# From labor alienation to cultural tragedy: A comparison between Marx's and Simmel's alienation theories

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Abstract: Facing the problem of alienation in modern society, although Marx and Simmel have something in common, there are fundamental differences in their analysis path. Marx linked human labor with alienation, and took "labor alienation" as his conceptual analysis tool, constructed the analytical framework of political economy criticism, and then opened up a way to sublate alienation. On the basis of inheriting and reflecting on Marx's alienation thought, Simmel focuses on the contradiction and conflict between the subject content and the object form by explaining the social and cultural significance of money, and then examines the pessimistic picture of the whole human society under modernity. In fact, Marx and Simmel constructed their modernity analysis framework through different critical orientations.

Keywords: Marx; Simmel; labor alienation; cultural alienation

#### 1. Introduction

Alienation, as an important topic of modern critical theory, has been concerned by many theorists. Starting from the manuscripts of Economics and Philosophy in 1844 and The Philosophy of Money, this paper attempts to compare and analyze the criticism of modernity made by Marx and Simmel from the perspective of alienation. By comparison, it is found that in the face of the problem of alienation in modern society, although Marx and Simmel have something in common, there are fundamental differences in their analysis path. Marx linked labor with alienation and used "labor alienation" as his conceptual analysis tool to construct the analytical framework of political economy criticism .In essence, Simmel transforms Marx's "labor alienation" into cultural sociological analysis, which is used as the "currency of cultural phenomenon" to respond to his concern for modernity. Furthermore, through "labor alienation", Marx focused his criticism on the capitalist economic and political system, and with a more optimistic attitude, he put forward an alternative way to solve the problem of alienation: through the revolution of the proletariat, to seek the true liberation of all mankind. Different from Marx, Simmel attributed the root of the crisis of modernity to the contradiction and conflict between the main content and the external form. By analyzing the economic phenomenon of money at the cultural level, Simmel keenly discovered the eternal dilemma faced by modern capitalist culture: cultural tragedy. He pessimistically diagnosed and predicted the inevitable conflicts and contradictions between modern people and culture, and believed that the contradiction between subjective and objective culture would accompany human society all the time. For this reason, Simmel did not put forward an effective way to solve the alienation of capitalist culture.

#### 2. Labor alienation

Alienation in Latin means: transfer; insanity; isolation and so on. As an important concept of German classical philosophy, Entfremdung refers to the transformation from subject to object that negates itself<sup>[1]</sup>. Alienation obviously comes from Hegel's philosophy. Hegel understands alienation as the subject turning to the opposite, dominated by the power of the opposite. Out of metaphysical consideration, Hegel believes that reason is alienated in its own activities, and it establishes the edifice of reason and society and shows it outside itself<sup>[2]</sup> he believes that Christianity was created by human beings, but it has changed in the process of historical evolution, and it has in turn become a force to oppress human beings themselves<sup>[3]</sup> inspired by Hegel's thought of alienation, Marx introduced the concept of "alienation" into the field of economics, introduced the concept of labor in economics into

philosophy, formed the concept of "labor alienation" and used it as its analytical tool. Criticize the thought of national economics, and then criticize the working conditions of capitalism.

Marx believes that alienation belongs to the category of commodity production, which is closely related to specific political and economic forms and social and historical conditions, and the emergence of alienation is inseparable from its unique premise. Marx discussed the premise of wages and the situation of workers at the beginning of the manuscript of Economics and Philosophy in 1844.Marx believes that workers have no other income except labor income, that is, wages, while landowners and capitalists can profit from their own industries. The separation of capital, land rent and labor is fatal to workers<sup>[4]</sup> when market prices fluctuate, workers' wages are more affected than the gains from capital and land rent. And the workers are attached to the capitalists, so when the capitalists make a profit, the workers may not necessarily be profitable, but when the capitalists are in a state of loss, the workers will certainly suffer their interests<sup>[4]</sup> after examining the situation of workers under different social conditions through the three main conditions of society, Marx believes that whether social wealth is in a state of decline or growing day by day, or when the growth of social wealth reaches its peak, "the outcome of workers must be labor transition and early death, becoming machines and slaves of capital". [4]in modern society, in addition, in modern society, "the outcome of workers must be labor transition and early death, reduced to machines and slaves to capital."[4]in addition, in modern society, Workers have to compete not only with other workers, but also with machines. when competition intensifies, their prices are lowered, workers are naturally in a weak position, and victory is bound to belong to the capitalists<sup>[4]</sup>.Under the capitalist mode of production, workers lose their bargaining power in the labor market. In view of this, from the perspective of national economics, Marx raised two questions beyond the dimension of national economics; first, what is the significance of attributing the largest part of human beings to abstract labor in human development? Second, what mistakes have reformists made in pinning their hopes on higher wages to improve the conditions of workers or regarding wage equality as the goal of reform<sup>[4]</sup>?Marx believes that national economics regards workers as animals that can only work. In national economics, labor only appears in the form of survival<sup>[4]</sup>. They ignore the internal attributes of workers as human beings, examine labor unilaterally and abstractly, and classify labor into the category of commodities.so that the labor that originally belongs to human beings lies outside human beings, and labor becomes the existence of dissidents. Instead of relying on machines, workers have become machines of work. After examining the workers' wages and their social conditions, Marx further discussed the prerequisites of alienation from the aspects of the opposition between capital, land rent and social interests. Marx believes that capital is the dominant power of labor and its products<sup>[4]</sup>. The natural attribute of capital is to pursue profits. Apart from accidental factors, the acquisition of capital profits can also benefit from the division of labor and the increase of human labor during the processing of natural products. As the owner of capital, capitalists have the irresistible right to buy capital, which means that capitalists can dominate labor through capital. Driven by economic laws, the interests of capital holders are not completely consistent with the social public interests, or even opposed to the social interests. Smith believes that the key to solving this problem lies in the competition among capitalists. Competition is the only way to raise workers' wages, lower commodity prices and resist capitalists. But in Marx's view, there is the possibility of competition only when the capital is scattered in the hands of most people. Under private ownership, capital is gathered in the hands of a small number of people, and the mission of capital is to open up a road of freedom for itself through competition<sup>[4]</sup>, the result of competition is that the small capitalists are swallowed up by the big capitalists. in this way, the situation of the workers is even more difficult, and their wages are not raised as a result of the competition, but in a situation where they can barely make ends meet. Economic laws govern the world blindly. People are insignificant [4], the rights of landowners come from plunder, and the collection of land rent is one of their ways of plunder. Like capital, land rent is driven by economic laws. However, the degree of collection of land rent is determined by the fertile condition and location of the land. Marx cited Smith's example of fork grass to illustrate the relationship between land rent and land fertility, and then pointed out the relationship between land rent and location. He refuted Smith's view that the interests of landowners were always consistent with those of society. Marx believes that landowners are contrary to social interests. And the interests of one landowner, because of competition, will never be consistent with those of another landowner<sup>[4]</sup>. the result of the competition is that the real estate and the small real estate are just like the relationship between the big capital and the small capitalists, and the small real estate is swallowed up by the real estate. The difference between capitalists and land rent owners disappears, and as a result, society will be further divided into two different classes: the bourgeoisie and the working class. Finally, like capital, real estate must show not only the rule of the working class, but also the rule of capitalists who rout or rise because of the law of capital movement. The medieval saying "there is no fief without a lord" is replaced by the modern saying "money has no master" [4]. Marx clearly explained with the

transformation of the common saying that in the process of evolution from ancient society to modern society, man's rule over matter turned to the rule of matter over man. This transformation reflects the alienation and deviation between man and his possession, which leads to alienation.

Using the language and laws of national economics, Marx refuted the one-sided understanding of the movement of property and material, and defined the four provisions of alienated labor. First, alienation arises from the phenomenon of production. The object produced by labor, that is, the product of labor, as an alien being, as independent of the power of the producer, is opposed to labor [4]. the object (labor product) produced by labor in the commodity production society is like the alienation of workers, like the alienation power of producers, the place where workers work and the content of their work no longer belong to themselves. the production part should be defined by itself, but in fact it is defined by others. Second, alienation comes from production behavior. The relationship between labor and productive behavior in the process of labor is the worker's relationship to his own activity, an alien activity that does not belong to him. Workers feel at ease only outside their work, but they feel uncomfortable in their work. His labor is not the labor of resources, but the forced labor<sup>[4]</sup>. Third, alienation comes from the nature of human beings. The nature of class is the attribute that distinguishes human beings from animals. Work distinguishes human beings from animals. Human beings transform the material world into goods that meet human needs through labor. Animals only produce themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature. However, in the commodity society, alienated labor belittles independent and free activities as a means, which turns human life into a means to maintain the existence of the human body<sup>[4]</sup>. Finally, alienation comes from the broad masses of compatriots. The direct result of alienation between human beings and their own labor products, their own life activities and their own kind of essence is the alienation of human beings<sup>[4]</sup>. in order to achieve the goal, people regard others as tools and objects. In the commodity society, as human beings, we only begin to interact with others when we need others, and human beings pursue the maximization of personal interests. Try to treat each other as objects, simplify the complex interpersonal relationship into a simple interest relationship between each other, and lack the unique emotional factors of human beings.

Although Marx did not directly use the concept of modernity, he replaced modernity through the capitalist mode of production in his works. There is no essential difference between the two in connotation. As a conceptual analysis tool of modernity criticism, alienation defines such a totality, whose permanence is based on the transformation of human beings into things, or materialization. Capitalism is increasingly stripping away human nature. It takes the real subject (proletariat) who participates in commodity production as the object, and transforms the real object (capital) of production activities into the fictional subject of modern life<sup>[5]</sup>. "Alienated labor" essentially reveals the internal contradiction between instrumental rationality and value rationality in capitalist society. From the objectification of "things" to "self-alienation" and then to "alienation of human society", under the capitalist mode of production, the maximization of interests has become the most lasting pursuit of human beings. They regard each other as tools to achieve their own goals, treat each other as objects, and ignore the unique subjectivity of human beings. Under the reality of alienation, people no longer care about the human world, no longer take the human subject as the center, no longer care about the inherent values of social fairness, justice, honor and emotion, and ignore human freedom and all-round development, the value of the subject is replaced by a cold objective entity. The fourth nature of alienation, that is, the alienation of human society, is the most important part of Marx's theory of alienation. The relationship between the broad masses of human compatriots by means of each other and materializing each other is the focus of his criticism. Marx believes that the crux of the problems in modern society, such as spiritual nothingness and lack of belief, lies in labor alienation [6]. Alienation arises under the production conditions of capitalism, and in order to solve the conditions for alienation, it is necessary to completely eradicate such institutional design. The working class has nothing except that labor can be sold, and it is the class with the deepest degree of alienation. Because of this, the working class has become the agent that Marx sought to solve the problem of alienation. In addition to using "alienated labor" to reflect on modernity, Marx used the concept of "alienated labor" as a tool to criticize the capitalist system itself, hoping to seek the real liberation of all mankind through the revolution of the proletariat.

## 3. Cultural tragedy

Born into a Jewish family, Simmel worked as a supernumerary professor at the University of Berlin after receiving his doctorate. At that time, anti-Semitism prevailed, and he was hired as a professor in his later years. Just like his unsatisfactory life, his thoughts are also dissociated from the mainstream academic circles, but this does not affect the extensive influence of his works later on. Before Simmel,

no one had made a cultural and philosophical explanation of the economic phenomenon of money. For example, Marx regards money as an economic phenomenon and analyzes its transformation process from commodity to capital to reveal the facts of exploitation hidden behind economic activities and provide theoretical support for the working class. In Simmel's view, money not only belongs to the category of economic phenomenon, but also an important cultural event. In other words, he is more concerned with the socio-cultural significance of money than the economic significance [7]. In the article "money in Modern Culture", through the discussion of ancient land ownership, Simmel concludes that monetary economy collapses the relationship between personal relations and real rights, which is unique in the feudal economy. At the same time, it develops two different cultural dimensions. "on the one hand, money creates an unprecedented impersonal nature that permeates all economic activities." On the other hand, it creates a kind of independence and autonomy of personality that has also been improved<sup>[8]</sup>.Currency gives the same support to two different cultural dimensions with an equal attitude. One of the cultural dimensions of money is that it leads to the leveling, equalization, objectification and quantification of social culture [9]. Money has changed from the original means to the ultimate goal, and has become the only effective value. Equalization degrades things of original value, and all things are measured by money, thus harming the unique value of things. Because of this, the goal that people pursue is no longer something of value, money has become the goal that people can pursue without any conditions, and the omnipotence of money has also become the single highest criterion that can measure everything. People's desire for money, like religious piety, has become a continuous state of mind. Money seems to transform itself into anything people want in an instant. In fact, money has become God in people's real life. The loss of a series of intrinsic values such as the meaning of life and religious experience makes the emotional world of modern people become nothingness, but money is only the bridge to the final value, and people can not live on the bridge<sup>[10]</sup>. Another cultural dimension of money is to make individualization, autonomy and independence possible. This tendency also promotes individual freedom and independence and provides necessary conditions for the development of personality. As an intermediary and bridge between subjects, money not only increases the relationship between them, but also prevents other subjects from interfering with individuals and eliminates personality dependence<sup>[11]</sup>. People become more connected, but they also become estranged and no longer dependent on each other. This creates a broad space for individuality and independence. Simmel illustrates the cultural dimension of money through the example of serf liberation. Serfs pay money in exchange for personal freedom, but this liberation is a superficial liberation and negative freedom. While they spend money to exempt themselves from their obligations, it also means that they have lost their original content of life, and their lives will be empty and empty.

Based on the interpretation of the cultural attribute of money, Simmel constructed his conceptual tool for cultural analysis, that is, "money as a cultural phenomenon", and then reflected on the culture of modern capitalist society. As the forerunner of the analysis of "capitalist spirit", Simmel defines culture as a kind of educational activity of the individual, and the various values of life expressed through cultural content are the enlightened nature. These values of life continue to develop on the basis of nature, and their concepts and forces that transcend nature are called culture. Modern society gives us a particularly clear experience that human beings have created a huge material world, but we can not really understand or even very strange to many of the things we have created. In the modern capitalist society, science, technology and knowledge have achieved unprecedented development, and the knowledge that can be obtained objectively is constantly increasing and accumulating. Compared with the material culture created by human beings, individual culture is constantly decreasing, shrinking, and even inevitable decline. On the one hand, it is the increasing growth of material culture, on the other hand, it is the further estrangement between individual culture and material culture. Human society is generally faced with the dilemma of "cultural tragedy". The conflict between subjective culture and object culture has become an inevitable contradiction in capitalist society. The less we know about objective culture, the more we rely on it. This also gives rise to the paradox that it is becoming more and more difficult for us to understand our society. Culture is created by human beings, but as soon as it comes into being, it exists independently of the creator and is no longer under the control of the creator. The materialization ability of human beings for their own creation also provides a necessary basis for the differentiation between subjective culture and objective culture. "the materialization of thought provides a form for the possible preservation and accumulation of mental work; the most important and far-reaching category of human history [12]. in Simmel's view, the reason for the difference between individual culture and material culture lies in the development of division of labor and specialization. The monetary economy and the capitalist system make large-scale specialization possible, and the division of labor leads to the separation of the mode of existence of workers from the mode of existence of their products. Because of the fragmented characteristics of specialized products, it lacks the characteristics of spirituality. Therefore, the significance of specialized

products is neither the reflection of subjectivity nor the reflection of creative spirit, but can only be found in the objective achievements far away from the subject. Similarly, the same is true of the separation of workers from the means of production. The labor differentiation of capitalism fundamentally separates the subjective and objective working conditions. in addition, labor itself goes its separate ways with workers, and labor has become a commodity that can be bought at will in the market. Specialization alienates workers and products, workers and means of production, workers and labor itself, keeps them away from the subject, and human beings are dominated by matter and lose control over the object. Finally, on the basis of specialization, the process of objectification of cultural content leads to the alienation between the subject and its products<sup>[12]</sup>. The increasing growth of objective culture infringes upon the subjective soul of the human world. We are enslaved by the material world and gradually lose the ability to resist the huge material world. Simmel believes that because of the tendency of money to be flattened, objective and rational, money becomes a prerequisite for specialization and complex organizations and a symbol that everything becomes exactly the same and objective and externalized. Money is the premise and basis for maintaining the relationship between subjective and objective culture. money transaction reflects the advantages of objective culture over subjective culture, as well as the independent improvement and development of subjective culture. Money plays the most far-reaching role in the contradiction between subjective and objective culture, and the large-scale specialization based on the basis and premise of monetary economy and capitalist system provides the way and basis for differences between subject and object culture. The overwhelming victory of material culture over the subject culture finally leads to the picture of cultural alienation in human society. The advantage of means over ends finds its generalization and extreme expression in the fact that the edge of life and things outside its spirituality have become the center of manipulating life and even our own masters<sup>[12]</sup>. Just as advances in science and technology such as mobile phones should have brought convenience to human life, but they are gradually embedded in our daily life and become tools to control us. This kind of putting the cart before the horse, what appears behind the means as the end is the domination of human beings by technology. The further development of science and technology should serve the subject. However, due to the overwhelming advantage of objective culture over individual culture, man is gradually alienated and deviated from his creation, on the contrary, the material culture originally created by the subject has become the shackles and tools to control the subject.

## 4. The comparative analysis of "labor alienation" and "cultural alienation"

In his book, The Philosophy of Money, Simmel reveals the pessimistic picture of human society and the dilemma of alienation through the analysis of the differences and contradictions between subjective and objective culture. Marx, on the other hand, is based on the criticism of capitalism, that is, under the capitalist system, the labor of workers becomes a commodity, and labor is no longer free and creative, but can be sold at a fixed price. to attack the suppression of the working class by the capitalist system itself. Simmel's cultural tragedy and Marx's alienated labor obviously have something in common. Simmel's theory of cultural alienation was deeply influenced by Marx. First, Marx's labor alienation and commodity fetishism provided Simmel with methodological enlightenment. Second, Marx's criticism of modernity of capitalism and its way of life is consistent with Simmel's analysis. In spite of this, the alienation theories of the two scholars have great differences in the connotation of the concept, the object and subject of study, as well as the attribution and solution to the reality of alienation. Accordingly, the following will analyze and compare Simmel's "cultural tragedy" and Marx's "labor alienation" from several dimensions.

First of all, there are great differences in the connotation of the use of the concept of alienation between the two scholars. Simmel's concept of alienation mainly refers to the suppressing effect of objective culture on subjective culture. Moreover, the subject of its investigation and the object of its analysis are the "cultural tragedies" faced by the whole human society. The scope of Simmel's concept of alienation is broader than Marx's concept of alienation, while Marx's concept of alienation is relatively specific, although the object of its investigation and the subject of analysis are sometimes referred to as the special category of human beings. but it is basically limited to the category of workers and the working class [13]. What Simmel pays attention to is the capitalist spiritual world, which is the unique life experience and self-feeling of modern people in the modern capitalist society. In a sense, Simmel is closer to Weber's criticism of instrumental rationality. Marx examined all kinds of unreasonable and inhuman treatment of workers under capitalist private ownership. Secondly, although Simmel and Marx live in the same era, in the face of the crisis of modernity, the positions held by the two theorists are very different. Marx is based on the position of the working class. through an in-depth

analysis of the exploitation under capitalist private ownership to provide a theoretical basis for the working class revolution, while Simmel pessimistically criticizes the profound contradictions of capitalist civilization from the cultural and aesthetic level. Simmel dismissed the vital issue of equality in Marx with the rose assumed by sociology<sup>[14]</sup>. Because of this, there are great differences in the attribution of alienation and the choice of ways to solve alienation. Marx's theory of labor alienation is obviously in line with his later works, that is, he stands on the standpoint of the working class, based on the living conditions of workers under the capitalist system and the reality of labor alienation. Sharp criticism of the capitalist system. Marx believed that the alienation of labor originated from the capitalist mode of production and relations of production. To overcome alienation, it is necessary to thoroughly transform this unequal and unreasonable social system, that is, to completely eradicate the political and economic form on which it is maintained by means of revolution. As the class most oppressed by the capitalist system, the working class, they have nothing but sell their labor. Naturally, they become the agents that Marx sought to solve the problem of alienation. Marx's alienated labor undoubtedly provided legitimacy and rationality for the proletarian revolution, and his later theory also provided a guide to action for the subsequent revolution. Simmel's focus is not on the grand theme, just as he dismisses the issue of social equality with a rose sociological hypothesis, he puts the sense of personal life in modernity under the framework of his analysis. Thus it can be seen that Simmel puts alienation in a pessimistic picture, that is, the ability of individual culture is becoming more and more difficult to keep up with the pace of object culture, and it is becoming more and more difficult for us to understand the world we create. and we are more and more manipulated by the world we create. Simmel believes that the reason why human society is facing the predicament of "cultural tragedy" is due to the process of division of labor and specialization. The more and more elaborate social division of labor and the improvement of specialization have given us the illusion that our lives have been dismembered, everything has become fragmented, and it is difficult for us to have the ability to perceive the whole. This makes the individual lose the ability to control the material culture. With the continuous accumulation and development of objective culture, subjective culture and objective culture are in a process of advancing and retreating, and this process will be accompanied by human society all the time. Simmel pessimistically believes that with the passage of time, the future society will face a more profound dilemma than the current society. Different from Marx's critique of economic politics, Simmel brought the issue of alienation into the cultural level. Of course, Simmel not only talked about culture in terms of culture, but extended the conflict of modernity to the cultural level<sup>[15]</sup>.By bringing the economic concept of money into the cultural level, that is, as the "currency of cultural phenomenon", Simmel predicted the future of human society in a pessimistic situation, believing that the relationship between man and culture is an eternal paradox, and the way to solve cultural alienation has become complicated and confusing. Although he stressed that art can resist the damage from alienation to a certain extent, it is regrettable that art has increasingly become a commodity, gradually suppressed by the existing system, and its autonomy is slowly shrinking. Different from Simmel's pessimism, Marx is more optimistic in the face of alienation. Marx believes that workers can not continue to be satisfied with the demand for free and democratic system, social reform and strict calculation of economic benefits. The proletariat must immediately realize that it is the subject of historical action-- not just the object of external forces-- and its goal is to eliminate alienation and class society<sup>[5]</sup>. In order to overcome the state of alienation, the working class must be aware of its historical mission, change the existing political and economic system by revolutionary means, and complete the reconstruction of the social form of capitalism.

In a word, from the above comparison, we can see that in the face of alienation, the dilemma of modern capitalist society, Marx focuses on criticizing capitalist production conditions and private ownership, while Simmel pays more attention to the cultural characteristics of capitalist society. Although their theoretical emphasis is different, their reflection on alienation is consistent. Using "labor alienation" as his conceptual analysis tool, Marx sharply criticized the capitalist economic and political system. He hoped to change the capitalist relations of production and ownership through the revolution of the proletariat to the ruling class, and then overcome the dilemma of workers' alienation caused by the existing system design, and finally achieve the free and all-round development of human beings. On the other hand, Simmel opened up a precedent for the analysis of "capitalist spirit". By explaining the social and cultural significance of money, he focused the criticism of modernity on the inevitable contradiction between subjective culture and objective culture, and then examined modernity under the pessimistic picture of the whole human society: the eternal paradox that human beings created material culture, but human beings were placed under the rule of material culture.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that modernity has brought rational brilliance to human society, but it all refers to the only thing: the disenchantment of the world. We no longer have to use magic to dominate or pray to the gods, like savages who believe in the existence of gods. Instead, there are technical methods and calculations. This is the main meaning of rationalization<sup>[16]</sup>.however, we are also trapped in the iron cage of reason described by Weber. Since the Enlightenment, the ideas of reason, democracy and freedom have occupied the central position, but with the change of the times, the weakening of autonomy has become an inevitable fact. Science, the most important legacy of the Enlightenment, is becoming a tool to control and discipline people, and it is found that the vision once pursued runs counter to today's results, and human civilization as a whole comes to an end. Foucault makes an in-depth discussion on the traditional rationality in discipline and punishment. By drawing lessons from the "panoramic Open Prison" designed by Bentham, Foucault put forward "panoramic openness", which Foucault uses to describe power. He believes that prisons, factories and schools in modern society all have a similar structure, which also means that power "capillaries" permeate every corner of society, allowing us to tame ourselves and achieve the purpose of discipline<sup>[17]</sup>.since the Enlightenment, the system of despotism has been completely overthrown, but have people really gained freedom as a result? On the contrary, rational knowledge does not bring freedom, on the contrary, freedom is suppressed. The progress of science makes it possible to manipulate and transform the body and soul in more detail. The combination of political power and rational knowledge of the modern bourgeoisie strengthens the control of human beings, and the "eye of power" is embedded in our daily life. Everywhere. So, since scientific rationality and the values pursued by the Enlightenment have been denied, where is the way for mankind to return?

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