

THE PHENOMENON OF LACK:  
Being, Man and Community

A SYNTHESIS OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY  
INQUIRY

Revised Edition

Elena Leontjeva

Aneta Vainė

Marija Vyšniauskaitė



LITHUANIAN FREE MARKET INSTITUTE

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## Preface

Lack is known by many names: incompleteness, finiteness, deficiency, privation, imperfection, inadequacy, insufficiency, shortage, scarcity. To many, it appears to be an unfortunate aspect of existence – a blemish, a feeling of dissatisfaction, a dismal prelude to economy. From lack of bread to lack of meaning or love, why can we never attain perfection? Is there a common denominator behind this perpetual incompleteness?

We present a synthesis of a long intellectual journey that has rediscovered lack as a universal principle of being, an essential yet unexplored component of life.

Our pursuit of the cause and meaning of lack has taken us far beyond the realm of economics. This interdisciplinary study embraces philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology and sociology. What we were astounded to discover is that the world is based not only on form and matter. That, in addition, there is a third principle: invisible, and yet fundamentally immanent. Lack, in its broadest sense – the object of our investigation – is revealed as a primary component of life, a catalyst for change and advancement. Behind each “lack of”, we discovered, lies universal lack, as a principle that permeates everything.

One may notice that many of the terms used to describe lack have negative connotations. They suggest that something *ought to be* present, but is not. That something is missing, or has been taken away. When viewed through this prism of negativity, it is difficult to even assume that lack is a purposeful element of being. Lack, it seems, is playing hide-and-seek with humankind. Hiding and shape-shifting are in its very nature.

Lack is both insufficiency and potential, imprinted in life and manifested in time. At every moment, each creation is on its way to acquire ever new features towards fulfilment. Lack precedes every

change – and therefore every human choice. It awaits human liberty as a space that is open to our deliberate action yet never fully completed.

By understanding that lack is intrinsically linked to liberty, we reach an illuminating insight that liberty is not simply a matter of liking or mindset. Liberty is immanent to, and inseparable from, the structure of being.

Yet, freedom of choice may also bring injustice, strife and impoverishment. This also means lack, but lack as an evil, man-made lack. The distinction between this secondary lack and lack as a cause is another key finding of this study. In the absence of this distinction people tend to see all lack as evil, and this explains why man-made lack obscures lack as a primordial principle.

This study inspires a fresh approach to economic theory and social science. Understanding that lack is a purposeful element of life – and not simply an outcome of human action – opens new avenues for the advancement of moral theory and practice. It reveals economic thought and action as humanity's endogenous response to scarcity, one of the reflections of lack. Through this understanding, we uncover the ontological origin and meaning of economic institutions such as exchange, ownership, and money. A new perspective unfolds for the appraisal of the laws that govern human action.

We come to understand that it is ignorance of the principle of lack that lies at the heart of social utopias and ever-growing interventions. When governments step in on our behalf to fight the various manifestations of lack, we are alienated from the very foundations of life. Our relationship with the world, and with each other, deforms.

The way in which a society perceives lack determines the path it takes: when lack is seen as a catalyst, people respond with free and creative efforts; when it is regarded as an obstacle, it becomes a pretext for coercion and redistribution.



The novel paradigm unveiled by this study can serve as a litmus test for political fallacies, for utopias old and new. It offers an intellectual tool to safeguard liberty and human character, at a time when humanity is obsessed as never before with the illusion that insufficiency and imperfection can be eliminated by human genius, benevolence, power, and progress. By recognizing lack as an essential component of the world around us, we are liberated from relentlessly pursuing utopias and illusions.

*Elena Leontjeva, Head of the Study,  
Founder and Chair of the Board,  
the Lithuanian Free Market Institute*

## Abstract

This paper\* presents a hermeneutic analysis of studies on lack from the diverse disciplines of philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics and offers interdisciplinary insights about the role of lack in the order of being and daily human existence.

The disciplines embraced in this research name and define lack in different ways and address its distinct aspects. Yet, the study reveals essential similarities across the disciplines and leads to a conclusion that lacking is a universal phenomenon that unfolds through diverse forms and manifestations.

The social sciences typically concentrate on negative aspects of lack that disguise it as a principle of being, creation, and change. This study takes a step further and focuses on the least explored aspects of lack, those which appear to be positive and essential for the functioning of society.

Philosophy finds that lack is one of the primary elements in the structure of being and a fundamental cause of change. Christian theology and Biblical anthropology explains the purposefulness of lacking and incompleteness. It appears to be an inevitable mark of being in body, in space, and in time. This understanding lays the ground for exploring the connection between lack, freedom, and morality.

Psychology, sociology, and anthropology show that our negative daily experiences of lack raise tensions and overshadow the understanding of its origin and purpose. Negative economic experiences and the traditional reduction of the universal principle of lack to the shortage of material goods create an illusion that scarcity must be abolished.

\* The first edition was published in Leontjeva, E., Vainė, A., Vyšniauskaitė, M. (eds) 2016. *Stokos reiškiny: būtis, žmogus ir bendruomenė*, Vilnius: Lietuvos laisvosios rinkos institutas, Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas.

Such perceptions create a meaningless confrontation with the reality, society, and oneself.

The understanding and acceptance of lack and scarcity make it possible to direct human energy and efforts toward purposeful and productive action, cooperation, and advancement.

**Keywords:** lack, lacking, scarcity, ontology, form, matter, change, cause, principle, freedom, morality, economy.

## Introduction

Scarcity, lack and limitation are usually regarded as synonyms referring to the fact that material and immaterial things in this world and human beings themselves are limited and finite. Our research shows that lack is:

- ▶ one of the metaphysical principles (or causes) of being together with form and matter (philosophy);
- ▶ a precondition of freedom and a sign of blessing (theology);
- ▶ an evil, natural or moral, caused by the imperfection of nature or human beings (philosophy, theology);
- ▶ poverty, a lack of material resources (anthropology);
- ▶ a state of unfulfillment of biological and social needs (psychology);
- ▶ a tension between natural needs and socially constructed wants (sociology);
- ▶ scarcity of resources (economics).

Our research finds that lack is addressed in all of the said disciplines, albeit in different aspects and by different names. Philosophers and theologians penetrate its origins and recognize lack as an integral, ontological feature of being. It is customary to name it deficiency and privation. Yet, even in those prime disciplines lack is a fragmentary topic. Major findings of ancient and medieval thought remained underdeveloped and were not taken forward. The knowledge of lack as an ontological category remained relatively incoherent and was barely pursued in the social sciences.

The fact that there is no common vocabulary and adjacent phenomena and their interactions are unexplored confirms that we embark on a subject barely known to science. Remarkably, this seems to be in line

with the spirit of our study: the knowledge about lack and scarcity is scarce.

This synthesis of interdisciplinary analysis is based on the hermeneutic method. We interpret distinct findings from across the disciplines to produce understanding of the entire phenomenon. The whole in turn unlocks a more in-depth understanding of distinct conclusions.

While working on this project we simultaneously pursued several lines of inquiry: we developed a dictionary of terms and concepts, explored the relationship between the phenomena under analysis, and investigated each discipline's potential to contribute to the study. The six disciplines – philosophy, theology, economics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology – provide a framework for the analysis of lack. They offer profound insights and open up new horizons for further research.

Lack is an immanent attribute of being in body, time, and space.

Classical philosophers, starting with Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) who later builds on Aristotle's heritage, show that lack is a universal cause of change. That explains why lack is reflected in every becoming. The will lacks the good and seeks the good; a bud lacks a blossom and gradually acquires it; a human being lacks knowledge and pursues it. Lack is revealed as a core stimulus of any change, an integral feature of a dynamic reality.

Philosophy shows that lack belongs to the reality of being and explains it as one of the primary causes. Christian theology and Biblical studies explore the sources of lacking itself. The theologians on our research team independently have come to a conclusion that lack is a purposeful characteristic of being, a natural and inherent element of creation. Theology argues that lack appeared together with creation, and so it

may not be associated exclusively with sin or evil. Lack is an immanent attribute of being in body, time, and space. The world and humanity are created in such a way that every created being is open to change inherent to its nature. In other words, everything is marked by lack.

Philosophy and theology reveal the knowledge of the phenomenon of lack. Yet, our study explicitly shows that these disciplines do not offer a profound analysis of lack,

which explains why there is no universal and coherent theory of lack. This also explains why the social sciences have not embraced philosophical and theological concepts of lack. In

As humanity increasingly denies its imperfection, lack is seen as something unnatural and construed, and so, as something to be removed.

those branches of science, lack is an object of human experience and its evaluation depends on a particular exposure. “From the point of view of anthropology and sociology, lack is fundamental,” and at the same time “in the area of sociality lack is surprisingly ‘bypassed’, both in practice and in theory” (Valantiejus 2016: 256–257).

The late scholastics who inherited from Aquinas the idea of lack (privation) as a cause of being had an unparalleled opportunity to develop it further. At a time of expanding and emancipating economic relations, theologians saw a need to explain the morality of economic action, and that advanced moral philosophy and economics. That is why we pay special attention to the works of the late scholastics, and especially to the heritage of the school of Salamanca. These studies reveal that lack was associated with the shortage of concrete mundane things, rather than with primordial lack beyond experience. This explains the tendency to regard lack as a consequence of original sin and to associate it with evil. Still, the works of the late scholastics offer multiple groundbreaking insights that can deepen the under-

standing of the role of lack and scarcity in the evolvement of private property, value, and the mechanism of exchange. Our study does not suggest that lack as a concept of ontological reality was purposefully developed by the late scholastics, or that this notion per se gave impetus to the understanding of economic laws. Most probably, lack and scarcity as understood in the Thomistic tradition intuitively guided the works of the late scholastics, but were not specifically defined.

The ontological nature of lack is not properly acknowledged by the social sciences and so lack is viewed as something negative, as misfortune, poverty, injustice, or an outcome of class struggle. The social sciences are orientated towards the elimination of scarcity.

*If we accept that fundamental lack, ontic or original sin, is a constant in human beings, then any theory speaking about the complete elimination of lack in human society and all our environment is a utopia. In other words, people cannot create themselves or their surrounding environment in which this feature would not exist (Kévalas 2016: 67).*

The loss of the understanding of human imperfection may explain why lack is perceived as something artificial. As humanity increasingly denies its imperfection, lack is seen as something unnatural and construed, and so, as something to be removed.

*Abolishing lack is equivalent to putting an end to life and change, to the existence of matter and body (Leontjeva 2016: 86).*

Sociology, anthropology, and psychology all speak about lack as experienced and transformed needs and desires. This was a cause of tension at the beginning of the project. However, a more profound methodological approach helped to gradually unveil the meaning of lack for human beings. Lack may be anything people need or desire but have not attained yet. For human beings lack is primarily a personal matter, something “I lack.” Therefore it centres the question on whether there is a distinction between needs and desires.

This study gives a new insight into the foundations of economic activity. Work, property, exchange, competition, money – all are different responses to scarcity that enable people to deal with it – to create and to multiply goods, to expand cooperation, peaceful co-existence and advancement.

While an interdisciplinary approach raised a number of challenges in the preparatory phase of this project, interpretation of the thoughts of philosophers, theologians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and economists brings forth a new understanding of lack and offers fascinating insights.

Philosophy reveals the primordial character of lack at the ontological level. Theology explains the purpose of lacking, and at the junction of those two disciplines a dialogue between lack and freedom unfolds. The social sciences unveil how an ordinary person experiences lack and how those experiences obscure the ontological and purposeful nature of lacking. Seen from the perspective of economics, scarcity is understood as a lack of resources, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. A closer analysis of the concept of “surplus” in sociology explains why freedom, which furthers economic prosperity, conceals lack and opens space to critique of the economy:

A closer analysis of the concept of “surplus” in sociology explains why freedom, which furthers economic prosperity, conceals lack and opens space to critique of the economy.

*It is a presupposition of elementary contact with reality that the sociologist, as people in everyday life, from the very beginning lives with the paradox of abundance, which naturally, potentially hides lacking. <...> “Lack” has to be explored together with expected “abundance,” that means dialectically – this is a brief sociological response to one-sided concepts of human beings in economy, politics and culture (Valantiejus 2016: 256, 259).*

Initially, a psychological examination of needs and desires did not seem to answer the questions we posed, but through interdisciplinary analysis the concept of needs and desires helped us to define



what an ordinary persons regards as lacking. The shift that can be seen in the concept of needs and wants explains a shift in the understanding of lack.

The reciprocity of psychology and economics illustrates how people respond to material scarcity in everyday life, and why some people treat it as a stimulus for creative action, while others are paralyzed by it:

*M. Seligman tried to explain the medical condition of depressed people who were reluctant to take active steps to improve their living situation. Seligman concludes that a person or an animal in an unfavorable situation, facing one or another need, seeks to eliminate it, but a repeated failure to meet the need establishes a tendency not to struggle to improve the situation. Even when an opportunity to change the situation for the better and to meet the needs evolves, the individual cannot do so, because they lack a successful experience of having satisfied similar needs. The elimination of such learned helplessness is a long-term and complex individual process of relearning, in which obstacles should be low and surmountable: this process must be accompanied by continuous and timely encouragement (Laurinavičius and Rekašiūtė-Balsienė 2016: 277–278).*

The study shows that the distinction between needs and wants is subjective. In each individual situation, the same good can be seen both as a desire and as a need; hence, any application of a uniform and objective criterion to a group of people is impractical and can be used as a coercive instrument: “the attempt to overcome scarcity, to centralize and rationally meet the needs of many or all members of society, easily transforms into regulatory systems of needs and moral norms” (Degėsys 2015: 17). In the Middle Ages, material things were not the only needs, and they were not even the primary needs. For example, Aquinas argues that there are six fundamental goods: life, marriage, knowledge, sociality, practicality, and the human relationship with the transcendental (Alves and Moreira 2016). Each is subject to lack.

Lacking also turns out to be a tool of comparison. It can irritate people, not only because they lack something, but because others do better and lack less. Hostility disguises mutual benefit.

People tend to produce different interpretations of their own and other people's success and failure. Personal achievements are usually attributed to personal qualities and efforts, while other people's accomplishments are seen as the results of external factors. In the case of failure, or unmet needs, it is the other way around. People tend to attribute personal failures to external circumstances or the doings of hostile people or groups. This helps to protect one's self-esteem and dignity (Laurinavičius and Rekašiūtė-Balsienė 2015).

In this paper we synthesize the studies from the different disciplines and present central observations about lack as a principle of being and human nature and as a cause of change. We embrace the complexity behind the recognition of lack, its role in the emergence of economic activity and economic science, and the relation between lack and morality. Those findings provide guidelines for an in-depth understanding of lack and an invitation to explore new avenues that could not be fully embraced by this investigation.

There are six fundamental goods: life, marriage, knowledge, sociality, practicality, and the human relationship with the transcendental. Each is subject to lack.



Documentary "Sublime Thirst"

# 1. THE REALITY OF LACK

## 1.1. Lack as a cause of being

A fundamental theoretical reflection on the essence of lack starts with Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC). To explain reality, Aristotle identifies three primary causes of being: form, matter and lack (στέρησις, usually translated as privation). Origins have in common that they are the first of which something either comes into being or is known (Barnes 1984). Those causes are necessary for the process of defining being itself and enabling coming into being. For things to come into being, to exist and to change, it takes a) that which evolves; b) that which is in opposition to what evolves; and c) that out of which something evolves. According to Aristotle's definition, a thing that evolves is the form, in opposition to it is lack, and those opposites operate in matter.

To explain lack as an origin, a conceptual distinction has to be made between lack and nothingness. Lack is not absolute nothingness, but an actual non-being in a particular matter, which can be actualized according to the form. For example, fire does not come into being out of the absence of just anything, but only out of those things that have the potential to cause fire, like dry straw. Therefore, lack is to be understood in relation to matter – lack is not tantamount to pure nothingness or nothing. Lack is a cause because it makes becoming, change and advancement of all entities possible.

Origins have in common that they are the first of which something either comes into being or is known.

Aristotle's thoughts about the causes of being are developed further by medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). In his early work, *On the Principles of Nature*, he interprets three characteristic and basic features of every entity. The new idea he points out is that matter and lack (*privatio* in Latin) concur according to the object, but differ in

terms of perception. For example, the same object is bronze (matter) and formless until the form of the statue appears (i.e., lacking form). However, the understanding of bronze itself and formlessness differs because of the difference of being bronze and being formless (Plėšnys 2016). So, lack makes

Lack is not tantamount to pure nothingness or nothing.

possible the emergence of entities out of opposite things, but itself does not appear in any pure shape; it is not an entity. That explains why people struggle to understand lack as a principle of origin. This knowledge is never acquired by the senses; it is attained only by a mental effort of deconstructing entities and searching for their causes. Meanwhile, a variety of manifestations of lack, like a particular shortage of time, material goods, skills, or a lack of relationships, are experienced directly. Such experiences are often accompanied by discomfort, and so lack is invariably seen in a negative context. Having a negative understanding of lack, people wish not only to relieve or reduce it, but to eliminate it as a source of discomfort altogether. Due to the primordial nature of lack this is impossible, therefore any such attempts are a meaningless waste of energy.

Lack is a cause because it makes becoming, change and advancement of all entities possible.

The complexity of the comprehension of lack, inherent to its primordial nature, leads human beings into confrontation with the order of being. It is therefore fundamentally important to be able to step back from sensory experiences and to make an effort to understand lack as an original principle. Aristotle distinguished three spiritual powers or functions: the vegetative, sensory, and reasonable. Vegetative spiritual power is characteristic of plants; besides the vegetative power animals possess sensory skills, while a human being among all living creatures is the only one with the

spiritual power of reason (Solovej 2015). Rationality, the unique human characteristic, indicates that people are not only capable of sensory experience, but also of understanding the order of being and its essential elements, such as lacking. Only by accepting lack in themselves and in the order of being can people direct their energy towards the pursuit of chosen ends, self-improvement, cooperation, and the multiplication of goods.

## 1.2. Lack as an element of the world

Theories interpreting the physical structure of the world also touch upon lack. Although not fully applicable to the human world, they convey a universal understanding of being. Human and physical structures of the world are embedded in the same primary causes.

Even before Aristotle, Greek philosopher Democritus (460–370 BC) explains reality by equating being with atoms, absolutely solid and indivisible particles. He regards the emptiness separating atoms as non-being; he sees temporary atomic combinations, emerging for some time, forming and dispersing the configurations of atoms, as a manifestation of phenomenal nature (Furley 1987). A void – an empty space between the atoms – is paralleled to lack:

*After all, if there were not the void separating atoms, these would be as if statically bricked in parts in a wall of concrete; or they would appear as an absolutely inert conglomerate made of glued particles. Not being able to move, they could not form atomic configurations; therefore, phenomena and, obviously, the whole phenomenal richness and diversity could not be possible in this world (Kardelis 2016: 26).*

In the physical world lack is understood as one of the essential causes of movement and emergence of new phenomena. If there were no

lack, if atoms filled all the space, they would not be able to move and create new combinations. The fact that physical reality is revealed to our senses as diverse and changing is determined by the foundation of lack, by space and opportunity. It can be said that the interaction of being/entities (atoms) and non-being/lacking (emptiness) is a necessity of all real existence.

However, attempts to bluntly apply this atomistic understanding of physical reality to human beings would cause extensive damage. At the level of atoms, everything is determined by physical laws and the outcomes are known in advance. In such a reality, a human being would be perceived only as a combination of atoms, only of physical nature. It would not be possible to regard people as free, rational, moral agents who unpredictably change reality by their actions and relationships.

### 1.3. Lack as a mark of humanity

Human beings are temporary, finite, fallible and limited. They experience lack in a variety of ways but are able to advance themselves precisely because of those insufficiencies. Such is the human nature that separates us from the physical and metaphysical world. People differ from physical nature by their freedom to institute change. From the divine metaphysical world, people differ by their inability to achieve complete perfection.

*We can start from the fact that a human being is born naked. In many societies nudity is associated with poverty and a lack of status. Having been born in such an early stage of biological development (compared with other mammals), individuals need a lot of things to survive and to continue to grow up. The birth of a person is the first shock into lacking – coldness, insecurity, hunger, a natural need for closeness and attention (Matulevičius 2015: 231).*

Theologians talk about being created in “perfect dependence” (Syssoev 2016), about the “needy man” (Wolff 1974). They argue that this

is the fundamental Old Testament term for the human being living in a condition of lack, expressing our state of wanting, desiring, and longing. Since the creation of humanity, we have been needy people in our whole being.

*“I” (the nefesh of me, the “soul”) am made to receive, to be complemented or fulfilled. God alone is life; we as created beings receive creaturely life (Lahayne 2016: 116).*

*Aristotle pointed out that a person is a compositum, a merger of various elements of act and potency, of form and matter. It is this idea that opens up a new perspective to understand the problem of lacking. From now on, we can speak about lacking not only in a negative, but in a positive way – about the potential and possibilities of a human being (Solovej 2015: 10).*

Human beings do not only know and experience lacking in themselves and in their environment, but they are also able to alleviate it. Lack is a stimulus for action.

In this way, free human activity gives meaning to our aspirations, the implementation of which actualizes human potential. Lacking is therefore to be

A human being is born naked.

In many societies nudity is associated with poverty and a lack of status.

regarded as a factor defining the humanity. The ability to accept lack and to appropriately respond to it gives an opportunity to actualize one’s potential in harmony with the order of this world.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the essence of humanity is the openness to the infinite, the desire to surpass one’s limitations, to transcend and thus actualize oneself. At the same time, it is essential to realize the boundaries of one’s potential and the limits in overcoming lack.

*The ancient Greeks would say to themselves and, of course, to people in these days: do not try to become gods, but try to become the best people according to your capacity and capabilities (Kardelis 2016: 17).*



The acceptance of oneself as a constantly lacking being makes it possible to avoid an endless war against one's nature. Divine perfection is beyond human reach; but the path toward human completeness marked by internal and external lacking is a harmonious fulfillment of one's being:

*To see what is positive in lack inspires us to seek every kind of fullness, the fulfillment of one's being, which best allows us to unveil our human potential in the range of limits of ontologically possible perfection, set by our limited human nature (Kardelis 2016: 11).*

It is important to emphasize that only a free person can actualize their potential. According to the Thomistic tradition, freedom is an essential condition for overcoming individual imperfections and achieving fulfillment.

*Only due to freedom can a person make use of his or her potentiality to enlarge, reduce or remove lack and deficiencies. The weaknesses and imperfections human beings detect in themselves and their environment can become a positive opportunity to actualize their inherent potential (Solovej 2015: 12).*

In theology, lacking and freedom are not the primary sources. The first source is God's love. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15, NIV). One of the most important theological findings is that lack is a necessary prerequisite for a person to develop their character, to work and to continue the creation of the world. Lack is the other side of creativity, action, choice, and freedom. If there were no lacking and incompleteness, there would not be freedom for people to create, to choose and to act; there would not be change and life in the world.

*"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Genesis 1:28, NIV).*

While improving the world, human beings are also called to improve themselves: lack of knowledge, lack of kin, lack of love, and other aspects of imperfection are not easy to bear but are necessary to acquire knowledge and to achieve the fullness of our human vocation. Therefore, theologically, lacking and need appear to be a necessary and proper characteristic of being. Rational analysis reveals a paradox: the human mind identifies, but also creates, lacking:

*Thanks to the capacity of the mind to recognize a new potency, people experience new forms of lacking around them which are inevitable since the fruits of the human mind are not yet realized at that particular moment (Kévalas 2016: 60).*

In that context, the importance of reflecting on lack is obvious. The mind comprehends that lack is not absolute. Human beings are mindful to choose measures to improve a situation and have the freedom to accomplish this. They are to be regarded as independent beings, ends in themselves, open to advancement and the knowledge of others, but not to forced dependency. Those features are captured on the primordial level and develop into a definition of what it means to be human.

#### **1.4. Lack as a universal concept of humanity**

The fundamental or ontological scarcity of perfection is rooted in the nature of the world and human beings and cannot be eliminated. All entities originate from a lack of something, and so they all are marked by incompleteness. The fact itself that something is changing, coming into being, or disappearing indicates that the world is not complete.

According to ancient Greeks, everything around us is characterized by the lack of absolute ontological perfection. Plato (2009) perceives all phenomena and objects of the dynamic world as dialectics of lack and plenitude in the very center of tension between being and non-being.

That understanding of reality reveals the universality of lack. It is found in the ontological structure of the world, in the physical and natural world, and in humans. Lack is universally revealed in human relationships.

Ancient Greeks created myths to interpret relationships between people. Plato highlights the bodily origin of desire in the myth about the origin of biological gender. The lust for another person, according to him, stems from the once divided human nature. The full, spherical beings were cut in half, which explains why people now passionately desire the other. They seek to merge again, back to the primordial full, or unscarce, form (Plato 2000).

In theology, the relationship with other people is also considered in the context of lacking.

*This ontological lack becomes a positive incentive for communion in a society where the relationship with another human being is also an expression of longing for communion with God (Kévalas 2016: 72).*

There are different stages of relationships:

- ▶ before the fall – lacking is a prerequisite of relationships and freedom.
- ▶ after the fall – lack also becomes a source of confrontation, war, fear and violence.
- ▶ in salvation – lack is accepted with peace and hope.

In the first stage, God created distinct entities which are dependent on each other – heaven and earth, male and female, etc. Prior to the fall, lacking and incompleteness was a blessing and a gift to man.

*Being created does not only mean to come into being in time, but to accept one's existence from another, to be existentially dependent, to exist through another, to be destined, in other words – to be metaphysically limited (Syssoev 2016: 164).*

Metaphysical dependency is already ingrained in the creation of humankind. The fact that a human was not created alone directly implies that we have been created for communion.

After the fall, lack became a source of fragmentation and made confrontation possible. Humans started to believe that they could be God, surmount their finiteness, and take over territory, resources, and other people. However, once the world's goods and the presence of other people are regarded as a prey rather than accepted as a gift, this mindset leads to destruction and self-destruction. If other people are the enemy and only a tool, there will be a permanent state of confrontation and war. The fall changed human reality and relationships, including their relation with lacking.

Desire, which is infinite, is now directed towards earthly goods; people have become insatiable and experience any deficiency as injustice, a violation of their freedom. Freedom is confused with the ability to realize one's desires. Lack as a blessing turns

The most agreeable way to deal with the reality is to understand lack as a unifying principle, accepting otherness as an end in itself, as an opportunity to cooperate and freely relate to other people.

into lack as a burden. Secondary lack spreads as injustice, discord, impoverishment. In contrast to the almighty God, human beings are weak. Marks of disability and decline – our defects and shortcomings, diseases and sufferings – are consequences of the fall. After the fall, evil came into the world; until then the human body, created by God, had been limited in its strength, but not frail (Lahayne 2016).

Indeed, the most agreeable way to deal with the reality is to understand lack as a unifying principle, accepting otherness as an end in itself, as an opportunity to cooperate and freely relate to other people. In that manner, the possibility of harmony with the world, with our nature,

and with others opens up. Psychology views community as an innate human characteristic.

*The sense of community, which has been mentioned as one of the social needs, is innate (a lone human being cannot survive). People feel wholesome and happy when they successfully cooperate with others in achieving the objectives of one's own or of the society (Laurinavičius and Rekašiūtė-Balsienė 2016: 284).*

From the anthropological point of view, reciprocity and exchange are a response to ontological lack.

Postulating natural human sociability, anthropology also demonstrates lack in all spheres of life:

*From the anthropological point of view, reciprocity and exchange are a response to ontological lack. Having experienced social isolation, a human being is afflicted by psychological and mental suffering. Having lost contact with their social environment people often lose their mental health or dehumanize, i.e., fall back into a primordial state of chaos, which in its essence is in opposite to what a human being is (Matulevičius, 2016: 238).*

Human interdependence and the desire for relationship do not deny autonomy because the real craving for relationship is a desire to know the other as a free, independent “world.” By relating to others people enrich themselves and alleviate personal lacking. Enslaving others does not involve self-development. It only aggravates imperfection, loneliness and meaninglessness, rather than reducing them.

### 1.5. Positive aspects of lack

A lack of a coherent philosophy of lack may explain its negative perception in the social sciences. The understanding of lack as a primordial principle enables a methodological breakthrough and the definition of its positive aspects.

A lack of knowledge about lack in such social sciences as psychology or sociology can be explained by the fact that analysis of the assumptions about lack falls beyond the boundaries of those disciplines. The social sciences focus on the manifestations of lack, not on lack *per se*, therefore the fundamental premises about lack may be overlooked.

Philosophy reveals the role of lack in the ontological structure of the world and uncovers its positive manifestations. Plato explores lack in two ways. On the one hand, he views lack as a deficiency in which an entity lacks some essential attributes. On the other, he considers lack as a stimulus to act, to move, and to change. For Aristotle, lack is an opportunity: a potency which leads to an act.

The social sciences focus on the manifestations of lack, not on lack *per se*, therefore the fundamental premises about lack may be overlooked.

If everything existed in total abundance, people would lose their identity and meaning of life. It is impossible to grasp the world if its limitations are ignored. After all, lack manifests itself not “as a negative phenomenon igniting resignation and depression, but as a positive existential challenge and a catalyst of passionate spiritual adventure” (Kardelis 2016: 327). Lacking arouses curiosity, the desire to know. From that perspective, to lack something and to understand this lack is not a negative experience. On the contrary, such a desire or longing is often experienced as more pleasant than the satisfaction itself. Think, for example, of the feeling of hunger before dinner or the expectation of new knowledge to be obtained from a recommended reading. Experiencing lack and the expectation of pleasure may appear more enjoyable than the feeling of abundance or of satiety. Lacking makes curiosity and the joy of discovery possible.

The essence of philosophy is revealed through the lack of wisdom and the desire for it. “I know that I know nothing,” said Socrates who, like all mortals, lacked the fullness of divine wisdom. According to the Greek thinkers, to be aware of one’s scarce knowledge means to be on the right track, because only fools think they know everything. The myth of Eros (in Plato’s Symposium) who lacked wisdom and therefore passionately sought it provides an apt illustration:

We cannot have passion and the potential for pursuit, desire, and love if we already have it all and do not fear losing it.

*His lack is shown to be not absolute: as son of Contrivance, Eros had a vague understanding of wisdom, and thus the ability to passionately (in an “erotic” way) seek after it. But as son of Poverty, he was condemned to seek wisdom forever and to never finally meet it, hence to always stay on the road to wisdom and permanently in a state of lacking, though not absolute lacking. In Plato’s dialogue, Eros emerges as the prototype and paradigm of every true philosopher, a passionate lover of wisdom (Kardelis 2016: 14).*

We cannot have passion and the potential for pursuit, desire, and love if we already have it all and do not fear losing it. The feeling of lack excites desire and encourages action and aspiration; it shows that the desired thing is important. The degree of personal mental freedom is proportional to the individual lack:

*The greater our freedom, the greater our lack: after all, our freedom is characterized by the availability of choices. In the case of infinite freedom this number of choices is also infinite – like an infinite number of degrees of freedom in a hypothetical mechanical system. Possessing infinite freedom, at the starting point of our existence, where we choose from an infinite number of possible variations of life, we see them all as unrealized possibilities – each of them as one or another hypothetically realized goal of our fast imagination reflecting our final point of teleological fulfillment (Kardelis 2016: 34).*

The endless number of unrealized possibilities associated with lack is a positive and potential future horizon. Even if it is sometimes

perceived as an irritant, there is no point in heedlessly trying to fully overcome fundamental lack because this is not possible. Neither should we ignore it and impoverish ourselves to a narrow perception of our options. It is important to understand the alternative: it is either fundamental lacking and freedom or determinism and slavery. Suffering under restricted freedom is much deeper than suffering in an imperfect, yet free, world.

### 1.6. Recognition of lack

The imprints of lack in human nature explain why people find it hard to accept it. Human beings are fallible, they lack knowledge, and they are social beings. The marks of lack are also found in the surrounding world. The world is described by temporality and space, and its scarce resources must be put to proper use. Imperfect people act in an imperfect world. In this regard, unacceptance of lack may be attributed to the following reasons:

*The ontological level.* The understanding of lack as a basic phenomenon of being is complicated by the fact that the primordial causes of being are not entities in themselves. Understanding them requires an intentional effort. It is through the senses that manifestations of the primordial element, but not its essence, can be experienced. Yet, at the same time it is hard to contemplate lack per se because the sensory perception of it immediately calls for action.

*It <...> impacts human beings as a catalyst, triggers the internal engine, incentivizing action, hope, and goal-setting. This evolving activity diverts attention from the possibility of reflection" (Leontjeva 2016: 87).*



*The social, anthropological level.* Due to the ignorance of the primordial nature of lack and the role it plays in this world, people see lacking only as a consequence of unjust social reality, a result of wrongdoing. Lacking is experienced as deprivation, poverty, evil, and injustice. Attention is focused on the elimination of those experiences, and the sense of lack with them. Lack is always experienced on a personal level, as “I lack”, and this inhibits understanding of the primordial and universal nature of lacking. This perception is prevalent. It also dominates the social sciences. In anthropology, lack is not perceived as a constant and independent element of the reality, but as a platform from which social relationships evolve and often as an outcome of social relationships.

Lack is always experienced on a personal level, as “I lack”, and this inhibits understanding of primordial and universal nature of lacking.

*The understanding of lack through the prism of poverty in social anthropology and sociology means first of all the analysis of the relations of power (Matulevičius 2016: 228).*

Anthropology expands the discourse on lack by interpreting it through mystification and stigmatization. It is likely that human consciousness has disguised lack from time immemorial.

*The chronological level.* The natural and human world is open to ongoing transformation in time. A pattern of change is immanent to natural entities; processes take place in due time, which means that at every moment an entity lacks its future form. A seed lacks a sprout, the sprout lacks a plant, the plant lacks a bud, the bud lacks a blossom, the blossom lacks fruit. Lack in nature is understood as a gap separating the current status from what will evolve. It is easier to recognize lack when the potency is near fulfillment, while complex and overlapping

transformations make lack hard to comprehend. The same can be said about a human being as a physical being.

In human reality, vagueness, insecurity, and future uncertainty are troublesome.

*Insecurity turns lack into an enemy of the human race, because lack seems to be the only impediment to full subsistence and safety (Leontjeva 2016: 95).*

Constant waiting makes lack even more difficult to bear. People hurry to satisfy their desires, to shorten their waiting time and to distance themselves from scarcity. We do not know when one scarcity vanishes and another unfolds,

and how to cope with this. People naturally long for security that abundance can provide, so they pursue a purposeful

Lack in nature is understood as a gap separating the current status from what will evolve.

action in response to scarcity. However, they can make mistakes and experience failure due to natural causes, such as a poor harvest caused by bad weather conditions, or human error. The acceptance of scarcity as an immanent principle does not guarantee security, but it helps to understand that ever-changing lacking is no impediment to happiness.

Potential lack, which can be defined as “it may be, but is not there yet,” depends on a person who lacks something: people can decide to forgo a particular experience of lack or they can control the time it takes to respond to it. For example, one is free to choose to learn Japanese or to build a house, within a chosen timeline, or to abandon those opportunities altogether. Natural lack described by a formula “it ought to be, but it is not there yet” (such as physical maturing) is related to natural processes and is difficult to control. Moral norms, religion, and rationality help to deal with lack in the flow of time, to develop self-control and moderation, and make adequate and timely

decisions. Linear time obliges people to assume responsibility for future consequences. Events do not occur independently of human action. They are driven by our deeds – every moment is created by another moment. Every choice has consequences for the individual, other people, and the world.

*The theological level.* The denial of lack is closely linked to the narrative of original sin. Original

sin changes human reality and relationships, and man's relationship with lacking. Formerly a blessing and a gift, lack turns into a wound and a burden.

Insecurity turns lack into an enemy of the human race, because lack seems to be the only impediment to full subsistence and safety.

Unlimited human desires now

focus on earthly goods. Work, which was a pure gift before the fall, a tool to subdue this world, becomes an exhausting and strenuous experience that is resisted. All areas of human experience – starting with mutuality and freedom – are now marked by imperfection. Everything is prone to error and sin and can lead to evil, and evil is also experienced as lack and ignites natural resistance. The understanding of lack as a punishment begins to obscure lack as a blessing, although the initial purpose of lack remains valid. The denial of the theological distinction between the Creator and creation arouses a belief that, before the fall, the world and human beings were perfect and did not differ in their perfection from God. This ignorance has dire consequences. There is belief that abundance can replace scarcity. It creates the grounds from which Marxist and materialistic ideologies evolve and new pantheistic movements spread. Though outwardly different, they all nourish the illusion of human omnipotence and promise to eliminate scarcity (Lahayne 2016). Therefore, the understanding that lack has existed since the creation of the world and prior to the fall is fundamental.

## 1.7. Two responses to lacking

Lacking may incentivize action, but it may also paralyze. For example, a lack of health may stimulate exercise and healthy eating habits, but it can also incite depression and resignation. Reaction to lack depends on one's character, experience, and values.

People can respond to the stimulus of lack by productive action or by pretension to possession. Productive efforts bring reward, while pretensions require fruit without making a productive effort. When people act, they unfold their potential through work and learning. In theology, work as a source of subsistence “is not only a curse brought on by sin, but a way to express one's likeness of God” (Syssoev 2016: 169). When people respond to lack only as claim holders and consumers, they deprive themselves of an opportunity for self-development and fulfillment. Human development through work, learning, and other efforts is inseparable from the development of all creation.

*Though limited and dependent, people are not separated from God, so their limitedness and dependence can become an intermediate position through which the Creator is united not only with humanity, but also with the whole creation (Syssoev 2016: 169).*

The two responses to lack determine different approaches to freedom. If people respond to lack through productive effort, freedom is about liberty to act and to fulfill oneself. If people choose to handle lack through pretension, freedom is seen as a social entitlement without an effort, usually at the expense of others. Indeed, realizing freedom and properly responding to lack is only possible through learning, creativity, and daily service to others. “Liberation” from this is tantamount to the abolition of liberty, to reducing man to the status of creature that is fully provided for.

Documentary "Sublime Thirst"



## 2. LACK, SCARCITY AND ECONOMICS

## 2.1. The discovery of scarcity in economics

Economic activity evolved in an attempt to survive in the conditions of lack. The economic aspect of lack is recognized under the name of scarcity and originates specific notions of scarcity. Not surprisingly, economic science has consistently developed this concept. The understanding of scarcity in terms of the material world has evolved from a specific concept in the Middle Ages to a more abstract idea in modern times. Back in the Middle Ages the concept of scarcity as we know it today was not conceptualized directly. Scarcity of physical items per se was not subjected to abstract contemplation. This type of thinking was reserved for spiritual things (Alves and Moreira 2016).

Lack in a broader sense was a subject of religious thinking in the context of eternal life. Economic activity was regarded as a means to ensure human existence and to realize one's potential.

Theologian T. R. Malthus (1766–1834) was by and large the first to coherently elaborate on the universality of scarcity. Malthus put the discourse on a new path. Thinking about the nature of poverty, he discovered scarcity as a universal phenomenon with natural causes such as population growth and production capacity. Malthus was concerned about poverty and considered scarcity in a negative light, as a kind of disorder. As a theologian, Malthus sensed that scarcity was in some way God's providence. His common religious assumption was that, given that everything was God's creation, this should lead to good. Malthus gave no answer to the question about how this might happen. He argued that the infinite variety of nature was admirably adapted to pursue higher goals of creativity and create as much good as possible. Malthus' negative view of human reproductive capacity and underestimation of human creative power resulted in his well-known conclusion that humanity would not be able to feed itself. Malthus did not foresee the opportunities to be offered by the expansion of economic relations

and the industrial revolution. And yet, his insights remain extremely valuable. When we revisit them, we can understand that humanity would actually be facing a gloomy future had it not been for the vast multiplication of goods that was possible thanks to economic activity and the rise of economic institutions. Indirectly, Malthus reveals the contribution of modern economy to the fortune of civilization: Humanity is capable of feeding itself and thereby of supporting a continuous growth in population.

Indirectly, Malthus reveals the contribution of modern economy to the fortune of civilization.

Research produced under this project pinpoints a wide range of inventions, from the bread recipe to oil-refining technology, emphasizing that technological progress is embedded in humanity's tireless creative genius and entrepreneurship as a response to scarcity. Baking bread takes flour that must be milled from grain, so the invention of the mill was an important step forward in food production. The Romans invented the rotary hand mill; earlier people used water- or horse-powered mills which later became the windmill. The need to produce more and better food triggered an array of brilliant ideas (Lahayne 2016). Research suggests that freedom was an essential precondition of all such inventions and their practical application. Our historical inquiry gives a warning that, if humanity were to lose the abilities which enabled it to escape from balancing on the brink of starvation, Malthus' prophecy might still come true and lead to global poverty and hunger (Davies 2016). The theological investigation finds that the fall of ancient constraints made room for the political and social freedom the world had not seen before. Freedom was a necessary prerequisite for ideas to spread. Some 200 years ago, Europe and North America surpassed the once rich and ingenious China and India, not least because they widely ensured human freedoms (Lahayne 2016).

Economist Carl Menger (1840–1921) reflects upon the universality of scarcity. Back in the 18th century physiocrats noted that things that were not scarce did not become economic goods. They did not analyse “free goods” (like air) because those were available in such abundance that they could not become objects of exchange. In fact, most classical economists were able to exclude such goods of unlimited quantity from the scientific investigation of “property.” Limited supply was essential for the definition of the classic law of supply and demand (Kirzner 1976: 111).

Menger uses scarcity to distinguish economic goods from non-economic goods and to explain how economic activity evolves. In defining goods that are scarce, Menger refrains from assessing whether people really need them and whether there is really a shortage of a certain good in the world. He draws a logical distinction between goods that are too abundant to be scarce and goods that are scarce and may become lacking. Menger’s criterion of scarcity disregards physical characteristics, origin, and other features of goods. It introduces a clear order in a complex world and helps us understand why economic activity evolved. Menger also explains that subjectivity is not an issue. The fact that air is an economic good in one case and is not in another is not a paradox or misunderstanding. Rather, it is a logical deduction of the application of the criterion of scarcity.

Ludwig von Mises tries to surpass the framework of traditional economics. He argues that the primary task of reason is to cope with the limits imposed by human nature and deal with scarcity. An acting and thinking individual is the result of a world of scarcity; a world in which all prosperity can only be achieved through hard work, through acting which is “economic” (Mises 1999: 235).

The hermeneutic approach gives insight into the birth of economic activity from the perspective of other disciplines. Theology sheds light on human limitedness and mortality, and thus newly explains the importance of those factors in the emergence of economizing action.



Whence time of a mortal man becomes scarce, the economic aspect runs throughout human life: people face the question of how to use limited resources within the limitations of time in all aspects of life. Human beings are also in constant need of energy: our bodies consume energy very quickly, so there is always a need for food to supply more energy. Before the fall such a condition was not life threatening, and survival did not require much struggle (Lahayne 2016).

Whence time of a mortal man becomes scarce, the economic aspect runs throughout human life.

At the junction of the disciplines it is impossible to evoke a world without lack, and therefore without economic activity,

because (a) there are things that cannot be multiplied, such as time, and (b) human desires are limitless. At the same time, it is clear that any human choice between alternative uses of limited time and resources requires economization. Not the nature or quantity of ends, but (a) the limitedness of time and resources, and (b) their alternative uses create preconditions for the emergence of economic activity. Thus, human behavior that is intended to satisfy human needs with limited means that have alternative uses predetermines choice and contains an economic aspect (Šilėnas and Žukauskas 2016).

Anthropology reflects on the immanent nature of human action:

*Drawing on M. Eliade's interpretative logic, one can conclude that lack as an anthropological experience belongs to the primordial domain of chaos from which human beings symbolically, ritually and physically try to break free. They transform the surrounding natural environment from the chaotic and 'not designed' to the 'organized'; they take natural resources and convert them to create added value for overcoming scarcity (Matulevičius 2016: 233).*

Matulevičius introduces the term “transformation of scarcity.” Human beings make an effort to save, to utilize and to create not only what

is consumed, but also what remains and is transferred to the next generation. Productive work is aimed to transform existing things into more useful ones. In this way, completely new things come into being. This type of effort creates things that previously did not exist. That fact alone implies scarcity.

Technological development and new production alleviates basic scarcity, but the rise of new opportunities induces scarcity. The production of new technological devices kindles

At the junction of the disciplines it is impossible to evoke a world without lack, and therefore without economic activity.

a desire to possess them, and again reason is called upon to make a decision. Perfect abundance would mean a full and instantaneous presence of everything, in which case no work would exist or be necessary. Everything we desire would be available. This implies that scarcity and work are directly related (Lahayne 2016).

Economist Lionel Robbins (1898–1984) elaborates on the importance of the context of scarcity and redefines economics as a science. According to Robbins, economics examines human behavior in the interaction of ends and limited resources that have alternative uses. His definition negates the misconception that economics is only concerned with material well-being and with explaining the process of its creation (Šilėnas and Žukauskas 2016).

Robbins articulates a paradox that has been little understood to this day: While economic activity allows humanity to multiply material goods, that is not the main concern of economics as a branch of science. Robbins fights against the materialistic definition of economics and maintains that, in general, it is not possible to distinguish between material and non-material well-being. He argues that economics does not explore only material goods and prosperity. Economics examines

people in their pursuit to satisfy their desires through action, and, in particular, the process of exchange as a tool for everybody to “produce” the fulfillment of one’s desires. Goods can be tangible (e.g., items) or intangible (e.g., services), according to Rothbard’s (2011) account of the tasks of economics as a science. In the context of this study it can be added that economics is not a science about numbers, as common belief has it, but about human beings who, being limited and mortal, face scarcity and are forced to constantly calculate, evaluate, compare, and make choices. Such an understanding of economics crowns one of the goals of this study, namely to identify interdisciplinary points of contact and to gain insights that center around the human being.

Scarcity as an incentive to act, to develop and to multiply depends on multiple external conditions. For example, according to research on an Asian rural population (Davies 2016), life on the edge of survival drives important changes in thinking and acting. When scarcity is so extreme that it can result in death, people become completely intolerant of risks and hostile to innovation. Communities develop solidarity customs; it is common, for example, to help a neighbor during a famine. At the same time, the quest for profit, the use of innovations, price fixing, and similar economic activities become stigmatized or prohibited.

Over the last 40 years the global population has increased from 4.5 billion to 7 billion. At the same time, the place available on Earth has not expanded, and the agricultural workforce has decreased. Despite that, the number of people living in absolute poverty has fallen from 2 billion to 1.5 billion (Roser 1945). In other words, the number of people not living in poverty has increased from 2.5 billion to 5.5 billion. Today economic relations and the progress of technology allow people to satisfy ever-growing needs and to do it efficiently, but this does not mean that scarcity ceases to exist.

The theological and economic discourse complement each other and emphasize that people are the most precious and scarce asset. People are not just more mouths to feed. Every person is a productive and creative mind that uniquely enriches the world, making it better off (Lahayne 2016).

## 2.2. Economic phenomena and scarcity

Action, or work, is the primary economic phenomenon and response to scarcity. People constantly look for and discover new ways to discern, prevent, and alleviate problems caused by scarcity. It is remarkable that in this process people are able not only to overcome obstacles but also reap benefits. We produce food to eat and clothes to wear, but we usually produce more than we need. Sometimes we invent a device that can be usefully applied more widely than we expected; we create drugs which save lives today and help find solutions in other areas in the future; our buildings endure much longer than one season, and so on. Animals do not attain such results (Soto 2015).

At the core of human action is an unceasing process of choice how to use limited resources, including time. This process unveils one of the most important modern economic concepts developed by economist Friedrich von Wieser (1851–1926), the concept of alternative costs. If we lived in a world of unlimited resources and time, we would still have to choose but our choices would not have alternative costs. Robbins explains:

*If I want to do two things, and I have ample time and ample means with which to do them, and I do not want the time or the means for anything else, then my conduct assumes none of those forms which are the subject of economic science. Nirvana is not necessarily single bliss. It is merely the complete satisfaction of all requirements (Robbins 1932: 13).*

It is important to understand alternative costs in everyday activities. As we choose the best option of using limited time and resources, we

abandon the second best choice. When we assess those choices, we perform an economic action: We abandon the less valuable option because, under given circumstances, the other option seems more valuable to us. In order to obtain additional quantities of any good, we have to give up something – a quantity of other goods or an opportunity to do something else (Baumgärtner et al. 2006).

Even in the practice of love, according to theologians, people face a heavy burden of choice.

This paradigm can be observed not only in activities that are traditionally referred to as economic action, but also in other areas. For example, when we go for a walk, we renounce the pleasure of reading a book; when we read, we cannot play with our children. Even in the practice of love, according to theologians, people face a heavy burden of choice:

*A realistic view of human life impels us to recognize that love is a choice: To indulge in a laborious undertaking, it is necessary to abandon all other, though perfectly legitimate, plans of self-realization (Syssoev 2016: 21).*

Not surprisingly, Lionel Robbins exceeds the limits of economics when he talks about choices. He writes:

*Here we are, sentient creatures with, bundles of desires and aspirations, with masses of instinctive tendencies all urging us in different ways to action. But the time in which these tendencies can be expressed is limited. The external world does not offer full opportunities for their complete achievement. Life is short. Nature is niggardly. Our fellows have other objectives. Yet we can use our lives for doing different things, our materials and the services of others for achieving different objectives (Robbins 1932: 13)*

Scarcity of time and other resources forces us to economize, to use goods as efficiently as possible and to save, as well as to find ways to multiply them. Menger's definition of economization can be rephrased: Economization is about saving (preserving a unit), retaining the useful

features of products, deciding which need is to be met and which is not, and then effectively using goods (Šilėnas and Žukauskas 2016).

Menger concludes that even property is a result of scarcity.

*Property <...> is not an arbitrary invention, but the only practical solution to the problem, which stems from the mismatch between the quantity of existing and desired economic goods (Menger 2007: 20).*

In this regard, Menger's thoughts are contrary to the conviction of philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) that the scarcity of goods is a result of private ownership. Menger's explanation is the opposite: Scarcity is the cause and private property is the consequence. According to Menger, when a clan lives near a river, there is never a shortage of water, so the need for private ownership of water will never arise. Similarly, alternative ways to provide water or investments in water efficiency will not evolve. Menger clarifies the emergence of ownership, while at the same time showing that the abolition of property can never eliminate scarcity.

Menger's thought is related to the insight of Biblical studies on the old divinely inspired wisdom that "it is easier to live in peace at a distance from each other, where everyone lives within his or her own territory and is not necessitated to fight for resources" (Leontjeva 2016: 105). Thus, the fundamental objective of private property and the division of land is "to avoid strife and injustice and to enable people to live together in a sustainable and peaceful manner. The emergence of private borders appears to be necessary and expedient" (Leontjeva 2016: 98). Thomas Aquinas reflects on the experience of humankind and concludes that the abandoning of common ownership and the emergence of private ownership under the condition of sin (1) incentivizes self-sacrificing work, (2) leads to greater efficiency, and (3) ensures peace. Aquinas goes further and denies the traditional Augustinian approach. According to him, there are reasons to believe that private property existed before the

fall. He argues that “things in Eden were held in common, but there was some *dominium* in the fact that men had to use the goods they needed in order to achieve the sustenance required to strive” (Alves and Moreira 2016: 191). However, after the fall, it became much more productive to expand property so that everybody could serve God best. Human laziness and envy were an impediment to keeping things in common.

While exploring the origins of property, Menger comes to a valuable insight: Whenever natural conditions permit, people are prone to the common use of goods. Thus, all

goods which are not scarce and which do not pose the question of alternative use can and will be used as common property. However, it is important to note that so-called primitive or “natural” communism arose


Not only work and property, but also exchange, money, pricing, cooperation, and competition evolved as a spontaneous response to scarcity.

from a simple fact that certain goods existed in such huge quantities that they ceased to be economic goods (Šilėnas and Žukauskas 2016). This answers the never-ending question about the preconditions for the arrival of communism.

Not only work and property, but also exchange, money, pricing, cooperation, and competition evolved as a spontaneous response to scarcity. Those phenomena came into being in the recurrent chain of choices; they reflect human nature and the order of being. This study offers insights into the origin of economic phenomena as preconditioned by ontological lack, and thus purposeful and indispensable.







Documentary "Sublime Thirst"

### 3. LACK AND MORALITY

### 3.1. Lack, freedom and the good

*In the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition the good is what corresponds to the essence of the entity. The good is what every entity consciously or unconsciously strives at as a goal, that corresponds to the nature and at the same time to the essence of the entity (Plėšnys 2016: 52).*

Lack is part of the reality of being and of human nature; therefore, accepting it paves the way for moral choices. Actions are characterized not only by economization. Moral criteria are always involved in the process of choosing. In

light of lack, we can take a fresh new look at the necessity of morality: Moral norms help distinguish good from evil and to make proper choices. When

lack is ignored or denied, or

when an illusion is created that scarcity does not exist, this leads to moral confusion. For example, if under the pressure of scarcity someone takes a job and experiences it as a suffering or coercion, they may feel trapped in wrongdoing, as if energy and time could have been used for a more noble cause. Or when someone tries to save the world from any suffering or deficiency, they feel morally superior, but their aim is an illusion in light of the order of being. A proper understanding of lack and scarcity sustains moral behavior and helps to make sound choices.

When lack is ignored or denied, or when an illusion is created that scarcity does not exist, this leads to moral confusion.

Morality is not possible where there is no freedom, as in nature where processes are determined by physical laws. In the human world, people make decisions. They exercise freedom in action (as they respond to scarcity) and assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions. People cannot be held responsible for involuntary actions. For example, a person cannot stop aging or fully prevent diseases. Responsibility goes with freedom and promotes proper choices and

thereby the good, because those who make choices and others will face the consequences of those actions:

*The free self-determination of acts is related to the moral side of human beings, and expresses the fullness of personal freedom. Therefore, human beings are not only able to be free, but they are free to choose the good, that is, they are free not only to desire freedom, but also to desire good (Solovej 2015: 12).*

Distinguishing right from wrong is an act of freedom supported by practical reason or natural law (*lex naturales*):

*People exercise reason and free will to set goals. They use the same reason to evaluate and determine which goals are good and to understand how those goals can be achieved. In this way people choose means to realize a goal (Plėšnys 2016: 40).*

Reason helps people to make choices, understand their nature, accept reality, evaluate alternatives, and weigh consequences; rationality functions within the moral compass, individual and universal. From the theological perspective, to fulfill their nature human beings are to be in tune with God's will through thinking so that they can judge for themselves what is best and can direct their will toward the good (Alves and Moreira 2016).

*In the most general sense *lex naturales* is the requirement to seek good and avoid evil in all activities. And what is good, we already know: good is what an individual pursues in order to perfect his or her nature. We can realize our natural abilities and refine our nature in very different ways. Therefore, the good is quite an individual concept. On the other hand, it is common, because we all are people and have human nature (Plėšnys 2016: 50).*

Reason enables us to understand which actions are just, freedom allows us to act, and the will helps us achieve goals. It stimulates the desire for what is good and keeps us on the right track.

According to the ancient understanding of the good, we can say that the good is what perfects a person and allows the powers of mind, will, and senses to develop. Evil in the moral sense is a corrupting force which brings in distraction from what is consistent with the essence of the individual and the order of being.

*The human being is incomplete (or lacks something) in the sense that the Creator gave him only powers – mind, senses, and will – on the basis of which each person is invited by the Creator to implement his or her unique vocation. Striving for the good and perfecting one’s nature, the person becomes a mature personality (Plėšnys 2016: 40).*

In theology, human lacking is manifested in people being limited as compared to God. All created beings lack the fullness of being which only God possesses. Lack is an immanent mark of creation:

*All created beings, including humans, are finite beings, participating in God’s being. They are limited because they lack the foundation of existence in themselves. Therefore, human beings and all creatures are “involved in being” and this participation in being is “borrowed” from God, who is the true Being (Kėvalas 2016: 57).*

If people were not lacking, they would not have space to realize their freedom and to advance. Theological studies explain that, as people get to know the world, they find a moral code in it, a kind of “grammar.” With their reason, people recognize the law of human existence, or the natural law.

*The existence of natural law in the context of human existence speaks about a drawn line, reminding people that they have to accept their own corporeality or the ontological deficiency, compared with the divine Being (Kėvalas 2016: 58).*

### **3.2. Understanding lack as good and evil**

Lack and scarcity are often regarded as a negative phenomenon. It is associated with poverty and injustice. The philosophy of Enlightenment in particular advanced this understanding, claiming that a person can eliminate all possible deficiencies and change human nature and the whole structure of the world. Lack is seen as a shortage of something specific which can be avoided, a defect of being that can be amended. Such an interpretation narrows the concept of lack and ignores its function as an essential element of being:

*Lack (as origin per accidens) can in no way be evil. On the one hand, lack is a principle of all creation and belongs to entities by their very nature. What is congruous with nature is good. Therefore, lack is good (Plėšnys 2016: 39).*

It follows that lack as a principle cannot be associated with evil. A deficiency as a lack of a specific form, a defect, is to be regarded as evil when an entity lacks what it is supposed to possess by nature. Analyzing the relationship between lack and evil, the authors of this study do not only refer to lack as a defect, but also describe the role of lack on the moral level.

Lack (as origin per accidens) can in no way be evil. On the one hand, lack is a principle of all creation and belongs to entities by their very nature. What is congruous with nature is good. Therefore, lack is good.

*Not only the lacking of what should belong to entities by their very nature is evil, but so is any action which disarrays a proper functioning of an entity. Such disordered actions are theft, lies, murder, and so on (Plėšnys 2016: 46).*

An action that ignores the order of being or is intended to inflict privation by violating the freedom of others must be regarded as immoral. Such action induces injustice, discord, and impoverishment. It damages not only others, but the acting man: their material lack may be lessened, but it transforms into spiritual lack, a lack of peace, concord, etc. This understanding is essential for a conscious pursuit of moral practice.

Evil is also associated with lacking in the theological tradition. A study of Genesis in the Old Testament shows that after the fall human actions often engender evil which is experienced as deprivation.

*Chapter 14 of the Genesis tells stories which will become paradigmatic to humanity: enslaved people rise, rebellions are suppressed, inhabitants of one land go to war against the people of another land, looting their possessions and food ... These verses scream out loud of all forms of privation, thrown into the human reality and the means by which people react to lack. Those means are force, deceit, violence and power.*

*When people use force and violence to alleviate their material lacking, spiritual lacking inflates. Privation as evil is suffered and spread (Leontjeva 2016: 98).*

This secondary negative lack obscures the positive aspects of lack as a principle. The distinction between primordial and secondary lack re-establishes the role of morality and its relation with economic action.

Profit appears to be a natural consequence of human action. Under normal conditions, the absence of profit (in a sense of the fruit of human activity) would be abnormal. Profit is to be sought by everybody according to their role in society: physicians seek to ensure their patients' health,

The fact that the removal of lacking is good does not mean that lacking is evil.

the police safeguard security, politicians promote concord and progress in society, educators develop wisdom and virtue in their students, and business people pursue financial results. Something goes wrong when people do not create profit and suffer a loss when they perform their work (Soto 2015). Where people intend to achieve enrichment through action, evil can befall them, such as a poor harvest or a failure of an expected performance, and augment scarcity. The reasons behind this can be manifold: human error, failure to foresee the future, or irresponsible and inappropriate decisions. The challenge lies in telling when losses occur due to deliberate immoral activities and when they can be ascribed to unforeseen changes in circumstances or common errors. People may regard mistakes made by others as intentional sins. In contrast to that, one's own immorality is justified by circumstances and imperfections.

*The moment of will, encoded in human nature, affects freedom, and freedom affects morality. The strengthening of the human will allows people to freely choose moral values and thereby to overcome the internal lack of perfection caused by the impaired human nature ... While human beings and the society are surrounded by physical scarcity or a lack of resources and by ontological scarcity or an internal lack of freedom, overcoming*

*this condition is not just about reducing lacking as such because it is inescapable or preordained. The purpose is to enable human moral abilities (Kévalas 2016: 64).*

There is a clear dividing line between evil, or a situation when an entity does not fulfill its purpose, and ontological lack that makes it possible for an entity to attain or not to attain its purpose. The existence of possibilities to fulfil one's purpose is good. Failure to use such possibilities is evil.

*The fact that the removal of lacking is good does not mean that lacking is evil (Plěšnys 2016: 49).*

Lack is a condition of human creativity; at the same time, it triggers tension and the need to overcome one's limitations. That is one of the reasons why accepting lack as good is difficult. Reason, an immanent feature of human nature, is able to distinguish what exists only as a potentiality and has not been realized yet. This potency unveils not only the inevitability of lack, but also its positive side:

Opportunities not yet realized  
"persecute" people as lack.

*Reason becomes an instrument to discover new opportunities and to realize them. Here the divine power of the mind shows to people the lack in them and their environment or potentially existing opportunities. Opportunities not yet realized "persecute" people as lack (Kévalas 2016: 60).*

Lacking is a condition for human fulfillment and creativity. In being creative human beings resemble God:

*Human creativity is a power, a sign of being made in the image of God. But it also causes tension or even suffering, because people feel they have the power to call into being what has not been realized yet, but they need to overcome internal resistance that invokes certainty and rigidity. <... > People feel able to rise above natural borders of necessity. However, this possibility is "costly": it takes time, physical and intellectual effort, and, finally, will, all qualities which are limited in every human being. Therefore, the inescapable tension between what is humanly possible and what is actually realizable can be defined as lacking due to the ability to be creative (Kévalas 2016: 73).*

### 3.3. Morality and lack

Responses to lacking can be broken down into three categories. First, people may use the surrounding nature to satisfy their needs. From an economic point of view, productive efforts depend on human ingenuity and available tools. In the sense of satisfaction of human needs, however, this relationship with the surrounding world is limited. It is relatively inefficient because it is devoid of cooperation and specialization. Second, in order to meet one's needs, a person may seek to derive benefit through coercion against other individuals: through war, robbery, theft, or slavery. Third, people can engage in voluntary relationships with others through mutual work and division of labor, cooperation, and voluntary exchange.

Human activity, or simply our response to scarcity, is linked with morality in two ways. Firstly, only voluntary relationships that are free from violence can be regarded as moral. The absence of coercive elements distinguishes moral action from immoral. Violence, envy and deceit bring injustice, conflict, and impoverishment. This evil, man-induced lack is oppressive. It obscures lack as a primordial principle.

Secondly, a response to scarcity may be a way to establish peaceful, voluntary, and efficient relations:

*Consistently practicing exchange as an expression of transformation of scarcity and facing it as a universal phenomenon, we see that human activities, as well as their ethical assessment, are closely related and influence each other (Matulevičius 2016: 237).*

In the economic sense voluntary human relationships are much more efficient than coercion. It is impossible to objectively state that any coercive action is productive because it is impossible to compare the aggressor's benefit to the damage that is suffered by the coerced party. More than that, because violence brings damage at least to one of the parties, it is less productive than relations in which both sides benefit.



Scarcity uniquely connects economic laws and morality. Observing moral rules serves economic activity, furthers mutuality and efficiency. The understanding of economic laws and adherence to moral standards enable people to properly respond to scarcity and multiply goods without encroaching on other people's freedom and interests. Finally, economic laws as such evolved from human actions under the conditions of scarcity. This suggests that actions which alleviate scarcity by means that are congruous with the natural order of being are to be regarded as moral.

When people act, they obey the laws governing economic action. But for human economic activity to be peaceful and harmonious, a certain normative basis is required. People have to respect one another's property and fulfill agreements and commitments. Morality can be viewed as a set of rules that lead people into peaceful and fruitful relationships. For an act to be moral, both its object and motivation are important.

Actions which alleviate scarcity by means that are congruous with the natural order of being are to be regarded as moral.

In the eyes of Thomas Aquinas, economic transactions, as all human relations, are inseparable from ethics. Since people flourish when they live with virtue and integrity, virtue is important in business and all other areas of human activity. In the economy, moral objectives are neither external nor peripheral. In stark contrast, they are fundamental for understanding what leads people to produce and exchange goods (Dierksmeier 2013: 159–178).

Certain virtues, such as self-control, wisdom, generosity, and love, are not only directed towards economic relations. They also allow us to integrate lack into our daily lives.

Virtue is a constant and strong determination to do good. When people repeat actions aimed at the attainment of the good as common

sense suggests, virtues subordinate and overwhelm all human faculties, leading to perfection and flourishing (Syssoev 2016: 178).

Liberation from the long-standing confusion between primordial and secondary lack is vital. It helps to guide human action in accord with the natural order of being and to grow in moral understanding and practice. Morality equips man with the knowledge and tools to foresee the outcomes of an action and to pursue good. Morality helps us to refrain from choices that may cause or escalate lack for ourselves and for our fellow men. Just as economy is a tool to multiply goods and reduce particular forms of scarcity, so morality is a tool to lessen overall lack. Aided by these instruments, human action becomes purposeful, mindful and fruitful.

Thus, human beings are not only objects controlled by the laws of nature. Moral laws apply to them because they are free creatures. The ignorance of economic laws weakens the opportunity to properly respond to scarcity. The disregard for moral norms also weakens relationships with others. It makes them futile, painful, or even breaks them off permanently. Aristotle and Aquinas argue that society and individual actions are inextricably linked, in a systematic and synergistic way: If I use my freedom correctly, I will become a better, more virtuous person. In turn, the good I have achieved will positively impact other people too. However, if I use freedom incorrectly, vices and wickedness will take root and spread in me and around me (Soto 2015).

To summarize, every action has an impact on the acting individual, on others, and on the world. If people use violence in order to alleviate their lacking or wish evil to others, they undermine freedom and create deprivation around them. This study is crowned with an insight that the discovery of lack as a principle of being and an immanent characteristic of human nature, the comprehension of economic laws, as well as the knowledge and practice of moral norms serve human freedom, harmony, and prosperity.

## Conclusion

Lack is one of the three principles of becoming and change. It is universal and omnipresent in all processes of being. Lack is immanent to human nature and functions as a key factor for people to learn, to act, and to seek fellowship and mutuality. Without lack, human freedom would be impossible. There would be no space for creativity and advancement. At the same time, lack ignites discomfort and insecurity. It constantly reminds people of their limitations and is often seen as a negative phenomenon. Such perceptions hinder the understanding of lack and incentivize the pursuit of its abolition. This refers to both the individual and society. Many find comfort in the idea that lack will be eliminated sooner or later. The novel paradigm unveiled by this study can serve as a litmus test for political fallacies, for old and new utopias. It is lack and human limitations that constantly require our choices and action. Ontological lack gives rise to economic phenomena, and economic activity makes multiplication of goods possible, helping to alleviate many concrete forms of scarcity. The distinction between primordial and secondary lack helps to guide human action in accord with the natural order of being and in the capacity to do good. Just as economic action is a tool to multiply goods and reduce particular manifestations of scarcity, so morality is a tool to embrace and alleviate diverse aspects of lack. Aided by these instruments, human action becomes purposeful, mindful and fruitful. It creates conditions for freedom and peace. And yet, lack will never cease to exist and will continue to challenge humanity.

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