (also) aims to reveal these as insufficient and misleading.

²⁰ It is not the case that Cassirer only discusses said topic in the second volume of his “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen”; both its other two volumes and various other papers shall be used, when one tries to outline Cassirer's positions. Plus, if one is analysing Cassirer's changing perspectives on the topic of “myth”, one may also turn to: Freudenberg, Heusden, Jagersma, Pätzold, Plümacher, Sandkühler, Wildgen, 2003: 32. Additionally, see Recki's analysis on in which works Cassirer reflects on myth: Recki, 2004: 84.

²¹ This is how the first (p. 35-86), the second (p. 87-180) and the third part (p. 181-273) are named, see: Cassirer, 2002 [1925]. The terms “das mythische Denken”, “Mythos”, “mythisches Denken” and “mythische Lebensform” are, as Recki points out (Recki, 2004: 90), being used by Cassirer in a “consistent” manner – in the following, I will use or rather translate them accordingly.

²² In addition to this finding, see: Plümacher, 2003: 183. And: Graeser, 1994: 64.

To find the first connection point,²³ we have to start with Cassirer's notion of mythical "concretion": Myth's "unity" invariably merges into "mere sameness" – for myth, in which "everything real moves together on the very same level, one and the same substance does not 'have' different attributes", but rather "every attribute as such is already a substance". Here, phenomena are experienced "in immediate concretion, in direct reification" (Cassirer, 2002 [1925]: 80). So when, on the one hand, an "essential feature" of mythical thinking is characterized by the fact that whenever it establishes a certain "relation between two parts", this relation changes to a "relation of identity" and since it, on the other hand, repeatedly comes to the "coincidence", to the "immediate 'concrecence' of the connected elements" (*ibid.*: 293),²⁴ one can draw a connection to Simmel, who – without ever explicitly using the term "mythical thinking" – makes the very same point. Reflecting on the early use of money, he points out that "the more primitive" one's "economic perceptions" are, the more the usual "measurement requires a sensual-instantaneous relation between the compared values" (1989 [1900]: 159). As we have seen, the early forms of "money trade" are defined by a certain "tendency to symmetry": large objects are being traded with those kinds of money, which signify equality in size, by being big or heavy themselves (*ibid.*: 161).

²³ Referring to Simmel's remarks, it is *not possible* to identify all the "basic categories" that represent the "mythical thinking" (Cassirer, 2002[1925]: 275) while looking for parallels of the early use of money. That is, because there is for example no Simmelian discussion about how the "holy" and the "profane" determine the "primary spatial difference, which shows itself in the complex mythical creations [...] over and over again" (*ibid.*: 100). Nor do we find reflections on how the "motive of 'metamorphosis'" (Cassirer, 2002 [1929]: 79) is responsible for the fact that the "moments of expression" ("Ausdrucksmomente") "follow each other without a fixed order or transition" and "the impression of the domestic, the familiar, the shielding and protecting turns into its opposite", which is "the inaccessible, the frightening, the horrifying." (*ibid.*: 102)

²⁴ Additionally, see: Vogl, 1999: 101, 115.

Here, we shall not only think about the above-mentioned “cowry shells, strung in a string” (*ibid.*: 159), but also about the “iron money, which circulates in the shape of rods and is used to describe the quanta of goods, so that a certain amount of tobacco or rum is called a rod of tobacco or a rod of rum” (*ibid.*: 159f.), as Simmel states. At all times, the most important aspect here is still the material, the substance; a “clear immediacy of equality is demanded” (*ibid.*: 162), if the the object's and its attributes relation is one of, as Cassirer writes, “identity” (2002 [1925]: 293).

Not only structurally, but also thematically, parts of Simmel's analysis are close to Cassirer's: Each font has its origin in the form of a “mimic sign”, the “image sign” – originally, “the image does not yet have any character of meaning or communication”. “It rather”, Cassirer specifies, “stands for the object itself”, “it replaces and represents it” (2002 [1925]: 278). In the light of his remarks about the “naive equation of equal quanta”, Simmel points out that the need to view “equality of value” as “equality of quantity”, is also reflected in signs and symbols. He therewith refers to the “old bronze coins”, which come “in the shape of fish” and carry “inscriptions, which probably mean tuna fish and fish basket.” If Simmel assumes that “these native fishing people originally used tuna fish as units of exchange and after they had introduced the coin, they found it necessary to represent the value of one tuna fish in one coin, which through the likeness of its form immediately sensualizes their equivalence and their substitutability” (1989 [1900]: 160), then another connection to Cassirer can be argued for: For Cassirer, within the myth's worldview “the font's symbol is not taken as such, but rather as a part of the world of objects in such a sense that it is seen as an excerpt of all the powers which lay in this world” (2002 [1925]: 278).

I will argue for another connection by looking at the extent to which the mythical number functions as a “primary and fundamental form of relationship” (*ibid.*: 169): For myth, to whom everything, which is “purely ideal” is unknown and to whom “every equality or similarity of content” seems to be a “real band”, which

“connects and bonds them”, *numbers* – e.g. the “determination of numeral equality” – are also perceived in a characteristic way: Because whenever two quantities appear to be “of equal numbers”, myth “explains” their correlation with the “objective association of its mythical ‘nature’” (*ibid.*: 168).²⁵

Thus, initially the number – or *digit* – does not have an “independent, [...] purely ‘abstract’ meaning”, it rather appears solely “with what it is counting”; it is “afflicted with its every characteristic and particularities”. As Cassirer puts it, the mythical number does not indiscriminately refer to “objects as such”, it rather relates to “a single class of objects” – accordingly, “for different types of objects one has to use different numeral words”; that is why “persons and objects, animate and inanimate things, flat or long or round objects each require their own group of numeral words” (*ibid.*: 394 f.); myths’ “function of expression” is in effect here, too.

According to Cassirer, there are words to be found that express both a certain kind of object and a certain group property of these objects: In reference to Gabelentz, he points to a language on the Fiji Islands, which uses distinct terms for “groups of two, of ten, of hundred, of thousand coconuts or even for a group of ten canoes, of ten fish and so forth”.²⁶ Even if the “numeral designation” is already detached from the “designation of things and attributes”, the following still holds true: The “numeral designation” tends to cling to the “diversity and variety of things and attributes”. Here, an arbitrary digit does not yet stand for any number of things, it still does not represent the “abstract plurality per se”, it rather

²⁵ For more on this topic, see: Vogl, 1999: 114 f.

²⁶ See: Gabelentz H. G. C. v. d. (1861). *Die melanesischen Sprachen nach ihrem grammatischen Bau und ihrer Verwandtschaft unter sich und mit den malaiisch-polynesischen Sprachen* (Abhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Bd. VIII/Abhandlungen der Philologisch-Historischen Classe der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Bd. III), Leipzig, p. 23, as cited by: Cassirer, 2001 [1923]: 191.

“expresses the mode of this plurality, its type and form” (Cassirer, 2001 [1923]: 191f.).²⁷

In reverence to the bartering's “indivisible objects”, Simmel points out that “the feeling of value psychologically does not easily part from the manifested unity of the single entity.” But: If one is bargaining about “a piece of jewellery being worth twelve or eight bars”, then the “jewellery's value is measured by the value of *one* bar”, too. Hence, while trading, the object's “external indecomposability” (1989 [1900]: 134f.) loses its meaning. Money advances the detachment of the, as Cassirer puts it, “numeral expression in opposite to the designation of things and attributes”; it is the very same development, when not only “any number stands for any object” but an arbitrary number stands “for the abstract multiplicity itself” (2001 [1923]: 192). To emphasize this point and once again cite Simmel: According to him, money is *the* “divisible barter object, whose unity makes it commensurable for the value of every indivisible object” and by making use of said quality, it not only “facilitates the detachment of the abstract value from its concrete-specific content”, it may “perhaps [...] require it” (1989 [1900]: 135).

To conclude: While mythical thinking, as Cassirer puts it, has not yet processed the “separation of the ‘material’ and the ‘mind’, the ‘physical’ and the ‘psychological’” (2002 [1925]: 185), in money,

²⁷ Depending on *what* is being counted – “persons or objects, animate or inanimate things” – in some “Native American languages”, different “sequences of numerical words” are being used. Cassirer points to the “islanders of Moānu”, who use different numbers from one to nine, if it is “coconuts or people, ghosts or animals or trees, canoes and villages or houses or sticks and plants”, they are talking about. In this sense, the “effort to count points to everything but ‘homogeneity’” (2001 [1923]: 192). “[A]pparently”, it is “something completely different, if people are unified in a ‘group’ or stones in a ‘pile’”, if we experience “a ‘series’ of idle or a ‘swarm’ of moving objects”. Thus, “language tends to keep every characteristic and nuance in its choice of collective words and in the regularity, with which it connects said words with the actual arithmetic expression” (*ibid.*: 193). In addition to these observations, see: Vogl, 1999: 114.

the Simmelian “substance value” and the Cassirerian mythical “function of expression” gradually lose their relevance; they rank among the earliest moments of the “abstraction” (“Vergeistigung”) of objects which have monetary qualities. It is a cultural-philosophical transition point, which prefigures developments such as those, which Cassirer would later on point out as characteristic for the symbolic forms *language* and *science*.

4. Contours of a broader systematic comparison

Over the past few sections, aspects which show connection points between the Simmelian monetary “substance value” and the Cassirerian symbolic form of myth were presented. Our analysis of the mythical foundation of money ends right before the point, where, as Simmel puts it, “[t]he abstraction, which will later see a small piece of metal as equivalent to any extensive object”, takes the same direction, so that “one half of the value equation cannot function as a value in itself anymore”, but “rather as an abstract expression of the other half’s value” (1989 [1900]: 162).

On this basis, two broader questions are to be asked which systematically aim at the comparison between Simmel and Cassirer. First: Can we find a theory of symbolic forms in Simmel’s works? In short: Simmel does not have a “theory” of symbolic forms. While there admittedly are basic approaches to a concept of “symbolic forms” – without them ever being explicitly marked as such –, they are rudimentary and rather qualify as preliminary work for Cassirer, for it is him, who substantially shapes and elaborates the concept of symbolic forms.

Nevertheless, both Simmel and Cassirer describe stages of increased objectification; we see varying examples of the process of detachment, a process which goes from substance to function. They both point to the *mind*, which is capable of abstracting concrete characteristics of things in order to grasp them for instance numerically, to put them in relation to each other or, as we have seen, to trade them. Simmel and Cassirer give us descriptions of

areas – those between the exchange of natural goods and the transfer of money, between the “space of expression” (“Ausdrucksraum”) and the “space of presentation” (“Darstellungsraum”) – in which a principle or a function becomes insufficient and obsolete and is being replaced by a different, more efficient or fitting principle or function. This brings us to the second systematic question:

In what way does the respective understanding of “culture” point to philosophical and sociological intersections? One could take a shortcut and merely cite Bast: “Cassirer has no actual social philosophy” (2000: 396). Undoubtedly, Cassirer lacks an extensively developed concept of subject, like the one Simmel offers and accordingly – granted, Cassirer is not primarily concerned with social philosophy –, a term of the magnitude of the Simmelian “Wechselwirkung” is missing. Still, short comments about said connection points can be made.

For Cassirer, “culture” – as the opposite of “monoculture” (Recki, 2004: 35) – implies a variety of different perspectives on the world. If we understand culture as *liberal*, one can speak of culture as an active, meaningful “task” (Orth, 1996: 223), which consists in the continuous formation of self, society and objects (Witsch, 2008: 36). In turn, Simmel variously – both in length and in depth – writes about the “paradox of culture”, which implies “that the subjective life, which tends to its inner completion, cannot reach this completion by itself”. It rather depends on the “crystallized structures” of modern life, which can be hostile and alienating and are characterized by their “self-sufficient seclusion” (1911: 198). The individual relies on them, though, since they function as a “mediating authority of human's relation to the world and its things” (Geßner, 2003: 158).

The intersection of both Cassirer's and Simmel's understanding of culture can be marked out around the above mentioned stages of increased objectification: It is the “process of mental distance-gaining” (Cassirer, 1930: 200), which is not only varyingly described by both; they also understand the process as a *cultural* one. Now, in

order to discern the social from the cultural, one has to go beyond this paper and analyse the posthumously published works of Cassirer, which were – at least in this regard – often greatly neglected, because they tell us about Cassirer's reference to certain works by Simmel; in particular, “Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie” (2002 [1905]: 7, 66, 135), “Kant und Goethe” (2006 [1906]: 82, 120), “Hauptprobleme der Philosophie” (1995 [1910]: 151) and “Lebensanschauung” (*ibid.*: 13f. Plus: 2014 [1918]: 29).

On the one hand, Cassirer structurally refers to what he calls the “turn to the idea”. It is both the second chapter of Simmel's “Lebensanschauung”,²⁸ which goes by the same name, and also Cassirer's perspective on a much broader Simmelian concept: In Simmel's work, Cassirer recognises moments of emancipation and objectivizing, of gaining more and more distance to objects, dynamics, circumstances (1995 [1910]: 13f. in comparison to: 2001 [1923]: 146); ideas, which are crucial for him. On the other hand, in Cassirer's criticism on different aspects of Simmel's understanding of culture (“Die Tragödie der Kultur” (2007 [1942]) – in particular those, which Simmel develops in his paper “Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur”²⁹ –, we see how and why the term “virtual

²⁸ Said chapter goes back to Simmel's paper “Vorformen der Idee”: Simmel G. (1916/17). “Vorformen der Idee. Aus den Studien zu einer Metaphysik”, in: *LOGOS. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, ed. by Kroner R., Mehlis G., Band VI, Heft 2, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, p. 103-141. Titled “Die Wendung zur Idee”, the paper was – edited and extended – integrated in his work “Lebensanschauung” from 1918, see the corresponding chapter: Simmel G. (1999) [1918]. “Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel”, in: *Georg Simmel. Gesamtausgabe. Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. Grundfragen der Soziologie. Vom Wesen des historischen Verstehens. Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur. Lebensanschauung*, ed. by Fitzi G. and Rammstedt O, p. 209-425, here: p. 236-296.

²⁹ Ferrari (2003: 320) gives us an extensive historical contextualisation of Cassirer's discussion of the “Krisis der Kultur”.

controversy”³⁰ between Simmel and Cassirer still offers new perspectives: It provides us not only with culturally critical points of reference, but also helps us reflect on the different levels on which the above-mentioned “turn to cultural philosophy” (Geßner, 1996:1) actually happens.

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³⁰ Recki (2004: 172) uses this term to describe the one-way dispute between Cassirer, who discusses the above-mentioned topics, and Simmel, who never substantially speaks of Cassirer in regard to his work.

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